



## Service

*The life of a congregation is a rich community tapestry of people, programs, ministries, and worship. We lift up the patterns of this tapestry at Unity Church with the threads of monthly themes woven through our worship and programming. These themes deepen our understanding of our faith and strengthen our bonds with one another in religious community.*

Integrity. Service. Joy. Those three words have shaped the culture and practice of Unity Church for over a decade. They are woven in, amongst and beyond much of what happens in the life of the congregation.

Although these themes are — or will be — explored as part of the monthly themes — they were carefully chosen and inextricably linked together, like a strand of pearls which are meant to both inspire and challenge.

The word service has a multiplicity of meanings, of course. We get our cars “serviced.” We attend a worship service or eat at a restaurant that has a dinner service. Our youth are required to do service projects, and misdemeanor offenders may be required to do community service. We may volunteer our services at church or retire from military service. Yet, the word service has a complex history. The root of the word can be traced back to Medieval Latin, *servitium* which connotes the state of serving or being in another’s command. In essence, it meant the “condition of being a slave, servitude.” The word is complicated.

When I was in seminary, I attended a learning-service trip to Haiti. It was sponsored by the United Methodists and the program was geared around being in service to the Haitians by helping them build a schoolhouse in a remote village. Another group had gone before ours, and they were charged with the task of laying the foundation of the school. Our group was to build on the foundation. When

we arrived, we saw that the foundation had crumbled and was useless. “What happened?” we asked our Haitian contact. He smiled and shrugged. “They didn’t ask me what kind of brick they should use. I could have told them that those bricks would dissolve in the first rainstorm.”

We know that sometimes our efforts to be of help can be patronizing and/or paternalistic. To be of service without examining our motives or, in this case, being the white savior, can do more harm than good. We see this particularly during times of crisis when people with compassionate hearts rush to a disaster wanting to help, but without taking the time for deeper reflection on how that help may impact individuals or a system.

So how do we apply our desire to be of service to humanity, to sentient beings and to the planet, without doing harm? To be of service requires us to reflect on critical questions. What is the primary reason I want to be of service? Is it because it might make me like myself better? Is it because it would look good on my resume? Is it because I’m convinced that my way is the right way? All of these motivations *can* lead us into a more selfless service, but not without some form of spiritual interrogation.

The Quaker writer and theologian Parker Palmer wrote, “Our deepest calling is to grow into our own authentic self-hood, whether or not it conforms to some image of who we

ought to be. As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks — we will also find our path of authentic service in the world.”

Authentic service is what arises from knowing one’s motivations. It also involves being mindful of one’s own capacity to serve. Sometimes we can’t be of service to others. Sometimes we need to allow ourselves to receive service and help from others. It is not only in the giving that we receive; but in the receiving, we also learn to surrender our insistence on only being the one who gives.

May this month of “service” provide you with rich opportunities to give and to receive.

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### Theme Resources

For further reflection on this theme please see this month’s Spiritual Practice Packet which will be available online at [unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html](http://unityunitarian.org/chalice-circles.html).