

## Homily on Belonging

The membership of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the nationwide association of UU congregations, declined for the third year in a row in 2011. In

- 2009 we lost 57 members nationwide,
- in 2010 252 or .2%,
- in 2011 1,400 or .9%.

From 1997 to 2009 our membership had been growing each year about 1%, - slower than the population growth of the country. In 2011 it dropped by almost 1%. For we UU's it is painful to see our numbers drop nationally.

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta actually grew by 2.6% in 2011 and I think we can all see the potential for much greater growth in our congregation and in our faith tradition if we get our message out. But even at Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Atlanta we can see that over the years from 1996 to 2011 our membership has fluctuated in a fairly narrow range from 642 members to 739 members in 2003, our "best" year. This got me thinking about membership in a UU congregation generally. I re-read the 2001 report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal titled "The Meaning of Membership" and I have quotes from it scattered though out my presentation tonight.

I have been a member of the UU Fellowship of Columbus Georgia for over 15 years and before that I was a 15 year member of what is now The Unitarian Congregation of Niagara, near Niagara Falls in Canada. I have also been blessed to be the ministerial intern right here at UUCA for over eight months. My association with UUCA will end June 1 and I am already beginning to sense the loss that that will be for me.

I have valued membership in a religious community very highly in my adult life, but the numbers indicate that others are seeing it as less and less of a priority. It is in the very nature of our faith tradition to have varying levels of commitment between individuals. I realize that I am preaching to the choir here today. I am talking to a group of Unitarian Universalists who are spending part of their Wednesday evening attending a small worship service. Clearly you guys value your religious community highly.

My intention tonight is not to fret about what we might do differently to reverse this trend. I know our association is working on that. Rather I want to just touch upon what is important in religious community and to see if any of this strikes a chord with you.

We use the word Worship often to describe what we do when we assemble for Sunday services. I have noted in an earlier Vesper service that the word worship is problematic for me. Clearly in the context of the Christian Bible worshipping God is analogous to paying homage to your Lord and Master. This is a concept that has no appeal to me and yet I am not ready to

discard the word. I have been looking for ways to redefine it. I have come upon two useful perspectives that are much more attractive.

The first of these is the idea that the worship experience is a conscious and planned effort to create a space with ritual, music, and symbols that opens us up to the possibility of transformation for the better. Theologian Henry Wieman writes about a faith in the potential for each human spirit to be transformed. Transformed and saved from devoting our lives to the transient goals of social success, financial opulence, scholarship, beauty or even social concern.

Wieman understands this “saving” this “salvation” not as an entry pass into another world at death, but as the recognition that right here we have an opportunity to be more than we currently are, to become complete, to find wholeness, health. This transformation is not the result of an act of will. It is not the result of an intellectual assessment of the facts.

This transformation can take place in what Wieman calls the “Creative Event;” that moment when context and God-given human nature combine to birth something new in the human heart. For Weiman, that is the central goal of worship. In this case the “Creative Event” depends on a community to provide the context, but the event itself is essentially personal, affecting the individual.

So the first perspective on Worship is that it provides a space for the creative event that brings the transformation of the individual.

A second perspective on worship is more focused on the community than the individual. Here the purpose of worship is to manifest a vision of what life in the local Unitarian Universalist congregation can be at its best. To hold up that which is of Ultimate Worth... that which is Holy if you will allow me to use that term.

For the hour or so of worship we are united in an experience of living that attempts to approach our ideal. Our children are honored, our suffering members comforted, we are lifted up in beautiful music and powerful symbols, our intellect is challenged and we are called to sustaining the community during the collection. By our presence we acknowledge a transcendent power of community that is greater than the individual.

Both of these perspectives reflect a decidedly Humanist orientation. We do not attend worship services as passive recipients of God’s grace. In our services Human kind is assuming conscious responsibility for its own destiny. Whether or not you believe there is a God, you had better act as though a better world is up to you!

Attending a tightly controlled worship service that holds us in community for 60 or 70 minutes is one thing. Building a religious community that manifests this ideal 24/7 is entirely another.

Within the confines of the worship service we are fed and no real demands are made upon us outside the collection of the offering. But back in the real world, the building of community

requires hard work. Often these days we hear people say that they are seeking a ‘spiritual community’ but want nothing to do with “organized religion.”

By the former they seem mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; by the latter they seem to be longing for a place that will not make demands upon them to support the institution’s needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other.

There is a tension built into the fabric of this country and the fabric of our faith between individual freedom and collective responsibility. The elevation of the right of the individual to the status of Holy can tear us apart. Communities of faith must oppose any and every view that begins uncritically with separate selves and then almost unavoidably becomes preoccupied with achieving satisfaction for the self.

Building an authentic human community is never easy, only fleetingly happy, and can be terribly disillusioning. We can literally lose our faith in the depths of disillusionment.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer has said, “Only that fellowship which faces such disillusionment, with all this unhappy and ugly aspects, begins to be what it should be in God’s sight; begins to grasp its faith, the promise that is given to it. The sooner this shock of disillusionment comes to an individual and the community the better for both.”

Disillusionment can easily lead to frustration and anger and these emotions can lead to actions that are anything but constructive. Our religious community must be rooted in a realistic expectation of human behavior. Those who love their dreams of community more than the community itself become destroyers of the latter, even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial.

The congregation provides us with resources and opportunities to accept one another’s imperfections, to reconcile our differences, to forgive and to be forgiven, to comfort and to be comforted, to love and to be loved. Isn’t that what church is all about – because it is what life is all about?

I thank you all for being here tonight; this band of spirits striving to build and hold together a meaningful religious community. May your worship experiences include both the inspiration of the Creative Act that works to transform you and the sustaining vision of the human community that we all yearn for....

Amen