

The Next Step, or Rev. Dave's Ten Suggestions:  
Reflections on the Responsibilities of Membership  
Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg

Rev. Dave Hunter

March 26, 2017

What does it mean to be a member of a religious community? What is expected of members? Questions like that always take me back to Princeton, New Jersey. That's where I did my ministerial internship, with the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Princeton – goodness, it's been fifteen years already. Curious person that I am, I would ask people there, from time to time, what does it mean to be a member here? What do we expect of our members? What are their responsibilities? Why would one want to become a member?

The responses I received usually involved some embarrassed hesitation, some clearing of throats, perhaps a recitation of all the ways one could be involved in the congregation *without* being a member, and eventually they would explain that to be a member you have to give money to the church.

That never satisfied me very much. Yes, keeping an institution of this sort going takes money, and who better to provide the money than the members. But isn't there more than that?

So in preparation for the expected question from one of the New UU class participants earlier this morning, I jotted a few notes down on the back of an envelope. But then in thinking about it, I decided that the best response to the question, "what does it mean to be a member of this congregation?" was to answer the question with a question: "That's a good question you've raised, what do *you* think it should mean to be a member? What would make membership meaningful for you? What do you expect from other members? What can other members reasonably expect from you?"

Of course, you didn't come here this morning to break into groups of three for discussion, you came expecting a learned discourse. So I've expanded the seven and a half items on the back of the envelope to ten, a good biblical number, and I've tried to embellish them a little.

But when I had finished writing my essay it occurred to me to do something different. Two of my close companions in seminary – my close UU companions, I mean – were Dan and Darla – these aren't their real names. I've kept in touch with them over the years, so I decided to email my draft to them and ask for their comments. Dan responded late yesterday evening, and Darla's response was waiting for me when I got up this morning. I'll try to work in some of their comments.

So here is what I imagine you've all been waiting for, my ten suggestions for meaningful membership – suggestions for what the congregation and its members might expect from you, suggestions for what you might expect of yourself and of your fellow members.

**Suggestion # 1.** *Members of the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg should be willing to be publicly identified as Unitarian Universalists.* You should be willing, to put it bluntly, to tell your mother that you are a Unitarian Universalist. You can go public by putting a UU bumper sticker on your car – I have a few here; you can get one from me during coffee hour – but you have to promise that you’ll actually attach it to the car; don’t just take one to make me feel good. You can wear UU jewelry. Can you see my lapel pin from there? When a neighbor or a co-worker asks you what church you attend, you can respond – you can respond with pride, I hope – the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg. That’s better than mumbling or trying to change the subject.

Here’s Dan’s comment: “Dave, you’ve gone too far; you can’t do this. What if your mother would disown you if she knew you were a UU, and no longer a . . . (you can fill in the blank)? What if your co-workers would shun you? You’re not in Washington any more.”

Good point. I should have thought of that.

Now let’s look at Darla’s comment: “Dave, you’ll never develop a high commitment congregation if you let them off the hook that easily. Have them out leafleting on the Square or at the Battlefield. Have them take a UUG welcome packet to anyone new who moves onto their block. Have them mention UUG when their day sponsorship is announced on WITF.”

I wonder if Darla would make such demands of members of her own congregation.

Here’s **Suggestion #2.** *Be able to explain why you are a Unitarian Universalist.* I can imagine all kinds of explanations here.

- “I was brought up UU and found no reason to change.”
- “I took the belief-o-matic test on BeliefNet.Com and scored highest for Unitarian Universalism.”
- “I was brought up Catholic and my husband Jewish. UU is our compromise, and we upset both our families equally.”
- “I live on Middle Street.”

Here’s Dan’s comment: “Dave, you’re stuck in your head too much. Some people can’t explain it, they just know that it feels right to them, it feels most comfortable, to be part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation on Sunday morning.”

And here’s Darla’s: “I think members should be able to give a three-part answer to the question, Why are you a Unitarian Universalist?”

### 3

“The first part would be theological – your beliefs about God, Jesus, the nature of humanity, one’s status after death should be within the UU norm.

“The second part is social – are you comfortable in your congregation? are these people you can work with, people that you feel committed to?

“The third part is justice – do you agree with UU stands on social justice? Are you in favor of empowering the poor, of liberating people of color and gays, of upholding the dignity of immigrants, whatever their status?”

OK, **Suggestion #3.** *Be able to explain two features of Unitarian Universalism.* Can you do that? Here are a few ideas that come to mind:

- We are noncreedal, that is, we’re not required to believe alike.
- We are committed to the use of reason. We don’t accept something just because it is in the Bible, or just because some preacher tells us that we’ll spend eternity in hell if we don’t.
- We care for our planet. Mother Earth has been good to us. Let’s not abuse her hospitality.

Here’s Dan’s comment: “Dave, would you really exclude from membership someone who dissented from what you consider a feature of Unitarian Universalism? What about the person who rejects the idea of global warming or believes that abortion is murder or expects reincarnation? Is there room for them in your congregation?”

Actually, Dan, my suggestion is that one be able to *explain* some features of UUism – I didn’t say you had to approve of them or agree with them.

Darla’s view is different: “Explain two features?! I’d give them a closed-book exam!”

That’s not going to happen here, is it?

**Suggestion #4.** *Be able to mention two historical facts about Unitarian Universalism.* Do you all know that Unitarian Universalism is the result of the consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalists? Indeed, we’ll celebrate the 60th anniversary of the consolidation in just a few years.

Can you name any Unitarian or Universalist presidents? The most recent was William Howard Taft, about a century ago. Did you know that the funeral for President Obama’s grandmother was held in the UU church in Honolulu? We’ve got a connection – a small connection – with this one.

Here's what Dan wrote: I agree that we should all know that ours is a faith tradition going back many centuries, but, Dave, most people nowadays live in the present. You can't expect them to know anything from before they were born.

I don't have to tell you what Darla had to say: "See #3 above. Give them a closed-book exam!"

**Suggestion #5.** *Sunday morning attendance is the default; it's our norm (for your kids, too).* You could call it a spiritual discipline. You could call it keeping faith with fellow members. You could call it a practice that unites the family.

Dan, as usual, has a different view. "Dave, you're living in the '50's. People are busier today. They have different priorities. Think of the couple where one partner is a UU and the other is, say, United Church of Christ. Think of children who have to spend every other Sunday with their noncustodial parent. Think of the single mother who works on Sundays, or Sunday morning soccer practice, or . . ."

Dan had another half dozen examples, but I think you get the idea. Life is complicated. I should give people a break.

But not if I listen to Darla: "Dave, you have to have standards, discipline. People are looking for a high commitment church. They want to be held accountable. At my church, we take attendance every Sunday. If you miss two Sundays in a row, you get a friendly phone call from your neighborhood monitor. If you miss three Sundays in a row, the minister visits you. If you miss four Sundays in a row . . ."

I don't think you want to hear what happens if you miss four in a row.

On to **Suggestion #6.** *Generously provide financial support to your congregation.* Whenever I say that, people want to know, what counts as generous? Well, it seems to me, if you're not sure whether an amount you have in mind is generous or not, then it probably is not – not for you, I mean. Or if you want to be generous, but you want to give the minimum amount that qualifies as generous, then again, you're probably not really thinking in a generous way. Keep in mind that for some of us \$100 a year is very generous, while for others of us, \$10,000 is not.

Of course, Dan and Darla disagree with me, and with each other.

Here's Dan's comment: "Dave, they don't like it when you talk about money. They'd rather you talk about sex or global warming or water boarding."

And here is what Darla writes: “We really shouldn’t have to talk about money so much. Just establish the congregational norm of tithing – 10%, off the top. If you set aside a tithe first, you won’t miss it. You’ll find you can get along quite well with the 90% that remains.”<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps you could do a controlled experiment in next year’s pledge drive: A randomly selected third of the congregation commits to 10%, a traditional tithe. A third of the congregation follows the giving guidelines suggested by the UUA. And we leave a third of the congregation to their own devices.

Only four more to go. We’ll make it. Here’s **Suggestion #7**. *Commit yourself to participating in the life of the congregation.* Bring flowers, serve as a greeter, make coffee, sing in the choir, assist with the children downstairs, distribute hymnals, wash dishes after coffee hour, clean the toilets, help set up the next art show, give a car-less person a ride to church, take soup to a shut-in. And, when it’s your turn, serve on the board.

But I can feel Dan trying to interrupt me: “Dave, Dave, what about the member who lives at the Brethren Home and can’t get out any more? What about the single parent trying to earn a college degree while working full time? What about the member forced into early retirement because of illness or injury? What about the nurse or the electrical worker who is required to work long hours of overtime?”

As usual, Darla stays more focused on the congregation. “If members of a congregation aren’t connected and involved, they’ll drift away. They need to bond with other members. They need to feel needed. They need to understand that the more you put into your relationship with the congregation, the more you get out of it, the more rewarding it will be. Think what your congregation could accomplish if each member spent five to ten hours a week volunteering!”

One size does not fit all in a congregation.

*Treat others in the congregation with respect;* that’s **Suggestion #8**. It follows, quite directly, from our first principle, that we – we member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association – we “covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” We’re not asking for anything heroic here, just common courtesy and common sense. Be understanding of others. Realize that there’s more than one way to do things. Talk to people directly. Keep your promises. Do your share of the work. Don’t take more than your share of the cookies.

Here’s what Dan writes: “Come on, Dave, do you really think that adults need to be reminded that they should be polite to one another? They’re not only adults, they’re Unitarian

---

<sup>1</sup> Empirical research supports Darla on this one. See Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice* (2004), ch. 8 “Why Decisions Disappoint: The Problem of Adaptation.”

Universalist adults. Doesn't that mean that they're better behaved than the average person off the street?"

And here's Darla's comment: "Dave, it looks to me like you want the members of your congregation to adopt a behavioral covenant. If that's true, why don't you just come out and say it? Here's an example," Darla continues, "of one congregation's covenant:"

Strengthened by our common humanity and inspired by our seven principles, we promise—

- to be a safe and welcoming community;
- to nurture each other's hearts and spirits;
- to delight in the beauty of our diversity;
- to struggle together on our spiritual journeys;
- and to challenge each other to live our values.

Thus, we pledge our time and vigor to the continuing celebration of spirit, of the world, and of humankind.<sup>2</sup>

"But, of course," Darla continues, "you can't just adopt another congregation's covenant. Each congregation has to work out its own. The process is as important as the end result. The members have to feel ownership of it, and they need to remind themselves of it from time to time, and reaffirm their commitment to it. And because you'll always have new members arriving, you need to do a serious review of the covenant every five years or so, so that members both new and old can feel that it's theirs."

What I neglected to mention to Dan and Darla was that we already have a congregational covenant. If you're not a member and are not familiar with the covenant, during coffee hour, just ask any UUG member, and I'm sure they'll be happy to recite it for you – three sections, eleven points.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Columbia, MD.

<sup>3</sup> We, the friends and members of the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg, as a loving and welcoming community, pledge the following:

*To respect others by:* Assuming that others act and speak with good intentions, Celebrating and embracing the things that make us different, Treating others with dignity and compassion, Honoring each individual's spiritual path.

*To respect self by:* Communicating and behaving with kindness and civility, Keeping an open

OK, **Suggestion #9:** *Refrain from nonchurch activities that would embarrass this congregation.* I remember reading in the paper a few years ago that Bernie Madoff had apologized to his co-op board for bringing public attention of a negative sort to the Manhattan co-op where he lives.<sup>4</sup> So please don't create a Ponzi scheme cheating people out of fifty billion dollars. I'm sure you can think of other potentially embarrassing activities.

In fact, our members do good things in our local community and in the wider world. Perhaps it would be better to state this affirmatively: *Behave so that your friends, neighbors, and coworkers, and those who hear or read of you, will say to themselves, "If I were looking for a church, I'd want to check out theirs."*

Dan thought this suggestion was totally unnecessary, and Darla sent me a list of the ten worst things that UUs have been caught doing in the last three years, but I'll leave the specifics to your imagination.

Which brings us, finally, to **Suggestion #10:** *Be willing to ask for help if you need it.* We all need help from time to time. You don't need to be shy or embarrassed to share your problem or to ask for help. And we try to be discrete.

It's amazing, but Dan and Darla agreed here: "yes, Dave, do encourage them to ask for help."

That's the end of my list. If you think of anything that I left out, please let me know.

Well, I thought I was at the end of the list, then I received this message from Dan:

"Dave, here's one that you left out: **#11:** *Don't make the decision to become a member (or to quit) hastily.* On the one hand, we want to make Unitarian Universalism widely available. There are many, many people out there who would be more spiritually and intellectually fulfilled by being part of our UU movement. On the other hand, I've seen too many people sign a UU congregation's membership book without having much of an idea of what they were getting themselves into, and then drifting away and dropping out."

---

mind, Treating ourselves with compassion.

*To respect the community by:* Approaching our differences with others with empathy and compassion, Respecting everyone's privacy and confidences, Supporting decisions achieved through the democratic process, Honoring financial and service promises freely made to the best of our abilities.

<sup>4</sup> "Madoff Apologizes to Neighbors for the Ultimate Co-op Crime" N.Y. Times, Jan. 11, 2009.

And no sooner had I read Dan's suggestion, when this came in from Darla:

**#12:** *Don't forget the big questions* – such as: “How does one find meaning in life?” “Is there room for God in your life? and who or what is God, anyway?” “Death is an inevitable part of life – how do I feel about that?” “Why should I do what is morally right, even when it's inconvenient, or even when I could get away with something else?” “How do I live my faith, how do I put it into action?” “Do I want my kids (or grandkids) to become lifelong UUs?”

Thank you, Dan, thank you, Darla, and that's enough. I was going to suggest that if you've gotten this far and you're still on board, *now you're ready to spread the word, share the good news, invite others to join us*. But I'll save that for another occasion. Amen.