

Starting or Restarting an Adult Religious Education Program: Frequently Asked Questions

By Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley
Unitarian Universalist Church; Tampa, FL

Q: How do I get an adult religious education program started or revived?

A: Consider a typical scenario: Several years ago, there was an adult program that many people enjoyed; but the person who headed up the program moved to another city and no one has resumed her work. Under the former leadership, course offerings were based on whatever volunteers wished to offer, representing an interesting, but hodgepodge approach. Now that 16 new members have joined the congregation, they and others are asking: How can we revitalize adult religious education programming?

You may wish to review the files from the program's beginning. If people who worked with the former program leader are still around, talk to them. There may be valuable learning before launching a new program.

Q: Whose job is it anyway?

A: The management of adult programs in Unitarian Universalist congregations varies widely. Sometimes, a minister assumes primary responsibility; sometimes a committee (variously named Adult Programs, Adult Enrichment, Adult Religious Education, Programs and Activities, et. al.); at other times, an individual is appointed or simply assumes responsibility. The advantage of working together in a committee is that group decisions are generally less subjective. Whether adult religious education is under the leadership of an individual or a committee, planning is needed. If no one has stepped forward, and this is a job you would like to do, check with the responsible party (or parties); it may be the minister, volunteer chair, or RE Committee (or subcommittee). In conjunction with these responsible parties, you may wish to draft a job description so that parameters and reporting relationships are clear. It may be beneficial to review your congregation's governance structure to determine reporting relationships and accountability structures.

Q: I am interested in coordinating adult religious education, but I don't know a lot about the subject.

A: For those who do not plan to become experts in the field of adult religious education, there are a few basics to remember. First, consider that adult *learning* is an ongoing activity; it is often accidental and an outcome of some other activity. By contrast, adult *education* is a planned activity, often having a specific short- or long-term objective. Adult *religious* education is a set of planned activities that enable people who share similar religious values, sense of spirituality, or a similar faith stance to work together for spiritual awakening and faith development—religious growth. Consider Parker Palmer's definition of spiritual:

"By spiritual, I mean the ancient and abiding human quest for connectedness with something larger and much more trust-worthy than our egos—with our own, with one another, with the worlds of history and nature, with the invisible winds of the spirit, and with the mystery of being alive."

Consider Sharon Daloz Parks' definition of faith development as "the human activity of making meaning."

Q: How should I begin thinking about the planning process?

A: There are several levels of planning. You may wish to begin with the congregation's mission statement. If the mission (or vision) statement has been reviewed or revised within the past 3 to 5 years, no doubt it reflects the current sentiment of the congregation. Notice whether there is a particular focus that might be a guiding point. For example, each word of the following concise mission statement from the Community Church of New York suggests several themes for adult religious education: "Creating a caring, diverse, antiracist, spiritual community."

If the congregation's mission is current, out-of-date, or less focused, the committee may wish to write a mission or vision statement for adult religious education. This does not need to be a long drawn out process, but is an opportunity for some consideration of the purpose of offering adult religious education. Having talented people within the congregation who wish to lead programs is not a good reason to start an adult religious education program.

Once the mission and purpose is sufficiently defined, consider conducting a needs assessment. This can be done informally by asking a minister, religious educator, membership chair, committee on ministry, and well-known opinion makers within the congregation. Or it can be a more formal process—a written survey or focus group—to determine the perceived needs of congregants. If appropriate, a survey might be inserted in the Sunday Order of Service, or given to each congregant as he or she enters the sanctuary on a particular Sunday.

The next level of planning involves determining the primary areas of programming. The Rev. Richard S. Gilbert discusses 4 dimensions of congregational life, which are interdependent:

- **Worship**
 - inform/educate
 - inspire commitment
 - transform
- **Love/Mutual Ministry**
 - relational theology... care/support

- learning through service (e.g., board/committee, pastoral associate, meals to people in need)
- **Growth/Religious Education**
 - education of the whole person opportunity to wrestle with ethical issues
 - opportunity to stretch—learning about/meeting the needs of diverse groups and people with different learning styles
 - encouragement toward spiritual growth for self, for others; faith development
- **Justice/Prophetic Community... moving beyond self/personal**
 - learning about justice through education, advocacy, witnessing, service, community, organizing, and deepening relationships of sustained engagement with the marginalized
 - understanding injustice and oppression as a systemic problem (systems thinking)

A comprehensive adult religious education program should include offerings in all 4 areas, and can be rotated over time.

Another area of planning involves who will facilitate the learning. Notice that the language (which is admittedly subjective) does not say, "who will teach the class." Teaching is often associated with top-down approaches in which the teacher stands before the class and pours out his or her knowledge to willing or unwilling subjects. Facilitation is the process of engaging people in the learning process. Adult learners come with experience. They ask questions. Some Unitarian Universalists are skeptical and challenging; others are goal oriented. Most adults make commitments to particular types of learning that has relevance in their lives. They are voluntary learners who are self-directed and highly motivated under the right conditions. They often seek particular kinds of information to supplement what they already know.

Q: What program formats shall we offer?

A: It is important to consider that learning styles may be as varied as the number of people in a given group. Some respond best to visual learning while others learn through auditory senses, and still others through kinesthetic approaches. Some may prefer an intellectual approach while others prefer an experiential approach. Some people are reflective learners, while others are concrete thinkers. Some will prefer a formal presentation, while others prefer a less-formal structure. Try not to restrict your offerings to classroom lectures, but include reading and discussion groups, worship and celebration, field trips (e.g., events that lead to cultural exploration and cultural critique), reflection on issues leading to social action, opportunities for service, or witness.

Q: How do I recruit facilitators?

A: If your congregation is not already in the habit of collecting information such as interests and skills from new members, you may wish to encourage such a practice. This is a good way to begin an assessment of who is already within the congregation that may have something valuable to share with others. Alternatively, include a question about skills and knowledge in your needs assessment. You may also make an announcement in the church bulletin or in the worship service. Be sure your decision-making process includes discernment. Effective adult religious education programs are not usually a collection of offerings from everybody who volunteered.

Q: What are some of the special issues and challenges in Unitarian Universalist adult religious education?

A: Here are some unique challenges:

- Our theological diversity challenges us. Can we move from tolerance to respect/affirmation? What can we learn in so doing?
- We need a better balance of head and heart (and hands).
- Insularity affects how we engage (or do not engage) with "the other" — those people who are perceived as "not like us." This impedes our action for social justice.
- Unitarian Universalists tend to be highly schooled. But to some extent, we are "miseducated," particularly in terms of the larger world and social justice. Western education trains us to think dualistically. (The Rev. William R. Jones calls this "binary logic.") Our religious myth is that one must either be humanist or theistic. On the other hand, religious pluralism suggests that a Christian spiritual humanism is possible. This can be a challenge.
- Religion and adult religious education are culture-bound and class-bound. We are shaped by culture (worldview). We need to ask: Do we accommodate to cultural norms/expectations (cultural conformity); or do we challenge those aspects of culture that are dehumanizing?

Q: What are good practices to keep in mind when planning adult religious education?

A: The following list was gathered at the Large Church Conference held in Portland, Oregon, in 2000. These suggestions may be adapted for mid-size and small congregations:

- Paid staff. Alternatively, a job description and a system of accountability for volunteer coordinator

- Discernment with lay leadership to understand and create links between congregational work (e.g., board and committees) and adult religious education, spiritual growth/development
- Links between adult religious education and community involvement
- Community-building activities and programs
- Offerings for people at all levels of commitment to Unitarian Universalism as well as all ages and stages of adult growth and learning
- Different time and length offerings (from a few hours to multiple weeks)
- Training for facilitators
- Basic facilitator skills
 - UU basics
 - Orientation to different methodologies, abilities, and learning styles
 - Holistic approaches
 - Guidelines for participation (e.g., you must read the assignment in order to speak)
 - Food ... for the body and soul
- Provide intergenerational activities.