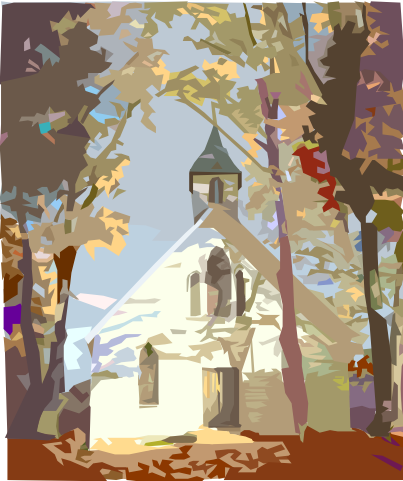


Your Congregation's Facilities

Your Congregation's Facilities

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What do your church facilities say about your congregation? Often we are so familiar with our surroundings that we do not intentionally consider what they symbolically represent about our congregation's identity. This is true whether a congregation has a campus of buildings or is renting space. Furnishings, decorations, and signage all communicate what an organization values and who is welcome. Culture, age, accessibility, economic class, and much else are conveyed through the facilities' appearance and are often most apparent to a newcomer. These characteristics can be visible to current members and staff if they tune in to them with the eyes of a newcomer and through the lens



of "Do our facilities project who we really are?"

As you approach your church building, consider the following:

- **Location** Is your building where your congregation's ministry is happening now, or where it happened long ago? What does this part of the town or county convey regarding status and what else is valued in the local community? Is the building near a major road, and is it visible from a major road?
- **General Appearance** Is the building well kept up? Or is it run down? Well loved? So immaculate that one would have to be careful? Is the door to the sanctuary or worship space clearly identified, in terms of the architecture? Can parents easily find the classrooms? If one is approaching the building or buildings during the week, is the entrance to the offices easy to locate? If the architecture does not delineate these features, are there ample signs to direct a newcomer to each place? And are they visible at night? Is there anything about the building or buildings that conveys that the congregation's identity is Unitarian Universalist? Are the grounds and the building entrance accessible to individuals with disabilities? For accessibility considerations, please see several resources on the Web at UUA.org by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching

"Accessibility."* For a checklist of options, see UUA.org, Leaders' Library, and search "Access Checklist."*

- **Parking** If you have a parking lot, is it ample for the numbers who use it on Sunday morning? If you depend on street parking, would a newcomer know where an overflow lot might be? Would individuals with limited mobility or the people driving them know where to park? Are there designated handicapped spaces? Are there designated visitor spaces?
- **Exterior Signage** Can people see your signs from the road? Are there signs directing the person to the church from the major road? Commercial church sign makers may be found on the Web at www.churchsign.com/, www.classic-church-signs.com/. You can search the Web for more sources by entering "Church Signs" in your browser. To make your own signs, see www.avery.com/us/products/signs/index.html. If a sign outside your church lists the staff, the sermon, or activities, is it up to date? Is it neat and clean?

As you enter your building, consider the following:

- **First Impressions** Do you have a greeter who is welcoming and knowledgeable about the congregation? Is there a visitors table to welcome guests? (For more information about how this fits into the context of the Unitarian Universalist membership journey, please see The Membership Journey at UUA.org by going to the Leaders' Library and by searching "Membership Journey."*) Do the greeters and those who staff the welcome table represent a variety of ages and ethnicities so a newcomer might see a peer? Are newcomers and guests ushered into the sanctuary? Are there Unitarian Universalist pamphlets they can read while waiting for the service to start? What general message is conveyed by the decoration in the entryway or narthex?
- **Interior Signage and Welcome** Are there signs directing people to restrooms? Are the restrooms clean, neat, and freshly painted? Are the restrooms user friendly in terms of having infant changing tables? Are they handicapped accessible? Is there a "family use" restroom? Is it clear where families with children should go? If there is a crying room, is it clear where it is? Are guests with small children made aware of the crying room? Is it clear where adaptive devices and related materials for people who have trouble seeing or hearing are located? Are there signs directing guests to where coffee is served, and are members offering to accompany them?

When navigating your facilities, consider the following:

- **Sanctuary or Worship Area** What does the space say about your particular congregation and our shared Unitarian Universalist heritage? What values and what culture are conveyed, and in what manner? For example, is there a generation or a cultural group that would feel most comfortable here? Least comfortable? Which parts of your sanctuary or worship area are fully accessible to people with various disabilities?
- **Children’s Religious Education Space** What is conveyed by each space? Do children feel welcome here? What culture and values do the spaces convey? Is there enough room for their age and activity level? Can children and adults tell what goes on here by looking? What curriculum is being used? How high are the bulletin boards and other items displayed? How clean and well cared for is the space? What sanitation procedures are in place? Is the space accessible for children with physical disabilities? Is it safe for the particular age group and for younger children who might wander in?
- **Adult Meeting Space** Are there spaces for meetings and other types of adult religious education events? How flexible is the space for a range of activities and group sizes? Is the space kept neat, clean, and attractive? What culture and values are conveyed? Is it accessible to people with various disabilities?
- **Social Space** What is the general ambiance of this space? Is it accessible to people with various disabilities? What is the culture conveyed by this space? How comfortable is the space, and for what kinds of activities? If there is a kitchen, how clean is it, and is it compliant with local health department codes? Do you offer information about the variety of activities available for people of all ages?
- **Office Space** To whom is office space allocated, and what kind of space is allocated to them? How is it furnished—with new, secondhand, or cast-off furnishings? What message is conveyed by this space? How up-to-date is the technology used in this space?
- **General Ambiance** What is locked, and why? Who has access? Is there a flow from space to space, or are there areas where people bunch up? Is safety of people and property valued? Can you tell this by the space? Does the space and what is in it convey something about what the congregation values—does it value anything specifically Unitarian Universalist? Do the various spaces convey something about desired behavior? How is the congregation’s current-self image conveyed? Who is welcome here, and how is that conveyed? Are there any artifacts that

remain in evidence from another generation or time? If so, why? What is their significance? Has an actual decision been made about keeping these artifacts in place?

Taking It Other Places

The above questions can be used to assess your own congregation's facilities and those of other congregations as well. Sometimes visiting another Unitarian Universalist congregation can help us think about our own facilities. Sometimes visiting a congregation of another tradition can illustrate what is important to welcoming a newcomer. This exercise is often best done in a group, with the discussion framed as, "What is working, what needs more clarity, and what is not helpful?" Often a mixed group (in terms of tenure and other characteristics) is most helpful, because each individual sees with different eyes.

In Closing

If church leaders, a committee, or board members walk around your facilities and note their impressions of the factors listed above, they can learn a lot and better understand the newcomers' experience. Your facilities convey things based on what is there and what is not there. The questions to ask yourselves are, Is this the message or impression we want to be conveying? Is this welcoming, a hindrance, or even a barrier? Who are we welcoming? What is it we are conveying that we value? By taking a step back, getting the big picture, picturing yourselves in another's shoes, and then being intentional in decision making, your facilities can embody all that you say you are, or that you aspire to be. What do your facilities say about your congregation?

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New Congregation and Growth Resources Congregational Services Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations



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