



ADULT STUDY & PROCESS GUIDE

to

Belonging: The Meaning of Membership

Report by the Commission on Appraisal, Unitarian Universalist Association
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Permission granted to duplicate for group study.

We gratefully acknowledge use of the following material:

"Would You Harbor Me?" Music and lyrics by Ysaye M. Barnwell, Barnwell's Notes Publishing, 1994, Washington, DC.



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Introduction

This study guide is intended to stimulate reflection and discussion, and to assist congregations in working through some of the questions raised by the Commission on Appraisal's report, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. The report is not a how-to guide to church membership. Nor is it a source for improving congregational membership procedures. Rather, it explores why people join our congregations, what sustains them, and ways to enrich and deepen membership experiences. Like the report, this guide is designed to help individuals or small groups engage in deeper reflection about what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist.

Ways to Use This Process and Study Guide

- Individual reflection and study
- Small groups or committees (e.g., young adult groups, membership committees, extra-congregational¹ organizations)
- Sunday forums
- Adult enrichment/education classes
- Reflection for congregational or extra-congregational leadership teams
- Religious professionals' study groups (e.g., ministers, religious educators, membership directors, church administrators, etc.)
- Sermon source

Process Suggestions for Groups

- *Getting started.* The publication of *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership* presents a renewed opportunity to learn about how your congregation works. Determine who will sponsor the program. You might begin by contacting the person responsible for organizing adult programs. If you don't know who is responsible, ask your minister or the adult religious education/enrichment chair or committee. Another place to

¹ The Commission uses the term *extra-congregational* to refer to "the official and unofficial UU-related, non-congregational bodies" including district-level and cluster formations and associate and independent affiliate organizations. (p. 78)

begin is with the Membership Committee. The structure and roles of church membership committees varies widely. You may wish to conduct an informal survey to determine if there is sufficient interest in a thematic time-limited group with a structured discussion about membership.

- *Who should attend?* This study guide is designed for youth, young adults (high school-age and beyond), and adults with all levels and lengths of affiliation or membership. It is especially important for all groups to be invited to attend Session 4: Investing in Youth and Young Adults. It is appropriate for general use in congregations or for congregational leadership groups. It is also designed for use by religious professionals and extra-congregational groups. A registration process will enable facilitators to do better planning.
- *Group or class size* is optional. Groups of six to twelve participants work well. Keep in mind that while more participants can stimulate a rich dialogue, they can also stifle real engagement with the subject.
- *Scheduling.* This curriculum is organized in four 2-hour sessions, but scheduling can be adapted to reflect different needs. No time frame is suggested for activities within each session; nor is it expected that groups will address all the questions offered. Sessions may be planned weekly, biweekly, or monthly. If a biweekly or monthly schedule is chosen, it is important that publicity indicate the schedule clearly. Frequent reminders may be needed for irregularly scheduled events.

The time and place this program is offered depend on the culture of your congregation or group. A stable location may lead to greater continuity. If there is already an established pattern (e.g., Sunday mornings, afternoons, or week nights), it is probably best to schedule this program within that time period. If no such pattern exists, you might wish to conduct an informal survey and include several options for preferred times. Because most congregations and affiliated groups gather in a particular place regularly, it is suggested that where possible, the venue for this program be the group or congregation's regular meeting place. Use your best judgment to determine which room or space best suits the needs of members as well as your needs as facilitator. If you meet in rented or borrowed space, select a

location that is convenient to most people, with attention to transportation needs. If you are going to meet in private homes, decide whether there will be one or several hosts, and consider factors such as size of the group, comfort, and flexibility of seating. Rotating locations will relieve the problem of the burden falling to any one individual.

- *Leadership.* This series can be led by a professional religious educator or lay leader. While it is perfectly acceptable for one individual to facilitate the classes, two facilitators are recommended, because co-facilitators offer different voices, styles, and experiences as well as a diversity of gifts, talents, and perspectives. In addition, co-leadership lightens the responsibilities of any one individual. If you choose co-leadership, intentionality around difference is desirable in terms of gender, age, physical ability, racial/ethnic/cultural heritage, theological orientation, sexual and affectional orientation, and/or style. Facilitation skills, time, and willingness to do pre-reading and reflection will be important in selecting leadership.

It is important for facilitators to read the report, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, and this guide fully, carefully reviewing those sessions that may pose a challenge for facilitators or participants. Study the exercises and discussion questions and modify them in ways that are comfortable for you.

- *Publicity.* In order to ensure a successful program, you should begin planning several months in advance. Publicity should be completed four to six weeks prior to the first session. Church newsletters and weekly bulletins are good places to start. These can be supplemented by adult religious education brochures or fliers strategically positioned throughout the church. If your congregation has a tradition of staffing tables during fellowship hour, a flyer about this curriculum and a registration form are good publicity boosts.

Several weeks in advance, advertise the program and post a sign-up or registration sheet. You may wish to emphasize that the program is not a discussion about membership procedures but is intended to deepen the spiritual significance of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist, whether affiliation is congregational or extra-congregational.

How the Sessions Are Organized

This study guide follows the basic structure of the report as follows:

Session 1	The Process of Commitment Theologies of Membership
Session 2	Measures of Membership Creating Thriving Congregations
Session 3	The Challenge of Incarnation Pathways to Growth
Session 4	Investing in Youth and Young Adults

You may wish to start each session with a simple chalice- or candle-lighting. Each session includes suggested opening words taken directly from the text of the report, which are intended to serve as a reflective thought for the entire session. If you have words that seem more appropriate, by all means use them.

Opening words are followed by an exercise designed to stimulate participation and underscore a primary theme for each session. Following each exercise is a series of suggested questions from which facilitators can choose. Facilitators are encouraged to prioritize the questions according to the group's expected interests and needs, and where needed, to pose questions in an open-ended manner. While this curriculum suggests a particular structure, facilitators should use their judgment in guiding the discussion based on the needs and interests of participants. Begin where your congregation is. Facilitators are encouraged to recall events from their congregation's life that might illustrate some of the issues and questions raised by the report. This should make the material more accessible to participants, and lead to greater depth and spiritual meaning. If a different approach would, in your judgment, better meet your congregation's needs, tweak the wording as needed, or skip the question altogether.

Materials Needed

- Chalice or candle and matches
- Extra copies of the book (*Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*) for loan, if possible
- Blackboard or newsprint and markers
- Name tags for each week (Note: In Session 3, participants will be asked to write on their name tags so design appropriately.)

Advance Preparation

1. If it is customary to reserve rooms for adult religious education events, make the reservation early enough to be consistent with your church's schedule.
2. Establish a registration process that, at minimum, involves a commitment to purchase *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. After you know the initial enrollment, order the book from the UUA bookstore (800-215-9076, bookstore@uua.org). Determine beforehand whether the books should be sent to the church, to your home, or to another address.
3. You may wish to prepare a packet for each participant that includes a letter from the facilitator confirming enrollment and a schedule of the sessions with weekly reading assignments. For groups that do not have a tradition of book discussion groups, you may need to emphasize the importance of doing the reading. This study guide is designed to take into account the likelihood that not all participants will complete all reading assignments. Whether or not they have completed the reading, participants should be able to grasp the essence of the questions and engage in meaningful dialogue. Every program has associated costs, which participants should expect to help pay. Donations for a sexton or limited photocopying may be an associated cost for some congregations.

Day of Event

1. Arrive at least 30 minutes before the scheduled event.
2. Set up the chalice, candle, or other centering object(s). You may wish to decorate the table with a colorful cloth, a simple flower, or other objects that might provide a focal point and promote a feeling of relaxation.
3. Room set-up is optional. Reflection and discussion are more important than note-taking. Arrange chairs informally or set up tables and chairs classroom-style as you wish.
4. When the first class begins, welcome participants and open with a centering—the suggested reading for each session or your own selection.

5. If participants do not know each other, brief introductions are encouraged.

Session 1: The Process of Commitment & Theologies of Membership

Opening Words

“To be human is to be religious. To be religious is to make connections. To lead a meaningful life among the many competing forces of the twenty-first century, each of us needs support in making meaningful re-connections to the best in our global heritage, the best in others, and the best in ourselves.”

—Rev. John Buehrens
p. 1



Begin this session by distributing name tags. Ask participants to wear their name tags at every session.

EXERCISE

Ask participants to find a partner whom they don't know well. When the pairs are formed, ask them to take 10 minutes for each partner to share the story of his/her experience in the congregation. Write the following list on newsprint or blackboard and explain to participants that these are themes that might emerge during their conversation:

- How I found my congregation or religious community
- What I was seeking in a religious community
- How I was welcomed into the community
- When I felt I belonged in the community
- When I was conscious that I had made a commitment to the congregation or community
- How I learned about the congregation as a system
- The decision-making process around affiliation and/or membership
- Lingering issues

At the end of 20 minutes, ask participants to briefly share key insights and learnings from their experiences and/or from the sharing, then proceed with any of the following questions.

1. "We each want a religious home where our own spiritual needs will be met. But we also each need to take a part in creating the kinds of religious communities that attract people who are searching for the same kind of spiritual home we have found—people who have left the religious practices of their childhood, people who grew up unchurched, interfaith couples and young adults and youth—all of the people who would fill our pews if we would only invite them in."
(p. 1)



*“Life is just a chance to
grow a soul.”*

—Rev. A. Powell Davies
p. 3

- Is your congregation one that attracts people who have a great deal in common or does it nurture people with a wide variety of needs?
- How do you measure your congregation’s openness to difference?
- What methods has your congregation used recently to welcome people with different needs into the life of your congregation?
- Does a direct approach to inviting newcomers feel appropriate to your congregation, or does it feel like proselytizing? If the latter, what would make the experience feel more comfortable?

2. “Making connections is the essence of the religious experience... . . . The connections that people seek when looking for a religious home are both internal and external. While becoming connected in a ‘spiritual network’ within the congregation is essential, committed membership also means getting connected to the larger community.” (p. 2)

- How do you judge religious experience? Can you give an example?
- Does your congregation place greater emphasis on internal or external connections? What do you think accounts for this? If your congregation were more deeply connected to its neighboring community, how might this affect congregational life?

3. “In educating our newcomers we commonly focus on religious ideas, and the ways in which our non-doctrinal approach to faith differs from others. But a religion is more than ideas. It is also a set of behaviors, practices, ways of being in community.” (p. 3)

- Stepping back for a moment from your congregational affiliation, which would a family visiting your congregation notice more: a sense of the spiritual or particular practices and behaviors, whether formal or informal?
- What would you like your congregation to convey to visitors and prospective members?

4. Rev. Maxwell Savage argues that “nobody knows or can know” how many Unitarians [and Universalists] there are at any given time: “Let us stop vying with the denominations of the land. We are not that kind of church. . . . We boast no capital C. As a whole we are not even an organization.” (p. 7)

- Who are we as a religious body—a movement, a church, a group of congregations, a denomination, and/or an organization?




*“A study about membership is
a study about evangelism ...
the process of building and
sustaining healthy
congregations.”*

p. 1

What difference, if any, do these or other such designations make?

- Why do we have such difficulty defining ourselves? Does it matter what we call ourselves? Why?
5. Citing historian Dr. Conrad Wright, the Commission on Appraisal report indicates that in spite of ever-changing congregational membership, a tension exists between two different value systems—one “the covenanted body of worshippers,” the other “the corporation established by law, with power to hold property for religious, educational, and philanthropic purposes.” (p. 8)
- Have you observed these two systems in your congregation? Do you experience tension between them?
 - Are both systems necessary for a religious community or is one dispensable?
6. The Commission's report makes a case for the necessity of community. It cites Rev. Peter Fleck, who states that the church, in spite of or because of its shortcomings, is “infinitely better than no church.” And yet, disillusionment with church communities seems to increase loyalty and commitment to the values and ideals to which the church aspires. (p. 10)
- What is the difference between community in the generic sense and a spiritual or religious community?
 - Have you witnessed times in your church life when commitment to membership increased in spite of initial disillusionment? If so, how do you explain this phenomenon?
7. Disillusionment, the Commission says, “plays a key part in the process of membership.” Theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and to a community the better for both.” (pp. 10-11)
- Do you recall your first experience of disillusionment with your congregation? What helped you to move from disillusionment to commitment?
 - If a new member voiced a concern to you that appeared to be heading toward disillusionment, how might you respond to help him/her move toward faith and a deepened commitment?
8. The report states that loyalties, commitments, covenants, and the promises we make to one another represent the deepest meanings of



*If one member suffers, they all
suffer together with it; if one
member is honored, all rejoice
together with it.*

-Paul of Tarsus,
I Corinthian 12
p. 17

church membership, that they “tell us what we belong to,” and by so doing, “tell us who we are.” (p. 12)

- To what extent does your church community (or its denominational affiliation) shape your personal or group identity?

9. The late ethicist and theologian Rev. Dr. James Luther Adams understood the purpose of the church as transformation. Rev. Dr. George Kimmich Beach, an Adams scholar, adds that the church also exists to “expose us to perspectives that fall outside our commonly circumscribed, self-protected existences ... [so that we can] read the signs of the times and change.” (pp. 12-13)

- Have you experienced or witnessed moments in the life of your church when you or others were transformed?
- What happens to identity in a transforming church?

10. In challenging Unitarian Universalists to carefully consider what it means to say, “We, the member congregations,” the Commission on Appraisal cites the parallel ways in which Paul of Tarsus understood citizenship in the Greco-Roman world and church membership. Citizens and church members alike had a common identity and sense of responsibility to each other. “A meaningful religious identity” says the Commission “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. . . . Identity, spirituality, and sense of commitment all depend on each other to develop.” (p. 16)

- What does commitment look like in a congregational context?
- What leads people to make a commitment to a congregation? Beyond meeting formal membership requirements (e.g., signing a membership book, pledging, etc.), to what extent do you think theology leads to a deepening sense of identification with a Unitarian Universalist congregation?
- If it is true that “a religious identity both bestows something upon and asks something” of us, what is that “something”?

11. The Commission cites identity formation, worship, and ritual as key elements in the development of a Unitarian Universalist theology of membership. (pp. 18-19)

- Would you use the same or different elements as key components in your theology of membership?
- How do you understand theology in relation to membership in Unitarian Universalism?

12. The Commission views process theology and relational theology as synonymous. The report highlights these theologies as well as liberation theologies as major threads in contemporary thinking that can serve as a Unitarian Universalist theology of membership. (pp. 21-26)

- Do you agree or disagree with the Commission's premise that process or relational theology is germane to Unitarian Universalism? Are liberation theologies equally germane?
- How would you explain process or relational theology?
- What are some of the characteristics of liberation theology?
- How might process or relational theology be applied in your congregational or group setting?
- How does liberation theology inform how your congregation thinks about its context?

13. "The distinguishing characteristic of our Unitarian [and Universalist] congregations is that they are covenantal bodies. We are united as congregations not by common beliefs but by common commitments." (p. 33)

- Does your congregation think of itself as a covenantal community?
- Can you name or describe the explicit covenant(s) of your congregation? Is such described in your congregation's mission or vision statement and membership procedures?
- Does being a non-creedal faith make us unique as covenantal communities? Are creeds and covenants mutually exclusive?

14. "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." (p. 27) As an illustration, the report suggests that one of the implicit covenants in Unitarian Universalism is our promise to create environments of respect for difference and diversity.

- Do implicit covenants in your congregation support the status quo or represent barriers to change?

15. Some of the fastest-growing congregations make joining the church difficult, not easy; they place a “high bar” at the membership threshold. While some Unitarian Universalists value our “easy in, easy out” approach to membership, “others recognize the need to imbue the membership experience with significance.” (p. 31)
- Should congregations have low or high expectations of their members?
 - What exactly should the minimum expectations of members be? Why?
16. In his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*, Dean M. Kelley lists four “Minimal Maxims of Seriousness” for religious groups (p. 31):
- Do not confuse [faith] with other beliefs/loyalties/practices, or mingle them together indiscriminately, or pretend they are alike, or of equal merit, or mutually compatible if they are not.
 - 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.
 - Do not consent to, encourage, or indulge any violations of its standards of belief or behavior by its professed adherents.
 - 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.
- In thinking about the extent to which we are serious about our faith as Unitarian Universalists, which, if any, of these maxims might be relevant?
 - Ignoring the assumption that they are rules, how would you re-word any of the four maxims to more appropriately fit a liberal congregational or group setting?

Session 2: Measures of Membership & Creating Thriving Congregations

Opening Words



“Membership is about deepening individuals’ connections with their congregations as well as encouraging their own spiritual journeys. It is about developing an understanding and theology of membership that renews individuals and our movement.”

p. 43

EXERCISE

Divide participants into groups of four. Copy, retype, or write the following statement and questions on newsprint or a board so that all participants can see it:

“Within our system of congregational polity there is a remarkable variety of ways to count membership or participation in congregations. . . . There are voting members, honorary voting members, active members, out-of-town members, lifetime members, emerita/us members, inactive members, youth members, and student members. . . .” Then there are friends—“pledging friends, contributing friends, newsletter friends, and RE friends”—who participate in the life of the congregation but have chosen not to sign the membership book. (pp. 40-41)

Give the groups 15 minutes to discuss the following questions:

- Which of these categories (member or friend) do you recognize within our congregation?
- What assumptions and values are at work in maintaining so many categories of membership or affiliation?
- Which categories might be consolidated or eliminated?

After 15 minutes, ask participants to highlight key observations and insights; then proceed to address any of the following questions:

1. The report cites four kinds of growth in congregations as identified by Loren Mead of the Alban Institute: *numerical* growth, *maturational* growth, *organic* growth, and *incarnational* growth. What is meant by *numerical* growth is self-evident. Briefly, *maturational* growth refers to “the experience of individuals as they are transformed by membership”; *organic* growth refers to “the congregation as a living system whose structures must constantly change and adapt to inputs (new members, more mature members) in order to sustain growth”; and *incarnational* growth is “the relationship between a particular

congregation and its environment” as the living embodiment of the faith. (pp. 39-40)

- In addition to the fact that congregational rolls are “notoriously unreliable,” what are some limitations of measuring congregational growth strictly in numeric terms?
- Which form of growth has your congregation most emphasized? Why do you think this is the case?

2. “Unitarian Universalists have a reputation for being fiercely independent in their theology and their social views, and this sense of independence can be expected to manifest itself in attitudes about paying one’s own way.” At the same time, “if we seriously intend to be economically diverse, there must be ways to readjust the relationship between membership and money.” (p. 41)

- To what extent should membership depend on the ability to pay for it?
- In order to move beyond numbers—to maturational, organic, and incarnational growth—which is more important: membership (determined by whatever standard you wish) or participation in the life of the congregation?
- Is economic diversity a recognized need in your congregation?
- What are the fairest and most responsible ways to balance the ideal of the congregation as a caring and compassionate community with the congregation as a viable economic entity?
- By what formula should congregations support the UUA and its districts so that there is no perceived advantage in keeping membership numbers low?
- Can you imagine a membership and governance structure based on a philosophy of hospitality of spirit rather than on money? What might such a structure look like?



3. The quality of membership in our congregations is witnessed through “support, acknowledgement, affirmation, caring, [and] response.” (p. 44)

- To what extent does the quality of membership or affiliation in your congregation reflect caring and compassion? How have you witnessed this?
- Do you understand this as a characteristic of theology?

4. According to Wade Clark Roof, “Liberal congregations may be more conflict-prone because they are more democratic.” This is especially so where there is a high degree of diversity. Another source, Penny Edgell Becker et al., states that “liberal congregations were the only ones to fight about inclusive language and becoming ‘open and affirming,’ while conservative congregations had the only conflicts over premarital or extramarital sex.” (pp. 44-45)

- Is conflict a byproduct of diversity or pluralism? What is it about our democratic governance structure that may lead to congregational conflict?
- To what extent are these divisive issues of a religious nature, to what degree are they societal, and how much are they mixed?
- Does our democratic governance structure deepen congregational participation and commitment or does it lead to greater conflict?
- Do we accept people who share our values unconditionally, or do we impose our identity and/or religious filters upon them? How might we increase acceptance?
- If we are a covenantal religious community, beyond tolerance, what can we promise each other in the face of conflict?

5. The Commission argues that although there is no creedal or faith test in our Free Church tradition, defining membership is, nevertheless, an important dimension of defining our boundaries as a religious movement and deepening commitment to our faith: “The inevitable differences of opinion that arise in any human community can be transcended, forgiven, or resolved and in the end contribute to a stronger, healthier congregation.” (p. 50)

- How shall we define our congregational boundaries?
- How can we create a membership that participates more fully in the democratic process of our congregations?
- Given that we are open to and accepting of many points of view to the point that our boundaries are not always clearly distinguishable, are we in danger of ‘tolerating’ ourselves out of existence as a significant religious movement that offers, all in all, an alternative to mainline religions?

6. “Our commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning can make it difficult to find that center of gravity that can help a congregation develop cohesiveness and a sense of purpose.” (p. 52)

- What holds us together as a religious movement?
- What or where is the vital center of our faith? Is it our beliefs, our values, our norms, or something else?

7. “Unwritten rules can be confusing to newcomers and often become an impediment to creating healthy, open communities.” (p. 51, also see p. 52)

- Are “Responsibilities of Membership”-type statements helpful in clarifying the covenantal relationship between congregation and member, or do these border on authoritarianism?

8. “It is not uncommon to hear UUs relate stories of the elation they felt upon first finding a liberal religious environment ... only to experience profound disappointment that their ‘truth’ is somehow not accepted by others in the congregation despite the statements of openness and tolerance.” (p. 52)

- Does your congregation view change in individual theological perspectives as healthy and necessary for spiritual growth? Does your congregation have a strategy that supports people in moving along a path of lifelong spiritual development?
- What approaches can congregations use to affirm and respect people who are pursuing faith development that deepen commitment rather than lead to feelings of exclusion based on a set of beliefs that will inevitably change?

9. The Commission on Appraisal report addresses four particular issues that are frequent, “trigger discussion and, at times, confuse our understanding of the meaning of membership.” (p. 54) After reviewing the issues (outlined on pp. 54-60), consider the following questions outlined by the Commission:

- *Annual Program Fund:* When dealing with fundraising policies and practices, how do we best avoid obsession with the peripheral issues and get on with the business of growing



“The particular definitions of membership matter less to us than do the steps taken by our congregations to define and clarify expectations on the part of each congregation.”

p. 54

strong congregations that take the message of our free liberal faith to the world?

- *Dual Membership*: How can congregations be encouraged to see dual members as welcome participants and resources instead of problems? How might congregations with a substantial incidence of dual membership work together to help individuals deepen their commitment to the movement and to both congregations? Identify strategies to provide a connection with the larger UU movement for youth and young adults as they leave the home community.
- *Increasing Membership Requirements*: Do explicit criteria for membership violate the premise of our free faith? Are such criteria congruent with the Principles and Purposes of the UUA? How can a congregation best maintain the “creative tension” needed to define effective boundaries? What benefit accrues to congregations that help members strengthen their sense of affiliation with the larger UU movement? Should members coming into membership from another UU congregation be expected to participate in orientation programs and other classes designed to deepen commitment, such as those offered as part of the path to membership?
- *Exclusion From Membership*: What fundamental values are so central to the core of our Unitarian Universalist congregational life that to threaten them would justify formal exclusion from membership? What kinds of behaviors diminish the appeal of the congregation? What would it mean to a congregation to have a discussion of this issue as part of a process to define its center of gravity? What if the norms and expectations were to become more explicit rather than implicit?

Session 3: The Challenge of Incarnation & Pathways to Growth

Opening Words*



“Would you harbor me?

Would I harbor you?

Would you harbor a

Christian, a Muslim, a

Jew, a heretic, convict or

spy?

Would you harbor a

runaway woman or child,

a poet, a prophet, a king?

Would you harbor an exile

or a refugee, a person

living with AIDS?

Would you harbor a

Tubman, a Garrett, a

Truth, a fugitive or a

slave?

Would you harbor a

Haitian, Korean, or

Czech, a lesbian or a

gay?”

-Ysaye Maria Barnwell

EXERCISE

Announce the following purposes of this exercise:

- To provide a forum for participants to engage in an intimate encounter with someone whose identity is different from their own
- To increase communication and understanding about difference and identity
- To engage in empathy and active listening

Ask each participant to choose one identity based on his/her gender, racial/ethnic/cultural background, or sexual or theological orientation and to write a word or phrase on his/her name tag that describes the chosen identity.

* Opening words can be musical or spoken. *Sacred Ground* by Sweet Honey in the Rock, available on CD or audio tape, contains “Would You Harbor Me?” by Ysaye M. Barnwell.

“It is part of our unofficial credo that if we use our resources to surmount barriers rather than to erect them, we will achieve heaven on earth. We hold what Toni Morrison calls a “complicated, demanding ... view of heaven as life; not heaven as past life.” The complicated, demanding part, of course, is that in order to break down barriers, or to resist building them, we have to do the messy, difficult, and occasionally heart-wrenching work of acknowledging the worthiness of all beings.”

p. 69

- Ideally, each participant should find a partner whose name tag differs in language and substance from his/her own. Ask participants to explain the identity they have written on their name tags to their partners. Each partner should grant the other 10 minutes of uninterrupted time to discuss his/her identity card. Encourage participants to give as little or as much detail as is comfortable.
- At the end of 20 minutes, when each person has completed his/her explanation, ask partners to reflect back to each other in 2 minutes or less what they heard—how they now understand their partners' chosen identities. Each partner should be asked to clarify any points of misunderstanding.
- When each group has completed the exercise, process what happened with the whole class. Ask a series of questions such as: How did it feel to do this exercise? How did it feel to listen to another person? Did you feel heard and understood?

Continue the session with any of the following questions:

1. The report states that some UUs believe that “the important issues are those related to recruitment and retention of a membership base that corresponds to populations most nearly matching the demographic characteristics of the present membership. New members are welcome as long as they ‘fit in,’ but the movement should not shift from its traditional demographic base in order to attract and include those of different backgrounds. . . . Incarnational growth is not about recruiting; it is about transforming perspective and awareness.” (p. 65)
 - How important is it that congregations maintain their traditional demographic bases? Why? What values are being upheld?
 - How important is it that congregations reflect the demographics of their neighboring communities? Why? What values are being upheld?
 - What are the implications of (a) maintaining the traditional Unitarian Universalist demographic base, and (b) reflecting the demographic makeup of the neighboring community?
 - What does your congregation need to do in order to make a space for new members who do not fit your congregation’s current demographic portrait?

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2. The Commission states that because of racial/ethnic, cultural, theological, and/or class differences, “people who self-define as Unitarian Universalist but feel ‘left out’ of their local congregations, lead to the inescapable conclusion that exclusion is indeed a problem. Ironically, congregations that espouse respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all beings nevertheless engage in behaviors that exclude some others who identify with that same Principle.” (p. 66)
 - Are there explicit or implicit barriers to membership in your congregation? Is exclusion (including unconscious and unintentional exclusion) an issue in your congregation? Are you aware of one or more persons who, over the years, may not have felt welcomed because of their racial/ethnic, cultural, class, or theological identity or any other form of difference?
 - What concrete steps might your congregation take to make space for persons who do not fit your congregation’s demographic mainstream that would represent a foundational change?

3. “We would avoid some pitfalls if, instead of talking about growth and membership and outreach, we talk about creating sanctuary. If we work as hard—or harder—at creating safe and worshipful places as we do at creating diverse congregations, we will most likely find that, paradoxically, transforming the awareness of the congregation will result in changing its demographics.” (p. 71)
 - How has your congregation or group approached growth? How has it approached diversity? How do these approaches compare to what is being called for in the above statement?
 - What might your congregation or group do to create a sanctuary for people who are different from your congregation’s cultural norm?

4. “‘There are seasons in human affairs,’ wrote William Ellery Channing, ‘when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in ‘multitudes,’ and a new and undefined good is thirsted for.’ We believe that such a season is upon us. The challenge lies in satisfying the thirst of the ‘multitudes’ in each of our individual congregations. A thirst for what? *Sanctuary*—what Laura Cerwinske describes as a ‘place of order and tranquility, a retreat from the disharmony of the world’ ... ‘a place to be creative, to seek meaning in life, to do the work of transformation that, at times, calls for descent into pain and chaos’? Unquestionably. Community? Undeniably.” Paradoxically perhaps, the Commission says, both “community and sanctuary” may be rewards for those who “dare to venture off the beaten path, into the unknown” in order to honor diversity. (pp. 63, 74)



“Unitarian Universalism is culturally Christian..., carries rationalist and nineteenth-century humanist values..., and it also honors my Buddhism. It challenges and questions me. I feel that Buddhism is not marginalized, but at the center of lived UUism.”

- Are we living in a *kairos*² moment when our congregations can create a larger, more inclusive soul by expanding a heretofore narrowly defined identity into a movement that affirms our common humanity?
 - What can your congregation do to create a sanctuary or a community for people of diverse backgrounds and theologies?
5. “No longer is affiliation with a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association the only way that people identify themselves as Unitarian Universalists or live out UU loyalty and commitment (if it ever was!). Nor are UU congregations the only way in which our tradition is supported and lived out in the greater community.” (pp. 77-78)
- How do you respond to the above statements? Does either of the statements challenge your presuppositions?
 - Do you know Unitarian Universalists who do not have a primary congregational affiliation but find their needs met in an extra-congregational organization, i.e. a UU camp or conference or affiliate or associate organization?
 - Have extra-congregational relationships created tension for you or your congregation? If so, has the tension subsided? How?
6. The Commission mentions five UU theologically focused extra-congregational organizations: UU Christian Fellowship (UUCF), Friends of Religious Humanism (FRH), Covenant of UU Pagans (CUUPS), and UUs for Jewish Awareness (UUJA), and the UU Buddhist Fellowship (UUBF).
- Are there other theologically focused extra-congregational organizations that could be mentioned?
 - Do you know members of any of the four organizations cited above? If so, to what extent are they affirmed within a local UU congregation?
 - Are you comfortable with Unitarian Universalists defining themselves in terms of their theological orientation (rather than simply “Unitarian Universalist”)?
 - Keeping in mind our fourth Principle (“encouragement to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning”), how can congregations be more affirming of Unitarian Universalists who have strong



² *kairos* (Gr.): qualitative time such as an occasion, a season, an age, or an era. In this sense, it may designate a ‘special’ time (e.g., just the right time)-a particular time that has a distinctive quality or significance, and may thereby be potentially transformative, a turning point that demands a particular response. *Kairos* can be contrasted to *chronos*, measurable time that moves forward quantitatively.

identifications with theologically focused extra-congregational organizations?

7. Many Humanists “believe that Unitarian Universalism is moving away from its place in the theological/religious world and becoming very much like other liberal Christian communities,” says the Commission. “While the atheist Humanists bewail the addition of spirituality and ‘God-talk,’ the Christians appreciate the inclusion but often long for explicitly Christian language and readings. There is an inherent tension in these requests: For Humanists and Christians alike, the ideal worship community would offer language that evokes their imagery and beliefs, without need of translation.” (p. 81)
 - What is the unique “place” of Unitarian Universalism in the world?
 - What does Unitarian Universalism have to say to the world that is different from other liberal Christian communities?
 - Have you observed a tension around religiously pluralistic worship in Unitarian Universalism? If so, how would you articulate the tension?
 - Who should determine the mix of theological expressions in worship and other programmatic aspects for your congregation?
8. “Although the UUA is and has been firmly committed to civil rights for persons of color and those of differing ethnic backgrounds, there have often been strong disagreements about what this means within the Association and how best to achieve and practice an openness to non-European Americans. Since the early to mid-1990s, the Association has taken on the goal of becoming an anti-racist organization that strives to be open to people of various racial and ethnic diversities. However, as the journey has not always been easy, members of various racial and ethnic minorities have created Affiliate organizations to provide support and counsel in the process of the UUA’s transformation. ... for many, these organizations [AAUUM, DRUUMM, LUUNA, UUNIA] are their primary loyalty and community of nurture and support.” (pp. 82-83)
 - Are there members of non-European ethnic groups in your congregation or organization? If so, are they active in or members of a UU extra-congregational ethnic affiliate group? If so, has your congregation been actively supportive in addressing their needs?
 - Who should determine the cultural expressions, worship styles, and other programmatic aspects for your congregation?
9. “Tensions still exist within our congregations about the involvement of BGLT [bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender] people. Some congregations are hesitant to be known as the ‘gay church’ within their

communities and urge a low-key approach and lack of advertising within the gay/lesbian community, whereas other congregations warmly embrace Interweave chapters as viable components of their membership, ministry, and outreach.” (p. 85)

- Have you observed tension between the BGLT community and your congregational leadership or membership?
 - If your congregation has been successful in welcoming BGLT people, how might your congregation help others who are struggling with this issue?
10. Our camps and conference centers often attract people who “have different social, religious, and political views” than a nearby congregation. Thus, because of a higher comfort level, our camps and conferences help to “cement some people more firmly within our UU movement, providing them a valid place to express their religious commitment” that they often don't find in congregations. And yet, questions of “loyalty and depth of commitment can be raised by those in the congregation who resent the camp or conference center involvement.” (pp. 87-88)
- Do you know people who are actively involved in one of our camps or conference sites but are not as active in the congregation? If so, can you affirm the Commission's premise stated above?
 - How can there be a closer relationship between congregations and Unitarian Universalist camps and conference centers?
 - What can your congregation do to increase understanding of why some people feel more comfortable in a camp or conference setting than in a congregation?
11. “The majority of these extra-congregational organizations exist for two reasons: to support their members during their participation in local congregations and to transform the face of Unitarian Universalism. They see their role as being that of increasing and supporting the diversity . . . encompassed in our non-creedal tradition committed to the inherent worth and dignity of every person. As such, they and their members must be taken seriously in any consideration of the meaning of membership within our Association and congregations.” (p. 88)
- Should there be a hierarchy between congregations and extra-congregational organizations? When it comes to how we should think about membership, are congregations more important than affiliate and associate groups, or should the two entities be considered more equal?

- Can extra-congregational organizations strengthen congregations, or vice versa? If so, how?
- In considering the meaning of membership, what would membership look like if we were to take extra-congregational organizations seriously?

Session 4: Investing in Youth and Young Adults

Opening Words



“I have noticed that it tends to be easier for adults in their twenties and thirties who were not raised in the UU church to find homes in congregations. On some level, our youth ministries are not preparing our youth to be adult members of our congregations.”

p. 93

Because this session is based on one chapter (as compared to other sessions, which cover two chapters), and given the need for a dynamic interchange between children, youth, young adults, and adults over the age of thirty-five, this exercise is designed for the first hour of a 2-hour session.

Ideally, youth and/or young adults have already been participating in the program. If not, it is suggested that a special invitation be made to children, youth, and young adults for Session 4. Ideally, several children, several youth, and several young adults should participate, representing a wide spectrum of ages from six through seventeen and eighteen through thirty-five. If this program is scheduled to take place on a weekday evening during the school year, consider whether the time should be changed so that children can participate. If, after your best effort, children or youth cannot participate, try to include parents of young children or youth.

Prior to the start of the session

1. Arrange up to six chairs in the inner side of a circle of two rows.
2. Arrange additional chairs (as there are regular participants over the age of thirty-five) on the outer side of the circle.

EXERCISE

This fishbowl exercise has three parts:

Part 1 (18 minutes) (as participants enter the room):

1. Ask children under the age of fourteen to occupy the chairs in the inner circle.
2. Ask adults over the age of thirty-five, as well as youth and young adults, to occupy the outer chairs.
3. Inform the group that those on the inner circle (children) are the only ones allowed to speak during the exercise. Those on the outer circle are listeners.

4. Ask the children to complete the following statement and discuss it freely among themselves: I wish the adults in our congregation would _____.
5. At the end of 15 minutes, in your own way, express appreciation to the children for their participation and ask them to now occupy the outer circle.

Allow 2 minutes for people to switch places.

Part 2 (18 minutes)

1. Ask youth, ages fourteen to eighteen, to occupy the chairs in the inner circle.
2. Ask adults over the age of thirty-five, as well as children and young adults, to occupy the outer chairs.
3. Remind the group that those on the inner circle (youth) are the only ones who can speak during the exercise. Those on the outer circle are listeners.
4. Ask the youth to complete the following statement and discuss it freely among themselves: If we were planning our own Religious Education and participation in our congregation, it would be _____.
5. At the end of 15 minutes, express your gratitude to the youth for their participation and ask them to now occupy the outer circle.

Allow 2 minutes for people to switch places.

Part 3 (18 minutes)

1. Ask young adults, ages eighteen to thirty-five, to occupy the chairs in the inner circle.
2. Ask adults over the age of thirty-five, as well as children and youth, to occupy the outer chairs.
3. Remind the group that only those on the inner circle—(young adults)will be speaking. Those on the outer circle are listeners.
4. Ask the young adults to complete the following question and discuss it freely among themselves: What I need most from my congregation at this stage in my life is _____.
5. At the end of 15 minutes, express your gratitude to the young adults for their participation.

At the end of the exercise, take the brief remaining time (probably not more than 2 minutes) to process how the exercise felt. For example, say something like “In two words or fewer, tell us how it felt to do this exercise when you were on the inner circle? When you were on the outer circle? ”

Thank all your guests (children, youth, and young adults), and invite them to stay for the second hour if possible. Considering the issues that arose in the

exercise, proceed to the second hour with any of the following questions that might enlarge points already raised in the exercise. (Please note that the final question for this session is not specific to children, youth, and young adults but applies to the full report.)

1. The report states that the “question of children becoming members is complex. Congregational practices vary widely, from no restrictions on youth membership to a minimum age requirement of eighteen.” (p. 93)
 - Do we need a uniform age standard for membership in Unitarian Universalist congregations, particularly for children and youth? If so, how should the question of congregational polity be addressed? If not, is it important for the Unitarian Universalist Association to know how many Unitarian Universalists children and youth are among us?
 - Does there need to be an affirmation of faith in Unitarian Universalism for children and youth, or should they be assumed to be Unitarian Universalist based on their upbringing in our faith from an early age?
 - Should there be a more formal process to offer membership to children who were raised Unitarian Universalist? If so, should there be a financial expectation of the child, the parents, or the family unit?
 - How should we think about membership for youth who find Unitarian Universalism on their own-whose parents are not Unitarian Universalists?
 - In other times and other religious traditions, membership for children and youth has been determined through family ties, christening or baptism, or nationality. Can you think of any non-financial approach to membership that might work for children and youth who consider themselves Unitarian Universalists?
2. Responding to a question from the Commission, one youth said, “I would be against having a second category for youth membership; yes we are different but we don't need to be shut off any more from our faith. We want to be UUs.” (p. 94)
 - After reading pp. 92-95 of the report, what do you think are the pros and cons of having a separate category for youth membership?
 - What are your congregation's policies or practices regarding youth membership? Were youth included in the discussion or decision?
 - How does your congregation's policy or practice compare to your personal perspective?
3. “Many congregations have a Coming of Age program that marks the transition from childhood to youth. Participation in such a program might

be recognized as equivalent to the new member classes given for adults. The completion of this program is a particularly appropriate time to invite youth to become members. It is a time when they are most connected and willing to consider joining.” (pp. 94-95)

- If you believe that youth membership is a good idea, should it be full voting membership with a financial expectation? If not, how would you distinguish between youth membership and regular adult membership?
 - Does your congregation have a Coming of Age program or its equivalent? If so, in your view, to what extent does it substitute for a new member program? If it does not, how might you reimagine it as a formal initiation process for youth who are already involved with the congregation?
4. “It is, for most congregations, *not* a good idea to have a designated seat for a youth on the board of trustees. If a youth is qualified and interested, he/she can be nominated and elected through the regular process. Too often, a designated youth is not sufficiently prepared or interested and soon drops away, not having had a good experience.” (p. 95)
- Can you cite a case in which a youth served well in any leadership capacity? What was the quality of that leadership?
 - Do you believe that youth (ages fourteen through eighteen) are ready to serve on the board of trustees of a congregation or an extra-congregational organization? If so, should the youth be elected through the regular process or should there be a designated seat?
 - Is youth leadership in a camp or conference similar to or different from a congregation; does the particular setting matter?
5. One youth interviewed by the Commission said, “If churches really understood and valued all of the contributions that they need to survive, [the question of money] becomes a bit irrelevant. Anyone, regardless of age, ability, color, native tongue, or economic class can contribute something to the effective running of a church.” (p. 95)
- Do our congregations emphasize money too much as a measure of commitment?
 - Even if there are other ways to measure commitment, how can we help congregations to change their traditional reliance on pledges in order to maintain the ministries and facilities of the church?
6. The UUA Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry defines young adults as those who are ages eighteen to thirty-five. The Commission, however, focuses on “the younger of the young adults” (ages eighteen to



twenty-five) because many over the age of twenty-five are “settled in their work and raising families.” (p. 96)

- Do young adults who are eighteen have enough in common with those who are twenty-five or with those who are thirty-five?
- Given that young adults are at various life stages (e.g., living at home, in college, beginning a career, partnering and starting families, or perhaps even approaching mid-career), should age be the determining factor for organizing a young adult group?
- Is the current UUA age range defining young adulthood adequate, or should it be changed?

7. For a variety of reasons, the Commission states that frequently young adults “are more involved with a district Young Adult group than with a local congregation?” (p. 96)


- *How do we encourage young adults to affiliate with and become members of our congregations?*
- Given that young adulthood is the time when young adults are making faith decisions that may ground them through adulthood, how can we encourage congregations to become more attentive to the needs and interests of young adults?

8. The Commission points out that many of our congregational programs focus on new members rather than those who were raised Unitarian Universalist or are long-term Unitarian Universalists—a factor that Sheri Prud’homme believes may alienate some young adults who grew up Unitarian Universalist. They may tend, she says, “to look elsewhere for religious community.” (p. 97)

- Does Prud’homme’s observation ring true for you? If so, what can be done?
- Does your congregation place as much emphasis on programs for long-time members as it does for new Unitarian Universalists?

9. “The UUA has been expending a great effort toward becoming an anti-racist institution. Many of our young adults have a broader experience with people of color than our adults. This will be even more marked in the future as the multiracial children in our congregations mature.” (p. 98)

- Do you think that Unitarian Universalist young adults are more aware of racial issues than their parents' generation?



“If a young adult is not given an opportunity to reflect on this [racial justice] in a spiritual context, important developmental needs will not be met, and connections that could ground a person over a life-time will not be made. The urgent young adult need to be a warrior, to serve, to lead, to make an impact on the world, risks being wasted in shallowness, mis-direction, or despair.”

p. 99

- Are Unitarian Universalist adults over the age of thirty-five as prepared as young adults seem to be in bringing about racial justice and social transformation in our congregations and communities?
- If you answered ‘yes’ to either of the above, how do we bridge the divide?
- Given that racial/cultural diversity in our congregations is most visible in multicultural families (e.g., inter-racial partnerships and cross-cultural adoptions), how can Coming of Age programs celebrate a congregation's commitment to diversity and address identity issues?

10. The Commission argues that congregations should be interested in campus ministry because it “provides an *affiliation* for young adults,” because it is “an investment in the future, helping those served by providing a religious community and maintaining relationships with those who will become members of congregations later in life.” (p. 99) Yet it is in the college years that so many young adults are deeply engaged in life exploration. Thus it is not surprising that many do not maintain membership in a congregation during these years.

- How does your congregation maintain its connection and commitment to college students who are or have been part of your congregation, or to campus ministries in your local region?
- Of the approaches mentioned in the report (pp. 99-100), what approaches might be used to deepen the relationship between congregations and Unitarian Universalist college students?

11. Considering the Commission on Appraisal's full report, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, and the fact that more than twice the number of people who show up on our congregational records self-identify as Unitarian Universalists,³ is membership in a congregation important? Why? Should one of our goals as a movement be to encourage more people who already embrace our religion to join a congregation? Does it matter?

³ The National Survey on Religious Identification conducted in 1990 reported that 502,000 adults in the United States self-identify as Unitarian Universalist, but only 145,250 adults reported membership in a Unitarian Universalist congregation for the same period.