

# Conclusion

In 1997, the Commission decided to study membership because the topic was important to our movement. Now, at the completion of our study, we are even more convinced of the significance this issue has for our liberal religious movement. We believe that a deeper and broader understanding of the meaning of membership is vital to our growth. The individual personal spiritual growth of each person who identifies with Unitarian Universalism and the growth of our congregations depend on deepening the theological understandings of membership and expanding the perspectives that are represented in our congregations. The challenges and opportunities abound.

A key concept underlying this report is our understanding of membership as a process. The theological perspective that grounds our work begins with St. Paul's classic metaphor of the relationship of the various "members" of the body and goes on to incorporate contemporary insights and ideas from many sources, liberation and process theology in particular. We chose our title, *Belonging*, near the end of our work, but it is central to Paul's original metaphor: Each organ of the body belongs to a whole that would not be whole without it. We find our wholeness in relationship, in community with others, people both like and unlike ourselves. Individually we are changed, transformed by our relationship with others; at the same time the community as a whole is changed by the presence and participation of each individual. Both individually and collectively we are in a constant state of change, of transformation. Transformation is the fundamental purpose of and reason for a religion

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of seriousness and depth. What we have called the process of membership is such a process, leading from superficial levels of identity and affiliation to deeper levels of commitment, to true membership.

We suggest three categories to outline this progression: *identification*, *affiliation*, and *membership*. The first is primarily self-identification: those who label themselves Unitarian Universalist but make no observable demonstration of their commitment—what someone has called “UUs without showing it.” Affiliation implies some level of connection or participation in a congregation and/or other organizational involvement—for example, in youth programs, summer camps, or special interest groups. Membership suggests minimally an overt commitment, demonstrated by fulfilling stated institutional requirements, which is, however, only the beginning of a process of deepening participation and commitment, a process that may be lifelong. Again, our fundamental thesis is that membership is a process.

In this light we are asking our congregations to reconsider the meaning of membership and their practices relative to welcoming and incorporating new members. In our view all who participate in the life of a congregation are effectively members in some sense, whether or not they have signed the book or otherwise formalized their relationship. Practical considerations such as reporting requirements and denominational annual fund appeals based on Fair Share giving encourage a precision of definition that may be organizationally necessary but is essentially false. A congregation, any true community, is in an almost constant state of redefinition, based upon the complexities of the relationships and inter-relationships of which it is composed. At a given point in time the most influential member of a given congregation may not be technically a member at all but an individual whose behavior positively or negatively focuses the energy and direction of the whole.

Congregations, in other words, are also always involved in a process of transformation. They are different communities virtually every Sunday, affected by the changing needs and aspirations of their changing constituencies, those who are in the truest sense their members. A congregation that takes itself seriously, that takes its work seriously, will have a clear understanding of what its central purposes are, of what it is calling its members to. This is the basis of our claim that a study of membership is really a study about evangelism.

In order to build and sustain healthy congregations, we all have to work hard. Our questions of membership are directed at you, someone who has enough interest in our Unitarian Universalist faith to read this book. As a part of your own growth and development, we ask you to reach out to those who have not yet taken that step. In developing a new meaning of membership, we can better communicate what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist to others who are seeking. UUs must examine and clarify the concept of spiritual home and grapple with tough issues in creating it. The Commission calls you to ex-

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amine your own theology—your meaning making—and how that calls you to live your life. We challenge you, as we challenge ourselves, to think creatively about what UUs are called to be and do in the world. We ask you to invest yourself in your local congregation so that it and the more than one thousand like it provide healthy, nurturing, and challenging communities of faith—communities that are open to all who seek.

In the course of our study, we asked ourselves whether one can be a Unitarian Universalist without being a member of a congregation. We know that one's identification with Unitarian Universalism does not necessarily depend on membership in a UU congregation. While we believe that affiliation with a UU congregation is the most common way of strengthening that identification and deepening a personal theology, it is not the only way. Some have told us that congregation affiliation is difficult and painful. Therefore, it is in the best interests of our movement to honor and affirm those extra-congregational paths because they make it possible for many who would not otherwise be among us to remain. We call for congregations to look at the ways they exclude those with different voices so that all may find affiliation with a congregation deepening and meaningful.

We call on you to expand your thinking to get beyond numbers. Any discussion of membership that focuses only on numerical growth is incomplete. Not only are such assessments misleading but they consume time and energy that can be better used to build relationships and focus on common goals. In order for our congregations to be sources of strength, vitality, and vision we must pay attention to the quality of congregational life as well. Congregations are organic structures, reconstituting themselves with every person who joins or leaves them. If we do not view membership as being in continual formation and reformation, our congregations will become static and calcified. As Unitarian Universalists we must be continually challenged to reflect on our faith, on our relationship to congregations, to the Universalist movement, and on how our faith takes shape in the larger community. In doing so, the meaning of membership will be clarified and strengthened for each of us as individuals and for the congregations with which we affiliate.

Our congregations face particular challenges in carrying out the practices that we identify with deepening the meaning of membership. If we are to build an inclusive and dynamic theology of membership, we must live with the tension that comes from identifying common goals and interests at the same time that we welcome and incorporate differences. This is a creative tension that strengthens rather than diminishes our movement. In order to live our faith, we must understand and embrace practices and processes that overcome conflicts that inevitably arise in a dynamic, growing system.

In order to create healthy, open congregations, a systems perspective recommends an open discussion of norms and expectations of membership. Engaging in a discussion and clarification of the expectations of membership is

what matters most. Avoiding that discussion results in ambiguity and ambivalence, which in turn create confusion, resentment, and alienation.

Our commitment to embracing diversity compels us to address the significant role that extra-congregational groups play in building the congregations that will, in turn, build a strong UU movement. Congregations are the foundation of our movement. They can and do provide support and community, especially in times of personal or spiritual crisis. Congregations can also become too comfortable. We get too comfortable thinking that everyone looks like us, believes as we do, and sees the world through the same cultural lenses. The result is a failure to live up to the theological basis of our free faith. We are called to listen to different voices and honor different experiences of the world. This call transcends tolerance. Indeed, tolerance is not enough. We are diminished individually and collectively if we fail to go beyond tolerance. We must celebrate and affirm the ways in which different experiences and perspectives enrich and strengthen our movement. The extra-congregational organizations discussed in this report play a vital role in helping us live our theology. They provide support and connection to many who do not yet feel included in a local congregation. They provide a beginning to important conversations. Such conversations are necessary if we are to truly learn and understand experiences of the world that are different from our own. Our congregational base does not mean we cannot find a broader understanding of how people come to identify with our movement and make stronger connections between our congregations and these important groups.

Youth and young adults present unique and important opportunities for they are the future of our movement. Most self-identify as Unitarian Universalist yet do not feel a connection to a local congregation. Many have participated in our religious education programs and are moving along that path of maturational and incarnational growth. All too often our congregations are not successful at engaging them in the life of the larger congregational community. We fail ourselves as well as our younger UUs when we overlook their contributions and their unique needs.

There are those who believe that we cannot survive the tension created by our efforts to address diversity. They call for us to emphasize what we have in common, minimizing the differences. This is not our conclusion. Rather, we believe that choosing to live in this tension will help our movement grow, not only numerically but in all respects. Our world cries out for a vision of different religions, different cultures, and different traditions living in harmony. We believe our faith community offers such a vision.

We acknowledge a risk in engaging in the kinds of discussions we propose. We have raised provocative questions that will foster discussion around the continent—questions that may well introduce difference of opinion into the daily life of our congregations. Bringing a discussion of norms and expectations into the open raises the likelihood of conflict. How congregations deal

with these conflicts has a significant impact on membership and is an important dimension of organic growth.

We believe that we are up to the challenge. We encourage you to act on our recommendations. Most of all, we ask you to deepen your commitment to growth, your own and that of your congregation. Together we will all reach new experiences of belonging and an enhanced understanding of the meaning of membership.

