

Session 8B: How Change Happens In Our Congregation

Learning Objectives:

- To examine the different kinds of changes that have happened in the congregation helping order to plan next steps of action
- To examine how change happens in the congregation and use this information to help plan next steps of action
- To examine one model of how change occurs

Session Summary:

This session will explore change in the congregation from a variety of viewpoints. Participants will incorporate and compare that information with one model of how change happens. The comparison will help inform the group as it decides where to focus its energy.

Background:

This session builds on conversations and lessons from sessions 6B and 7B. The model for change used is one that explains the process of becoming a *Welcoming Congregation*.

Materials:

1. Newsprint
2. Markers
3. Paper
4. Writing utensils
5. Change model diagram handout

Preparation:

- Ahead of time, invite 3-6 key members of the congregation to sit on a panel about change in the congregation. This could include longtime members who have had

leadership roles, professional leaders in the congregation such as the minister(s), religious educator, and/or choir/music director. (For example the panel might consist of the minister, the religious educator, the board chair, and two longtime members still active in the congregation).

- If you wish, invite the panelists to stay for the entire session or you can have them leave at the end of questions and answers.
- It is advisable to give the panelists a list of the questions ahead of time, as well as have printed and posted the questions on newsprint the day of the panel.
- Arrange seating so that, unless the group is very large, people are sitting in a circle facing one another.
- You may wish to have newsprint and paper available to record notes.
- Have copies of the change model for all people.

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:

Panel on Change in the Congregation (80 minutes)

Welcome the participants and guests to the workshop. Inform them that this time is to be used as a dialogue about how change happens in the congregation. Tell the workshop participants that the guests have been invited into the workshop to talk about how they perceive change based on their particular perspective of the congregation. Inform the panel that the participants have been examining how change happens for them personally as well as how change happens in the congregation. Let everyone know that there will be time for discussion and questions & answers toward the end of the session but for now the opportunity will be to hear from the panelists about change.

Tell the panelists there are 5 topics and that each topic should take 10 minutes total so that they should each of them will have xx minutes (10 divided by the number of panelists) to speak. [*These are the questions to give the panelist ahead of time.*]

1. Think of a systemic or institutional change that has happened in the congregation. Think about how the congregation functioned/s as well as its explicit and subtle rules. Describe the change and how the change happened.
2. Think of a subtle change that has happened in the congregation, if possible, one that really never surfaced into language just behavior. Describe that change and how that change happened.
3. What are things about your congregation that you appreciate and would like to remain the same?
4. Of the things that have not changed while you have been in the congregation, think of some examples you might wish to explore changing. If

you were to go about trying to change these things, how could these changes happen in the congregation? What and who would be needed to make it happen? How could change happen and what sort of time would be needed?

5. What advice would you have for the participants of this class in any change it might try to help create in the congregation?

Once the questions have been completed, thank the panelists for their reflections. Remind all participants that the focus of this conversation is on how change happens in the congregation and that now is the time for discussion of this theme.

Discourage questions that might be argumentative about particular instances and encourage questions and conversations that deal with how change happens in the congregation. You may wish to ask the participants to compare their own answers from session 6B about how change happens to how they heard change described in the congregation. What were the similarities and differences?

Allow for up to half an hour of conversation, keeping the topic focused on change and how it happens. At the end of the time, thank the participants and panelists again. You may wish to invite the panelists to stay for the change model conversation or you may wish to excuse them for the remainder of the session.

Studying on Change Model (30 minutes)

Tell participants you are now going to examine one change model for congregational life. This model comes from the UUA's Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns about how a congregation moves toward becoming a "recognized" Welcoming Congregation. This model can be used in other areas of congregational life as well.

Pass out the *Change Model* handout and allow people to read it. If you prefer, you may choose

to present this model on newsprint instead of passing it out. After it has been read/presented, allow for about five minutes of questions and comments on the model itself. Then ask the group, if it hasn't begun to already, reflect on the following questions:

1. Was this true for our process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation?
2. How does this change model compare to other changes in the congregation that we talked about with the panel?
3. How might this model inform our plan for what we do next?

Tell participants the next session will be putting what you've done so far together and moving towards the creation of a plan of action. Invite participants to think on these things until 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.)

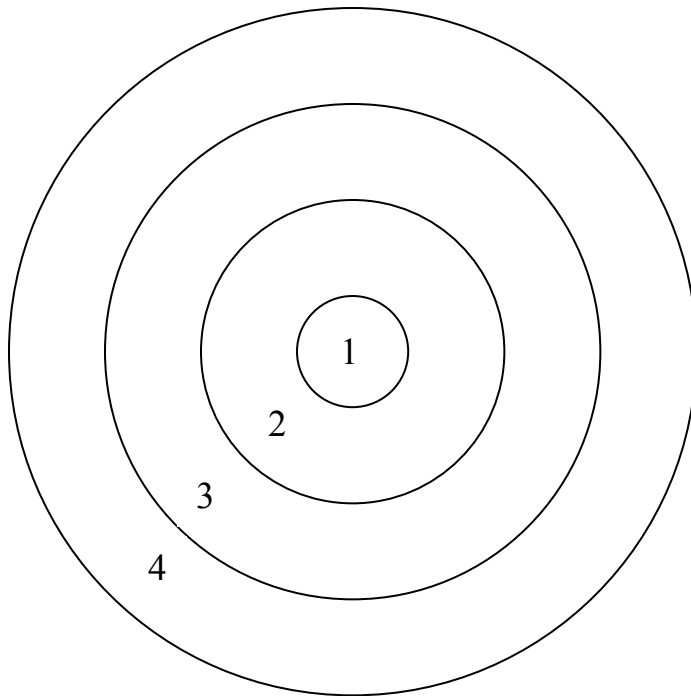
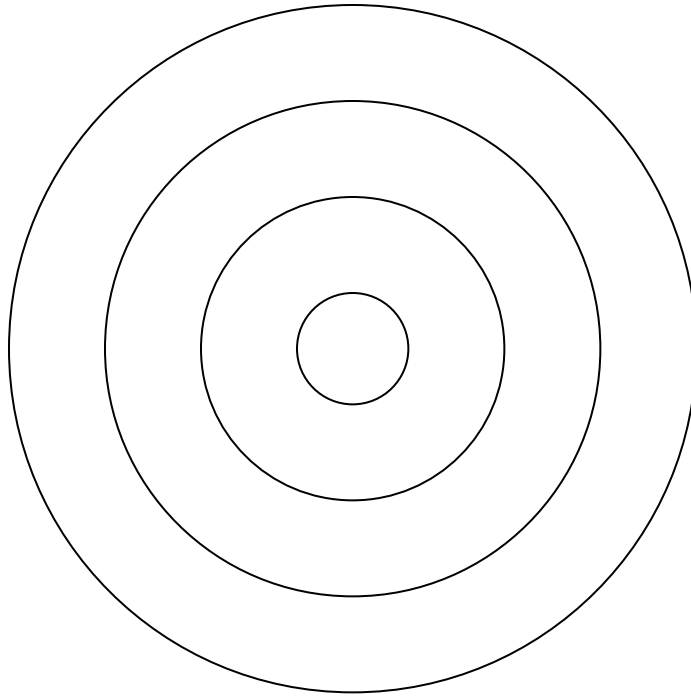
Suggested Hymns

Suggested Readings

Add Your Suggestion

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

Change Model



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Change Model

Over the years, the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns (OBGLTC) has observed patterns in the congregations that we have directly serviced. The following change model has arisen from these experiences and observations. This model was developed through experience with congregations going through the Welcoming Congregation process and therefore, the example here explains that particular process. The change model most likely has applications for many types of change both inside and outside of the congregation, but the OBGLTC do not have direct experience with change beyond the Welcoming Congregation in UU congregations.

Understanding the Circle Diagram as a Congregation

Take a look at the circles. Imagine that this represents a congregation. The congregation wishes to become a Welcoming Congregation. People in the congregation feel differently about the project, ranging from strongly for, to supportive, to indifferent, to against. There is anxiety and concern about how to move this project forward.

Circle #1 is often a small group of people. In our congregational example, these are the people who “get it” and get it in a big way. They are totally committed to the congregation becoming a Welcoming Congregation and understand that the work of unlearning homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism is long-term work; work beyond the completion of the Welcoming Congregation program. They are excited by the work, and they realize that while they know more about homophobia than many folks, there is still much that can be learned and much they really don’t know. These folks are interested in changing individuals and changing the structure of the congregation and society at large. They are interested in ending prejudice and superiority of thinking in others and in the way society operates.

If this group was the entire congregation, they would vote unanimously to become a Welcoming Congregation and be asking the question, “What do we do next to broaden/deepen this welcome?”

Circle #2 is often a slightly larger circle than Circle #1. In our congregational example, these people also “get it”. They too are committed to seeing the congregation become a Welcoming Congregation, though they often hold the opinion that this is a good two-year project that has an ending. Once the ending is reached, the work is pretty much done. They too want individuals, the congregation, and society to get it, but often believe in changing a few things and dealing with prejudice more than superiority. They may not be completely aware of the subtle presences of oppressions but are definitely opposed to it.

People in Circle #2 would also vote unanimously to become a Welcoming Congregation. Feeling the congregation has moved to a certain point, they may move to other concerns when the vote is successful.

The people in both Circle #1 and Circle #2 are on the Welcoming Congregation committee and attend the workshops.

Circle #3 is often the largest circle in the congregation. They are often careful to say the right thing. They often do not see this care as a pressing issue, unless there is some serious incident that happens in their lives. They support the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes and often don't spend much time thinking about homophobia unless it is directly in front of them. These are the people who will upon hearing a Sunday service on homophobia appreciate the service and then feel the congregation has done its bit on one of many social justice issues that good Unitarian Universalists believe. Further examination of a topic is unnecessary and often annoying and oft-putting. These are the folks who typically ask the question, "Aren't we already Welcoming Anyway?". They are not opposed to the Welcoming Congregation, they just don't understand why it is a big deal. They believe everyone is welcome here and we support the inherent worth and dignity of all people. They ask, "Why are we just focusing on gay and lesbian issues (they rarely say bisexual and transgender in this question), why not race and class and sex as well?"

The people in Circle #3 see homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism as other people's problems outside of the congregation. They primarily see oppression as prejudice only. If a congregational vote were to be taken, most of these people would vote yes—for a variety of reasons (citing the Principles and Purposes, not wanting to appear to not be a good Unitarian Universalist, hoping to quickly move on to other topics, etc.). A few however might abstain in the voting process or even vote against it feeling it unnecessary or thinking it singles a group of people out in a non-useful way or feel it will make the congregation a single-issue congregation, known as the "gay church" in town.

Circle #4—These are the folks who are actually opposed to the congregation becoming a Welcoming Congregation. They do not want the congregation to do this and will try and keep it from happening in some way throughout the process. This circle gets smaller and smaller in Unitarian Universalism. They may believe there is something wrong with bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people.

If a vote were held before the process started, they would either vote no or stay away from the vote.

Other variables:

Minister(s)/Church matriarch and/or patriarch—Depending on the size of the congregation this process will be affected by the role the minister(s) plays, or in the case of a smaller congregation, the congregational matriarch and/or patriarch. If the minister(s) fit in Circles #1 or #2, the process will be helped by the minister(s). If the ministers(s) fit in Circle #3, the process will take considerably longer but should eventually happen. If the ministers(s) are in Circle #4, then the process will not happen until the ministers leave.

If the minister is openly bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender, then the process will take longer. This is largely due to the fact that those in Circles #3 and #2 will believe that the

congregation has its example of being Welcoming—“our gay minister.” Additionally, those congregants who fit in Circle #4 often first talk about this process and their concerns with their minister. If the minister is openly bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender then the congregant is more likely to keep quiet—and not be challenged or changed in any way.

Another important variable is the number of openly bisexual/gay/lesbian/transgender people in the congregation. A congregation with a reasonable number of b/g/l/t people in the congregation (as in more than 4, or in a larger congregation more than 1%) should have fewer problems than other congregations might experience. However a congregation with a sizeable b/g/l/t population may be complacent about the program. An interesting note is that it seems that heterosexual people often perceive larger percentages of b/g/l/t people than are actually there. (One example comes from a congregation of 200 where about 10 people were openly b/g/l/t—5%. The heterosexual people in the congregation estimated that the congregation was anywhere from 10-15% percent b/g/l/t.) In congregations that have no open b/g/l/t people in the congregation, the Welcoming Congregation committee often turns to an outside source for support, often the UUA’s Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns. These congregations have moved through the process reasonably well. The hardest variable seems to be when there is only one or two openly b/g/l/t people in the congregation. Often the person or persons is the “token(s)” of the congregation and their special status is appreciated by everyone—so much so, that often the idea of inviting others scares many into working to not changing things, including the tokens who may have worked hard to earn their status.

Geography and church size—Also these are factors. Often very liberal places do not accept (or believe) the need. Often very conservative places see the need but have fears about what it will mean in the larger community. Church size is important simply in terms of who has time to do the work, which is often an issue in smaller congregations.

How Change Happens in This Model

Let’s suppose this congregation decides to work toward becoming a Welcoming Congregation. There is a Welcoming Congregation committee made up of folks from Circles #1 and #2. They present the curriculum where they and some other #1’s and #2’s show up. They have a great time. They decide to offer the curriculum again. Almost no one signs up, except for the #1’s and #2’s who missed it the first time. The Welcoming Congregation Committee wonders what went wrong. Actually nothing did other than high expectations. This is still part of the milieu of the congregation and is talked about from time to time on Sunday morning or in the newsletter. Some folks realize they are hearing concerns from folks. These concerns are coming from the #4’s, who realize they can no longer keep the congregation from becoming a “*recognized*” Welcoming Congregation. This is positive motion even though it seems as though in general not much is going on.

In fact there is. People are talking as they are ready. The interesting thing to note about this model is knowing who speaks well to others. In this circle model of the congregation, it is important to know that in the process of becoming a Welcoming Congregation, good conversations happen only between people in the same circle or between people in adjacent circles. In other words, a #2 can talk well about this with another #2, a #1, or a #3, but not a #4. #

1's can talk to other #1s or #2's. #3s can talk with other #3s, #2s or #4s. #4s talk with other #4s or #3s.

But #1s and #4s generally can't talk well about this at all. They are basically at such different places they speak different languages about this. So they both end up frustrated. They can talk about other things, they may sit well on other committees together, but not this.

Yet change is happening. How? Well in these conversations between adjacent groups, little conversions happen. Over time, the #2's move toward or into Circle #1, the #3's move toward or into Circle #2, and the #4's move toward or into Circle #3 or they leave. (We used to get more anxious about people leaving than we do now.) In the Welcoming Congregation process this now seems to take some 18-24 months for these conversations to happen. Not everyone moves, but enough people do.

Often the work of the Welcoming Congregation picks up again toward the end of the process and the vote is successful.

As a result, the congregation now feels the change. It has done that something and something worthwhile. More often than not membership and pledging increase after a church is officially recognized by OBGLTC as a Welcoming Congregation. There is more likely to be action taken by more of the congregation on b/g/l/t issues.

One side effect is that often the Welcoming Congregation Committee is tired after leading this work and takes a break. The work is often not picked up until later, perhaps even years later. But change has happened in the congregation.

Many people having heard this model have applied it to other changes in and outside of their congregation. What seems to be important is the need for "milling and thinking time" and allowing people to move with gentle prodding, as they are ready. Additionally, working on energizing the true change agents (1s and 2s) seems more useful than trying to overtly change those in the outer two circles. People are attracted to passion and enthusiasm and open themselves up more than when presented solely with an issue to think about. The combination of direct work and indirect work on the issues also seems to be an important factor—allowing for multiple entry points for people. And this is known. Every congregation that has done the work for at least 18-24 months has voted successfully to become a Welcoming Congregation.