

Why attend church, especially when it's a Unitarian Universalist church?

October 2017 - Adapted



Welcome to, or welcome back to, Covenant Groups. These confidential small groups give us room to

- Express ourselves about topics of interest to us
- Think deeply about ourselves and the world
- Listen deeply to others, in order to better understand them and ourselves
- Continue worship in a different setting
- Provide service to others

We'll start with a **check-in**, a time for each person to make a brief statement about what's on their mind, in order to release it and focus on our topic. You can pass if you don't wish to speak.

Readings

Both of these readings and the closing reading are from a 2011 talk by Bill Kronhom of Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Helena, MT the full reading has been inserted after the second paragraph below.

... she goes to church to search for truth, even if the search is less than perfect. Again, it is something you might think she could do herself, anytime, anywhere. But the search for truth also is a communal affair. Churches are places where we can explore together what it means to be human; where we can discuss big issues of morality and reality; where we link the big truths to our own lives.

Mark Morrison-Reed is a retired UU minister and author. He wrote a short reading in the back of our hymnal titled "The Task of the Religious Community." Part of it reads: "It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed."

Why Do We Go To Church? - led by Bill Kronholm

posted on Aug 28, 2011 <http://bigskyuu.org/2011/08/why-do-we-go-to-church/>

Good morning everyone, and welcome back after what seemed like a very short summer break! We usually say services will resume in the fall, but of course it feels nothing like fall outside. It is a beautiful Sunday morning in August in Montana, where summer is short and weekend days are precious. And, you could still be out hiking, or fishing, or rafting, or bicycling, or simply kicking back. But instead you chose to spend your Sunday noon-hour here, inside, in church. I'm pleased of course, that you are here to hear me and our guest performer Roy Zimmerman. But I have to wonder: Why? Why in the heck are you people here? Why do any of us choose to spend our Sundays here?

If this were a traditional Christian church, the answer to that would be fairly simple. We would be here to worship God and to proclaim Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Or to put it more bluntly, we would be here because we hope to go to heaven instead of hell. I doubt that's a reason for many in this crowd. Even if you felt the need to appear in church occasionally to save your soul and avoid hell, you could do it just as well on some cold and rainy Sunday in November when there wasn't much else going on.

And as much as I'm grateful to the Welcoming Committee, I'm doubtful that anyone is here mainly for the coffee and snacks, or even our monthly potluck. So what keeps bringing us back?

Like a lot of people, there was a long hiatus in my own churchgoing when I was younger. I was brought up in a fairly fundamentalist Lutheran home, and once I escaped to college, church dropped off my calendar – and stayed off the calendar for the next 20 years. I started attending church again after moving to Montana and meeting Joyce, and I did so mainly because spirituality was important to her.

But I can't say I became enthusiastic about church until finding UU. I've told people that that was because it was the first church I attended where I didn't feel like I should cross my fingers behind my back while reciting stuff and singing hymns. But just as importantly, it was the first church I attended where I felt the people around me also would not be crossing their fingers and saying things they didn't really believe. There was a mutual honesty and respect for truth that, rightly or wrongly, I didn't feel in mainstream Christian churches.

And while we are talking about attending church, let me make clear, I am not being critical of those who are not here today. Before Joyce and I retired, our goal was to attend church at least one or two Sundays each month. But we loved the outdoors and weekend days off were precious. So the other two or three or four Sundays were up for grabs.

I have to believe that for regular, every-Sunday attenders, particularly among traditional Christians, reasons for attending church may be less spiritual and more social or cultural. While it is not as true now as it was in the '50s, many people still attend church because it is the expected and respectable thing to do, at least in their particular social circles.

A while back, we had a UU woman who attended our services briefly while she was in Helena on a federal government assignment. She had come here from San Antonio, and she told me she felt smothered by the social pressure of the fundamentalist Christian culture that pervaded that city. Inevitably, she said, when she met new people, the first question they asked was not: where are you from, or do you have kids, or what do you do for fun? It was: Where do you go to church? It was a defining question even in secular office settings, and it made an immediate first impression, positive or negative, based purely on religion. Your answer was significant.

Thankfully, we do not face those social or spiritual imperatives to that degree. And yet we are here. Why?

Lucy Maud Montgomery was a Canadian author who wrote "Anne of Green Gables" and its antecedents early in the last century. She also kept a journal, and provided a thoughtful answer to that question in her entry of August 23, 1901:

"I sometimes ask myself why, after all, I go to church so regularly. Well, I go for a jumble of reasons, some of which are very good, and others very flimsy and ashamed of themselves. It's the respectable thing to do — this is one of the flimsy ones — and I would be branded a black sheep if I didn't go. Then, in this quiet uneventful land, church is really a social function and the only regular one we have. We get out, see our friends and are seen of them, and air our best clothes which otherwise would be left for the most part to the tender mercies of moth and rust."

She goes on: "Oh, you miserable reasons! Now for a few better ones!"

"I go to church because I think it well to shut the world out from my soul now and then and look my spiritual self squarely in the face. I go because I think it well to search for truth everywhere, even if we never find it in its entirety. And finally I go because all the associations of the church and service make for good and bring the best that is in me to the surface — the memories of old days, old friends, childish aspirations for the beautiful and sacred. All these come back, like the dew of some spiritual benediction — and so I go to church." End quote.

You'll notice she doesn't mention God, or Jesus, or heaven or hell. Her reasons are all internal.

But a common thread underlies her reasoning, and that is the notion of church as community. Becky Warren once said up here that we are her tribe. We share values and thoughts and aspirations for society. There is a power in community that makes our collective thoughts more than simply the sum of our individual thoughts. There is a joy in community, and this too is a reason we attend church. It underlies Lucy Maude Montgomery's reasoning. Take a closer look:

First, she said she goes to church to shut out the outside world for a short time and take a hard look at herself from a spiritual perspective. At first blush, you would think anyone could do this entirely on their own, anytime, anywhere. But

Ms. Montgomery seems to know how easy it is to fool yourself about your spiritual status and progress. Human beings seem to need the presence of other people to be entirely honest with themselves.

Second, she goes to church to search for truth, even if the search is less than perfect. Again, it is something you might think she could do herself, anytime, anywhere. But the search for truth also is a communal affair. Churches are places where we can explore together what it means to be human; where we can discuss big issues of morality and reality; where we link the big truths to our own lives.

Finally, Ms. Montgomery says she goes to church is because it brings out the best in her. This is one that strikes a particular chord in me. It is echoed in a sermon on the subject, by the Rev. A. Powell Davis of All Souls Unitarian in Washington. Rev. Davis wrote:

“I come to church—and would whether I was a preacher or not—because I fall below my own standards and need to be constantly brought back to them. It is not enough that I should think about the world and its problems at the level of a newspaper report or a magazine discussion. It could too soon become too low a level. I must have my conscience sharpened—sharpened until it goads me to the most thorough and responsible thinking of which I am capable. I must feel again the love I owe my fellow men (and women). I must not only hear about it but feel it. In church, I do.

“I need to be reminded that there are things I must do in the world—unselfish things, things undertaken at the level of idealism. Workaday enthusiasms are not enough. They wear out too soon. I want to experience human nature at its best—and be reminded of its highest possibilities, and this happens to me in church. It may seem as though the same things could be found in solitude, but it does not easily happen so.” End quote.

I’ll be honest with you, I don’t consider myself to be particularly noble, or courageous, or selfless. But in this room, I am surrounded by people whom I love and respect, and who expect me to be a good person. I don’t want to let anyone here down, because by doing so I would let myself down. And so, the community here helps bring out the best in me, that part of me that I sometimes might deny, might not believe exists.

Mark Morrison-Reed is a retired UU minister and author. He wrote a short reading in the back of our hymnal titled “The Task of the Religious Community.” Part of it reads:

“It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together our vision widens and our strength is renewed.”

So I guess that’s it for me. I am here because you inspire me. You uplift me. You renew me. And you make me a better person. This is what we all do for each other. For that, I thank you.

Shalom.

Discussion questions

1. What brings you to UUCSV on a Sunday morning?
2. What keeps you coming back?
3. What would make your church experience deeper?
4. How do/could you deepen your spiritual growth?
5. How might you be more involved with the UUCSV this year?

Closing Reading

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