

Commission on Appraisal Skit for GA 2001

*Belonging*

By Rev. Silvia Behrend

Performed by members of the COA, June 22, 2001

CD will play which tells the story of the Tower of Babel. The stage is dark. *There are at least five stationary mikes in a square pattern with a middle mike and four lavalieres, for a total of nine mikes. All actors start offstage. Five mikes to be placed on risers, of different heights if possible. Lavalieres will be worn by Mask1 (L1) Mask2 (L2), Mask3 (L3) and Mask4 (L4) ( all four wear masks). There are also five other parts (Voice 1-5) Parts can be combined for fewer players.*

*As the music increases in intensity, Mask1 enters, goes to middle :*

MASK1: Hey, you can't start with that!!! That's from the Bible! What's going on? *(Crosses to stage left and stays there unmoving)*

VOICE1: *(On front riser stage left, with spot light on her as she begins to speak)*

This is a perfect story to talk about who we are a church, what it means to belong to this church, who its members are. Here we are all engaged in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. And we don't all speak the same language.

VOICE2: *(on center riser, with spotlight)*

That's why we're here today. The Commission on Appraisal asked UU congregations what membership meant: their answers were, of course, varied.

VOICE3: *(stage right riser with light)*

Some thought that signing the book was enough, making no demands on participation.

VOICE4: *(stage right. Light on him as he begins to speak)*

Others were sure that membership was for those who not only signed the book, but also contributed financially in significant ways.

VOICE5: *(stage left rear, light)* Yet others insisted anyone could be a member whether they pledged or not, whether they volunteered or not.

VOICE1: *(stage left front)* And there were organizations who exist outside our congregations. They call themselves UU but the churches don't recognize them. They're "outside."

VOICE3: Some of these organizations are Buddhist, Christian or Pagan oriented, they find their identity as Unitarian Universalists outside the church community.

VOICE2: We looked at ourselves as a denomination that is organic, non-dogmatic, and constantly in process of becoming. We wanted to make sure that all voices were heard. We wanted the price and privilege of membership as well as congregational norms and attitudes to be clear and known!

VOICE5: And that all who wish to sit at the table with us may do so without feeling diminished in role, responsibility and value. Not so easy.

VOICE4: We asked, what does membership really mean?

*(all lights go off the speakers. At this point, the four masked people with lavalieres will speak as they cross the stage. Mask1 (L1) from stage left to stage right, stopping in the middle as he speaks)*

MASK1: *(L1)* This is my church. I joined because here I could freely express my thoughts and be accepted for who I am. We are like-minded individuals who come together to discuss what is important, what we can and should do to create justice.

MASK2: *(L2) crosses from right to left)*

This is my church. I am a member because here I find that people accept me for who I am. I am free to believe in whatever I want and no one can tell me I am.

MASK3: *(L3) crosses right to left)*

This is my church. I belong because I have always belonged. My parents started this church forty years ago because they needed a place where liberals could join to pursue justice and meaning. We have always been this way. We have an open door. Anyone is welcome.

MASK4: *(L4) crosses left to right)*

This is my church. Any person who comes here is welcome, regardless of income, education, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, political affiliation, ability or diversity of belief.

MASK1: Not Republicans, of course, but we do have lots of forums, and sometimes we even have fun ! ! !

MASK2: No one stops me from speaking my mind, even if it is in the middle of the service. They may not like it, but they have to accept me. After all, tolerance is one of my church's lynchpin.

MASK3: I just don't understand why people come to visit and don't stay. We're very welcoming; we have coffee cups for newcomers and brochures. *(CD plays a classical piece)* Our music is the best in town; the director is the master conductor for the local symphony. Everyone loves the music. And the preaching, of course. The minister never preaches longer than thirty minutes. *(Pause)* Clearly we are not for everybody. We have had a Middle Eastern family once and a gay couple with two kids, but they didn't stay.

MASK4: You can tell we're all a happy family because everyone knows everyone else. During coffee hour, old friends gather together to share news and joys and concerns. The young people really feel welcome here. There is a group just for them, they go to coffee, lunch, and when we DO have a need for a group to sponsor an event, we sometimes even call them to do the set-up and the cleaning.

*(All masks take a step forward at the same time and say in unison)*

ALL: Membership in our church is open to all. WE welcome diversity.

*(Lights go off the masked actors. They return to their positions, bracketing the space. Lights will go on one by one as the other actors speak starting with left rear)*

VOICE5: There is no question that each person and even each of our thousand some congregations believe themselves to be authentically committed to our principles. We believe in diversity, we welcome all people of color, gays, lesbians, bisexual and transgender people, differently abled, linguistically challenged, *(go on and on, listing each category with your fingers)*.

VOICE4: (*right front*) Wait a minute!!! Membership is fundamentally theological. Theology is not the study only of God, theology is at the very root of our meaning making and meaning seeking. (*Pause*)

(*Crossfade lights to Right rear who turns to talk to Voice2, center stage*)

VOICE3: Do we really offer a safe space where people can discover their deepest meaning in community?

VOICE2: Do we really offer hope, change and transformation? I mean all through a person's life? How do we serve the old time members whose needs also change as they grow older? We can't forget them!

MASK1: (*L1 moves into position at front stage right*) Well, we are a church of mostly converts who join because we feel affirmed by others. We didn't come for salvation, (*laughs*) that's for sure, but we did come for belonging and commitment. (*Pause*)

MASK2: (*moves forward left stage front*) Here we can live out deep life, find that which gives shape and meaning to our existence.

MASK3: (*moves left stage front*) Yeah, we can do that because we have an institution that supports our efforts. Where would we be without fundraisers, canvasses, and committees? Without the structure of the institution, we can't do anything.

MASK2: More important than the institution is the communal life, where we actually become who we can become, in spite of the imperfection of our systems.

VOICE1: That is the tension in which we all live, we have to figure out who is a member and how we support the church. It's a challenge when our churches are living communities which are never the same from week to week but community needs the structure to maintain its life!

VOICE4: To grow in depth and meaning, how do structures elicit the deep commitment of its members, both to the institution and also to its ideals and purposes?

MASK4: What you ask of us is too much. I want the church, the ministers and the Board to do things right. I don't expect conflict or disagreement, I don't want to figure it all out, we just need to accept each other. I don't come to church to be disappointed!

VOICE2: (*shrugging*) It's true, we do ask a lot. To belong to a church community such as ours, is to accept each other's imperfections, (*pause*) to reconcile our differences, (*pause*) to forgive and be forgiven (*pause*) to comfort and to be comforted, to love and to be loved. Isn't that what the church is all about -- because it is what life is all about?

MASK3: (*turns to Voice5*) So how does that work? I've been here for thirty years, and I like it this way, are you saying that the purpose of this church is to take people like me and change them? I already know what I believe.

VOICE5: The purpose of the church is also to expose us to perspectives that fall outside our commonly self-protected existences. It is to risk taking off our masks and meet one another, mind to mind, heart to heart, soul to soul and be willing to be changed by them.

MASK2: But, we already do that. We believe in diversity, acceptance and tolerance. It's not our fault that so many people don't stay with us!

MASK3: We are mostly white, middle and upper middle class, educated, and yes, we do have members who are blue-collar workers. (*a little plaintively*)

MASK4: We don't have to change to become them; after all, we work to make justice in the world, to better their lives. So many of our members work on task forces around town...

VOICE5: We found that's the greatest challenge of all! In relationship to others who are not like us, we are forced to change, yet no one wants to have their sense of identity called in to question. How do we allow membership to be an experience that has deep and enduring value?

VOICE1: If we are about the work of transforming the world and ourselves, then the work of transformation requires us to get out of our comfort zones, allow ourselves to be changed.

MASK3: Change is okay, but we don't have to become pagans, do we? Or Buddhist or Christian or Humanist, for God's sake! Can't we change the way we are without changing who we are?

MASK4: (*takes off mask and steps directly center stage*) I guess that's what the problem is. I am a pagan. If I want to be part of this church, I have to sit through worship that ignores me, join a pagan group, or risk being labeled "the pagan" who wants to destroy who we really are. Why can't I just be part of the congregation even if I do believe differently? It's a good thing I am a pagan and not gay, though. I've heard what people say: It's fine to have gay people at our church, but we don't want to become the "gay" church in town. What will people think?

MASK2: (*takes off mask!*) What would happen if I wanted to join the Board? Would I be the token gay person? Would I be seen for who I am, with my conservative views, at least in this church, and not as a token which shows everyone how open we are?

MASK1: (*takes off mask*) I get scared sometimes. Seeing all those young people with pierced faces and such. Their music is so awful. They want to change everything. Vegan this, they want 'meaningful worship' that includes movement, drama, stories, other types of music. They say we're stuck in a worship mode that only fits one type of person. How can that be? I don't know why people of color don't come here, but if they did, I would hate to see what would happen to the church I know and love. I don't want to sing loudly, I don't want to participate in interactive worship. I would lose everything this church means to me. I don't know what to do.

MASK3: (*takes off mask*) I wish it weren't so easy to be a member. There is no real expectation of what people are supposed to do. We all know what 'is expected' because somehow it is in the air. But we aren't told specifically. I want the church to care that I am a member, I want us as individuals and as a community to be clear that to belong to this church requires my commitment, that I am important, that we all are important. I want a church that knows it is a church beyond our Sunday mornings, beyond worship, beyond talk.

VOICE4: Indeed, membership requires an ability to accept ambiguity and live with it. It...

MASK2: Oh, enough with the talk already !!! What do you know? You're part of the problem. "Boston" decides to do a study and then tell us what to think, and how to do our churches better. If it weren't for the Fair Share Giving, we wouldn't have to count who is a member and who isn't. You just want money and power.

MASK4: That's right, why should we trust you? We're independent and each one of us is different. What are you trying to do, make us all the same?

VOICE2: I guess what you say is true. We do not have a long history of trust between and among us. Who are we to tell you, all of you, how to become members, how to look at yourselves and see if you are fulfilling your missions?

VOICE5: I can't blame you either. Our history doesn't exactly help us feel part of one body. We do not all feel that we belong to something bigger than each one of our churches. And we have our norms and traditions and cultures in each church.

VOICE1: The question of membership is at the heart of your challenge to us. Can we talk about what our identity is? What we belong to? How we belong-- To one another, to the institutions with which we associate, to the UUA?

VOICE3: Are we indeed willing to look at ourselves honestly and listen to all the voices that tell us that 'they' are 'we'.

VOICE4: The ones we don't want to recognize because they are not like we are.

VOICE2: The ones who want more spirituality, less spirituality, the ones who want God and those who want no God.

VOICE5: The ones whose only safe place to be themselves is in this church, even when their presence makes us uncomfortable.

ALL VOICES: We cannot tell you what constitutes membership,

VOICE3: We can only ask you to ask yourselves that question.

VOICE1: Is your church a committed organization, where all members, young, young adults, the elderly, the well-off, the young families, feel that they are equally important to the life of the church and of the world?

VOICE4: Look around.

VOICE5: Who are you?

VOICE2: What are you members of?

VOICE5: How do you know that to be true?

VOICE1: And really,

ALL: who is welcome at your table?