

“To Be Of Use”

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I am surprised by the definitions of “service” and “volunteer.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines service as employment in duties or work for another. The root of the word “service” comes from the word “slave.” In this light “service” seems compulsory, obligation oriented, and potentially deadening. The word “volunteer,” on the other hand, is defined as “a person who performs or offers to perform a service voluntarily – to perform of one’s own free will, to do work without pay. Why would a person want to volunteer, work without pay? The answer is in the root of the word. The root “vol” means “to wish,” and the root “voluntas” means “choice.”

Volunteering is a wish choice, a free will hope effort for human progress, connection, wholeness, healing, and growth. It is no wonder that so many psychological theorists see volunteerism as part of healthy human development. Psychologist Erik Erikson believes that a major challenge of adulthood is (what he called) generativity (identified as caring for others and creating things) vs. stagnation (self-absorption). The experience of generativity helps us to become whole humans.

Erikson also noted that in most modern societies children do not contribute to the productivity of the family or society (formerly they worked in the fields with their family, served as apprentices, etc.). Since Erikson believes that industry is critical to youth development, he believes that children need to learn how to work cooperatively with others, if they are to be productive later in life, and that the way to do this is through volunteer work, participation in sports, music, and other group opportunities.¹ I am glad that our senior high class at First Church volunteers at the Drop Inn Center on a monthly basis and I regret not asking them what they have learned from this experience. Erikson believes they are learning to be caring, productive members of society as a whole. Studies validate his opinion.

In 1978 a study was conducted based on data taken from high school students in 1955. Researchers wanted to study the relationship between group participation as children and group participation in adulthood. What they found was a direct correlation. “Membership in youth organizations predicted membership in adult organizations 15 years later, and membership in organizations at age 30 positively predicted voting behavior and negatively predicted feelings of alienation.”² Clearly volunteer participation is both a human yearning and necessary for meaningful development.

In her poem “To Be of Use” Marge Piercy writes

I want to be with people who submerge in the task,
 Who go into the fields to harvest and work in a row and pass the bags along,

¹ Community Service 24.

² Community service, 30.

Who stand in the line and haul in their places,
 Who are not parlor generals and field deserters but move in a common rhythm
 when the food must come in or the fire be put out.
 The work of the world is common as mud.
 Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.
 But the thing worth doing well done has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.
 Greek amphoras for wine or oil,
 Hopi vases that held corn,
 Are put in museums but you know they were made to be used.
 The pitcher cries for water to carry and a person for work that is real.

At First Church we do work that is real, and something we require of all members is real work. But I want you to think of it less as service and more as volunteer work, fulfilling your wish choice, acknowledging that we are all different, moved and motivated by different tasks. In preparation for this service Ray Sinclair sampled 10 new and long time members for their thoughts on service, and I'd like to share some of their thoughts now.

Lyn Martin wrote, "I believe that it's OK to say no when the need doesn't match your skills or it comes at a time when another aspect of your life is demanding more attention . . . One of my guiding principles when I'm in the position of deciding whether or not to 'serve' is this quote from Parker Palmer: *True vocation joins self and service . . . the place where your deep gladness meets the world's deep need.*" Someone else wrote "I have gotten better about recognizing that it isn't how I serve, but just that I serve at all.

We expect you to volunteer here as a member, and we expect you to say "no" if the work doesn't match a skill or comes at a personal price. But we also expect you to look for volunteer work here that matches your deep gladness with the world's deep need, whether that is singing in the choir or making beds for our IHN guests. And when that happens, we hope you to say "yes," because it deepens your development as a human being.

The volunteer work we do here also creates something rare and precious, community. The 19th century French observer of America, Alex de Tocqueville noted that "community is both elusive and critically important, and it is fostered by religious association."³ 20th century sociologist, Robert Bellah, noted the same thing. Bellah was asked by the UUA to speak at General Assembly in 1998. As a sociologist who has devoted his life to championing community, Bellah was actually critical of the individualism upheld in our faith while at the same time noting the value of what our Unitarian Universalist congregations offer.

Bellah said

Our religious individualism is linked to an economic individualism which, though it makes no distinction between persons except monetary ones, ultimately knows nothing of the sacredness of the individual . . . In the dissenting tradition the individual is primary and community, however valued, is secondary . . . This understanding of community is perilous because individuals devote themselves to

³ Faith and Philanthropy in America, 284

it so long as it “meets their needs,” and when it doesn’t, there is no claim of perseverance or loyalty that community so understood, can exert.”⁴

Bellah criticized our overt individualism, just as he criticizes it in American society, while at the same time reminding us that when we are in community, volunteering in community, we find the sacredness within ourselves and others. This returns to Erikson and so many other psychologists (Maslow and Fowler) who note the human need to develop through community and human interaction.

Bellah did have a suggestion for us. He suggested that to avoid excessive individualism, and in recognition that human nature is “fundamentally social,” we should make our last principle, the interconnected web of life, our first principle.⁵ Remembering this I was interested when Lyn Martin wrote

Probably the best explanation I can give for my person motivation to serve is related to our 7th principle – my belief in the interconnected web of life. I believe strongly that if you are part of a group – whether it’s a family, an organization, a congregation, whatever – there’s a certain obligation to contribute to the successful working of that group. It’s part of being in right relationship with the other members.

Bellah would be so pleased to hear this. Lyn just got it, and many of us here do. People volunteer when they care and believe an organization has purpose, and many of us are deeply devoted to First Church, something that I treasure about this congregation. One of you explained, “First Church is the place where I volunteer most of my time . . . I love the people, I love the building, I love what we stand for and what we actually accomplish. I work for First Church because I want it to grow and prosper.”

Another person wrote “when I volunteer to do service at church, it’s because I believe in our mission and the important role our church plays in our community. More importantly, I am grateful to have a church family that is enriching, challenging and mostly comforting to me . . . My gratitude for our church community is the primary motivating factor for my service to our church. Annie Foerster described some of her volunteer work with the Appalachian Trail as “an effort that paid life back for what I was receiving from it.” Our interconnected web of being – we receive and give and give and receive.

You gave Ray several others reasons why you volunteer. One of you described service as “spiritual because it connects me to the whole.” One of you described service as “self-preserving” – as an active antidote to the injustices and suffering in the world. Another of you serves because of the example of Jesus of Nazareth. Morita Marmo wrote that it satisfies her need to be useful. James Fowler, who wrote about stages of faith development, sees the purpose of religion as helping people find meaning in their lives. To be useful is meaningful and we find that here.

Of the responses that Ray collected I quickly noted that many of them spoke of service and volunteer work as a family legacy, something learned at home. This made me proud that we work so hard to find age-appropriate activities that help our children

⁴ Bellah.

⁵ Robert Bellah, “Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective” (June 27, 1998).

and families participate in volunteer work. I want to especially thank our Religious Education and Social Justice Committee for partnering on events.

Several members wrote that you serve because your parents did, which seems to verify the theory that those involved with groups when young (via their family) are still involved later. Andrew Carter, who spent most of his life engaged in volunteer service explained “When I was a kid there was my dad [W. H. G. Carter], raising 20 kids, struggling to provide for all of us, but at the same time, trying to feed 700 people in the neighborhood, trying to get people out of jail, trying to get people pensions. I had a ROLE MODEL.” Linda Miltner wrote “being the oldest of 10, I never questioned doing things for others. That was the only way we could survive. Granted, our “service” was more for the family – but the principle still holds. Families, communities, churches can’t survive if people don’t help each other.”

Family memory and stories even seems to lead some of us in the direction of our service today. Mimi Gingold remembers the story of her grandmother who fled Eastern European pogroms, and then upon her arrival here, kept a table in her backyard during the Depression so she could feed homeless people who wandered up the railroad tracks. Not so surprising then that as one of our Social Justice chairs Mimi would lead us in both refugee and homeless volunteer service.

Morita Marmo wrote “My parents set an example of service . . . My dad was mayor of our small town for four terms and my mom was on the school board . . . and both did personal acts of service – we always had people without families at our house for holiday meals and Dad took vegetables from his garden to older folks around town.” Again, Morita has had several of us over for holiday dinners, and today she is the unofficial chauffeur for all our members who live at Marjorie P. Lee Retirement Community in Hyde Park. Every Sunday Morita pulls up in the car, and gives our older members a ride and if she can’t do it, she calls around to find someone who can. Volunteer service.

The standard phrase of gifts given by members to a congregation includes “time, treasure, and talent.” After writing this sermon I see the time and talent as volunteer efforts more than service. I want us to be in the business of wish choice rather than slavery. Those wish choices have deep religious, spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and developmental meaning – to connect us to the interdependent web of which we are all a part. And in the process to learn that there is more to life than the sum of our opinions – there is a community of life giving spirit, power, meaning, transformation, and change. Without it we will remain unfinished and so will our world. With it anything is possible.

Katie Campbell wrote about the rewards of volunteer service, “One that stands out is singing with the Martin Luther King Chorale and the inmates at Warren Correctional Institution. Having to forego jewelry and zippered clothing . . . and stepping between that double set of locking doors made me appreciate my freedom. Hearing beautiful music and inspirational words performed by convicted criminals reminded me that everyone has something to contribute.” May it always be so.



Ray Sinclair, Volunteer Service Coordinator

Comments on Volunteering:

I'm grateful to Sharon to have a couple of minutes to address you about volunteering at First Church.

I have a straightforward communication for you: If you come to this church – you should be ready to volunteer.

If you come here – please volunteer.

Now that's pretty direct, but I think I'm on pretty solid ground here. First, volunteering is necessary for you to grow as a person, and your growth is necessary for First Church to survive. In his 1993 book about church health, *More than Numbers, The Way Churches Grow*, Loren Mead argues that for a church to remain vital it must do more than just increase its numbers. He says that, "It must also provide opportunities for maturational growth -- ways for members to deepen their faith and spiritual roots." Mead says that, "This kind of growth also includes the ways in which, and the depth to which, the congregation cares for others. For maturational growth to occur, a congregation must empower members to contribute their unique talents and gifts for the well-being of the whole." To turn Mead around, unless we engage in volunteer work – someplace -- as an expression of our personal existence and singular journeys through life, First Church will die. The church's purpose is to support personal growth, and without that growth, it doesn't have a reason to be around.

And there's another reason to volunteer here – look at the way this faith is set up. Unitarianism has strong traditions of independent congregations and lay leadership. We believe that membership in our congregations means involvement – it is the essence of our democratic traditions. We're self-governed so we have to show up to run the place. No one is going to do it for us. If you join First Church, expect to get involved if for no other reason than because that's the premise – we have to run the place. Want some instant gratification on this issue? There's a congregational meeting following the service, and the annual pledge campaign is just around the corner (we can consider the giving of money a volunteer experience).

One more reason to volunteer around here specifically – if you don't, you probably won't be here for long. Studies show that new members who do not make at least six new acquaintances in their first year of membership are often headed to becoming inactive – and later to resigning membership. How do you meet new people here? There's a chance you could do it just by introducing yourself to your sanctuary neighbor every week, but the way most of us meet others is while doing something else for the church. Of course, knowing people here is just as important for longer term members. Those of us who've been around for awhile should be always working on new relationships to keep ourselves connected to this dynamic community.

No volunteer-based organization lasts as long as this organization has lasted without a good record of volunteering by its members, and First Church has a fine record indeed. It would be silly to try to document leaders in volunteering by members because the list would be so long. I have always been impressed by the level of commitment to the organization and to society demonstrated by our volunteer labor.

Nevertheless, the task of integrating new members will always be a challenge to churches, and we're no exception. Some of us still believe the myth that new members shouldn't be expected to volunteer for a period of time after they join. For heaven's sakes – they signed a book, they didn't go through childbirth! They joined an organization and they want to contribute to it. While we probably shouldn't ask a new member to chair a committee or join the Board, we have to find ways for them to contribute, meet people, and learn our unique ways. And we have to start learning from them as quickly as possible.

It was with that goal in mind that two years ago this spring, the Board of Trustees approved a pilot project to enhance new member integration, The Volunteer Coordinator Project, within the Membership Committee. In a kind of hiccup, I volunteered to be the Volunteer Coordinator. My colleagues on the membership committee and I studied successful practices of Volunteer Coordinators at other churches (in some Unitarian churches it's a paid position). We learned that new members need short-term, low-commitment jobs that bring them into contact with other members. We solicited such jobs from committee chairs. We developed a standard set of questions for new members.

And we began, tentatively and fitfully, to learn about our new members and match them with church jobs. From the start, per advice from other churches, our code has been for new member interests and skills to trump church needs. In other words, our objective has been to make sure new members find something to do that interests them and helps make them feel part of the organization. I know we've made mistakes, but I am confident that we've helped at least a few people feel more a part of our community. I hope we can help many more in the days ahead. And it is clear to me that new members are contributing enormously to the life of the church in dozens of ways.

Whether you're a new member or an old member, if this service or anything else motivates you to check out volunteer opportunities at First Church, please contact me. I'm in the directory. Or, contact a staff member or any of the committee chairs. They all know of things that need to be done. In fact, this morning we're unveiling an experiment, the First Church Job Tree. As you can see, this tree is covered with hooks. Soon those hooks will hold dozens of jobs that church leaders and staff know need to be done. The job tree will be located in a convenient place for you to check for something you have the time and inclination to do. Each job card will have contact information for easy response. We'll let you know when and where the Tree will make its first official appearance. And we'll see if it helps connect members with meaningful work.

If you come here . . . please volunteer.

