

Theologies of Membership

What is a member? Perusing the definitions in numerous dictionaries yields a wide variety of answers. One in particular, from an older edition of *Webster's Dictionary*, seems particularly relevant. This edition defines a member as "...one who forms part of a metaphysical or metaphorical body." This is clearly a reference to the imagery found in I Corinthians 12:12.¹ When UUA President John Buehrens met with the Commission on Appraisal in the course of our work on this report, he urged us, as part of our membership study, to look at this text. This passage is so often quoted in the literature about church membership that it is hard to ignore. How could this image be helpful to Unitarian Universalists, given its endurance and power?

The image is powerful and enduring because it was carefully drawn out of several powerful and enduring cultural contexts. The first was the idea of being a covenanted people—the basic message of the Hebrew Bible. The early Christian community held on to that idea of being in covenant—they understood themselves to be people in covenant with the same God who had been in covenant with their Abrahamic ancestors. They understood Jesus to be the mediator of a new covenant, but that new covenant was in continuity with the old. The word *covenant* is still relevant to our contemporary understanding of membership in the liberal church. In fact, one of the purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association's strategic planning process, called *Fulfilling the Promise*, is to encourage a process of recovenanting—both in local congregations and among the congregations that together constitute the Association. Individual

Unitarian Universalists and congregations are being challenged to answer questions such as: How shall we treat each other? What are we willing to promise each other? What does it mean to be “We, the member congregations”?²

The author of I Corinthians, presumably Paul of Tarsus, also drew on the understanding of citizenship in the Greco-Roman world in offering his body of Christ metaphor. Being part of a larger whole—an individual contributing to the workings of a larger organization—echoed the Hellenistic ideal of a democracy in which every citizen participated. That ideal of participatory democracy is imbedded in the heart of our Unitarian Universalist Principles in the words, “. . . the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large. . . .”

Further, Roman citizens understood themselves to be Romans no matter where in the world they found themselves. Being a Roman bestowed an identity. When Paul reminded those Corinthian adherents that they were, by their baptism, brought into one body, he was reminding them that their identity as Christians was as profound as their identity as Romans. No matter where they went or what happened to them, they would always be Christians. Would that our identification as Unitarian Universalists bestowed such a profound sense of religious identity!

This kind of deep identification with our faith tradition would, perhaps, keep our young people committed to Unitarian Universalism after graduating from our religious education programs. It would change the membership practices in our local congregations so that they reflected the depth of love and care that we feel for them. No more “easy in, easy out” attitude! A meaningful religious identity is a reflection of a meaningful path to membership. And a meaningful path to membership can only be laid by people who have committed to our congregations; people who have not only “signed the book” but have experienced an increasing spiritual depth. Identity, spirituality, and sense of commitment all depend on each other to develop. Whether a Christian in the Roman Empire or a Unitarian Universalist in contemporary Western culture, a religious identity both bestows something upon and asks something of one.

But just as the Roman citizen self-identified as a Roman, he/she was a member of a local colony—a subset of the empire.³ One needed to be part of a local community in order to live out one’s identity. So too, affiliation with a local church was important to maintaining the meaning of the Christian identity. Just claiming the label *Christian* did not bestow that profound identity. Being a member of a community of faith is what makes the meaning of one’s religious identity come alive. Not just by faith, but by affiliation is one saved! And so it is with Unitarian Universalism. We are, by historical tradition, a strongly congregational faith. Primary religious affiliation, like the power of decision making, is located primarily in the local congregation. While many people claim to be Unitarian Universalists without affiliating with a Unitarian

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Universalist congregation, a more profound identity develops in the context of the local congregation.

It is important to understand that Chapter 12 in I Corinthians begins by talking about spiritual gifts.⁴ Paul urges his followers to recognize the many and varied spiritual gifts in the Christian community and to welcome and make use of all of them. He then goes on to use a metaphor of the body to describe the church. All are brought together by baptism and together make up one spiritual body. No one organ or part is more important than another; all are essential to the healthy functioning of the whole. In fact, the more frail parts are the most indispensable; the most unseemly are given the most honor: “If one member suffers, they all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (I Cor. 12: 26-27).

The emphasis of this text is on building a fellowship based on equality, unity, and mutuality.⁵ The church that Paul urges the Corinthians toward is one in which individual persons become part of something greater. It is not a place one would join simply in order to “find one’s self.” A family shopping for the church with the most benefits would not find this one to their liking. As Bernard Jones puts it, “It is clear that the church was not an organization that an individual went along to join as he might make an application to join a golf club. It was an ‘ecclesia’—a group of people called . . .”⁶ A *calling* implies the expectation of a serious and transforming relationship. People called to membership take that membership seriously. A church built on equality, unity, and mutuality will appeal to those who are looking for a repository for their particular gifts and talents, who are looking for a place to grow beyond their own particular perspectives. It is also a church that will appeal to people who are looking for a way to live out their faith in the larger community. It is a church that celebrates the whole that is so much more than the sum of the parts, that welcomes and encourages all comers to be part of an organic entity that stretches well beyond the vision or intent of any one individual leader. It is a church where “I can take care of myself” is replaced by “We can and will take care of each other.”

It is almost a cliché that individualism and personal entitlement have come close to crippling American democracy in general and Unitarian Universalism in particular. What Robert Bellah calls *ontological individualism* has led to a loss of a collective understanding of the common good at many levels from the halls of Congress to the annual meetings of Unitarian Universalist congregations. George Rupp claims that in this atmosphere, communities of faith have an obligation to stand in opposition to a narrow focus on individual fulfillment:

Over against this orientation, communities of faith must oppose any and every view that begins uncritically with separate selves and then almost unavoidably becomes preoccupied with achieving satisfaction for the self,

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including satisfying relationships as simply a means to this end. Over against this orientation, communities of faith must remind us all that we do not begin as separate entities, which then somehow must become connected.

Rupp rather elegantly and forcefully reminds us of the image that Paul gave to the Corinthians: “Instead, we are all members of a common body—a body that is broken, even fragmented, but that is also an expression of the finally all-inclusive divine-human community in which we live and love and have our being.”⁷

So if I Corinthians 12 has something to say to contemporary Unitarian Universalists about the meaning of membership, what exactly is it? It is that membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation can be a profound experience—an experience that brings us into covenant with other people who, though diverse in their personal experiences and needs, all seek one thing in common: wholeness. The experience of membership offers to individuals the opportunity to become more whole, more committed to each other and to that which is of ultimate worth, more grounded, more profoundly human, and more aware of the gift of community. The experience of membership both affirms inherent personal worth and confers a new and expanded sense of worth as a member of a local congregation and as a Unitarian Universalist.

Becoming a member of the body of Unitarian Universalism is an opportunity to find honor, affirmation, freedom, commitment, and salvation. Understand salvation not as an entry pass into another world at death, but as the recognition that right here we have an opportunity to be more than we currently are, to become complete, to find wholeness, health, shalom.

The ancient biblical metaphor for membership contained in I Corinthians informs concepts learned from the very contemporary literature of systems theory and organizational development. A relevant theology of membership based on a systems view will understand membership as an organic and ongoing process. People (members and potential members) seek out the particular relationship that is membership in a particular local congregation. Each individual brings to this process certain needs, expectations, and personal history; the congregation also carries its history and expectations into every new relationship. Understanding the process means understanding what happens to that organic whole (the congregation) as it expands and contracts in order to accommodate the dynamic parts (members) that make it up. In developing a theology of membership for Unitarian Universalism, we propose and attempt to answer several questions.

First consider the question of *identity*. What is it that an individual assents to in becoming a member? How is each of us changed by our experience of membership in a local congregation? Just as importantly, how is the congregation changed? And how does it remain the same—what is it about the

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church that is consistent, even immutable? Since membership in the local congregation is built on relationships, a theology of membership will be a relational theology.

The next question is one of *formation*. If membership is an ongoing process, what is it that I am becoming or moving toward as my journey into membership progresses? What do I learn? What do I give and get? What structures are provided to ensure what Loren Mead calls the maturational growth of the congregation?⁸

Finally there is the question of *worship and ritual*. How does the church take note of and celebrate the identifiable moments when identity changes, when milestones are reached in the process of formation? There are the obvious celebrations such as child dedications and new member recognition ceremonies. What about installation of officers? Affirmation of lay ministries? We note ritually the milestones in our faith journeys in many different ways. Youth Sunday is, in many congregations, an opportunity for our adolescents to make powerful statements about their faith and their sense of commitment. Congregations that offer a Coming of Age program to their youth often give youth an opportunity to conduct worship services in which they share their adolescent faith journeys. Likewise, many Unitarian Universalist summer camps and conferences, as well as district conferences and the General Assembly, offer a bridging ceremony that welcomes older youth into the young adult community. Perhaps some congregations also follow this practice. We need to offer more such opportunities for people of all ages to reflect on their faith journeys and their sense of connection to the congregation.

Unitarian Universalist minister Linda Olson-Peebles offers a definition of ritual that is important to our understanding of worship. “Ritual,” she says, “is an act or event which carries with it memory and association beyond the event itself.” Rituals remind us that there is more to this life than just what we bring to it.⁹ John Burkhart, author of several preaching and worship texts, adds this to our understanding: “Rituals are symbolic activities that speak for themselves while pointing beyond themselves. They are expressive [for example, when we light a chalice at the beginning of a service, we understand that the chalice is more than just a candle—it is a reminder of our history, of our connections to other Unitarian Universalists]. Worship changes people.”¹⁰

A theology of membership will include questions of identity, formation, and worship practices. It should offer a vision of what life in the local Unitarian Universalist congregation can be—a transcendent vision that acknowledges the importance of the day-to-day work of the church but also pulls people past issues of money and status into the realm of the ultimate. It should organize our approach to faith, practice, and experience in the local congregation. George Rupp, in his study of the nature of commitment in contemporary religious communities, reminds us that an adequate theology must be both descriptive and prescriptive.¹¹ That is, it must take into account the

whole spectrum of realities it is attempting to address, and it must also enable people to see the possibilities and ideas inherent in their communities of faith.

It is important to emphasize that the impetus for an individual to seek membership in a local congregation is still a subjective experience, not a theoretical construct. As we develop our theology of membership, our prescription will be to move from a focus on the individual to a focus on the organic whole. But we must always remember that each person becomes part of that whole through his/her individual lens. This assumption resonates with the first Source in our Unitarian Universalist Statement of Principles and Purposes, a legacy from our Transcendentalist ancestors.¹² It also resonates with Henry Nelson Wieman's contention that theology must be empirical, by which he means that theological thinking begins with the evidence we gather with our own senses: "We can have no spiritual experience which does not include sense experience, because the living organism is always sensing. . . . Every power of cognition, every power of appreciation, devotion, love and aspiration requires sense experience in its beginning and in its development."¹³

We cannot create a theology (or a church) that is completely new. All we can do is gather our various experiences of life and try to put together a community that responds to the questions, issues, and needs that those experiences raise. This process will inevitably raise more questions and bring forth different issues. A healthy congregation is an organic entity; it will experience growth and change as will the individuals who constitute it.

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As Unitarian Universalists we know as well as anybody that our church, our faith, is the product of human reason and imagination. We also know that our congregations are voluntary associations. They were created by free people exercising their free will and making the decision to come together for worship, fellowship, and service. This is the legacy of our ancestors in the Radical Reformation. Those brave people died for their belief that religion should be a matter of choice. Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, president of the Starr King School for the Ministry, reminds us that there are some relationships we are born into, and others that we choose voluntarily. All those relationships bring benefits and confer obligations. Our theology of membership will address both the benefits and the obligations of our freely chosen religious association.

Our theology will reflect our history and our widely divergent contemporary viewpoints. We don't have an authoritative book, creed, or priestly class to give credence to our corporate body. All we have is ourselves and each other, and the many people who chose our particular path before us. George Rupp says that one of the problems faced by the contemporary church in general is coming to terms with the realization that the symbolic universe of religious communities is "a creation of collective human insight and imagination"¹⁴ as opposed to something that emerged directly from the hand or mouth of God. It may be easier for us to live with that realization than it is for some other religious faiths. But even that recognition requires a will-

ingness to honor the collective, and to give up our assumption that any one personal, subjective human experience is sufficient basis for a full religious life. We move from the individual to the collective, seeking wholeness and completeness.

So we gather our experiences, and we create our congregations. We acknowledge that what we create is not completely new, though it may differ radically from other communities of faith. But just as we build on a diverse spectrum of traditions and experiences, we also build on the thinking of theologians from a wide variety of traditions. The Commission believes that there are two major threads of contemporary theological thinking that can inform our theology of membership: relational theologies and liberation theology.

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Relational Theologies

Relational theologies are ways to understand how it is possible to elevate human relationships to the level of ultimate worth and meaning, to make real John Buehrens's assertion that Unitarian Universalism is a movement that "*embodies* a reverent and respectful pluralism" (emphasis ours). One of the most important things we learned from the focus groups we convened in the research phase of this report is that for many people, the experience of fellowship, of connection to other people, was the single most important factor in evaluating the meaning of their membership. Interpersonal relationships make going to church a more significant experience. We therefore wanted to develop a theological framework that took this into account; a theology of human relationships. Two of the most important theologians in this area of relational theology are Mary Hunt and Henry Nelson Wieman.

Although Hunt and Wieman are in many ways light-years apart, they have in common some basic assumptions that are particularly relevant to the work of articulating a theology of membership for Unitarian Universalism. First of all, both assume that in some way, individuals encounter the holy in intentional, nurturing relationships. Both authors are humanistic, not in the sense that they necessarily reject the possibility of a deity, but in the sense that they believe in the centrality of human experience. Rev. Harold Rosen offers this definition of humanistic theology: "Wieman's thought is humanistic, as opposed to transcendentalist on one hand, or mechanistic on the other. He repeatedly emphasizes how all evidence to date supports the view that, for better or for worse, human beings are the agents within whom the greatest value-appreciation has been released into the known universe."¹⁵

Finally, relational theologies are transformative, generative, and directed toward the creation of community. This means that individuals who enter into particular relationships can expect to be changed by these relationships, to

become more caring, more concerned with the well-being of people around them, and more able and willing to effect change.

In spite of what they have in common, the thought and the models proposed by Hunt and Wieman are radically different from each other; so much so that they cannot be presented together.

Henry Nelson Wieman is a process thinker; his work is based on the assumptions of process philosophy developed by Alfred North Whitehead. James Luther Adams has described Whitehead as a thinker whose

primary concern is to catch and communicate a religious vision of the meaning of life, indeed to grasp and communicate a vision of greatness. This vision, he is convinced, has to do with something more than the life of the individual. In short . . . it is concerned with what individuals and groups do with their solitariness in relationship—with their togetherness.¹⁶

Wieman describes religion as “man’s [sic] attempt to realize the highest good, through coming into harmonious relations with some reality greater than himself, which commands his reverence and loyal service.”¹⁷

Although Wieman is humanistic in his understanding of human nature and its place in the universe, he is also theistic in that he believes that there is something other than humanity that is worthy of our ultimate commitment. God, in process theology, is not understood to be a Being, but a Process. Wieman says, “God is the growth which springs anew when old forms perish.”¹⁸ Rosen further elaborates that “God, then, is the generative source of all constructive values.”¹⁹

Wieman proposes a four-step process through which creative interchange happens. Keep in mind that this process is not linear but cyclical. Step one is called *emergent perspectives*. In this step, individuals reflect on their own life experiences. They do this not in isolation, but in a group setting. Each person then communicates some of what he/she has concluded to others. When people talk to each other about their lives—what has happened, what has been important, what has been felt most deeply—they learn to attach meaning to experience. The second step is *progressive integration*. In this step, the exchange of meanings from step one leads each person to enrich his/her own thoughts and feelings with the meanings of others. This step, unlike the first, is more likely to happen in solitude.

The third step is called *expanding appreciation*. During this step the shared values are integrated into one’s way of living, and as a result his/her world expands—the range of experiences that he/she can understand and analyze is larger. Wieman describes it as “a range and variety of events, a richness of quality, and a reach of ideal possibility which were not there prior to this transformation.”²⁰ Though the subject for reflection is one’s own life, the process requires the presence and encouragement of other people. The group allows

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each person to become more than any of them could have been while struggling alone.

Wieman calls the final step in the creative interchange *growing community*: “If you and I have expanded our appreciable worlds as individuals, then the relations we have with our respective communities will also prove creatively transforming, such that they will grow in healthy, non-competitive ways.”²¹ This is the action step and it points the way toward justice, care of others, and deepening of relational bonds.

The great value in Wieman’s work is that it gives us a way to make our human relationships worthy of our ultimate commitment. In thinking about a theology of membership, it is essential to be able to identify the very real human-to-human relationships as the basic reality of people’s experience of belonging to a congregation. If we can use language that elevates these relationships to the level of the holy—that which is of ultimate worth—we can begin to explore membership as an experience that has deep and enduring value.

Mary Hunt is a contemporary feminist theologian associated with the Women’s Alliance for Theology and Ritual. Her basic contention is that friendship is a relationship that reveals what is of ultimate worth to us. Friendship is a voluntary association freely entered into by two or more persons. It reflects human choice; the nature of the relationship shows intentionality. She has created a model for the theological study of friendship that has four elements: love, power, embodiment, and spirituality. The model is dynamic and circular, like Wieman’s process of creative interchange. When these four elements work in harmony the friendship is generative. This means that the process generates something new “for both persons and for the larger community of which they are a part. Generativity is the hallmark of friendship.”²²

Love is the intention to recognize the drive in relationships towards unity and community. Love is a commitment to deepen bonds between persons without losing individuality. Love is the power that allows for unity in diversity, that illusive goal we are always reaching for. By *power*, Hunt means the ability of individuals to make choices. Power is individual and personal. It is also social and structural. In a congregation built on a theology of friendship, justice-seeking friends exercise their personal power in order to make changes in structural power. *Embodiment* is included in the model to acknowledge the fact that all of our reactions and relationships are mediated by our physical bodies. As the Humanist psychologist Abraham Maslow teaches us, lack of proper nutrition, rest, health care, pleasure, and work impinges on our ability to enter into community. Communities created out of the power and love of friendship encourage their members toward “healthy, integrated embodiment.”²³ This concept of embodiment reflects an understanding of the worth of every individual, and echoes Buehrens’s description of Unitarian Universalism.

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Spirituality is defined not as a private, ethereal quality but as an intentional process of making choices that affect self and community. Hunt believes that concern for meaning and value is ultimately expressed in very concrete ways—in ways that affect the quality of life for self and community. Spirituality is attentiveness, focus, awareness of how our behavior and choices affect the people around us.

Hunt's model offers us another way to use covenantal language without invoking the traditional God image of the traditional covenant. She elevates aspects of human relatedness to the realm of the holy. Love, power, embodiment, and spirituality become matters of ultimate concern and commitment.

Both Hunt and Wieman offer us a theological basis for talking about human relationships as matters of ultimate worth. If we are to deepen the meaning of membership in our congregations, it is essential that we acknowledge that what we hold sacred is the community that is created when we come together. Relational theologies can help us to invoke the holy when we talk about our ways of being together.

Liberation Theology

Being together in a meaningful way is profoundly important, but it is not a sufficient reason for the existence of the liberal church. If membership were based only on face-to-face relationships, the church would lose its power to act as an agent of transformation. Personal spiritual growth and social transformation are equally important, and our congregations, in order to make membership meaningful, must find ways to actualize these ideals. We therefore turn to the theories of liberation theology to elucidate these outward-looking aspects of membership.

The most basic definition of liberation theology would probably be “reflective praxis.” That is, a group of people think critically about their life experiences, their cultural context, their history, and their faith stance. They then take action based on the results of that reflection. This is not a linear process; it is cyclical. Reflection and praxis are part of an ongoing process of engaging with the world. This process would allow Unitarian Universalists to realize more fully our dream of being a truly diverse and inclusive movement. It engages human reason, makes room for a wide variety of experiences and opinions, and empowers all people to the work of making sense of their own unique lives.

Several concepts that all liberation theologies hold in common are important for us. The first is that theology done from a liberation perspective is always contextual. This means that it is rooted in the particularities of a given time and place; it emerges out of the real-life experience of the people engaged in the process. This is what makes it possible for people who are relatively uneducated to “do” theology. Although it is rooted in particularities, it is related

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to the universal and points toward the development of meaning. Theologian James Cone says, “I firmly believe that the issues to which theology addresses itself should be those that emerge out of life in a society as persons seek to achieve meaning in a dehumanized world.”²⁴

Any Unitarian Universalist who has taken the *Building Your Own Theology* curriculum will be familiar with the liberationist understanding of the nature of theological inquiry. Rev. Dr. Richard Gilbert says in that curriculum, “I continue to maintain that theology comes out of the tough and tender experiences of life: first comes the experience (religion) and then the reflection on that experience (theology).”²⁵

Second, liberation theology is an engaged theology. It is in dialogue with the culture; it seeks to understand the history of a people in terms of their experiences of oppression and freedom, exploitation and justice. “Do we believe,” asks Unitarian Universalist theologian Dr. Thandeka, “that simply to think about an issue is the same as to live in a way which exemplifies our concern for the issue?”²⁶ This question, addressed specifically to Unitarian Universalists, nudges us rather urgently toward engagement.

Third, liberation theology is always hopeful. History is mined in order to understand not just what has happened but what could have been and what still could be. It is, in essence, the use of history to project a more hopeful future, what mujerista theologian Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz calls “the preferred future as a source of hope.”²⁷ Unitarian Universalism has always been a hopeful faith—sometimes accused of unfounded optimism. However, if our faith in the future comes not from ignoring the pain of the present but from transforming it through a careful process of reflection and action, there is, as in the title of Rev. Dr. Frederick Muir’s book, a reason to hope. As liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez writes, “The commitment to the creation of a just society, and, ultimately, a new humanity, presupposes confidence in the future.”²⁸

Fourth, the basic process of liberation theology is critical reflection. This is the place where we believe that exciting work could be done in Unitarian Universalist congregations. We already have a tradition of honoring the use of reason. We have too often assumed that only well-educated, well-read people could “do” Unitarian Universalist theology. However, Rev. Lucy Hitchcock, in a conversation with the Commission on Appraisal, reminded us that poor people, uneducated people, can “be thoughtful about the world.”

Hitchcock referred to the work of Paolo Freire in this regard. Freire has done groundbreaking work in Brazil with uneducated and illiterate populations. His purpose is to move them from “naïve awareness to critical awareness.”²⁹ His book *Pedagogy For The Oppressed* has applications in this country as well. It is cited in a leadership training manual produced by Youthbuild USA, which works with inner-city American youth. YouthBuild incorporates his ideas into its youth organizing by building basic literacy and public speaking skills into all programming.

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This is an exciting avenue for Unitarian Universalists to pursue in our quest to make our congregations more diverse. Using a liberation process, we could open up our process of theology building so that it recognizes and welcomes the participation of people whom we have previously thought of as not well-read or well-educated enough. It would be, first of all, a matter of educating ourselves about the fact that critical reflection on lived experience is not the exclusive business of the intellectual elite or the well-educated. Then, together with our new partners in theology, we could all become what Gutierrez calls the organic intellectuals, that is, “theologians personally and vitally engaged in historical realities.”³⁰

The fifth characteristic of liberation theology is that it is always a justice-seeking process. Liberation theologies have all arisen out of the experience of oppression—economic, social, and racial/ethnic. For each particular strand of liberation theology, the basic question is always, “What does this painful experience mean, given the promises that our faith tells us God has made?” In other words, where is God in the process of oppression? The answer, in various ways, is that God clearly expresses a preferential option for the poor. The preferential option for the poor has been a part of biblical interpretation for millennia. The prophets of the Hebrew scriptures railed against economic injustice. Jesus continually urged his followers to shed their worldly possessions and focus on acts of justice and of healing. Rev. Richard Gilbert credits Thomas Aquinas with best articulating the theological basis for this “preferential option” in his discussion of distributive justice.³¹ When the Bible is read through the lens of this preferential option, a commitment to justice is an inevitable result.

Justice seeking is the praxis piece of the cycle. Isasi-Diaz explains, “In *mujerista* theology, praxis is critical reflective action based on an analysis of historical reality perceived through the lens of an option for a commitment to liberation.”³² The result of a belief that God has a preferential option for the poor is not to sit around waiting for God to act on that preference. Belief in the preferential option is, instead, the inspiration for people to act.

Isasi-Diaz talks extensively about the development of moral agency in Hispanic women. Moral agency means making your own lived experience available to others; it allows people to become self-determining. In *mujerista* theology, moral agency is generative; that is, to become a moral agent means to take on increased responsibility for and care for the community. It is not about individual self-actualization but about changing the experience of the whole community. “Life,” she says, “is life if it is linked to others.”³³

While *mujerista* theology comes out of a theistic tradition, its theme of moral agency is echoed in the work of Unitarian Universalist theologian William R. Jones, a firm Humanist. Jones urges us to believe in “the functional ultimacy of humanity.”³⁴ In other words, whether or not you believe there is a God, you had better act as though a better world is up to you!

And this leads to the sixth and final aspect of liberation theology—it is Humanist. Not in the contemporary understanding of Humanist in opposition to theist—but in the more traditional Renaissance meaning that focuses on the centrality of human experience as the source of authority for moral and ethical decision making. Gustavo Gutierrez describes this clearly:

Humankind is seen as assuming conscious responsibility for its own destiny. This understanding provides a dynamic context and broadens the horizons of the desired social changes. In this perspective the unfolding of all the dimensions of humanness is demanded—persons who *make themselves* throughout their life and throughout history. [emphasis ours]³⁵

The process and concepts of liberation theology can significantly inform the process of identity and formation in Unitarian Universalist congregations. We can use the liberation theology process to open up our congregations to a variety of people who might otherwise find us puzzling or inaccessible.

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Implicit Covenants

As we begin to consider the possibility of welcoming into membership a more diverse population than we currently have, it is important to pay attention to some of the unstated but implicit covenants that govern our congregations.

At some level a statement of purpose contained in the bylaws, or even an affirmation read in services every Sunday, is nothing more than words on a page. More significant to the life of any community than the words it says it lives by are the affirmations (and negations) it actually lives by, expressed by its accustomed behaviors, customs, processes, and traditions. Implicit covenants are communicated almost subliminally, primarily by the real leaders—who may or may not be the nominal leaders—of the community. These folk are the gatekeepers, the matriarchs and patriarchs, the people who are continually teaching “how we do things here.” This applies to all communities, not just congregations, but it certainly applies to congregations.

These implicit covenants are all the more powerful for the fact that they are largely invisible to those who are already established in the community. They are “just the way things are.” Woe to a fledgling minister, or a would-be lay leader, who cannot see beneath the surface of the declared covenant of a congregation to its subliminal rules and assumptions.

Implicit covenants are a fact of life. A community would not really be a community without them. But they also represent the greatest barrier to change. To take an obvious example, many if not most of our congregations make stated commitments to diversity and openness, and some make even more explicit declarations of welcoming persons regardless of race, class, or

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sexual orientation. Yet by and large our congregations remain as they have been—white and middle-class. Some change has occurred with regard to sexual minorities, which is no doubt attributable in some measure to our relative uniqueness in ordaining significant numbers of openly gay and lesbian clergy, while many of the other even moderately liberal denominations have struggled with this issue.

We can learn at least two things from these facts. One is the power of implicit covenants, or to give it another name, the power of the status quo, which should never be underestimated. Communities change, as individuals change, with great difficulty. Like attracts like, so the way we were becomes the way we are and the way we often continue to be. The second thing, however, is that change is possible. To reiterate an important point made earlier in this report, each new member of a congregation changes it to some degree. Individuals do not simply become members of a community. By their joining and their participation the community is reconstituted, reformed, changed; it is no longer quite what it was before. In this fact there is hope.

There is also hope in the fact that there are some aspects of our history, our congregational culture, and our practices, that support and affirm the attempt to gather a diverse membership.

More than seventy years ago, Rev. Dr. Earl Morse Wilbur wrote an exhaustive history of the Unitarian side of our faith. He concluded that what makes our movement unique in history is our emphasis on freedom, reason, and tolerance: “When the Unitarian movement began, the marks of true religions were commonly thought to be belief in the creeds, membership in the church, and participation in its rites and sacraments. To the Unitarian of today [1925] the marks of true religion are spiritual freedom, enlightened reason, broad and tolerant sympathy, upright character, and unselfish service.”³⁶

Rev. John Buehrens has summarized our unique place in the contemporary American religious landscape:

At a time when many of America’s historic ‘mainline’ denominations are stagnant and divided, and when the politically motivated religious right seems the most prominent expression of religion in our culture, Unitarian Universalism offers a clear alternative—supporting the worth and dignity of every individual, respecting the rights of conscience, promoting the practice of authentic democracy, and recognizing our interdependence with all that exists. We do not have a required formula of belief. Instead, we *embody a reverent, respectful religious pluralism*. [emphasis ours]³⁷

One of the purposes of religion, any religion, is to offer people the opportunity to search for meaning, to make connections, and to seek spiritual transformation. Our particular contribution to that general purpose, always hoped for but not always realized, is that embodiment of reverent, respectful plural-

ism. There is a great deal of talk these days about diversity and about how to create an atmosphere of respect for difference. We have always been a religion that advocates the use of reason and the primacy of human experience. We have been a faith that emphasizes process over content, covenant over creed. These are tools and traditions that our congregations can use in order to become places where diversity is welcomed and celebrated, places where every person's ideas and experiences are acknowledged, and where it is safe to bring personal experience into the religious conversation. A Unitarian Universalist theology of membership must take into account both the universal human religious need and the particular Unitarian Universalist response to that need.

Returning to Wilbur's history, we consider the idea of spiritual freedom as one of the most attractive aspects of our liberal faith. Ask a typical member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation what particularly attracted him/her to this way of faith and sooner rather than later he/she will say the word *freedom*. "Freedom of conscience." "Freedom of belief." What he/she would mean is the non-creedal principle, which is indeed central to our tradition. But a church is more than a club for freethinkers, or ought to be. You don't need a church to believe what you want, or to think for yourself. You need a church to be in relationship with others. As the word itself implies, a *community* is defined by something in common, gathered around some common purpose or belief.

As the theologian Martin Buber puts it, "The real essence of community is to be found in the fact—manifest or otherwise—that it has a center. The real beginning of a community is when its members have a common relation to the center overriding all other relations: the circle is described by the radii, not by the points along its circumference."³⁸ This is a crucial insight. A community is defined by its center and by the various individuals' relationships to that center. Churches are commonly thought of as communities centered around a creed or doctrine. Ours our centered around a covenant.

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Explicit Covenants

We often say that our congregations are covenantal communities. A *covenant* is a set of mutual commitments, promises, or agreements that form the bond of a community, its center. Following the practice established early on by our Puritan forebears, many of our congregations have explicit covenants, whether in traditional or contemporary form and language, which individuals "own" or "subscribe to" in the act of joining. These are sometimes called "bonds of union" or "bonds of fellowship." One of the most well-known of these is a variant of the so-called Ames Covenant. In the original formulation of its author, Rev. Charles G. Ames, the Ames Covenant read, "In the freedom of the Truth, and the spirit of Jesus Christ, we unite for the worship of God and the service of Man." Another example, which also exists in several vari-

We are united not by common beliefs but by common purposes and intentions.

ants, was composed by Rev. James Vila Blake: “Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our great covenant: To dwell together in peace, To seek the truth in love, And to help one another.”

One point in declaring that our congregations are covenantal communities is to emphasize that they are not creedal communities. We are united not by common beliefs but by common purposes and intentions. The essential difference is between the words “we believe” (a creed, a statement of common belief) and “we unite” (a covenant, a statement of common commitment).

Conrad Wright points out two “characteristic problems” with such statements. The first is a matter of language. As he says, “Some Unitarian Universalists are so allergic to particular styles of language that if they see a covenant that is not in accord with their preference, they stop reading.” Some congregations expend considerable energy in attempting to reformulate their covenants to suit current tastes, though Wright himself suggests that since we welcome and encourage diversity, it might be “better to have such statements couched in language that represents nobody’s preference, that belongs to no faction, so long as the substance behind the language is correct.”³⁹ That is, as long as it is centered on the affirmation “we unite.”

The second difficulty cited by Wright is of even more significance to the concerns of this report:

The other problem with our covenants is that we do not take them seriously enough. . . . We need to pay more attention to what the commitments are that are undertaken in a covenant relationship and how they may be terminated. Joining a church should not be quite the same thing as joining the National Geographic Association [sic].⁴⁰

If this problem is to be addressed at all, it needs to be addressed in the process of joining rather than at the point of departure. A truly covenantal community will take its covenantal nature seriously and communicate its seriousness to those considering membership. But the reality in most of our congregations is that membership is treated at worst casually and even at best as largely a matter of solely individual choice. In our success-oriented culture both ministers and membership committees are often anxious to swell the ranks of the enlisted, so that visitors may find themselves being invited to join the congregation on their second or third appearance. It is encouraging in this regard to see growing numbers of congregations now suggesting a number of steps—such as taking a series of introductory classes or formal appointments with the minister—prior to membership.

The recently formed Epiphany Community Church in Fenton, Michigan, has taken another approach, one that has much to recommend it. This congregation has “translated” its covenant (the Ames Covenant) into a series of behavioral expectations, making explicit the commitments expected of both

members and the congregation itself, one to another. “In the love of truth,” for example, commits members to their own integrity: “I fearlessly seek the truth of my life. I reflect on my beliefs and actions and take responsibility for my spiritual growth.” At the same time the congregation “commits to providing opportunities for truth-seeking. Worship classes, book studies and discussion groups are available.” Each clause of the covenant is similarly fleshed out in this manner, such that the meaning of membership is vividly expressed. The entire text of the Epiphany model is attached as an appendix to this report.

The Membership Threshold

If we take our covenants seriously, treating them as blueprints for community rather than irrelevant but nice-sounding statements, then we will also begin to take more seriously the meaning of membership in our covenanted communities. While some UUs dearly value what they call the “easy in, easy out” culture, others recognize the need to imbue the membership experience with significance. Dean M. Kelley, points out in his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* that the fastest-growing churches tend to make joining the church difficult, not easy. These churches place a “high bar” at the membership threshold.

Written some thirty years ago, Kelley’s book is still worth reading and subsequent research has largely confirmed his conclusions. The book has proved prophetic in predicting the long-term, ongoing decline in mainline religion and the rise of what he called “serious” or “strict” religious groups. His “Minimal Maxims of Seriousness” are worth reflecting upon. “Those who are serious about their faith,” Kelley writes,

1. Do not confuse it with other beliefs/loyalties/practice, or mingle them together indiscriminately, or pretend they are alike, of equal merit, or mutually compatible if they are not.
2. Make high demands of those admitted to the organization that bears the faith, and do not include or allow to continue within it those who are not fully committed to it.
3. Do not consent to, encourage, or indulge any violations of its standards of belief or behavior by its professed adherents.
4. Do not keep silent about it, apologize for it, or let it be treated as though it made no difference, or should make no difference, in their behavior or in their relationships with others.⁴¹

This list is worth pondering. While some of their specific approaches would be inappropriate to liberal congregations, there is no question that conserva-

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tive churches communicate their seriousness about the meaning and commitments of membership. What does seem appropriate to liberal congregations is to take with greater seriousness the meaning and implications of their covenantal basis. We should, as Conrad Wright has suggested, take our covenants more seriously than we often do.

One way of doing so may be expressed in our rites and ceremonies of membership. The churches of many other denominations make a big deal of the act of joining as representing a moment of transformation in the life of the individual. Baptism, for example, at least in the traditions where it is central, symbolizes death and spiritual rebirth and enacts this process with a dramatic full immersion. Most of our congregations, by contrast, treat this event rather casually. In most, membership in the congregation is a voluntary individual decision, recognized ceremonially but with little fanfare. This is in keeping with our emphasis on individual conscience and free choice, but it fails to acknowledge the spiritual importance of membership—not only to the individual member but to the community itself.

Some of our older New England congregations, perhaps retaining forms from the past, require a formal declaration of intent to join the congregation, followed by a stipulated waiting period of weeks or even months before an individual's membership is confirmed. Presumably, the waiting period is to encourage serious contemplation of the decision and may include some spiritual discipline, required education, or pastoral conversation. If nothing else, such requirements signal that the congregation takes membership as something more serious than the casual signing of a book.

It is somewhat more common for the governing body of a congregation to formally receive new members. Though certainly *pro forma*, such practice does indicate and highlight the fact that membership is a reciprocal relationship, a mutual covenant between an individual and a congregation with at least implied obligations and responsibilities on both sides. Many congregations stipulate a waiting period between the time of signing the membership book and the conferring of voting rights.

A liturgical expression of the membership covenant is perhaps the most common of all reception practices, usually in the form of a ceremony of welcome incorporated into a Sunday worship service. Often these recognition events are rather informal. Taken with appropriate seriousness (as they commonly are by the new members themselves), they can serve as regular reminders and expressions of the fact that the congregation is a covenantal body, created by mutual promises and a sense of mutual obligation between and among its members, new and continuing.

The importance of allowing the children of the congregation to be in attendance on such occasions is often overlooked. Here is an opportunity for the children to witness a liturgical expression of the basic nature of the congregation, characterized by voluntary association and covenantal obligation. They

may learn from such repeated experiences that congregation membership deserves to be and is taken seriously by the adult community. A similar case can be made for children's attendance at other important events in the congregation's liturgical life that define and express the community, such as christenings, dedications, and coming-of-age rituals.

To recapitulate: The distinguishing characteristic of our Unitarian congregations is that they are covenantal bodies. We are united as congregations not by common beliefs but by common commitments. Covenantal congregations are united not by statements of shared beliefs but instead by mutual promises. There are both implied and explicit commitments that the members of a congregation make to one another in joining themselves together; this is their covenant, made of mutual commitments of support, presence, and participation. The most familiar example of a covenantal relationship is marriage, in which the wedding vows are the covenant.

We moderns no longer take our covenants as seriously as did people in earlier times. As Conrad Wright has written with specific reference to our churches: "We do not remind ourselves that a covenant is an agreement made between parties, not a statement by an individual to be discarded and forgotten unilaterally. A church united by covenant is made up of people who have made commitments to one another."⁴² He quotes the Cambridge Platform: "Church-members may not remove or depart from the Church, & so one from another as they please, nor without just & weighty cause but ought to live & dwell together."⁴³

In those long-ago times people treated the bonds of church membership as seriously as they did the bonds of matrimony, which is to say very seriously indeed. The Commission invites Unitarian Universalists to return to the practice of taking membership seriously. We also invite Unitarian Universalists to consider a new, expanded, and generous definition of membership. This report is an urgent plea to create congregations that are inclusive and welcoming; most especially it is a plea to create non-traditional paths to membership that would usher in people who have previously felt unwelcome in our congregations. We believe that the survival, strength, and impact of our movement is dependent on strong, committed members at the local level.

If we were to re-create our congregations using the concepts of relational and liberation theology discussed earlier in this chapter, if we were to invite all of the people circling around the periphery of Unitarian Universalist congregations to tell their stories and to let their stories inform our decision making around membership practices, how would our congregations change? We are certain that we would see a small explosion of growth as people who long for affiliation with our religious communities found themselves welcomed. Our congregations would become more diverse—ethnically and theologically—as folks whose values are congruent with ours found new ways to express their spirituality within our walls. Music, dance, visual expressions, poetry,

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language—all would be transformed as our membership expanded. Infusions of energy from young people—both those who grew up in our congregations and those just finding our faith—would further transform our congregations in exciting ways.

One goal of this study of the meaning of membership is to enable our congregations to become more vital, more effective, and more diverse. Another goal is to help congregations create a membership process that allows individuals to deepen their experience of participation—to imbue the process of becoming a member with a spiritual meaning well beyond the technicalities of signing a book or voting. Unitarian Universalists want to belong to vital, growing, changing congregations that look outward as well as inward, congregations that support the spiritual growth and deepening faith of individual members and still ask questions about how they fit into the larger community. In order to achieve these goals, we propose an expanded definition of membership.

The Commission suggests that Unitarian Universalists begin to look at membership as an ongoing process of affiliation and connection between individuals (members) and the larger group (the congregation). The decision to become a part of the life of a Unitarian Universalist congregation is not necessarily made logically or in a linear mode. Amy Sales and Gary Tobin, in their survey of contemporary research about the way Americans affiliate with religious communities, emphasize the emotional, spiritual, and experiential aspects of the membership decision:

... decisions about affiliation or dropping out are highly charged emotionally. Unlike decisions about which automobile to purchase or what color to paint one's house, decisions about church or synagogue membership touch on an individual's identity, ideology and beliefs, faith and spirituality, and on how all these will play out in the context of the family. These issues involve deep feeling.⁴⁴

Honoring the spiritual milestone for each member would encourage people to become involved in the life of the local congregation.

The sense of belonging, of making a commitment on a spiritual level, may or may not be congruent in time with the act of signing a book or doing whatever is required to vote. David Bartholomew, writing about the issue of membership in contemporary American congregations, urges the separation of the voting role from the spiritual milestone.⁴⁵ Taking note of and honoring the spiritual milestone for each member, rather than celebrating only the technical act of book-signing, would encourage many different kinds of people to become involved in the life of the local congregation. Membership committees could then begin to focus on the relational aspects of the membership process rather than the technical problem of categorizing people based on whether or not they vote, pledge a certain amount, or have their signatures in a certain place.

Rather than focusing on defining qualifications for voting members, we suggest that congregations focus on appropriate participation as the variable

that defines membership. Those that participate appropriately in the life of the congregation constitute its membership.

Appropriate participation can range from simple presence at worship, to making a contribution once a year, to bringing one's needs for ministry to the community. For example, a long-time member who is now confined to a nursing home participates appropriately by remaining on the mailing list and receiving visits from the minister and other caring members of the community. Another person may, due to limitations of health or circumstance, be present in the prayer life of the congregation, and this is appropriate participation also. Having needs and allowing oneself to be "ministered unto" is one way to participate appropriately in the life of the congregation.

Parents whose children are grown may choose not to attend but continue to write a check every year because they want to ensure the ongoing presence of the congregation in their town. We cannot define precisely appropriate participation or presence, but every congregation can broaden its understanding of membership to include many more people who wish to be part of the life of the congregation but don't fit into the traditional membership categories. Rather than trying to make rules about who is a member and who is not, one local congregation places people in a Caring Circle when they attend at least monthly. This is one measure of presence and invites further appropriate participation even from people who have not made the traditional "signing the book" commitment to membership. We encourage congregations to think creatively about what appropriate participation might be for individuals and families with differing circumstances who wish to be part of the congregation in some way.

Participation in the life of the community does assume some form of accountability to the community. Accountability has to do with a willingness to take some responsibility for the quality of life in the congregation. One new member interviewed soon after joining a UU congregation commented that although the decision to join had been completely subjective, he knew that the subjective experience demanded of him some pretty objective changes in behavior. He listed pledging at a higher rate, volunteering more seriously, and taking responsibility for the congregation. "Being a member is living it, not being passive." Recall the comment cited earlier regarding membership as a measure of how strongly a person wants to influence the destiny of the group.

Appropriate participation also assumes assent to the covenant of the congregation. Remember that in our discussion about the particular niche that Unitarian Universalism occupies in the American religious landscape, an emphasis on covenant rather than on creed was one of the identifiers. In order for members, especially new members, to assent to a covenant, the congregation has to have a covenant that is explicit. It is the responsibility of the group to define the ways it wishes to be together, to be clear with newcomers about the expectations of the group, and to remind each other frequently about the

terms of the covenant. A caveat here: This does not mean that each new member who joins a congregation remakes himself/herself in the image of the covenant. In fact, if we understand the congregation to be an organic entity, every new person who participates actively in the life of the congregation changes the dynamic and, in effect, causes the covenant to be rewritten.

The Commission recommends that Unitarian Universalist congregations significantly expand their membership practices and definitions to embrace all people who wish to participate in a meaningful and healthy way in the life of the local congregation. The people who are participating appropriately are the constituency of your congregations. Rather than focusing on qualifications for voting, minimum pledge payments, age, theology, or any other attribute, we urge congregations to look at the range of people who share the worship life, the social life, and the justice-seeking life of the congregation. This is our membership, though all may not have signatures in the membership book. We recognize that this is a radical departure from the practices of many, if not most, membership committees. We also recognize that this practice raises some complicated issues around identity, accountability, inclusion, and definition.

Notes

1. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."
2. Unitarian Universalist Association, *Fulfilling the Promise: A Recovenanting Process for the 21st Century* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1998).
3. Bernard Jones, *Belonging: A Lay Theology of Church Membership* (London: Epworth Press, 1973), 74.
4. "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone." I Cor. 12: 4-6.
5. John Throop, "Believing In Lay Ministry," *The Christian Ministry* (November-December, 1997): 16.
6. Jones, op. cit., 22.
7. George Rupp, *Commitment and Community*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 78.
8. Loren B. Mead, *More Than Numbers. The Way Churches Grow* (Washington, DC: Alban Institute), 42.
9. Linda Olson-Peebles, Church Newsletter (Alexandria, VA: Mt. Vernon Unitarian Church).
10. John Burkhardt, *Worship: A Searching Examination of the Liturgical Experience* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982), 23.
11. Rupp, op. cit., 50.

12. "The living tradition we share draws from many sources: direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces that create and uphold life."
13. Henry Nelson Wieman, as quoted in Bruce Southworth, *At Home in Creativity: The Naturalistic Theology of Henry Nelson Wieman* (Boston: Skinner House Books), 30.
14. Rupp, op. cit., 5.
15. Harold Rosen, *Religious Education and Our Ultimate Commitment. An Application of Henry Nelson Wieman's Philosophy of Creative Interchange*. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 11.
16. James Luther Adams, as quoted in Ibid., 39.
17. Ibid., 33.
18. Henry Nelson Wieman as quoted in ibid., 46.
19. Rosen, op. cit., 46.
20. Ibid., 42.
21. Wieman, as quoted in ibid., 43.
22. Mary Hunt, *Fierce Tenderness: A Feminist Theology of Friendship* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992), 99.
23. Ibid., 104.
24. James Cone as quoted in Diana Hayes, *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 5.
25. Richard Gilbert, *Building Your Own Theology*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2000), 3.
26. Thandeka, as quoted in Frederic John Muir, *A Reason For Hope: Liberation Theology Confronts a Liberal Faith* (Carmel, CA: Sunflower Ink, 1994), 61.
27. Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, *En La Lucha (In the Struggle: Elaborating a Mujerista Theology)* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 5. Mujerista theology refers to theological work done by women of Hispanic heritage.
28. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation History: Politics and Salvation*, Rev. Ed (New York: Orbis Books, 1988), 121.
29. Gutierrez, op. cit., 57.
30. Ibid., 10.
31. Richard S. Gilbert, *How Much Do We Deserve? An Inquiry into Distributive Justice*, 2nd. ed. (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2001), 11.
32. Isasi-Diaz, op. cit., 167.
33. Ibid., 156.
34. William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 187.
35. Gutierrez, op. cit., 24.
36. Earl Morse Wilbur, *Our Unitarian Heritage* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1925), 470.

37. John A. Buehrens, ed., *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), x.
38. Martin Buber as quoted in Jacob Trapp, ed., *To Hallow this Life* (New York: Harper, 1958), 135.
39. Conrad Wright, *Walking Together*. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989), 9.
40. *Ibid.*, 9.
41. Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 121.
42. Wright, *op. cit.*, 9.
43. Cambridge Platform, as quoted in *ibid.* The Cambridge Platform is a document written in 1648 that established the polity of the New England Puritans. It is the normative basis for congregational polity.
44. Amy Sales and Gary Tobin, eds., *Church and Synagogue Affiliation: Theory, Research, and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 7.
45. David Bartholomew, "Membership Matters," *Epworth Review*, 20, no. 2 (April 1997): 60.