

# The Fire of Commitment

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For some people, signing the membership book in a religious community is no big deal. In one Fellowship I worked at, in fact, they had to change the practice of having the book open for people to sign on the first Monday of every month when they realized people were mistaking it for the guest book.

“Who is Betty Smith,” someone asked across the office, leafing through the time-worn membership book, a book very much like our own, a book that contained the signatures of every member who had ever joined their Fellowship. “Oh, she came once, a few months ago. We followed up with her and she said she didn’t think she’d be coming back. Why?” “Well, um, she signed our membership book.”

For some people, choosing to become a member is a mysterious process. What do those blue dots mean? What’s the difference between a member and a non-member? Can I come to events if I haven’t signed the book? There’s a book? I have to sign it? I’m betting there are people here in this community today who are pretty sure you are members, even though your name is not in our membership book.

The flip side to not having the membership book out and available all the time is that it sometimes takes people a little while to figure out how to become members in the first place—I’ve recently heard feedback that makes me think we need to be a little more open about our membership processes. Consider the message heard.

For some people, becoming an official member of a congregation is a really big deal. I know that there are some people who have been coming to this Fellowship for decades who are not formally members—though you would never know it by their dedication to our community.

Different people have different reasons for this—many people I’ve talked to expressed their concern that signing our membership book somehow negates other parts of who they are, especially religious and cultural upbringing that is important to their identity.

I get that, even if I truly believe that Unitarian Universalism is one of the few religions in this world that allow you to be both it and something else.

And, truth be told, I’m always glad when people take the commitment of membership in any community seriously. Signing our book should be a step along your journey—neither the first nor the last step on that journey.

And given that the material benefits of membership are few, if important—a vote in congregational governance, the chance to serve on our Board, an asterisk by your name in our directory and that blue dot on your nametag—the act of signing the book has to have spiritual benefits that come along with it.

Becoming a member, something done by the mere act of signing our membership book, must be an outward expression of an inward commitment—an agreement to be part of this covenantal community, and an agreement to live up to the responsibilities of membership.

I believe that there are three basic commitments inherent in the decision to become a member in this community—three basic responsibilities that each member of this Fellowship should be held to. Those things are: a commitment to ourselves, a commitment to our Fellowship and a commitment to our world.

First, I believe that signing our membership book means that you are making a commitment to your own spiritual journey. A commitment to explore, to learn, to stretch yourself. A commitment to care for yourself when you need care, to step back when you need room to breathe, and to re-engage when you can. A commitment to reflect about your own values and motivations, to examine your spiritual longings, and to speak up when you need something from this community. It is necessary that we ask members to make a commitment to themselves.

Next, it is necessary that the covenant of membership include a commitment to the institution that is this Fellowship, and to the other people who make up the gathered community here.

This includes several things. It means a commitment to showing up—on Sunday mornings to worship on a regular basis, to special events, to congregational meetings like the one we’re having at the end of this month. It means a commitment to pitching in—to sharing in the ministry of this Fellowship, even in small ways. It means a commitment to the financial well-being of this institution through generosity. And it means a commitment to helping envision the Fellowship’s future.

I don’t mean to imply that everyone should be engaged at the same level, that we all need to be the Volunteer of the Year, or the highest-pledging donor. Clearly, that’s not possible. But we need to make a commitment to finding our own place within this Fellowship community.

Finally, I believe that Unitarian Universalism asks us to make a commitment to healing our broken world.

I like to explain to people that Unitarian Universalists don’t agree on many theological matters, but the one we can all embrace is that as human beings we have the power to do good in our world.

For me, I believe this power comes with the responsibility to help create the beloved community, to work for justice and equity, to care for our planet and its creatures.

You might not feel as strongly about this as I do, yet I believe that part of our commitment as members is to think about how our spiritual journey is reflected in our relationships with the world outside of this Fellowship’s walls—a commitment at the very least to live your values out in the world.

About a year and a half ago, I introduced the concept of “shared ministry.” At the time, I wanted to be sure that people here knew that it was OK to care for yourselves, to engage with the Fellowship from a place of joy (instead of guilt), to take a step back if you needed to. At the time, there were a lot of tired folks in the chairs every Sunday.

That's not so much the case anymore. There's a lot of energy here—a lot of things going on, new people bringing new ideas and vitality to our community and long-time members re-discovering the joys of membership. It's been a wonderful transformation, and I hope it will sustain itself.

Yet the call to shared ministry is as needed as it was then. If you were here for that service, let me briefly refresh your memories about what I mean by that term, and, if you're new since then, let me introduce you to this way of being together.

A movement towards shared ministry means a re-thinking what membership means. It means changing the relationship between members and Fellowship.

In order to change this relationship, we need to understand where we're starting. Right now, too many people in too many congregations view their relationship with their community of faith as that of consumer and service provider.

We come on Sundays, pay our dues, contribute to the plate when it's passed, and, in return, receive some bit of spiritual guidance and insight: some music, some reflection, a thoughtful sermon, a cup of coffee—these are the things we get for our admission fee.

For a little bit more, we get the deluxe package, complete with RE classes for our children, adult classes for us, and space for our gatherings. We approach religion this way because that's the way our society runs. We pay for services all the time—banking, haircuts, dinners...why not worship?

Well, there are good reasons why not—theological reasons that are foundational to who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Long ago, our spiritual ancestors decided that there had to be a better—a more democratic, a freer, a less hierarchical—system for running communities of faith than the one they had inherited from the Church of England. And so they created it. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

In discussing shared ministry, my late colleague the Rev. Roy Phillips began with a centuries-old idea taken from the Quakers—the idea of abolition of the laity. Think about that. The abolition of the laity—lay people, that is—would leave us with only ministers...which is, of course, precisely the point.

What this idea means is erasing the distinction between member and minister, and empowering all of us to be ministers, each in our own unique and special way, each with our own "call," discerned from our values, our gifts, our experiences, our passions and our abilities.

This is the basic goal of a shift toward the shared ministry model: in a congregation which operates under the shared ministry model, all members are ministers of the Fellowship—all people share in the ministry of the community.

I can hear some people questioning why, in such a system, we would need a professional minister. There are many good reasons for that, not the least of which is that it helps you to share the ministry if there's someone here to engage full-time in the practices of theological reflection, constant learning, pastoral listening and meaning-making.

But it's important to understand the theology behind shared ministry, because it's a theology that traces its way all the way back to 1648, when the congregations of the Massachusetts Bay Colony (many of which would become Unitarian congregations in subsequent years) devised a brand-new way to govern themselves, a way that became to be known as congregationalism—a method of governance we still use to this day.

And the congregational system, in which each gathered community was ultimately responsible for its own affairs, in which there were no bishops or popes or presbyteries to tell us what to do, had theological implications regarding membership and ministry.

The people who assembled in Cambridge, Massachusetts on and off for two years in those early days of colonial conquest in these parts decided that their clergy would not be set apart from the rest of the membership by an indelible mark from God.

They decided that they would call ministers from among themselves. They educated their ministers and, in return, those ministers served essentially lifetime appointments. But never did the minister have a special relationship with God that was unavailable to everyone.

Never did the minister have holy powers or other such things (don't I wish!)—just special training and a call to deep reflection and ongoing relationship with a congregation.

Months and years from now, I don't want to be flipping through our membership book and come across a name I don't recognize from my time here as minister. I don't want to have this Fellowship's equivalent of Betty Smith, who thought she was signing the guest book.

I—and I know I'm not alone—want membership here to mean something. What does it mean to you? What has it meant over the course of your time here? What do you hope it will mean in time to come?

What is it that you are called to do? What is it that you are ready and able to commit to? How do you see yourself interacting with others in this community? How can you see yourself as sharing in the ministry of this religious institution? Let's explore these things together.