

Ideas for Worship: A Discussion Guide for Congregations

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The following are discussion questions based on the DVD *Ideas for Worship*, filmed at the 1st UUA Conference on Contemporary Worship in February, 2007. We hope that these questions can be used to get your group thinking in new and interesting ways about worship.

We invite you to share your ideas for worship with other congregations. The UUA Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry office is always looking to develop new resources for congregations around worship. Visit UUA.org for more information.

Keynote Address: Creating Worship With Deep Soul The Rev. Dr. Marcia McFee

Worship Is The Deepest Thing

Dr. McFee describes her philosophy of worship by quoting a friend of hers who, upon meeting, “let us speak about the deepest things we know right away.” What does it mean to have a “deep” discussion with someone? What does it mean to address things that are “deep” in worship? How does “deep” worship differ from “shallow” worship?

Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his famous 1838 address to the students of the Harvard Divinity School about the need for worship to connect with the lives of those in the congregation (as well as to come from the life of the preacher). He wrote:

Whenever the pulpit is usurped by a formalist, then is the worshipper defrauded and disconsolate. We shrink as soon as the prayers begin, which do not uplift, but smite and offend us. We are fain to wrap our cloaks about us, and secure, as best we can, a solitude that hears not. I once heard a preacher who sorely tempted me to say, I would go to church no more. Men go, thought I, where they are wont to go, else had no soul entered the temple in the afternoon.

A snow storm was falling around us. The snow storm was real; the preacher merely spectral; and the eye felt the sad contrast in looking at him, and then out of the window behind him, into the beautiful meteor of the snow. He had lived in vain. He had no one word intimating that he had laughed or wept, was married or in love, had been commended, or cheated, or chagrined. If he had ever lived and acted, we were none the wiser for it.

The capital secret of his profession, namely, to convert life into truth, he had not learned. Not one fact in all his experience, had he yet imported into his doctrine. This man had ploughed, and planted, and talked, and bought, and sold; he had read books; he had eaten and drunken; his head aches; his heart throbs; he smiles and suffers; yet was there not a surmise, a hint, in all the discourse, that he had ever lived at all. Not a line did he draw out of real history.

The true preacher can be known by this, that he deals out to the people his life, — life passed through the fire of thought. But of the bad preacher, it could not be told from his sermon, what age of the world he fell in; whether he had a father or a child; whether he was a freeholder or a pauper; whether he was a citizen or a countryman; or any other fact of his biography.

How is this related to Dr. McFee’s notion of “depth” in worship? How do you create worship that connects with the lives of the people in the congregation?

Dr. McFee speaks of there being “inherent diversity and creativity” in every congregation, no matter how homogenous they might seem. What kinds of diversity are present in your congregation? What are the different ways in which the people in your congregation express creativity?

What signals did you get that you were welcomed in your congregation the first time you came to worship?

The Ball, The Feather & The &#@!

How is worship different when planned by a team rather than by an individual?

What are examples of different worship services you’ve been at that have had very different energy?

How might changing the energy level of your worship affect how the message is received?

How does worship change when the narrative is told in more than one voice? From more than one perspective?

Worship That’s M-m Good

This is a good segment to begin with—your group can use the exercise she leads the large group in.

Dr. McFee talks about worship that is “meaningful and memorable.” Describe a worship service that you remember. What is it that stays with you from that worship service?

Describe a worship service that was meaningful to you. How did that worship touch you? What about it was meaningful? How was that meaning conveyed?

After the “What People Love About Worship” Brainstorming

Dr. McFee says that “what touches one person is not necessarily what touches another person.” How do you create worship services that reach different people? What elements can you use in worship from time to time to reach people who are not reached by worship currently?

Dr. McFee uses Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence theory to discuss worship. What are the ways in which you learn best? What is an element in worship that corresponds to this learning style?

Who are you including and excluding in your worship services based on theories of multiple intelligences?

Generational, Schmenerational

What are things your congregation does multigenerationally?

What is one element of worship that you don't particularly like but that you are thankful for because you know that it is meaningful to others?

Thinking Like A Filmmaker

Dr. McFee talks about "embodying what we proclaim." Think of a time in which a worship service *embodied* the message, through movement or other physical/visceral activity. How did this happen? How was it introduced? How did it enhance the message of the worship?

What part of your worship might benefit from a musical underscore to change the energy?

What Does Your Worship Sound Like?

How can you incorporate different voices in worship?

What does your worship *sound* like? How can you make it sound different?

What kinds of music do you use in your worship? How might you incorporate different kinds of music?

The Energy Of Worship

What parts of worship need more energy? Less?

How do you vary the energy level of worship throughout the service?

A Worship Planning Model

What model does your congregation use to plan worship?

How much input does the minister seek in planning the worship services she/he/ze leads?

How might you involve more voices/perspectives without expanding your "core team?"

What are themes you can think of for a series of worship services that would be meaningful to your congregation?

Who in your congregation might be able to contribute to the visual appeal of a series of worship services?

How might you connect your children and youth to worship in your congregation?

Workshops

Multicultural Music and Movement – Jeannie Gagné

Does your congregation use song leaders or hymn leaders? Are there people in the congregation who might be able to fill this role?

What does a hymn leader add to the singing of a hymn?

How can you design movement elements that are welcoming to people with various mobility impairments? How can you introduce standing/walking elements in a way that does not marginalize people who cannot stand/walk?

How might you incorporate drums and other rhythm instruments into your worship?

Have you been in a worship service in which the music or rhythm made it “really hard to sit still?” What did that feel like? How did that worship service touch you? What was the feeling you left that worship service with?

What do you think of when you hear the term “contemporary music?” Do you agree or disagree with Jeannie Gagné’s definition, which comes from the academic study of music? Why?

How can your congregation take more risks with music?

Describe a time in which you had a “spiritual” experience listening to music—whether or not in a worship service. Where was it? What was it like? How were you affected by the music? How might you bring that feeling to your congregation?

What hymns does your congregation love to sing? What does it feel like in a worship service when you sing those hymns? How might you bring that energy to other hymns?

How might you help make music a more embodied experience for the congregation?

Emerging Worship Forms – Dr. Angela Merkert and Rev. Dr. Ken Brown

How would you describe the worship in your congregation on Sunday morning? What ties it together? What kind of energy does it have?

How do newcomers to your congregation experience worship?

How might you introduce “a greater range of what worship might be” in your congregation?

How might you share resources with other nearby congregations? What sort of culture change would it take for you to work together with other UU congregations on worship?

The Faith Communities Today study showed that growing congregations are more open to changing worship forms and experimenting with different types of worship services. How open would your congregation be to changing worship or to introducing new and different worship services? Where would the resistance come from? How can that resistance be overcome?

How do you respond to someone who resists change because “that’s not the way we do things around here” or “we’ve always done it another way?”

Empowering Youth In Worship – Melodie Feather and Sarah Dan Jones

What elements of your current worship are participatory? What elements could be with little change?

How are children and youth involved in creating worship in your congregation? How are their voices heard in the process of creating worship?

What liturgical elements can you use in your worship to make children and youth welcome in the service?

What does “multigenerational” mean to you? How is it different from “intergenerational?” What does worship look like that is intergenerational? Multigenerational?

How can we envision worship that is intentionally welcoming to children and youth and also inspiring and stimulating for adults?

What skills, talents and gifts do the children and youth in your congregation have? How can you invite them to share those skills, gifts and talents with the congregation in worship?

What is the difference between performance and sharing in worship? How can we explain this difference to people in our congregations, especially children?

How does your minister/ministerial team (if you have one) interact with children and youth?

Spirited Worship For All Ages– Rev. Erika Hewitt

What “baggage” does the phrase “intergenerational worship” bring up for you? How can you overcome that reaction?

How open is your congregation to taking risks? What are some risks you’ve taken in worship?

What stories (folk tales, books, etc) do you know of that might be appropriate to focus a worship on? How can you break the story up to tell it over the course of an entire worship service?

What rituals does your congregation find meaningful in worship?

What do these rituals say about Unitarian Universalism?

What ritual would you like to add to your congregation’s worship?

How might we alter our rituals to make them more welcoming to children? To newcomers?

Do you use your whole body in worship on a regular basis? How might movement be integrated in your worship services? How can movement be made welcoming to people of differing physical abilities?

How are pastoral needs acknowledged in your worship? How can this be done well with children present in the worship?

How are children invited to be part of the stewardship of your congregation? How might you do this?

Do you rehearse worship services? When does this happen?

Who pays attention to how a worship service flows together? How can children be involved in this?

How do we respond to mistakes in worship services?

Sharing or Theft: Cultural Misappropriation – Petra Aldrich

How would you define “cultural misappropriation?” What do you agree with in Petra Aldrich’s definition? With what do you disagree?

Can you think of other examples of “false respect” in communities you have been a part of?

What are some examples of Unitarian Universalists idealizing people in marginalized groups (people from non-Euro-American cultures, people of color, Latino/Latina/Hispanic people, Lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer people, etc.)?

How do you invite people to share their cultures in your congregation?

What do you think is “wrong” to do in worship?

What is “missing” in worship for you? How have you experienced spiritual vibrance, tradition, and creativity in worship?

How might cultural misappropriation help fill gaps/needs/deficiencies in worship?

How can you fill those gaps/needs/deficiencies in culturally-appropriate ways?

What are examples of “authentically Unitarian Universalist” rituals?

How can we share Unitarian Universalist history through worship in meaningful and inspiring ways?

What is a Unitarian Universalist approach to encountering mystery in a worship setting?

How do you define Unitarian Universalism to others? How might you express this definition through worship?

What are ways in which you can engage in cultural sharing in worship that are appropriate and healthy?

How can cultural sharing spur us to build relationships with different cultural groups? What might it look like to have relationships with different cultural and religious groups in your community?

Blurring the Lines Between Participation and Performance – Matt Meyer

Describe the experience of singing in your congregation.

How do people use their bodies in worship in your congregation?

Does the choir interact with the congregation in your congregation's worship? How might you introduce elements in which the choir does this?

How do *you* want to be engaged with music in worship when you are in the congregation?

What are examples of different ways in which congregations can be involved in singing other than the traditional ways of singing hymns? What would it take to implement some of these ways in worship in your congregation?

How can religious professionals other than music directors help people be involved with music?

What does music sung quietly feel like? What does it feel like when music is sung loudly? Slowly? Quickly?

How can music be used in conjunction with parts of the worship other than hymns and musical interludes?

Choose a reading from the back of the hymnal and imagine how music can be used with it.

Worship Montage

What are things that appealed to you about the worship services at this conference?

What are elements in these worship services that you can imagine using in your own congregation?

Having viewed the worship montage, what is one thing you can envision doing differently in your own congregation's worship?

What messages did you get from the clips shown? How were these messages conveyed?

What did these worship services have in common? How were they different?

How did these worship services fit your notion of "contemporary worship?" How were they different?

What do you think of as "contemporary" about these worship services?

What were you hoping to see in these worship services but didn't?

Bonus Interview with the Rev. Wayne Arnason

What can Unitarian Universalists learn from the ways in which other faith groups worship?

What is the purpose of worship in UU congregations?

What is the most inspiring worship you have been a part of?

What kinds of music does your congregation use?

How is diversity acknowledged in your congregation?

How is theological diversity made a part of the worship in your congregation?

What would “contemporary worship” that is not music-driven look, sound and feel like?

What are historically-UU worship forms that are different from what we use today?

How can we reclaim historical traditions rooted in Christian worship and make them relevant to our theologically-diverse and creedless congregations?

How can meaning be made through movement?

How can we increase the quality of worship in our congregations?