

Engaging Our Theological Diversity Introductory Session

Chalice Lighting

Opening Word (From Robert Fulghum):

In the credo I wrote at twenty-one, the longest part was devoted to God.

It was a Supreme Court appeal against the existence of the Sunday-school version of the deity imposed on me in childhood. On reading my fiercely argued case, one professor said that not only had I thrown the baby out with the bath water, but I had thrown out the soap and towel and bath tub as well - and then tried to burn down the bathroom while I was at it.

Was there nothing, he asked, that might replace what I had so thoroughly rejected? At the time, the answer was NO, absolutely not.

Reading of our Covenant (pass covenant around so each person reads one sentence or phrase)

Check In

Introducing the COA (Mission/charge, historical overview, members and terms, past and current reports, etc...from the COA website)

Introducing the Report

Group Exercise (See handouts in following page)

Small Group Dialogue (in pairs) followed by large group conversation on the result of the exercise

1. How do you define yourself theologically?
2. Are you surprised by the result?

Closing Word (by Forrest Church):

God is not God's name. God is our name for the highest power we can imagine. For some the highest imaginable power will be a petty and angry tribal baron ensconced high above the clouds on a golden throne, visiting punishment on all who don't believe in him.

But for others, the highest power is love, goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself. Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion.

The 1997 Unitarian Universalism Needs and Aspirations Survey posted the following question:
“Please check one of the following which best describes your theological perspective.”
8118 UUs responded to this survey. Fill in the blank to indicate what **YOU** think the answers were, in percentages %.

- Humanist: _____ %
- Earth/Nature centered: _____ %
- Theist: _____ %
- Christian: _____ %
- Mystic: _____ %
- Buddhist: _____ %
- Jewish: _____ %
- Hindu: _____ %
- Moslem: _____ %
- Other: _____ %

Our Church’s Search Committee, in 2001, conducted a survey of our membership and posted the following Question:

“Please indicate which of the following, or what combination, best describes your religious orientation. (If none seems adequate, add your own statement.)”

How would YOU answer?

- a. _____ Theological Christianity: Jesus is a unique revelation of the divine.
- b. _____ Ethical Christianity: Jesus is a great moral teacher.
- c. _____ Some form of Judaism.
- d. _____ Humanism: Human nature is the basis of all religion and ethics.
- e. _____ Atheism or Non-theism: The concept of deity is not helpful.
- f. _____ Skepticism: There is no way of knowing the truth with regard to theological matters.
- g. _____ Agnosticism: I simply do not know "the truth" about theological matters.
- h. _____ Ethical Religion: The function of religion is to encourage the development of ethical living.
- i. _____ Theism: God (Christian or other concepts) is the center of faith.
- j. _____ Naturalistic Theism: The powers we have traditionally attributed to a supernatural god are inherent in the natural world. The natural world elicits our respect and devotion.
- k. _____ Mysticism: It is possible for humans to have a vital identification with the Cosmos.
- l. _____ Earth centered spirituality which celebrates the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.
- m. _____ Eclectic: Includes values from many different sources, including world religions.
- n. _____ Other: _____

Engaging Our Theological Diversity
Session 2
Framing the Question: What Holds Us Together?

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words (from Rev. Tom Owen-Towle, Co-Minister with his wife, Carolyn, of the UU Church of San Diego, CA, and currently a member of the Commission on Appraisal.)

“I am a mystical humanist with naturalistic leanings and receptivity to disclosures of the divine. I meander comfortably amid the Judeo-Christian motifs and stories of my heritage. My religious vision is tempered by existentialism, grounded in earth-centered spiritualities, aligned with the wisdoms of Asian tradition, especially Taoism, and bathed in trustful agnosticism. In short, as Walt Whitman mused, “Do I contradict myself?” Yes, I contain multitudes.”

Check-in

Hand out index cards and pens. “You may need to take a moment to write this down.”

Hand out P&P. “You might need to refer to this document.”

“Write down 5 words that are important and central to your religious belief as a UU.”

Summary of the Chapter

Question: Hand out sheet with following question written on top – “What features of Unitarian Universalism, if you took them away, would leave us with something that is no longer Unitarian Universalism?” and the following question in the middle – “What would a person have to do, or believe, to get thrown out of a UU church?”

Sharing & Discussion in pair, then in group.

Closing Words (from Janice Marie Johnson, President of DRUUMM, Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries)

“I came into this faith with the understanding that beloved community is a goal. These discussions around the core of our faith have given me hope that all of us who engage in this dialogue are articulating and creating beloved community.”

Engaging Our Theological Diversity
Session 4
Values: To What Do We Aspire?

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words (from Hymnal #459 by Bill Schulz, past UUA President and currently Executive Director of Amnesty International)

“This is the mission of our faith:
To teach the fragile art of hospitality;
To revere both the critical mind and the generous heart;
To prove that diversity need not mean divisiveness;
And to witness to all that we must hold the whole world in our hands.”

Check-in

Hand out index cards and pens. Write down 5 values that are important to you as a religious person.

Summary of the Chapter

Question:

Here are some of the common values that unite us as a religious community. Rate them from 1-9 in order of importance to you.

- Valuing love and community
- Seeking growth, learning and transformation
- Advancing truth to cherish wisdom, intellect and logic
- Balancing freedom and choice with service to others and a vision of justice
- Pledge to integrity and honesty
- Appreciating inner harmony and beauty
- Honoring the interdependent web and affirming human worth
- Accepting one another and respecting ourselves
- Open-mindedness and learning through dialogue in diversity

Which of these values do you feel are being supported by your church community? Which are not?

Sharing & Discussion in pair, then in group.

Closing Words (from Hymnal #456 by Elizabeth Selle Jones)

“We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.”

Engaging Our Theological Diversity
Session 7
Justice: How Shall We Serve?

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words by *Martin Niemoller*, who served as the pastor of a Berlin church in the 1930's

“In Germany, they came first for the Communists – and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak up, because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't speak up, because I was Protestant.

“Then they came for **me** – and there was no one left to speak up.”

Check-in

Summary of the Chapter

Question:

Make a list of some of the Social Concerns activities and programs that you have participated in at our church.

If there's one Social Justice issue that you think our church should take up as a united front to address (as we have done in 2001 over the Wen Ho Lee issue – hand out copies of the resolution we adopted), what would it be? How would you go about it?

Sharing & Discussion in pair, then in group.

Closing Words from Hymnal No. 457 -- *Edward Everett Hale*

I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

Engaging Our Theological Diversity
Session 8
Conclusion and Recommendation

Chalice Lighting

Opening Words by Rev. Richard S. Gilbert, who wrote this when he was serving as Minister in Rochester NY, currently retired.

Be gentle with one another--
The cry comes out of the hurting heart of humanity,
It comes from the lives of those battered with thoughtless words
And brutal deeds;
It comes from the lips of those who speak them
And the lives of those who do them.
Be gentle with one another--

Who of us can look inside another and know what is there?
Of hope and hurt, or promise and pain?
Who can know from what far places each has come
Or to what far places each may hope to go?

Our lives are like fragile eggs--
They are brittle--
They crack and the substance escapes--
Handle with care!

Handle with exceeding, tender care for there are human beings within
Human beings vulnerable as we are vulnerable;
Who feel as we feel,
Who hurt as we hurt.

Life is too transient to be cruel with one another,
It is too short for thoughtlessness,
Too brief for hurting.
Life is long enough for caring,
It is lasting enough for sharing,
Precious enough for love.
Be gentle with one another.

Check-in

Summary of the Chapter with following group exercise:

- 1) Take a straw poll. Ask participants to indicate “agree” (thumbs up), “neutral” (thumbs horizontal) or “disagree” (thumbs down) on each of the suggested statements that are central and uniting to UUs as individuals, as communities and towards the world.

- 2) Brain storming. What would you call people into community for? If you were to invite a friend to come and participate in our church, what would you tell your friend about us that might attract them to come?

Question: (Actually an exercise)

Here's a list of the recommendations from the report. Put the letter "I" next to those you can do alone, "C" next to those you can do in community with your congregation, "N/A" if they don't apply to you, and the \$ sign next to those that would involve some financial commitment from you.

Write down a few ideas next to the "I"s as to how you would go about them. What gifts would you be bringing to your congregation if we were to proceed with those that you've marked with "C"s.

- Focus on Theology as an Association
- Develop Worship Resources
- Encourage Theological Literacy
- Promote Spiritual Practices
- Protect Theological Diversity in Our Congregations
- Make Peace with Our Religious Past
- Affirm Theological Diversity Among Ministers
- Foster Theology in Religious Education
- Serve the Needs of Youth and Young Adults
- Affirm Cultural Competency
- Engage Theology

Dialogue and Sharing in pairs, then back to the whole group.

Closing Words by Rev. Richard S. Gilbert

As we leave this community of the spirit,
May we remember the difficult lesson
That each day offers more things than we can do.

May we do what needs to be done,
Postpone what does not,
And be at peace with what we can be and do.

Therefore, may we learn to separate
That which matters most
And that which matters least of all.

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