

Faith Community Onboarding

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Good morning! How wonderful to be here together on this New Member Sunday. Today is the formal initiation of new members into this community of faith. Initiation is a rite of passage for many people who join groups or organizations, and this rite of passage can vary dramatically depending on the group or organization. At Oberlin College, the football team shaves your head over a garbage can after your first day of practice. A fraternity at The College of William & Mary dumps food on your head and then invites you to join their fraternity. At the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville, New Member Sunday is our rite of passage, which does not involve shaving anyone's head or dumping food on anyone, at least so far.

Today is an occasion for new and current members to reflect on the values and core mission of this church and of the Unitarian-Universalist faith. We are here because we believe in The Seven UU Principles. These are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

We are here because we believe in the mission of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville. Our mission statement, which you can find on our website, is:

We, the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville, Maine:

Promote a search for personal truth and spiritual growth sustained by worship that honors a variety of traditions and rituals.

Respect diverse points of view as we create a peaceful, loving, and just community while serving our congregation and the world beyond.

Build a sustainable relationship with our Earth through responsible action and leadership.

We are here because we believe in this church's Statement of Values, which can also be found on our website:

We, the congregation of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville, Maine, honoring our liberal religious heritage and acknowledging our presence in Waterville since 1826, affirm the value of...

Individuals and their unique journeys of personal and spiritual growth,

A community that welcomes children and adults to an extended family with social as well as religious life,

Worship that brings together tradition and ritual with creative contributions from our diverse congregation,
Service beyond self as a means of expressing our religious convictions, and
Self-governance in our life together as a congregation in keeping with the tradition of our denomination.

These are the mission and values of Unitarian Universalism and of the Universalist Unitarian Church of Waterville, Maine. These are what attracted us to this church and these are what keep us here.

Now is the time to think about how we can help new members adjust to their new membership roles as successfully as possible. In the corporate world, the process by which employers help new employees adjust to their new jobs is called onboarding. Although we are not hiring anyone today, we are formally welcoming new volunteer members into this community of faith. Successful faith community onboarding helps us create a fulfilling and long-term partnership between the church and its members.

Onboarding happens way before people officially join the church. Onboarding begins when people first hear about this church, either through word-of-mouth, seeing our church from the street, or researching our church online. People tend to invest a significant amount of time evaluating churches online before they actually set foot in the church for a visit. For many potential visitors, visiting our website is the first time that they evaluate how well they will fit in with our church. If they are optimistic that they will be a good fit with our church, then they are more likely to actually visit.

Once people walk through the door for the first time, the time it takes people to become church members varies tremendously. A report conducted by the Unitarian Universalist Association in 2010 found that 70% of people take 3 or more months to decide whether to join a UU church. In fact, 30% of people take a year or longer to decide. And 4% never decide; they just keep coming to church. If there is one take-away from these statistics, it is that for most people, the onboarding process begins way before they officially join the church.

In the corporate world, the four keys to successful onboarding are: fit within an organizational culture, self-confidence, role clarity, and social integration. We will discuss these four keys to successful onboarding so that we can onboard our new members as successfully as possible.

Communicating the organization's culture is the first key to successful onboarding. When we communicate our culture, people can evaluate how well they fit with that culture. An organization's culture is based on that organization's core values and mission. People determine their culture fit based on how well their values align with the organization's values. We have already discussed this church's core values and mission, which attracted us to this church in the first place. This church's core values are manifested in the institutional structure of this church. One way that we can make new member onboarding successful is to explain to new members how the church is structured, how the committees are set up and who is on them, and what kind of unique terminology and traditions we have. We have an administrative structure that includes a Board of Trustees and Officers. By my unofficial count, we also have 32 teams, committees

and sub-committees, each of which performs a unique function to help the church achieve its mission. These include the Worship Committee, which contains five sub-committees, the Caring Committee, the Membership Committee, the Communications Team, and the Fellowship Team, to name just a few. We have unique language and traditions. While the chalice might seem obvious to many of us, the chalice is new to many visitors. When someone performs during church, we often show our appreciation by wiggling our fingers in the air like this. These are examples of unique aspects of our church culture that might be new to a visitor. Successful onboarding communicates to new members how the administrative structure of this church is set up, who the people are that are on the leadership team and on all of the other teams, committees and sub-committees, and what kind of unique language and traditions we have. This will help the new member understand the church's culture and fit in with the church's culture.

Role clarity is the second key to successful onboarding. If you have ever had a job where you were not sure what you supposed to do, you can imagine how stressful that can be. It is stressful because you do not know what to do, you do not know if what you *are* doing is correct, and you have no idea how people are evaluating your performance. That is super stressful and demoralizing. As a church, one of the best things that we can do for new members is to let them know what we expect them to do. The corporate world refers to this as a realistic job preview. A realistic job preview tells a job applicant what the job *actually* is before their first day on the job. People are less likely to accept a job offer if they receive a realistic job preview, but those who *do* accept the job offer are more likely to stay on the job. The realistic job preview continues even after the employee's first day on the job. It is difficult to explain to someone each and every aspect of a job before they start, so the employee continues to learn what they will be doing for weeks or months after their first day. We can do the same thing for our new members. Last month, the new members gathered in the office and received a realistic job preview of sorts. The two key take-aways from this meeting were that the church expects new members to help with church events and initiatives and to contribute financially to the church. We can help new members adjust to their new member roles by providing them with additional information about what we expect them to do. The more specific that the church is about how involved members are expected to be and how much money they are expected to give, the better that new members can perform their membership role.

Self-confidence is the third key to helping a new member adjust to their membership role. People are motivated to learn how to perform their job if they are confident that they can perform their job well. Self-confidence increases people's motivation to learn, which ultimately increases people's actual job performance as they acquire knowledge and skills. We want new members to feel confident that they can perform their membership roles well. We can help new members feel confident by encouraging them. Whenever you have the opportunity, tell new members that they are doing a good job and encourage them to keep doing what they are doing. Encouragement is good, but it only goes so far if people don't know *how* to do something. Therefore, we can also *teach* people what to do. The corporate world calls this a training intervention. Identify knowledge and skills gaps and then close those gaps by training up employees. We can do something similar with new members. Teach new members the knowledge and skills that they need. A new member might be motivated to take on a responsibility or to join a committee; however, the new member might not know *how* to perform the work. Every committee or team requires specific knowledge and skills in order to succeed. Figure out what committee members

need to know. When a new member joins, be proactive and give them a crash course, and help them learn along the way. That will greatly help a new member get up and running and feel like a valuable contributor.

Social integration is the fourth key to successful onboarding. In the corporate world, one of the biggest predictors of organizational tenure is how socially connected an employee feels with his or her coworkers. Social integration, or cohesion, is the glue that keeps groups and organizations together. One social psychologist defined cohesion as the extent to which group members want to remain members of the group. Without cohesion, the group falls apart. We are here because we *want* to be part of this community of faith. Along with our commitment to the UU principles, social integration is the glue that holds us together. We can help new members adjust to their membership role by welcoming them and inviting them to participate in formal and informal church events. The more contact that new members have with church “insiders,” the more socially-integrated new members will become. Hospitality hour is perhaps the first informal church event that comes to mind. Invite new members to hospitality hour, learn about who they are, and tell them about yourself and this church. As you get to know new members, think of ways that new members can also become involved in more formal ways that would be a good fit with their interests and skills, such as joining a church committee or helping with a church event.

Now that we have talked about the keys for successful onboarding, we also need to think about how to keep our members. A progressive Christian church in Washington, D.C. found that the number one reason why people left is that they felt like their spiritual needs were not being met. While there are many reasons that people choose to leave churches, maybe, ultimately, it comes down to unmet spiritual needs. We are a religious organization. We exist to serve people’s spiritual needs. Perhaps the biggest way that a faith organizational can fail its members is by not satisfying their spiritual needs.

Toward the end of today’s service, we will recite the New Member Covenant. The New Member Covenant is an agreement between the new members and the church. The New Member Covenant lays out some expectations that the new members and the church have of one another; however, the New Member Covenant does not spell out every single expectation. Instead, we also have unwritten expectations of one another. These are the things that the church and the new members expect of one another but that are not formally spelled out.

The unwritten part of the New Member Covenant is similar to the psychological contract that exists between employees and employers. When we enter into an employment relationship, the employee and employer become parties to a psychological contract. The psychological contract is all of the unwritten obligations that the employee and employer have of one another. These are the things that you think your employer is obligated to provide to you. It could be as simple as fair treatment, a safe workplace or fair pay. At the same time, the employer has expectations of its employees. For example, an employer may think that you are obligated to be ethical, to show up to work on time, and to perform your job to the best of your ability.

When people feel like their employers have not lived up to their obligations, they feel like the employer has violated their psychological contract. Employees become cynical, disappointed or demoralized, and they begin to distrust their employers. Some employees retaliate by

withholding effort, showing up late to work, undermining their coworkers, or speaking badly about the employer. They start looking for jobs somewhere else. Eventually, many employees quit.

The psychological contract also applies to churches. We can see this in the different expectations that the church has of members and non-members. When you're a visitor or friend of the church and you do something for the church, everyone is happily surprised. The expectations of visitors or friends of the church are fairly low and therefore it is easy to exceed expectations. That makes sense because visitors and the church have not entered into a formal agreement or covenant. But when you become a member and you do something for the church, then the church is of course grateful and appreciative, but no one is especially surprised. When you are a member and you do member things, then you are meeting expectations.

A healthy psychological contract between a church and its members is one of the best ways for a church to keep its members. The church can make sure that it has a healthy psychological contract with its members by staying laser-focused on why people are attracted to this church in the first place. We have talked about this church's mission and values. Ultimately, this church's core mission is to support its members' spiritual growth. That is why we are here. This church is the place for conversations about the great unknown. Here is the place to discuss the meaning of life, why we are here, and our role in the world. Here is the place to discuss our insecurities, our vulnerabilities, and our anxieties about the questions that we cannot answer. Here is the place to connect with the human spirit that makes us generous, resilient, and worthy of love. Our ministry and everything that we do at this church are the expressions of our spiritual journey.

Members want the church to support them in their spiritual growth. This is the church's most important obligation to its members. Meeting this obligation is the best way for the church to maintain a healthy psychological contract with its members. The church is the collection of individuals within it. Members can talk to one another and help make sure that the church remains laser-focused on its core mission to support everyone in their spiritual growth. Let's always be on the look-out for any obstacles to our spiritual journey. As a congregation, let's always be proactive and remove those obstacles as soon as we identify them. We are all obligated to create a church environment that supports our spiritual growth and to help remove any barriers that might get in the way of it.

In the year 1716, Christopher Bullock wrote in his satirical novel called *The Cobbler of Preston* "Tis impossible to be sure of any thing but Death and Taxes." We can also add *change* to the short list of things of which we can be certain. Organizations are constantly changing, evolving, growing, shrinking, and restructuring. Our church as it exists today will not be identical to the church as it will be one year from today, or two years from today, or three years from today. Think how different this church is today compared to how it was one year ago, or two years ago, or three years ago.

The attraction-selection-attrition theory in organizational psychology provides insights into how organizations develop over time. Initially, people are attracted to an organization because it has a similar personality profile. The organization shares people's interests and values. Over time, some people realize that they've made a mistake and that the organization isn't a good fit for

them after all, so they leave. After those people leave, the pool of remaining people contains people who are even more similar to one another. This process repeats, and the organization becomes more and more eccentric and appeals to fewer and fewer people. Over time, the members of the organization become so similar to one another that the organization loses the ability to adapt to changes in the outside world. It loses its broad appeal.

A challenge for this church, and for many other churches, is how to adapt to a changing environment while still remaining true to our values. We see evidence that organized religion is losing its appeal to the outside world. We know that the number of church-going Americans is declining from year to year. Mainline Protestant and Catholic membership has been declining. This trend has also caught up with Evangelical Protestant membership, which has started to decline. At the same time, the percentage of unaffiliated people has increased by 6.7%, according to the Pew Research Center. These unaffiliated people are referred to as “nones,” spelled n o n e s – not n u n s. These are people who are either atheist, agnostic, or, as they say, “nothing in particular.” In another Pew study, the percentage of people who identified as spiritual but not religious increased from 19% to 27% over the last five years, which is an increase of 8 percentage points in a very short time.

These numbers suggest an opportunity for UU churches. Last year, UU church membership increased by 980 members. That was the first year since 2009 that UU membership has increased. Over the last 10 years, our aggregate membership numbers are down, but the slight increase in membership in 2018 is a promising sign. As of today, there are 154,790 UU members in the world, most of which are located in the United States.

Americans are still seeking spiritual growth, but they are less attracted to dogmatic faiths. The number one reason why nones become nones is because they question religious teachings. They do not want to be told what to think. UUs don't *give* people the answers but we help people in their quest to find the answers for themselves. We as a congregation have the opportunity to serve the need for people who hunger for an authentic spiritual journey within a supportive faith community. These people are the nones. These people are the spiritual but not religious. These people are the previously affiliated with another religion. And these are even people formally affiliated with other religions.

As always, our challenge is to figure out how to serve this need – how to help people in their spiritual journey. We express our values through this church and through everything we do here. Yet, we must always ask ourselves: are we doing the right things? What are we doing right and what can we change so that we so that we can best serve people's hunger for spiritual growth? The world is changing constantly, but our values remain the same. What are the best things for us to do in order to express our values in this changing world? As members of this church, we are all obligated to grapple with this question.

Today's Thought for Contemplation speaks to the crux of why we are here today. "Let us venture together into the future of faith, determined to keep faith alive because our humanity is only complete when our believing selves are strong and healthy." This quote comes from Sophia Lyon Fahs in her book *Today's Children and Yesterday's Heritage: A Philosophy of Creative*

Religious Development. Sophia Lyon Fahs was a pioneer in American Unitarian religious education.

In her quotation, Sophia Lyon Fahs might be referring to faith in God, but she could also be referring to faith in humanity or to faith in the human spirit, or, more generally, to faith in *something*. The pursuit of faith is about being together, supporting one another, and having faith in the future. We are not afraid of the future. We approach the future with curiosity and optimism. We approach the future with faith in the human spirit to overcome the great challenges facing humanity. For the new members of this church, their spiritual journey probably began long ago. But today we make their spiritual journey within this church official. Let us all live up to our obligation to support one another – long-standing and new members alike – in our spiritual journeys. Today is a wonderful day to commemorate the beginning of this journey together. Welcome!