

## Is This Really a Church?

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I want to do a little experiment this morning: I want you to think of the word “church” and pay attention to your first reaction. There’s no right answer – only your answer. So check in with yourself and your reaction to the word “church.” Is it positive? Neutral? Negative?

Now we’re going to do a little spatial sorting and I’m going to ask you to move to a part of the room based on your reaction. Before you move, let me tell you where you’ll be going.

If you experienced a positive reaction as you first considered the word church, I’d like you to stand on the right hand side of the Sanctuary – to my left, your right. For those who felt neutral – neither positive nor negative - about the word, please take a place in the back of the Sanctuary, near the double doors. Of course, that leaves the left-hand side for those of you who felt a negative response – your left, my right.

And, if you aren’t comfortable standing for a few minutes, stay in your seat – you’ll still have a chance to participate.

Now, just notice how we are arrayed in the room. Notice those on the right side – and if you’re still seated, please raise your hand if you are also in the group who felt a negative response to the word “church.” Okay, look to the back of the room. Again, anyone seated who feels neutral, raise your hand to be included in this group. And, last, those who felt a positive reaction – or those seated who now should raise their hand – on the left-hand side of the room.

Think about the word “church” – what comes to mind for you? What attributes, characteristics, or qualities do you think about when you think about “church”? Now, what about the folks who respond to “church” negatively? And, now, from the positive reactions. Thank you for participating. Now, please return to your seats.

My purpose for this exercise wasn’t to “out” you as a “church hater,” to reward one group or to shame another. What I want us to see is that on this issue, as on so many other issues related to our faith tradition, we can hold different opinions, responses, and viewpoints and still be a church. Even in this Fellowship - this church, if you will - where we share a commitment to a common set of values for seeking truth and meaning, we find a wide range of visions of the concept of church. In my mind, nobody is wrong; it just puts us in an interesting place for discussion, I think.

So, what did you notice as you looked around the room?

- Were people of one age group more or less represented in the division?
- Did people’s relative length of experience as a UU seem to be at play in where they stood?
- Other impressions or things you noticed?

The word “church,” besides signifying the building in which religious services and worship are held, also refers to the gathering of people within its walls who come together to consider the mysteries and meanings of life. “Church” has been a volatile concept for Unitarian Universalists for a long time, which may explain why you’ll find that so many of our faith communities avoid the issue and call themselves something else entirely – a society, community, fellowship, meeting, and so forth. There are those who use the word, “church,” as well.

Historically, I think that we came to this place denominationally because we had such a challenge with “THE” church that it was hard for us to identify ourselves as “A” church. Sort of like the dilemma we sometimes have with “THE” truth as differentiated from “a” truth.

Beyond the basic meaning of the word, we layer on our own perceptions, impressions, experiences, and reactions. As we’ve seen already this morning, “church” means something uniquely different to each of us here. We learn what it is that we know about church from a variety of sources. For those with past experiences in a church or churches, impressions are informed by that experience, even if you only went to a wedding or funeral.

When I was young, I attended a Presbyterian church. As I remember, it was a very “high church” sort of service – a set of standard rituals repeated every week, in a specific order, performed by a certain set of people. I don’t remember much action or interaction, much laughter or friendliness. It was pretty serious. Consequently, that’s what I thought church was “supposed” to be like. I didn’t necessarily enjoy it, but it was the only reference I had. Carl, my husband, got me involved in Unitarian Universalism. The first few times I attended a UU service, I kept trying to make the experience fit into my old model of “church.” It didn’t work. Not all of the services were the same. The minister told stories and people laughed. Other people talked. People talked to each other. The music was more upbeat. Some people even moved when they sang. It took me awhile to get into this new experience and reframe my concept of what it meant to be at “church.”

Do you remember your experience when you started attending UU Sunday services? What was it like for you? I think it’s important to note that these days, more and more of those who are finding Unitarian Universalism as a faith community are coming here with little or no formal religious background whatsoever.

But, we have other ways we learn about church. One of them is from popular culture. Some examples include watching TV and experiencing the ministerial style of the Rev. Timothy Lovejoy on *The Simpsons*, reading about secret religious societies in *The Da Vinci Code*, participating in a church in the virtual online “Second Life” community, or hearing about the raid of a polygamous sect of Mormons on the five o’clock news. While there are exceptions, I know, it seems that most pop culture representations of churches aren’t very positive. I imagine that if all you knew about church came strictly from the news or television, say, you probably wouldn’t be too inclined to go check out what was happening in your local mosque, synagogue, church, or house of worship.

Some people’s ideas about church are a projection of their own needs or preferences. They bring their personal goals and objectives to the congregation, expecting that the community will bend to their vision and alter itself to meet their specific needs, in the particular ways they’d like to see them played out. Churches do meet many needs, to be sure, and all of us hope that our involvement in a congregation fulfills us and helps us meet at least some of our personal needs and goals. But a church is not a department store, where we participate like consumers, picking and choosing among the “offerings” available to us, solely on the basis of our individualistic preferences.

In our time, when everything from education to relationships to healthcare has become a product to be consumed instead of an experience to be engaged, our church must be a place where we do not treat each other, or our community, as a commodity. Rather than merely a drop-in center or social club, in our church we are called to create a place where we recognize and embrace each other as unique human beings, each with an individual story and compelling destiny to fulfill. When we are together in church, we are in sacred time, because of our commitment to enter into a deeper relationship with each other, with life, and with our beliefs.

Here, together, our purpose is to be willing to find our sense of calling, of ministry to one another and to the world. Within our church, we need to not only receive, get, and absorb, but also to commit ourselves to participation, exploration, engagement, and growth. When we commit to a church community, we agree to show up and participate in exploring the mystery of life together.

Maybe when you were young, like me, you learned this little rhyme about church. Feel free to follow along.

Here is the church. Here is the steeple.  
Open the doors. See all the people.

I think that, especially for Unitarian Universalists, the last line should be “The church is the people.” A church is more than the building or furnishings. People can be a church community without having their own building to meet in. A church is also more than the minister; a minister needs a community to serve and love. The people are the church and the church is the people.

At its core, our church is concerned with relationships – to each other, to our faith tradition, to the interconnected web of all existence. Our business together is how we support, encourage, engage, and embody our faith with each other and in the larger community on a day-to-day basis.

In the Fall, 2008 UU World, there’s a wonderful quote from Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, who says, “that the ancient question, “Who am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “WHOSE am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationship. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask, “Whose am I?” is to extend the question far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious and invisible ways?”

Now, some UUs would answer the question “Whose am I” by saying that they belong to God, or Jesus, or other higher power. And there are other UUs who would choose a very different answer when it came to the inclusion or exclusion of that-which-is-larger-than-ourselves. But, I believe all UUs would agree that, in our faith tradition, we belong to each other in the covenanted relationship of our congregation. We are here for each other, as well as for ourselves. And, we are here for the world.

Churches have missions larger than the individual needs and wants of those who attend that church. In our faith tradition, while our faith community nurtures us, we also have a calling to act for justice in the larger world. UUFLG has a mission like that, too, which we’ve recently started to include again in our publications. It’s in your Order of Service and I’d like you to turn to it now, on the bottom of the second inside blue page.

This particular mission was developed by members of this congregation in 1995. Let's read it together.

As you can see, we have things we aspire to do in the world, needs within and beyond this congregation which we strive to address. Participating in making this a reality in our community certainly can be satisfying individually and may meet some of our own needs – for meaning, for support, for community. Our mission represents the covenant we have with each other for what we want our church to be. UUs don't subscribe to a dogma or creed. We do, however, use a covenant - a voluntary agreement with each other - to describe what it means to be a part of this community and what we are about as we pursue our mission in the world.

In her essay, "Religion as Relationship," the Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer notes: "Unitarian Universalists covenant together. It is our voluntary agreement with each other, it is our freedom to promise mutuality. It is our pledge to respect "individual religious rights" and it is our commitment to action. Our covenant is a pledge to bond together to pursue common goals."

This spring, with the guidance of the Board of Trustees, we'll revisit our Fellowship's mission. It's a good time to review the hopes and aspirations represented in its language and insure that our mission statement continues to capture the image we want for our faith community, amongst ourselves and in the larger world.

Our mission helps us know about the work of this church. And, as our mission states, an important part of our work together is the care and nurturing of our souls. No matter what tasks we must perform, or issues we need to address, the enduring work of our church, of our faith tradition, is to be a place where we can engage the eternal and essential, where we can find renewed hope when life is tragic and share in celebration when life is joyful. Our church is a place where we explore how to be prepared for life's inevitables and be a force for good; how we can be a source of hope and encouragement and wisdom for each other in our search for truth and meaning.

In creating this beloved community, in being the people of this church, each of us has an important role to play, each of us brings a unique perspective, each of us receives as well as contributes. Think about your role or roles at UUFLG.

If you are on the Board of Trustees of UUFLG, or ever have been involved in the leadership of this congregation, please stand. If you serve or have served on a committee of this Fellowship, I'd like to ask you to please stand. If you've participated in a Social Action project, please stand. If you've attended or led a Religious Education class, workshop, or lecture, or you've helped with children's RE, please stand. If you've volunteered yourself in service to this church - to bring snacks, serve as a Greeter, make a casserole, provide a ride, or helped out on a work party, please stand. If you are a member of this congregation, please stand. If you participated in a Chalice Circle, a women's or men's group, gone to Dinners for Eight, or attended a potluck or film or social event here at this Fellowship, please stand. And, one of our most important groups - if you are a visitor here, please stand. Look around you. This is our church.

Turn to the people around you and thank them for contributing to our religious life. Let them know you appreciate them for bringing themselves to the deep relationship of this congregation, for helping us live out our mission as a people of faith.

Blessed be.