

I want to begin by telling you how this sermon came to be. It's the Membership Committee's fault. They've been working hard to support the membership, providing name badges, working with ambassadors, reaching out to visitors, providing ushers and more. The membership committee, per the bylaws—how many of you have ever read any portion of our by-laws—I won't ask how many are familiar with them.

Per the by-laws, the Membership Committee shall:

Organize and promote activities which encourage membership growth and facilitate involvement of all members in the life of the Fellowship community. Maintain the official membership list to report to the UUA (based on which we pay Fair Share dues to the Association); document attendance, verify voter eligibility and quorum at Corporate Meetings; arrange for greeters and ushers on Sundays and other special services; publish the annual member directory in February to correspond to the official membership list provided to the UUA; orient new members to the UUF; ensure, through a working group, that caring activities are available." End quote. By the way, a big project the committee is working on is a new photo directory of our membership, help them out, please make yourselves available to Betsy Silverstein and Tom Hackett to have your picture taken and do it soon.

Membership came to me with a request asking that I tell people that the opportunity is always available to you to join the Fellowship by signing the membership book. They explained it was something that was done essentially every week during the tenure of the interim minister Orlanda Brugnolia. They seemed to feel an invitation to join, from up here, while wearing a robe, might have a greater impact than an invitation from members of the membership committee.

Fundamentally, I supported the request but told them I was uncomfortable inviting people to sign the book without first having a sense that they understood the expectations of membership. Like in the investment world, brokerages are obligated to inform people that past performance is no guarantee of future performance—or something to that effect. People need to know what they are signing up for.

Membership--- what does it mean??? I fully understand the issue of membership or not, pledges or not and how much to pledge—is often a sticky issue in our Unitarian Universalist world, —so anytime we “go there” there is risk of generating emotional reactions... I understand that by expressing my thoughts on the subject, I may push some buttons this morning but I've decided to wade in the water---with love.

Technical definitions of membership are in our bylaws: Here's what it says: **MEMBERSHIP:** any person who has reached the age of 16 years and is in sympathy with the purpose of this Fellowship may become a member by signing the Membership Book, and making a financial pledge of support and an identifiable financial contribution to the Fellowship. Membership includes the right to speak at meetings and to be welcome into all appropriate activities of the Fellowship. Only those who have made an identifiable contribution to the Fellowship at least 45 days, but not more than 18 months, prior to a Corporate meeting shall be eligible to vote at that meeting and be counted as part of a quorum and be eligible to hold elected position or committee chairmanship. The minister with agreement from the Executive Committee can waive the identifiable financial contribution requirement. One remains a member until death, or written resignation or it's been determined that the member has withdrawn from the Fellowship. The above notwithstanding, anybody can participate in the life of the congregation." End quote.

In other words, member or no, you are free to hang out with us and reap the benefits of belonging, you just can't vote or hold elected office or chair a committee---but you can be a *member* of a committee and otherwise serve the Fellowship.

So what's in a word? Technically, what separates a member from a participant (we often call them Friends) is the signing of the Book, a financial contribution and the right to vote. Theoretically, you can sign the book, make an identifiable contribution, pledge once in your life and be elected the President of the Congregation!!!! You just couldn't vote at the Corporate meeting—but who would know you didn't vote?? So why bother to become a member? And I dare say, some don't bother—and by looking at their involvement in the life of the Fellowship, you'd never know they are not members!

The by-laws notwithstanding, I've got to believe there is more to membership than signing the book and a making a pledge, and voting—I believe those things *are indeed* important, but there has got to be more. And here reasonable people can disagree, that said—we know some folks are more reasonable than others—don't we? But let's talk about it anyways.

No doubt membership means different things to different people, and different things in some congregations than in others---I'd think being a member in a large congregation, for example, might well be different than in a congregation of 60 people—which is close to the number of the majority of our congregations in the country.

Let me add another element---changing times in the world and changes in the American religious landscape, calls for us to change, if we are to stay relevant in the public square---as we have been during the time of slavery and women's suffrage. More recently, we've been a national leader in Civil Rights Movement and on LGBT issues.

This thing of membership for us Unitarian Universalist is an interesting issue. We're quick to tell people we are not a creedal religion (meaning you don't need to state a specific belief) ---in fact not all Unitarian Universalists are even comfortable naming ours a religion, many prefer the term movement.

So you gotta know we are in awkward territory. We once had a marketing campaign that asked people if they were a UU and didn't know it. I suspect there's a significant part of the population that would feel perfectly comfortable with our espoused beliefs, our principles, our sense of concern for the earth and general wellbeing of the world but have never placed a foot in a UU church or Fellowship.

Without a specific set of beliefs what does it mean to be a member? I know when I was growing up, I felt like a member of my Baptist church when I was baptized. And I know Jewish young people go through a rigorous learning process before their coming of age ritual of Bar mitzvah and Bat mitzvah. In our faith, some believe you can be a UU and not know it—I'm not one of them.

When I think of membership, the analogy that comes to mind is renting vs owning. When one rents, they are not responsible for cutting the grass or repairing the furnace when it dies, or fixing the leaky faucet. That's the responsibility of the owner. Nor is the renter particularly concerned with property values ---they have no investment in the property's long term condition or value. They don't need to think about meeting the mortgage or insurance that needs to be carried on the property.

They fundamentally have a different relationship with the property than does an owner. That's not to say a renter is unconcerned with how the outside of the building and grounds look. It doesn't mean the renter is unconcerned about whether the building is sufficiently heated. Just that they have a different relationship to those issues and obligations.

Owners on the other hand, have a vested interest. In all the meanings of that term. From maintenance, to mortgage to insurance to property values. Membership, it seems to me is most like ownership, asking us to take responsibility for the good of the whole.

In a religious community, the whole is a lot more than property values, mortgages and insurance. It's a lot more than keeping the lights on. In a faith community, ownership for the whole is primarily about the mission/why the congregation exists. And secondly, ownership for the well-being of the other members. Care for their spiritual well-being as well as physical well-being. And third, care for the building or structure.

Some might be surprised that I list care for others as secondary. But if a congregation is *primarily* concerned with its membership, the people, it runs the very real risk of becoming a social club, whose primary interest is to entertain, to keep people happy, to have fun, to feel good.

To me, one becomes a member of an organization because you believe in what they stand for, what they do, the value they add to one's life or to society. That's mission, that's about purpose, intent, practice.

I've always found that if people are committed to something greater than themselves, they become invested, they gladly choose to help, to belong, to associate, to do their fair share or more. Think about organizations or endeavors you really care about or you know others really care about---how do you behave, do they behave??? More times than not, they give way more than just their money. I'd bet they give of themselves, their time and effort and their support. This is true whether or not they are actual "*members*". They simply need to be committed, invested, feel a part of the greater whole.

For us as a Fellowship or church, or congregation, a faith community, whether or not someone chooses to "sign the book" is infinitely less important to me than them being committed to what we are about. And yet, numbers do make a difference---the number employees you have—2, or 102 or 1002 gives a very different impression of what you are capable of---a different impression of what you can or do accomplish.

Membership does matter, but only if people are committed. If you have 200 people standing on the sidelines, it impacts what you can accomplish.

One more thing about ownership I want to mention, because I believe it too is important in a faith community. And I believe it is a fundamental part of what our faith community is about: responsibility, or ownership of our own lives, of our own growth, our own spiritual or religious development.

A faith community requires people who are committed to their beliefs, who are committed to living out their beliefs, and committed to growing in faith. Theologians call it spiritual maturity. As we individually grow in spirit, we facilitate other's spiritual growth...both in and outside of the Fellowship.

I invite anyone who shares our commitment to covenantal relationship and who shares our fundamental Unitarian Universalists beliefs about human dignity and an individual search for truth and meaning, I invite you to join us. Join us and help us as individuals grow in our beliefs and help us to better manifest our beliefs in the world.

Come, join us, help us to do more, to do better, to do what is ours as a faith community to do. Help us to do what we, uniquely, are called to do. And we promise to be of help to you. This month, we especially invite you to join our Fellowship. You can see anyone on the Membership Committee, an Ambassador or me, or simply call the office.