

Sexually Healthy Congregations

In addition to reading these few pages, please visit the UUA's Online Assessment for Sexual Health in UU Congregations (<http://www.uua.org/safe/healthy/index.shtml>) and make some notes on the nine building blocks of a sexually healthy faith community.

- Congregation Policies and Environment

- Sexually Healthy Religious Professionals

- Worship and Preaching

- Pastoral Care

- Sexuality Education for Children and Youth

- Sexuality Education for Adults

- Welcome and Full Inclusion

- Safe Congregations

- Social Justice

This handout is excerpted from "Toward a Sexually Healthy and Responsible Unitarian Universalist Association" by the Religious Institute, Inc (pgs. 19-21). The entire report is available on their website: www.religioustheology.org. Used with permission.

Background:

A sexually healthy faith community is committed to fostering spiritual, sexual, and emotional health among the congregation, and to providing a safe environment where sexuality issues are addressed with respect, mutuality, and openness. The building blocks of a sexually healthy congregation are sexually healthy religious professionals, worship and preaching on sexuality issues, pastoral care, education for youth, adult education, welcoming and affirming congregations, safe congregations, and social action that includes sexual justice as a priority.¹

¹ Haffner, Debra W. (2001). *A Time to Build: Creating Sexually Healthy Faith Communities*. Westport, CT: Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing.

Due to financial constraints, this report did not conduct individual assessments of congregations or interview lay leaders. However, the Ministers' Survey provides information about the types of services, activities, and policies on sexuality that are being offered at the local level, as well as topics covered from the pulpit.

Ministers who serve congregations in any capacity were asked which sexuality-related services were provided. The following table demonstrates the percentage of ministers who say their congregations offer a specific service:

Table A

Relationships w/ community BGLT organizations	79%
BGLT ministries	78%
OWL at some level	68%
Middle school	66%
High school	42%
4 – 6th grade	30%
K – 2nd grade	16%
Adult	11%
Parent	6%
Young adult	5%
Allow BGLT groups to use building	64%
AR/AO programs	47%
BGLT family support groups	15%
Marriage/couples enrichment	14%
Groups for BGLT teens	12%
AIDS ministries	9%
Groups on divorce	8%
Support groups for survivors of abuse	4%

In a further analysis of services offered, urban and suburban congregations were more likely to offer AR/AO programs, AIDS ministries, and marriage/couples enrichment programs, and to allow other BGLT community agencies to use their buildings. Rural

congregations were more likely to offer ministry to BGLT people and support groups for families with BGLT members. Larger congregations (those with memberships over 251, and especially those with memberships over 500) were more likely to offer AIDS ministries, AR/AO programs, marriage enrichment, support groups for families with BGLT members and teens, and divorce and survivor groups. Equal numbers of all sizes of congregations offered BGLT ministries.

Strengths:

More than three quarters of UU congregations offer BGLT ministries of some kind.

Almost six in 10 ministers have preached about sexual orientation in the past two years, and one third has preached on transgender issues.

More than two thirds offer some level of OWL programming: two of three at the junior high school level, and four in 10 at the high school level.

Almost half offer AR/AO programming and commitments, and many acknowledged that it includes BGLT issues.

Areas for Improvement and Recommendations:

Many areas of sexuality-related services are lacking in most congregations. With the exception of ministries for lesbian and gay persons, congregations by and large are not actively engaging many of the sexuality issues faced by congregants. And even in the area of lesbian and gay ministries, there is still more that could be done.

Few ministers have preached on sexuality topics other than orientation/identity. Only one in five has preached on domestic violence, one in six on reproductive justice and sexuality education, and fewer than one in 10 on sexual abuse. Nearly one in three (27%) has not preached on any sexuality issue. An annual prize for a sermon on a sexuality issue might encourage more ministers to speak about these issues from the pulpit.

The OWL program is not being taught in significant numbers beyond junior high or high school levels.

Support groups and adult education offerings are not generally available for marriage/couples enrichment or self-help groups, nor do most have groups for lesbian and gay teens. In a study completed last year by the Religious Institute, a smaller percentage of UU congregations offer AIDS ministries than any mainline religious denomination.

There is a need to help congregations assess whether they are sexually healthy and responsible. The Religious Institute proposes to develop an online assessment tool for congregations, matching supportive attitudes to programs, policies, and social action. A further step would be to develop a guidebook for UU congregations on being a sexually healthy and responsible congregation.

Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling
Handout 2:1

District offices need to be more engaged in these efforts. There is a need to survey the District Executives and Program Consultants on their knowledge, skills, background, and need for training on sexuality issues, as they are often the “first responders” when congregations face issues related to OWL, sexual misconduct, conflict over welcoming policies, a sex offender at church, etc. There has been no recent training of District Executives or Program Consultants on these issues. Fewer than half of the congregations have a safe congregations team. The development of regional teams with expertise in these areas could also be considered. Experienced and outstanding OWL trainers might provide the core of such a network.