

## The Responsibilities and Benefits of Membership

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome the participation of non-members in worship services, youth or adult classes, social events and social action projects. Though most friends of UU congregations eventually pledge financial support, or at least make regular contributions, there often is less expectation of such support than there is from members, and the same can be said of the expectations of volunteer support. So why should a person become a member, when as a friend, you can have almost all of the benefits without as much responsibility?

There are some tangible benefits which are enjoyed only by members, and though these are of greater significance than is often acknowledged, the intangible benefits may be even greater. The right to vote in congregational meetings is the one tangible benefit that is universally reserved for members. This may seem to be of minimal importance as long as the agenda only includes the usual items of electing the leadership or adopting a budget. But when more important or controversial items come along, such as the adoption of congregational stands on issues in the larger community, the calling of a new minister, or proposed changes to the facilities, non-voting friends often realize too late that having a vote can be important. The free use of the facilities and services of a minister for weddings and memorial services, inclusion in child dedication ceremonies, and other similar benefits are often, but less universally, reserved for members. They also may not seem that important until a person needs them.

The intangible benefits of membership speak more to the heart of why we gather in our non-creedal religious communities in the first place. To sign your name in a membership book and to promise to support your community financially and spend some of your time helping to co-create its ministry programs are acts of commitment that have great power. There are some people who, for a variety of reasons, may be wary of commitment, fearing, perhaps, a loss of freedom. Membership in a UU congregation is not, however, a legal contract, so the loss of freedom is imaginary. Making that commitment instead offers a sense of ownership that leads to greater power of creation. It is an acknowledgment that we are in this together, and that we can make a greater difference together than we ever could alone. The members are what really make it all happen, rather than merely being spectators.

The responsibilities of membership lead directly to the benefits. Making a financial pledge that is commensurate with one's income and other financial commitments means that the church will be able to maintain the facilities, hire the staff, and create the ministry programs that make a difference in the lives of the members of the church and in the larger community. Taking part in the shared ministry with your volunteer time means that you are a co-minister of your religious community. Attending congregational meetings, informing oneself about the issues before the congregation, and voting according to one's conscience and for the greater good of the community makes the democracy of the congregation stronger and more representative. Those who wish to receive the benefits of the ministry without doing their part in creating that ministry are reducing the power of the congregation. In addition, they are not able to reap the full benefits, since the old adage is true: what you get out of it is proportional to what you put into it. Until you make the commitment, you won't feel the power.

Of course, the specific amount that one is able to pledge financially and the time one is able to spend doing volunteer work varies from person to person, and from time to time in one person's life. It is understood that conditions will wax and wane. Give when and what you can, so that you may rest assured that your community will continue to be there, both for you when you need it, and to serve as a religious home for future generations of freedom loving people.