

Are You Committed?

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March 7, 2021

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the South Jersey Shore

Are You Committed?

What does your commitment look like, these days?

Is your identity infused with your values such that, when asked to define yourself, “I am a Unitarian Universalist,” makes it somewhere near the opening paragraph in the story about who you are?

Are you a season ticket-holding UU?

When Unitarian Universalists talk about commitment, we often refer to our commitment to our ideals and values, the ethical and moral principles by which we strive to live our lives.

We also think about movements to which we might be committed – like social justice, protecting the environment, or world peace.

On a more personal level, we will say that we are committed to our families, our communities, our congregation, our political party.

Being committed to something larger than ourselves can give us a sense of purpose, a thing by which we can define ourselves, a community or tribe to which we belong.

Now, belonging to a Unitarian Universalist congregation is something we usually describe as being in a covenanted community, right? You’ve all heard that language, yes?

Right. So a covenanted community is different from other groups and organizations because of the covenant part – ours is not a group governed by strict rules or some kind of contractual, transactional language. You do not generally get ejected if you break a rule. A covenant carries with it the understanding that the people are human and will sometimes fail to live up to its aspirational tenets.

The difference between a contract and a covenant is much like the difference between a chain and a rope.

A contract can be voided if one party breaks it. It is only as strong as its weakest link.

But a covenant, like a rope, is made strong by the combined effort of all its threads, working together to stretch and flex when necessary, able to carry far more together than the sum of what each of the threads could lift individually.

Knowing that we will all fail at our covenant at one time or another, what is it, then, that keeps us committed to this entity we know as Unitarian Universalism, or to this congregation in particular?

What keeps us connected in a meaningful way to anything in which we claim membership?

UUs are curious creatures. Unitarians separated from Trinitarian Congregationalists, and Universalists split off from Baptists. You've heard me talk about how foundational history affects the history of any organization or institution in the same way that how you season an iron pan will flavor everything that is cooked in it thereafter. So, what is it, then, that keeps us from leaving UUism when we get mad about one thing or another?

What are you committed to, personally? Collectively?

How deep is that commitment? We can be committed to a thing and then something shifts and we turn away. What makes that happen? What kind of disappointment does it take for us to abandon something we have expressed a commitment to?

What would it take to make you leave your political party?

What would it take to make you leave your union?

What about your job?

Or the place you live?

What might it take for you to leave a friendship?

A romantic relationship?

A family of origin?

What is it that can cause us to turn away from these things that we hold so dear?

For some, we know the answer. It could be abuse, a toxic relationship, a betrayal of trust, or some deep harm done.

Let's think about something a little lighter.

Let's look at baseball for a moment.

I think many people have a deeper covenanted relationship with their major league baseball team than they have with their church.

What would the Philadelphia Phillies have to do for local fans to forsake them?

I am always fascinated by how committed people are to their sports teams

For things that have close to ZERO actual impact on our lives, we can be ridiculously loyal to our hometown heroes who play professional sports.

Baseball season has begun its spring training schedule, so for fun, I looked up what season tickets cost to see the Phillies play every regular-season home game. Super-duper deluxe box seats go for \$12,555, while seats in the upper deck of the nosebleed section behind home plate and along the baselines cost almost \$2,000. If you want parking closer to the gate, that can cost you a couple thousand extra as well.

For my beloved Red Sox, a single box seat behind home plate will run you \$12,198 for all 81 home games, and a seat in the outfield wasteland of the middle bleachers will cost \$2,643. Fenway Park being where it is, fancy parking is not an option.

The Phillies last won a World Series in 2008. Before that, their most recent championship was in 1980. Jimmie Carter was president.

The Red Sox, on the other hand, most recently won a world series in 2013, and before that in 2007, and 2004. Of course, that 2004 win came after an 86-year championship drought that started when the Sox traded Babe Ruth to the Yankees for the 1919 season. We still do not speak of the curse. But the fans remain loyal. Devotedly so. It is a level of commitment ministers covet in unspeakable ways.

Sports teams and professional athletes can behave in outrageous and offensive ways and people will still support them. Think of the cases of spousal abuse that are well-documented but do nothing to discourage the commitment of the fan base. Think about the obscene amounts of money spent, the bad behavior of owners and players and all manner of other offenses that swirl among the culture of professional sports. And yet, the fans are loyal. In the face of bad behavior, and losing seasons, fans are still committed.

Religious communities, particularly progressive ones, have nothing like that level of devotion from their members. All it takes is a small change to the newsletter, how we do the announcements, or a shift in some part of the Joys and Sorrows ritual, and people leave in a huff, never to return.

I mean, we don't get the luxury to have a hundred losing seasons in a row. For a profession that spends so much time considering eternity, our fan base in the here and now is remarkably fickle.

As an example, let us look at the unique situation of the Chicago Cubs.

They most recently won a World Series in 2016. Before that, their most recent win was in 1908, more than a century earlier. A CENTURY.

You want to know what a season ticket costs? It's nearly impossible to figure out, because you can't get a season ticket. They are not available. They're sold out. Every one of them.

There is a waiting list, but understand that it has more than 100,000 people already ahead of you.

If the team office calls you with an offer to buy a season ticket but you don't like the seats, you go back to the end of the line.

The most recent numbers I could find in my limited and entirely unprofessional internet research were for the year 2019, when a good seat – a single box seat behind home plate – cost \$14,472.

Upper deck seat in the reserved section in the outfield stands will run you \$2,439.

But with a significant caveat, of course:

The only sure way to purchase a 2021 season ticket is to renew your 2020 season ticket, or, if you're lucky, renew and move up in the quality (and price) of seating choices. It is entirely possible to spend a lifetime moving incrementally from a bleacher seat in the farthest outfield to a box seat behind home plate.

There is a reason people pass down their Cubs season tickets in their wills.

Remember, now: the Cubs have won exactly ONE World Series Championship since 1908, that being the one in 2016. For reference: Theodore Roosevelt was president when the Cubs won in 1908. If there was any congratulatory message from the president upon that win, it would have come by telegram because phones weren't a regular fixture in ball club locker rooms.

And yet, as the loyal fans of the Chicago Cubs prove, a single failure – or even many years of not-quite getting the brass ring – is no reason to abandon ship and root for the White Sox.

If the Phillies come apart after the All-Star break and fail to even make a wild-card berth in the playoffs, are you going to decide to start following the Pittsburgh Pirates? Or the Orioles? Or the Nationals? Or, God forbid, a New York team like the Yankees or the Mets?

Of course not. The Phillies are a part of the culture here, and you'll follow them. That's just part of the deal, living here in South Jersey. Like being Eagles fans come fall. Philly teams are as close to home as we can get for a home-town team, so they're ours.

That's the kind of magic, intangible *something* that makes a covenant more than a contract. That's the sort of thing that marks the difference between a strictly transactional relationship and a missional one. In the transactional relationship, a customer spends or invests something of value – money, time, talent, whatever – in

exchange for goods or services. In a missional relationship, a person is in a partnership that is committed to a shared mission, not merely purchasing widgets or an afternoon's entertainment at the theater or ballpark.

And so we get to how this relates to us in this moment. The church – this congregation – is not the place where you show up, pay your money, and have enlightenment handed to you on a plate.

Nor is it the kind of place where we withdraw our support when things don't go our way. Good grief, if fans stick with the losing-est baseball team in America, people can stick with a church community during challenging times like these

Are you committed to your congregation?

Are you committed to your denomination?

This is stewardship season. It is the time when we ask people to make a financial commitment for the coming fiscal year so that we can create a budget to achieve our goals. And, lest we forget, our goals include spiritual growth and development of those whose lives we touch, and to focus our efforts to achieve social justice at levels both local and global.

We are not a chain, measuring our collective strength by the capacity of our weakest member. We are like rope or cable, bound together by a common purpose, entwined by our shared values, made stronger by the contributions of each fiber and thread, and able to do so much more together than we might accomplish as individuals.

The 2020 year was a bit of a train wreck. At this time last year, we were kicking off our stewardship campaign with no clear idea what this pandemic was going to look like. We were anxious about our capacity to give our financial support. The stock market was on a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs, and stability was elusive at best. We came up with a budget, but were unable to raise the money to fund it completely. We took a leap of faith and went forward, and then some remarkable things happened. We got a PPP loan that covered almost half of the shortfall between pledged money and budgeted need. Our financial stewards were frugal and wise, and saved money where they could. We had a non-auction-auction fundraiser that helped raise a tidy sum. And this past week, we got news that looks like we're going to get another of the PPP loans that will cover the last of the projected deficit in our budget.

In the year 2020, when the world was on fire, democracy was in peril, and a pandemic killed a half-million Americans, we're going to likely end the year in the black.

Oh, and let's not forget that back before the holidays, a single, very generous gift landed in our coffers and allowed us to pay off the balance on our mortgage. The UU Congregation of the South Jersey Shore is coming through this year in the black and debt-free!

Its enough to make the Unitarians say words like "miraculous."

At this moment in time, things are not entirely recovered, for certain. Many are still out of work or getting by on reduced hours and income. Those who rely on their investments, though, are likely in better shape now than they were a year ago. As happens in times of crisis, those who are on the margins get further marginalized, while those who are comfortable generally become more so.

What I am asking this year is for each of us – for all of us – to keep the faith and believe that this congregation will come through stronger than we were when this whole pandemic began.

Those of you who cannot give, I understand that. We each give what we can, and I trust that you will do your part. Those of you who are in a better space this year than you were last year? I'd love to see you do what you can to help put this fiscal year on solid financial footing. You know who you are. If you can afford to give more, you know that, and I ask that you consider it.

For those of you who are new or visiting, rest assured that you do not need to be a member to pledge an annual contribution. If you've found us because of our online availability and find yourself in worship with us frequently, I invite you to make a pledge of support. Our weekly worship broadcasts will not stop when we are back in our building. The demand for online access is clear, and we'll find a way to make that happen.

We have the month of March in which to secure the necessary pledges to assemble our budget in a responsible way. There will be opportunities to have conversations about what your financial commitment will be, and I encourage you to participate in those.

In the meantime, I ask you to consider if you are as committed to Unitarian Universalism, or to this congregation, as you might be to a sports team or some other passion. Consider how your heart feels when you attend worship or see your friends from book club or the everyday spirituality group. Think about how important your meditation group is and the peace you find there. Think about how you are challenged to grow and live into your values.

This is a covenantal religion, bound by values and passion and heart. I invite you to support it as wholly as you are able.

May our generosity be our practice and our prayer.