

Belonging

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The Meaning of Membership

A Report by the Commission on Appraisal
Unitarian Universalist Association

June 2001

Unitarian Universalist Association
Boston

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Preface

This report, *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*, is the tenth report submitted by the Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The bylaws of the UUA provide for the establishment of the Commission:

The Commission on Appraisal shall consist of nine elected members. A member shall not during the term of office serve as an officer or hold a salaried position in the Association. The Commission on Appraisal shall:

- a. review any function or activity of the Association which in its judgment will benefit from an independent review and report its conclusions to a regular General Assembly;
- b. study and suggest approaches to issues which may be of concern to the Association; and
- c. report to a regular General Assembly at least once every four years on the program and accomplishments of the Association (Section 5.8).

Our methodology for this study was eclectic. We held open hearings around the continent during our meetings and at General Assemblies. We held focus groups with specific constituencies within the Association. We sent out questionnaires to selected individuals and congregations, and we held many face-to-face and e-mail to e-mail conversations with people in our movement.

We read the current membership literature, participated in the Memb-L electronic mailing list, and discussed and debated every aspect of the report. We worked not only at our quarterly meetings, but reading, research, and tasks were completed between meetings with the aid of letter, telephone, fax, and e-mail. The project manager and editor carried out the final integration, for which we thank them.

What we submit is a joint effort for which we take joint responsibility. The current commissioners appreciate the work of the former commissioners who contributed to the early stages of the report but whose terms expired before publication: David N. Barus, JD, New York, New York; Rev. George Kimmich Beach, Arlington, Virginia; and Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley, Boston, Massachusetts. We also thank Rev. John Buehrens for his active interest in our work; as president of the UUA, he is an *ex officio* member of the Commission.

The Commission wishes to thank all those who have assisted in the preparation of this report. Among the individuals who contributed are Rev. Kathleen Allan, David Barus, Roger Butts, Renee-Noelle Felice, Rev. Emily Gage, Susan Grider, Rev. W. Edward Harris, Jacqui James (UUA Anti-Oppression Programs and Resources Director), Rev. Keith Kron (UUA Director, Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns), Dr. Roger Meyer, Rev. Nurya Love Parish, Rev. Dr. Laurie Proctor, Rev. Tracey Robinson-Harris, Rev. Louis Schwebius, Dr. Norman Shawchuk, Jack Seigel, Rev. Barbara Wells, and Dr. Conrad Wright. In addition, many groups significantly assisted the project. They include persons attending hearings, participants of the Memb-L electronic mailing list of the UUA, participants in camps and conferences who shared their thoughts, respondents to questionnaires on membership, and participants of the focus groups.

Special thanks go to UUA staff members Nancy Lawrence and Peggy Potter-Smith for supporting the Commission in carrying out its duties. The excellent support of our editor, Mary Benard, was essential to the completion of this report, and we also give thanks to the rest of the Publications Department of the UUA (and in particular Joni McDonald) for their expertise in shepherding this report through publication.

The Commission invites comments on this report and on other matters of concern to the Association. Written comments or inquiries may be addressed to the Commission on Appraisal, c/o Unitarian Universalist Association, 25 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02108, while e-mail responses may be made to coa@uua.org.

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Introduction

What is the meaning of membership, or more thoroughly, what are the meanings of membership? What is it that people seek when they affiliate with our congregations? What is it that congregations owe to their membership, and members owe to their congregation? Whom do we include as members of congregations?

These are the questions that came to the Commission on Appraisal as we published our last report, *Interdependence: Renewing Congregational Polity*, in 1997. Yet we realized that these questions were not about polity—the relationship between, among, and within congregations—but rather about the relationships between individuals and congregations. These important questions are worthy of their own report. Consequently, the meaning of membership became the topic of the report we now submit to the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

During the four years of our study (1997–2001), we realized that membership questions are much broader than whom we count for what purposes, and what criteria we establish for legal membership in bylaws. Membership is also, or even more importantly, about how we help the people who come to Unitarian Universalism live out their faith within our congregations, and how the congregations assist them in this endeavor. We realized that we shortchange ourselves, and the world beyond Unitarian Universalism, by focusing only on narrowly construed membership questions such as “How do we do such and such?” We realized that there are multiple resources addressing the how-to’s,

from first encounter through joining, deepening, and leaving membership. We believe that we can make our most positive impact on the meaning of membership by focusing on what is unique to membership and the meaning of membership within our Unitarian Universalist congregations and how to help our congregations to become more vital, more effective, and more diverse.

What this report is, then, is a study of the questions that we believe are either unique to Unitarian Universalism or to which we as Unitarian Universalists may have unique answers or approaches. We begin by addressing the theological underpinnings of membership, and based on the work of relational and liberation theologians, develop a UU theology of membership. We explore the relationships of the individual to the congregation and the congregation to the individual—what each owes to the other—and how we can best understand these questions. We take what we believe are some of the most appropriate theologies and theories about membership and apply them to our unique position within the religious spectrum, adapting the work of such authors as Loren Mead, Henry Nelson Wieman, Lyle Schaller, and Mary Hunt to our UU history and practices. The result is an understanding of membership that goes beyond numbers and technical requirements, embraces the diversity of practice and people within our movements, and calls our congregations to view membership in a new light.

This new light is that membership is a journey, both for the individual and the congregation. It is not just a technical or legal state, nor only a numerical measurement. It is a process that engages human beings and takes us from a starting place to a new place. By paying careful attention to the paths that provide for this journey, we urge congregations to take into account individual needs for deepening and affirmation. Membership issues do not end when you get a name in “the book”; in fact, this may be when they truly begin.

This report is meant to get Unitarian Universalists thinking. Thinking about their own membership paths, and what they mean. Thinking about the ways their congregations go about meeting the ongoing needs of the membership. Thinking about the values we confer on membership and participation.

And thinking about the multiplicity of difficult issues involved in membership. Some of these difficult issues are numerical and technical, such as the controversy around how to count and report membership to determine Annual Program Fund Fair Share payments. Other issues are philosophical, such as the question of how to embrace people who participate in extra-congregational organizations but haven’t found a home in a local congregation. Still others are urgently ethical. These are questions of inclusion and exclusion, of diversity and boundaries.

In looking at these questions, we found Loren Mead’s framework, built upon the work of Ted Buckle, to be valuable. Mead suggests four distinct dynamics to church growth: numerical, maturational, organic, and incarnational. By understanding and applying this framework, we believe we can learn

much about how to address the tensions inherent in the questions. These tensions are real and can serve either to divide congregations or to prompt them to take creative solutions to their resolution. We hope congregations will do the latter. To aid you, we pose areas to wrestle with, sometimes providing specific questions to help in this endeavor, and other times raising challenges through descriptions of the status quo and what could be. We look at what we think it will take to make Unitarian Universalist congregations and the movement as a whole stronger, as well as provide a more satisfactory, and deeper, experience for individuals who are part of this religious movement.

What this report is not is a how-to manual about membership practices. We did not believe it worthwhile to duplicate the countless wonderful resources that already exist. However we have listed some of our favorites in the Resources at the end of this report for those who have not yet found this literature on their own.

We hope that you will find this report informative, challenging, and transformative of how you and your congregation view the tensions and issues that surround membership. And we hope you join us in trying to achieve the best practices of Unitarian Universalist membership so that all who embrace us philosophically can find a true home within our movement.

Belonging
