

***Why We Gather***  
**Kent Hemmen Saleska, Minister**  
**UU Church of Minnetonka**  
**February 17, 2008**

*Belonging*

Commission on Appraisal Skit for GA 2001, by Rev. Silvia Behrend  
Performed by members of the Commission On Appraisal, June 22, 2001

*(Edited for six people – not the original nine – for use during the “Why We Gather” service  
at the UU Church of Minnetonka, on February 17, 2008)*

Members of UUCM skit

Michael Holt	Voice 1
Mary Loberg	Voice 2
Christy Dachelet	Mask 1
Weld Ransom	Mask 2
Jackie Zimmerman	Mask 3
Mike Elliott	Mask 4

*Kent begins reading the story of the Tower of Babel from a handheld microphone in the back of the church. As the story continues, Mask 1 enters down the middle aisle saying:*

MASK 1 (Christy): Hey, you can't start with that!!! That's from the Bible! What's going on?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): *(already at podium)* 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.

VOICE 2 (Mary): *(already at podium)*

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

VOICE 1 (Michael H): Some thought that signing the book was enough, making no demands on participation. Others were sure that membership was for those who not only signed the book, but also contributed financially in significant ways.

VOICE 2 (Mary): Yet others insisted anyone could be a member whether they pledged or not, whether they volunteered or not.

VOICE 1 (Michael H): And there were organizations who exist outside our congregations. They call themselves UU but the churches don't recognize them. They're "outside."

VOICE 2 (Mary): Some of these organizations are Buddhist, Christian or Pagan oriented, they find their identity as Unitarian Universalists outside the church community. We looked at ourselves as a denomination that is organic, nondogmatic, 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!

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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.

VOICE 2 (Mary): We asked, what does membership really mean?

*(Voice 1 and 2 sit down on stage edge behind podium. All four masked people walk up on either side of stage, taking their positions stage left and right)*

MASK 1 (Christy): 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.

MASK 2 (Weld): 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.

MASK 3 (Jackie): 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.

MASK 4 (Mike E): 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.

MASK 1 (Christy): Not Republicans, of course, but we do have lots of forums, and sometimes we even have fun! ! !

MASK 2 (Weld): 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.

MASK 3 (Jackie): 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. 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.

MASK 4 (Mike E): 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 setup 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.

*(A pause, and then all four masked people sit down on stage edge behind podium, as Voice 1 and 2 rise and move to stand behind podium)*

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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)*.

VOICE 2 (Mary): *(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)*

VOICE 1 (Michael H): Do we really offer a safe space where people can discover their deepest meaning in community?

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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!

*(each masked person stands as they speak)*

MASK 1 (Christy): 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)*

MASK 2 (Weld): Here we can live out deep life, find that which gives shape and meaning to our existence.

MASK 3 (Jackie): 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.

MASK 4 (Mike E): 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.

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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!

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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?

MASK 1 (Christy): 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!

VOICE 2 (Mary): (*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?

MASK 3 (Jackie): (*turns to Voices at podium*) 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.

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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.

MASK 2 (Weld): 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!

MASK 1 (Christy): We are mostly white, middle and upper middle class, educated, and yes, we do have members who are blue-collar workers. (*a little plaintively*)

MASK 4 (Mike E): 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...

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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.

MASK 3 (Jackie): 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?

MASK 4 (Mike E): (*takes off mask and steps directly forward*) 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?

MASK 2 (Weld): (*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?

MASK 1 (Christy): (*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, vegetarian that, 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.

MASK 3 (Jackie): (*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.

VOICE 1 (Michael H): Indeed, membership requires an ability to accept ambiguity and live with it. It...

MASK 2 (Weld): 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.

MASK 4 (Mike E): 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?

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): 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.

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): Are we indeed willing to look at ourselves honestly and listen to all the voices that tell us that "they" are "we"?

VOICE 2 (Mary): The ones we don't want to recognize because they are not like we are.

VOICE 1 (Michael H): The ones who want more spirituality, less spirituality, the ones who want God and those who want no God.

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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,

VOICE 1 (Michael H): We can only ask you to ask yourselves that question.

VOICE 2 (Mary): 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?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): Look around.

VOICE 2 (Mary): Who are you?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): What are you members of?

VOICE 2 (Mary): How do you know that to be true?

VOICE 1 (Michael H): And really,

ALL: who is welcome at your table?

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As a fairly new minister, I am attempting to get to know people in the congregation in a variety of ways. Over the past few weeks, on the Sundays I'm not preaching, I've gone downstairs to visit the kids in their classrooms. Last Sunday I visited two of the grade school religious education classes. In one of the classes, the kids and the teachers had prepared a bucket full of questions that they passed around the table, each child pulling out one piece of paper with one question on it to ask me. In the other class, as the kids introduced themselves, they each got to ask me a question. I was asked a range of questions, from "what was my favorite Star Wars character" to "how did I decide to become a minister." I had a very enjoyable time with the kids in both classrooms.

After they asked their questions, I had a few of my own. One question I asked was, "Why do you come to this church?" The overwhelming first answer I got from just about everyone was, "because our parents make us come!" After a bit more probing, I did get some other more in-depth responses like, "because of the snacks" and "because we get to go upstairs for cookies after the service." Of course, some of the kids did eventually respond with some answers that adults like to hear, like "because my friends are here," and "because we get to do fun stuff."

People come to church for a variety of reasons. Even as adults, some of us may feel forced to come here by a spouse or by ancient programming, or we may come to church because of the great wine and cheese snacks at our wonderful parties, or because we have friends here, or maybe it's just out of habit.

These are not bad reasons. If you come to church because it is a habit, I think that's a pretty good reason as far as it goes. A habit of coming to church is very close to what might be called a spiritual practice of coming to church. Though it is healthy and good for us, most of us brush our teeth every morning out of habit, and wouldn't think of leaving the house without brushing first. Some people are that way about church. They wouldn't think about beginning the week without going to church first.

As a minister though, the questions about why we come to church, and the purpose of worship, and the purpose of the church itself, are perennially at the forefront of my mind. It constantly amazes me that in our Unitarian Universalist faith, each week under one roof, people gather together who consider themselves Christian and Humanist, Theist and Atheist, Pagan and Agnostic, or with Buddhist, Jewish or Muslim backgrounds. Each week, people with this wide range of theologies gather together on a Sunday morning in a place called a church to listen to a person called a minister give a talk called a sermon, hoping and expecting that the message will speak to them directly and be meaningful to them in this particular moment of their lives. Having been raised in Unitarian Universalism almost all my life, it is not so much a daunting task to speak to this wide range of theologies as it causes me to wonder what is the larger container that holds all of us gumballs together.

The two streams of our heritage, the Unitarians and the Universalists, both come from solidly Christian backgrounds. It used to be that the Unitarian story and the Universalist story were both easily contained within the Christian story. This is no longer the case. First with the

advent of the Transcendentalists in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and then with the emergence of the Humanist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, our religious movement has continued to move the tent stakes further and further out, causing us to broaden our self-definition. On the one hand, this is a positive and grace-filled movement that not only allows, but welcomes, such theological variety. On the other hand though, the more diverse become, the less it seems we are able to articulate who we are and why we come together.

And so it was that in the late 1990s that the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Appraisal assessed our association with an eye toward articulating what it means to be a member of one of our congregations, and wrote a report that was published in 2001 called *Belonging: The Meaning of Membership*. The Commission on Appraisal is an independent group of nine laypeople and ministers who are charged with reviewing "any function or activity of the Association which in its judgment will benefit from an independent review and report its conclusions to a regular General Assembly."

As a creative move, the Commission on Appraisal introduced their report to the 2001 General Assembly with the skit we presented earlier. Many of the lines in the skit, especially the ones spoken by the masked players, were taken directly from comments people made during the Commission's four years of research.

The Commission found that membership was not static. Rather, they discovered that it is a process. In Chapter 1 of their report, the Commission writes:

[T]he process of membership is in reality a gradual progression from lesser to greater commitment, which neither begins nor ends at the point of formal joining. Thus, for both the individual and the institution the meaning of membership changes over time...*Community* is a happy-sounding word, and it is common for religious liberals to emphasize the ideal of community as a primary reason and purpose for the institution of the church. Such idealism has its place, but building an authentic human community is never easy and only fleetingly happy.

Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment. Often these days we hear people say they are seeking a "spiritual community" but want nothing to do with "organized religion." By the former they seem to mean a place that will meet their own religious needs; the latter they seem to associate with a place that will make demands upon them to support the institution's needs. The reality is that you cannot have one without the other, and part of the church's job is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive, giving not only our money but ourselves. In other words, only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community. And this commitment consists not of lofty idealisms but of practical realities.

So we in this congregation today are wrestling with these same issues, the issues around what it means to gather together, what it means to worship, and what it means to be a "church" in our modern society.

This congregation has been through a lot of hard times in the past several years. There was a painful ending with the previous minister, and then three years of Interim ministry as you struggled through the work to assess where you had come from, where you were at, and where you wanted to go. Though I was not here at the time, I know it involved a lot of hard work and soul-searching. And though I don't know for sure, my sense from all that I've read and heard is

that the congregation had a bit of a head-down-blinders-on-let's-just-get-through-this-mess attitude. The focus of the congregation turned inward, social justice programming stopped, and approaches to congregational life tended toward just simply finding ways to survive. I know this is not the entire truth about the past few years, but from a systemic view, this is the sense of the congregation I've gotten.

But as painful and difficult as the past few years may have been, I see it as part of an ongoing life cycle. There are times when we need to look inward and focus on survival, and there are times when we take our gifts and skills and abilities and, with a sense of generosity and abundance, begin to turn outward and engage the world. I've heard from a few people that they are tired of hearing about the past, that they want to focus on other topics and look toward the future.

Well, I think there is more than one way to look inward. In times past, the inward view seemed to be more of a means for survival. What I see now, even in my short six months of being here, is more a looking inward that takes the form of assessment, a form that critically examines who we are and who we want to be. In my six months of being here we have organized and conducted an extremely successful capital campaign, we've voted to purchase land for a new building a mile and a half east of here, and we've hired architects to help us achieve our vision for that new building.

After at least a year without much of an active or visible social justice work, John Crossen has agreed to be the facilitator of our Social Justice Ministry, which I believe will be a huge help as we begin once again to turn our vision outside and beyond these church walls.

And now, as part of our inward-looking rejuvenation, next Saturday we are holding a workshop called "Why We Gather: Faith and Commitment." The entire congregation is invited to this workshop, both long-time members and newcomers. This workshop is jointly hosted and organized by the Worship Arts Ministry and by the Committee on Ministry, and will explore two main questions: "What is the purpose of worship?" and "What is the purpose of the church?"

The genesis for this workshop came about through and after several conversations in both groups around the issue of not announcing Sunday services. Some people find this practice maddening, and some find the practice appropriate and in alignment with our professed beliefs. My personal feeling is that what we do here is meaningful and worshipful every week, no matter who is speaking or what the topic is. But beneath the question of whether or not we announce services lies these two questions, "What is the purpose of worship?" and "What is the purpose of the church?"

As I approach it, worship is a public and communal experience, practiced with our liberal religious expression, in the context of opening our selves to the awe and wonder of the universe. The hour of worship each Sunday is the one hour each week that is one of the most visible and public indicators and expressions of our communal and congregational identity. As a minister, I view worship as one of my most important responsibilities.

And yet, as important as worship is, I also know that gathering together for one hour each week is not the sum total of who we are as a congregation, or the only reason people are attracted to and join the church. We still have the other six days and 167 hours of the week in which to live our lives and move together as a religious community.

But as the Commission on Appraisal wrote, "Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work. Like any effective relationship, it requires commitment...Part of the church's job," The Commission continues, "is to lead people to the discovery of the spiritual truth that it is only by giving that we receive, giving not only our money but ourselves. In other

words, only by making a commitment to a community can we hope to build a community. And this commitment consists not of lofty idealisms but of practical realities.”

Part of the meaning of membership, part of the purpose of worship, and part of the purpose of the church, involves a tension between the needs and wants of the individual, and the requirements of sustaining or expanding the institution. If the purpose of the church is to serve each member’s needs or scratch each member’s itch, then we are nothing more than a country club. But I believe we are more than a country club, and one of the practical realities of a church is that we don’t always get our way. As we gather together from our various theological backgrounds, and as we gather together as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual and transgender, and as we gather together as black, brown, white, red, yellow, and any other color you can think of, and as we gather together as young and old, single and coupled, with children and without...we come together to be part of something larger than our selves. We also come for challenge and transformation. As one of the voices in the skit says, “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.”

Part of the purpose of the church then, at least as far back as the early Christian church, and also in the Jewish prophetic tradition before that, is to use our faith and values to call the secular world to account for their behaviors. We have a long tradition of continually offering transformation for those who are members inside our walls, and for the world outside and beyond them.

Next Saturday during our morning workshop, we will explore these questions in more depth about why we gather. We will work in small groups and in large groups. We will work hard and have fun. And it will not be just a great intellectual exercise. The workshop is designed to be the beginning of an ongoing conversation, a conversation that will continually ask us to look inward as we behave in all our outward manifestations. We will end the morning with specific ideas and plans for our next steps, and for planning additional conversation.

For those of you who are interested, please take a packet before you leave today. The packet includes the first chapter of the Commission on Appraisal’s 2001 report on “Belonging.” We invite you to read through the chapter before next Saturday, and come prepared with your questions, your ideas and excitement.

“Real community can only be built through hard and unglamorous work.” Join us next week and engage each other on the meaning of membership, the purpose of worship, and the purpose of the church. The workshop may not be glamorous, but it will be meaningful, and will help shape the future of this church.