

Session 7B: Taking A Tour of the Congregation

Learning Objectives:

- To gain a wider view of the congregation as it is
- To experience how the congregation has changed over time
- To examine the above from a “How Welcoming Are We Really?” lens

Session Summary:

This session will help participants focus on what the congregation is currently doing, in reality, and look at how welcoming it truly is. The participants will first tour the church “virtually” in their minds, then take an *actual* tour to compare how accurate their virtual tour was *and* to take an intentional look at the congregation through a Welcoming lens.

Background:

For some people, the congregation exists at a fixed point in time. Their memory of the congregation may supercede the changes that have happened since a particular time. For others their experience/memory of the church may match its current state. Many people may not have looked at the congregation with the intention of examining it to understand how welcoming it really is, (i.e. what subtle and overt messages are given).

This session requires that the participants take a “tour” of the church from a particular perspective other than their own. We recommend that you create the tour to be as close as possible to what a first-time member may experience. At the minimum this would involve setting up the church as it appears on a Sunday, at the maximum, it would involve the workshop participants agreeing to attend a certain service and experience the “actual” church.

Logistically the Sunday morning service may be more difficult, but if possible, we recommend it. Determining how *Welcoming* the congregation is, does not depend solely on “Things”, but also on the people, the service, the music... everything.

If you choose to do this, here are some tips that may help with logistics and effectiveness.

- Set-up the tour well ahead of time so that workshop participants can plan to attend that Sunday worship.
- One possibility for structuring this session is to have the workshop on Sunday that week. The group can meet before the service for the first half of the workshop (50 minutes), then go to service, and re-group for an hour after the service.
- Alternately, you can break this session into 2 parts, doing the Virtual Tour and Preparation for the Tour the first week. Participants attend Service and then meet the following week for the second half of the workshop. In this case, it will be helpful to provide the participants with a handout with the questions/things to consider and a place for them to take notes afterward.
- We advise that the “tour” is not known by the rest of the congregation ahead of time (so that no one changes/alters the service to accommodate you).

Materials:

1. Newsprint
2. Markers
3. Writing utensils
4. Paper
5. (Handouts)

Preparation:

- Read over the Tour Guide information ahead of time.
- If not taking a tour during service, make sure that you have access to the building for an actual tour. You may also wish to have the list of roles for the actual tour written on newsprint (but keep it out of sight until after the virtual tour).
- If doing a tour on a Sunday: Print copies of the virtual tour and the possible roles as handouts.

Workshop Plan

Opening Reading/Hymn (5 Minutes)

(You are invited to pick a reading and/or an opening hymn. Singing The Living Tradition is an excellent resource. Other options are a moment of silence, a prayer, or a brief check-in. You are encouraged to also begin with a chalice lighting. Please submit any readings and/or hymn choices that you have used successfully to the OBGLTC as feedback for possible inclusion in future editions of LWC.)

Activities:

Preparation for the Virtual Tour (5 minutes)

Tell participants they are about to take a tour of the congregation in their minds. The purpose of this tour is for them to get as accurate a picture and account as possible of what the congregation is really like when it gathers on Sundays. Ask them to take on the role of newcomer to the congregation: try to obtain a sense of what the congregation presents to newcomers; how it presents itself; and the messages it gives to people, particularly bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people as they enter for the first time. Tell them that after the tour, they will be given a few minutes to journal and then later the opportunity to participate in a larger

discussion of what they noticed and reflected upon.

Virtual Tour (25 minutes)

Invite the participants to get comfortable. They may close their eyes if they wish. The actual tour will take about 15 minutes. Remind them that they are to consider themselves to be newcomers to the congregation, experiencing it for the first time.

The virtual tour script:

You are arriving at the Unitarian Universalist congregation for the very first time. As you arrive at the building, what do you notice? Was it easy to find? Is there a sign? (Pause)

You are entering the congregational building. What do you immediately see this Sunday? What people? What signs? What things? (Pause)

Who talks to you? What do they say? What do they say to your children? Do people pay appropriate attention to you? Too much? Too little? Do they make assumptions about you? (pause)

Imagine you have children who would be in the religious education program. How easy is it to find out what to do for them and where to go? Do you have to register them? What information do they ask of you? How is it asked? (pause)

You are entering the worship space. What things do you notice as you arrive? Are you given an order of service? What information is on that? What does it tell you about the congregation? Where do you sit? Are you greeted by anyone near you? (Pause)

What happens in the worship service? What messages did the different parts of the service send you? In what ways did you feel welcomed? In what ways did you not feel welcomed? What do you learn from observing the other people in the congregation? What do you learn from

observing the service leaders/minister(s)?
(pause)

What happens when the service is over? Are you greeted? How? What do your children say about their classes? As you move around the congregation in all its different places, what do you notice? In the offices? Classrooms? Meeting spaces? Rest rooms? What do you learn about what Unitarian Universalism is and how do you feel about Unitarian Universalism? (pause)

As you leave the congregation, what will you say the next day if someone were to ask you what you did on Sunday?

Tell participants the tour has ended. Offer them about five minutes of time to journal or draw/write any reflections they might have about this tour. Tell them they will have a chance to reflect with the larger group on this after the next activity and encourage them to note any particular observations they wish to share with the group for later.

Roles for the Tour (5 minutes)

Tell participants that now they are going to take an actual tour of the congregation to compare with the virtual tour they just took. Inform them that in this tour, each person will be asked to also imagine what someone with a particular identity might experience as s/he visited the congregation for the first time.

You can either read aloud or place the following roles on newsprint for people to select. More than one person may have the same role but try to have all roles represented at least once. Participant may also attempt to do the tour as themselves (carrying both their identity and the new one) or they can just take on one of the identities from the list. (You are encouraged to keep this list out of view until after the virtual tour is over.) You may also add other appropriate roles or change ages and other information to best suit your congregation.

Roles:

- Single Gay White Man in his late 20's
- Childless White Lesbian Couple in their 50's
- Interracial Gay Male Couple, 40ish, (Asian American/White or African American/White) with adopted 6 year old boy of color
- White lesbian mother, 30's with a daughter
- A First Nations/Native American transgender person, 30 years old whose gender does not conform to either "man" or "woman."
- A woman dressed in a suit and very short hair
- A bisexual man in his 30's
- A Latino gay man in his early 60's
- A Heterosexual couple with two children, a boy and a girl, the boy is somewhat effeminate
- A man, over 6 feet tall, dressed as a woman in a dress and heels

After the roles have been assigned, prepare to take the actual tour. Encourage them to notice what messages they get from the various places in the congregation. What do they see, hear, and sense?

Tell participants to keep in mind the path of the virtual tour and to give themselves time for reflection as they experience their congregation in a new way.

[If going to an actual service, this is where the first part/session would end.]

The Real Tour (will vary)

Take the tour of the congregation. If not going to an actual service, work to have the congregation appear completely or in part as it would on a Sunday with tables, literature, and whatever else is out on a Sunday.

The tour should be efficient but thorough taking about 15 minutes. Follow the path of the virtual tour as closely as possible and allow for moments of reflection on the way. When the tour is complete, have the participants re-gather in the classroom.

Group Reflections (20 minutes)

In small groups of 3-4 invite participants to share their reflections of what they experienced. How were their tours similar and different? How similar was the virtual tour to their own first experience of the congregation? How did their roles affect what they experienced? What did they learn about their congregation?

After about 15 minutes, invite the groups back together and discuss what differences they noticed? What did they learn about their congregation from being in the role they were assigned? Were there things they became aware of because of their role?

List these responses on newsprint first, and then have a general conversation about the entire list. Ask the group to consider questions such as: Was this helpful? What did we learn? Are there things we can do to deepen our welcome? What do we need to know more about in order to deepen that welcome? Note what is said.

The Little Things (10 minutes)

Ask the group to reflect on the following statement: Often it is the little things that say more about someone than the bigger more obvious things. The big things you expect. The little things often go unnoticed and chip away at you.

Were there things on the tour that you noticed that you would qualify as big or little differences in the way a bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender newcomer is welcomed as opposed to someone else?

What are some examples of things that might be said that would qualify as big or little things? How do these affect the welcome of your congregation?

(For example, does the greeter ask if you are married? What do any of the forms say? What questions are typically asked of newcomers? Do people in the congregation complain about talking about b/g/l/t issues all the time?)

Identifying Priorities (20 minutes)

Tell participants that they are now going to take the insights from their tours and from the discussion to explore areas where more Welcoming work can be done.

Take 5 minutes and brainstorm a list of things that could be done to make the Congregation more welcoming. Remind the participants that brainstorming means no editing and that the point is to generate a list without comments or interruptions.

When this list is finished, take another 5 minutes and brainstorm the areas of Welcoming Congregation that are *already* done well by the congregation.

Once the lists are completed, ask people to get into pairs to discuss their thoughts on the lists for and what their priorities for this work would be. Tell them to think not only about what needs to be improved on this list, but also about what

things are being done well that should be celebrated. Those are things that could possibly be explored to be done even better or at least be purposefully maintained. Give the pairs a few minutes to discuss.

Tell participants that they are now going to vote silently for what they want to work on from the two lists. Ask them to think about what items will take a higher commitment and priority. If there are items that will take little energy to do or maintain, then perhaps those need not be voted on but simply just done.

Ask people to write down their top 3 priorities for each list on a sheet of paper (for a total of six choices). Tell participants these will be read aloud but they can be anonymous. Participants can choose less than three but no more than three. Allow a few minutes to write, then collect the papers and redistribute them randomly. Have the participants read the priorities aloud, recording the votes with a tally to see what the priorities are for the group. When the votes are completed, circle the top three from each side. Allow for a few minutes of reflection but tell the group they will come back and look at this list in the next session.

Closing Reading/Hymn (5 minutes)

(You are encouraged to find a suitable one. The difference between the Opening and Closing is that we suggest that one reading and/or one hymn is selected to be used as the closing for all sessions. The Opening may vary from session to session.)

Suggested Hymns

Suggested Readings

Add Your Suggestion

Ask participants to hold hands as they are willing, able, and comfortable.

Living the Welcoming Congregation Tour Information

Remember that you are experiencing your church/congregation as a newcomer. As best as you can, assume the role(s) you have chosen. Below is the script from the Virtual Tour that you have taken. Keep this script with you as you attend your service to remind you of what things to notice. There is room on the paper for you to write notes about your thoughts/experience for discussion with the group later.

Virtual Tour script:

You are arriving at the Unitarian Universalist congregation for the very first time. As you arrive at the building, what do you notice? Was it easy to find? Is there a sign?

You are entering the congregational building. What do you immediately see this Sunday? What people? What signs? What things?

Who talks to you? What do they say? What do they say to your children? Do people pay appropriate attention to you? Too much? Too little? Do they make assumptions about you?

Imagine you have children who would be in the religious education program. How easy is it to find out what to do for them and where to go? Do you have to register them? What information do they ask of you? How? (pause)

You are entering the worship space. What things do you notice as you arrive? Are you given an order of service? What information is on that? What does it tell you about the congregation? Where do you sit? Are you greeted by anyone near you? (Pause)

What happens in the worship service? What messages did the different parts of the service send you? In what ways did you feel welcomed? In what ways did you not feel welcomed? What do you learn from observing the other people in the congregation? What do you learn from observing the service leaders/minister(s)?

How are you greeted after the service is over? Are you greeted at all? What do your children say about their classes? As you move around the congregation in all its different places, what do you notice? In the offices? Classrooms? Meeting spaces? Rest rooms? What do you learn about what Unitarian Universalism is and how do you feel about Unitarian Universalism?

As you leave the congregation, what will you say the next day if someone were to ask you what you did on Sunday?

Roles:

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