



UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST
ASSOCIATION

**New England
Region**



The Practices of SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

New England Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association

Fall 2018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As a team, we are profoundly aware that the wisdoms we seek to share here do not solely originate with us. They have been passed along to us by countless ancestors, teachers, friends and colleagues including former New England Region staff colleagues, and the community of leaders, partners, and friends of the Women's Theological Center.

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CONTEXT

Your UUA New England Regional Staff are afforded a unique vantage point on the Unitarian Universalist landscape in New England. We have the great privilege of traveling alongside you, providing support and coaching through all the dimensions of your church work.

Our positions give us access to witness your collective spiritual life and when we step back and reflect, we glean patterns and meaning on what is shared or significant across congregations. Transforming what we observe from you into future coaching and training is a large part of what we do.

We have reached an exciting point in critical reflection on our work. Last year we analyzed the New England Region's work to date, and coalesced what we saw into some "essential wisdoms." We named what we have learned, highlighted where our findings overlapped, and uncovered how these revelations guide our work. So far we have informally shared these collected essential wisdoms with colleagues and congregations. We hosted workshops on them for congregational teams in May and October of 2018. Now, we invite you into the next step of refining this work and helping us integrate it into our future work together. Please [click here to engage](#) with us directly about this work.

Basically, our essential wisdoms are the Practices of Spiritual Leadership, which you might recognize as faithful leadership practices we consistently teach in workshops and lift up in coaching conversations. You may also recognize them as the building blocks of healthy, vital Unitarian Universalist congregational life. They reflect the central role of congregations and what congregational life is all about. We emphasize them as *practices* because they demonstrate lived, embodied ways of being — like many aspects of religious life — that all of us can develop and hone over time.

To engage with us directly about this work, please [share your thoughts through this form](#).

Please also feel free to [download workshop materials](#) on Spiritual Leadership from our recent workshops.

OVERVIEW OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

Spiritual Leadership is grounded in a vision of Beloved Community that reflects the “more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”¹ It is an ongoing embodiment of our awareness that as human beings we belong to one another. Spiritual Leadership is exercised whenever we use our creative energy and power to deliver our gifts in pursuit of collective liberation from systems of domination and control.

Distinct from other forms of leadership, Spiritual Leadership is not a set of tasks or a role but an orientation and a practice. It is leadership that does not require us to be “leaders.” It does not depend on our rank, status, education or social location. It can, therefore, be exercised by anyone. Indeed, creating, sustaining, and restoring Beloved Community depends on Spiritual Leadership being exercised by each and all of us.

Spiritual Leadership assumes a reciprocal relationship between the individual and the collective; it requires community. At their best, our Unitarian Universalist congregations are covenanted communities of practice in which individuals are supported to discern and deliver their gifts on behalf of collective liberation and wellbeing — both within and beyond the congregation. And congregations receive those gifts and/or support individuals to discern where those gifts are needed and can be received. Life itself gives us the authority to exercise our Spiritual Leadership, but community gives us a practice.

We believe the purpose of congregational life is to equip congregants to exercise their Spiritual Leadership. While not everyone in a congregation is called to serve in a leadership role in a congregation, everyone is called to Spiritual Leadership. All church work therefore can be approached as opportunities for spiritual growth, community building, and mission fulfillment.

Spiritual Leadership is the essence of a congregation’s orientation to leadership. It is not an idea or a feeling. Without practice, it is nothing. We have identified five Practices of Spiritual Leadership for Unitarian Universalist congregations:

- the practice of **Centering in Gifts**

A religious community has a responsibility to identify, affirm, and celebrate the genius of each of its members, as well as to receive those gifts and help members discern where those gifts could be delivered.

¹ Title of a book by Charles Eisenstein

- the practice of **Doing our Inner Work**

Congregations make clear the expectation of attending to our inner landscape and creating settings and opportunities for us to grow awareness of how our conditioning, social locations, character, and connection to Spirit impact our interactions and choices.

- the practice of **Binding to Tradition**

Our attempts to collectively live into and carry forward the religious lineage and legacy we have inherited, and own up to historical and institutional roots, bind us to tradition.

- the practice of **Covenanting**

Covenant is the foundation of Unitarian Universalism. It represents our solemn promises of mutual fidelity and accountability to one another and to something greater than ourselves. It is the practice that binds community to nurture and renew the call to Spiritual Leadership.

- the practice of **Faithful Risking**

Our faith calls us out of comfort and maintenance into conscious, intentional experiments to fully live into our mission and purpose. We collectively consider the interplay of our context, mission, will, capacity, and potential impact in setting — and adapting — a course of action.

We understand these practices to be the core of living faithful lives as Unitarian Universalists. We will go into more detail about each practice in the pages that follow. We also include questions for reflection for you and your colleagues to consider as you engage these practices.

TYPES OF LEADERSHIP COMPARED TO SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP²

By naming Spiritual Leadership as the core purpose and practice of congregational life, we are not dismissing other forms of leadership. Indeed, congregations depend for their health and vitality on leadership of many kinds. Spiritual Leadership does not replace or invalidate other forms of leadership. A brief look at technical leadership, facilitative leadership and adaptive leadership will help distinguish Spiritual Leadership from these other forms.

Technical Leadership

This type of leadership is first of all about solving problems for which there is a technical fix. The leadership stance here is that of director and expert and its key skill is the ability to create and manage a step-by-step process of lining up resources — equipment, money, information, people, supplies, etc. — to solve a problem. Its orientation is a plan. Its mark of completion is “problem solved.”

An example:

The Stewardship Committee is having trouble tracking pledges and donations. They are still using a paper system. Some data is tracked by the treasurer, some by the administrator and some by members of the committee. There are errors and omissions. Some congregants are variously puzzled and upset because their personal records for giving do not match the committee’s records. A congregant with computer skills steps up and offers their expertise to design an online tracking system that can be accessed by multiple people via the internet, keeps the data in one place, and allows for cross referencing and correction. Problem solved.

Facilitative Leadership

This type of leadership is about developing leadership in others. Its leadership stance, therefore, is that of coach, mentor or facilitator. Its key skill is the ability to draw out others’ gifts and strengths. Its orientation is an intention, such as a successful stewardship campaign. Its mark of completion is when leadership and responsibility for a task can be assumed by someone else.

² Adapted from the work of the Women’s Theological Center

TYPES OF LEADERSHIP

An example:

The Stewardship Committee chair has taken responsibility for organizing the yearly campaign for several years running and is ready to step down. However, before doing so, she takes the time to mentor the new chair to the tasks and responsibilities of the position. Once the new chair is oriented, they can assume the new role with a measure of confidence and the former chair can release responsibility.

Adaptive Leadership

Adaptive leadership is needed when a change in perspective or behavior is called for. Because change typically brings out anxiety, the key skill in adaptive leadership is the ability to lead people through change at a level of discomfort they can tolerate. The leadership stance of adaptive leadership is, therefore, that of learner and innovator. Its orientation is experimentation. By experimenting with incremental change, an adaptive leader helps people imagine and try on new ideas and behaviors. The mark of completion is when an appropriate shift in culture has been made.

An example:

The Stewardship Committee takes the congregation through an adaptive learning process in order to move from a *yearly canvass* to *year-round giving*. This has implications for communication, administration, volunteering and pledging and thus requires adaptive leaders to navigate between keeping the status quo and causing panic. It may take several annual cycles to complete.

Spiritual Leadership

As already said, Spiritual Leadership is not a role. Rather, its leadership stance is an orientation and a practice. Its key skill is the ability to navigate between the power within us — that is, our gifts, wisdom, spirit — and our powerlessness — that is, all those things that are outside our control. Its orientation is a vision such as Beloved Community and/or collective liberation. It has no mark of completion since Beloved

TYPES OF LEADERSHIP

Community is never achieved once and for all. We are called into our Spiritual Leadership as long as we are alive.

An example:

The Stewardship Committee recognizes a chronic sense of fear in the congregation that there isn't enough money. Consequently, ministries are done on a shoestring and fail to thrive. The committee invites the congregation to move away from a scarcity mentality, to notice the sufficiency and abundance of gifts that support them now and have always supported them, to imagine security in new ways, to consider generosity as an exercise in faith formation, and to faithfully risk living more deeply into their ministries as they learn to depend on the wealth that is community.

Not everyone has the skills or capacities for technical leadership, facilitative leadership, or adaptive leadership. Yet, everyone has the calling and capacity for exercising their Spiritual Leadership. We hope that what follows makes clear how we can practice.

Practice: Centering in Gifts



CENTERING IN GIFTS

“Whether they are raised in indigenous or modern culture, there are two things that people crave: the full realization of their innate gifts, and to have these gifts approved, acknowledged, and confirmed. There are countless people in the West whose efforts are sadly wasted because they have no means of expressing their unique genius. In the psyches of such people there is an inner power and authority that fails to shine because the world around them is blind to it.”

- Malidoma Somé, *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*

As expressed above by Malidoma Somé, the Dagara, an indigenous people in West Africa, understand that we come into the world with gifts and that all of us crave to have our gifts noticed and affirmed. Our gifts are a genius we carry, an inner power that we cannot tap if we have nowhere to deliver our gifts. In fact, we may not even know what our gifts are. While they arrive with us at birth as potential, the conditions for their “activation” must also be met. Typically, those conditions include the attention and care of other people.

Dominant culture in the West is more interested in our marketable skills than in our giftedness. Many of us, therefore, do not know what our innate gifts are or we undervalue them because they are not compensated. We can spend much of our lives honing and delivering skills that keep the engines of commerce going but do not promote community wellbeing. When we apply our gifts for this, we misspend our genius by delivering it in ways that harm community more than build or heal it. As Rebecca Parker writes:

Your gifts — whatever you discover them to be — can be used to bless or curse the world.

— CENTERING IN GIFTS —

At its best, the relationship between a community and its individuals is reciprocal. In that case, the community takes responsibility for identifying, affirming and celebrating the gifts of its members. The community also receives those gifts and helps members to discern where those gifts are needed and could be delivered to “bless the world.” In turn, the responsibility of individuals in community is to discern, hone and deliver their gifts within or beyond the community for collective liberation and wellbeing.

Congregations that center in gifts assume and consciously notice the gifts of each individual. They do not have a “fill the slot” approach to leadership, recruiting people into standard church roles vacated by those who are too burnt out to continue in the role. They recognize the difference between activating *skills* that people have acquired in their lives and work, and calling forth *gifts*. Such congregations purposefully and intentionally pay attention to each individual to ensure that no one’s gifts are overlooked or marginalized. They find ways to celebrate and affirm each individuals’ gifts and support people to risk delivering their gifts ever more abundantly.

Imagine how we might experience congregational life if we rooted ourselves in the understanding that each person we encounter longs to deliver their gifts. Imagine if every ministry of our congregations and every aspect of congregational life were engaged as opportunities to affirm, receive, and celebrate the gifts of our faith community. Imagine ministries that reflect each member’s calling, in the words of Frederick Buechner, “*to that place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.*”

You could create worship services that spotlight and celebrate the gifts within the community. Covenant circles could focus on discerning each person’s gifts and where/how those gifts could be delivered more powerfully and faithfully. At coffee hour, folks might reflect in twos and threes on how the community is blessed by the other’s gifts. You could send each other birthday cards that name some ways you saw that person deliver their gifts in the past year. The work of committees could be organized and shaped around the gifts of the people who are on them. Pledging might include not only what you plan to contribute financially, but also some specific ways you hope to offer your gifts over the year. How you practice centering in gifts need only be limited by your collective imagination!

³ from her poem “[Choose to Bless the World](#)”

— CENTERING IN GIFTS —

Questions for reflection:

What is a gift you bring to offer the world?

How might the gift you have to offer be needed in your congregation?

How might your congregation invite you to deliver this gift for the good of the community?

Practice: Doing Our Inner Work



DOING OUR INNER WORK

It's hard to be a human being. We are born vulnerable and utterly dependent on others. We cannot survive without other human beings. From early on, we seek to please others so they stay loyal to us. Or we seek to control others so they cannot hurt us. We desire comfort, safety, prestige, goodwill, happiness, security. We avoid hunger, thirst, pain, loss, death. These desires and avoidances make us reactive.

From a Buddhist frame, inner work is about letting go of our attachment to desire, letting go of our revulsion to pain.

It is about *not* being controlled by our emotions but about controlling our reactivity when emotions show up. This perspective is evident in the following quote by the Dalai Lama:

*The very purpose of religion is to control yourself, not to criticize others.
Rather, we must criticize ourselves. How much am I doing about my anger?
About my attachment, about my hatred, about my pride, my jealousy?
These are the things which we must check in daily life. - Dalai Lama*

From a Western perspective, doing our inner work is about working with our egos. Sometimes we feel nothing but small. We get hurt and we shrink. We get afraid and we hide. We compare ourselves to others and feel less than. That is under ego at work.

And sometimes we inflate who we are. We feel smug and proud and act like we're better than other people. We feel entitled to more than others, entitled to give them a piece of our mind, entitled to being served by others. That is over ego at work.

— DOING OUR INNER WORK —

As long as ego is in charge, we can forget about the spacious, radiant mystery and wonder inside us. We can forget about soul — the true owner of our person. The practice of doing our inner work is about wakening our souls.

In his essay “The Pilgrimage of Awareness,” Ram Dass writes:

Ramakrishna had a wonderful image of that tension between ego and soul: There is a horse-drawn carriage, he said, the kind with a driver up on top. The driver, who has been guiding the carriage all throughout a long trip, gets to thinking that the carriage belongs to him. Suddenly the person inside the carriage knocks his cane against the roof and says, “Stop here.” The driver says, “Who do you think you are?” The man answers, “I own this carriage.” But the driver says, “Don’t be silly — this is my carriage.” The driver, the ego, has been having too much fun guiding the carriage to surrender control to the real owner, the soul. But once the soul has awakened and established its control, the ego can begin to play its role as a wonderful servant.⁴

Navigating the tension between ego and soul is exacerbated in a culture that systematically and systemically creates unequal relationships between groups of people. In such systems, everyone’s sense of somebodiness gets warped. Those who are taught to dominate come to believe that their somebodiness depends on being in control because they are “male,” “white,” “straight,” “able-bodied,” etc. Those who are dominated come to believe that they are not somebodies. By doing our inner work, all are invited into deeper belief in our own and others’ dignity and worth as well as a recognition of our own and others’ ultimate significance.⁵

All of these dynamics become magnified when we come into community such as a congregation. Our socialization, experiences, neuroses, desires and revulsions start to show up as we encounter, worship, and volunteer with each other. *Being* together means that we take seriously the way we show up in collective space and tend to the places where our egos have us either looking down at or looking up to others. It is the responsibility of religious community to help us remember we belong to one another as equals — all somebodies with gifts and purpose — and to help us remember that we are connected to the web of Life and Love that came before us and will remain after us.

⁴ Carlson, Richard. *Handbook for the Soul* (p. 71). Little, Brown and Company. Kindle Edition.

⁵ Based on concept of “somebodiness” as lifted up by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in his speech “What is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

— DOING OUR INNER WORK —

Congregations that support us to do our inner work purposefully lead us into disciplined inquiry and process to act on our beliefs about our own and each other's dignity and worth. These congregations find ways — through worship, small groups, pastoral care, faith formation, and on and on — to encourage and equip us in wakening our souls.

Questions for reflection:

How does your congregation support, encourage, and equip you to do your inner work?

How does your congregation involve you in supporting, encouraging, and equipping others in doing their inner work?

Practice: Binding to Tradition



BINDING TO TRADITION

Sometimes we are confronted with attitudes such as “UUs can believe anything” or “the UUA can’t tell us what to do” or other statements that suggest being a part of a “free faith” means we get to do whatever we want. The Spiritual Leadership practice of binding to tradition is about what it really means to identify Unitarian Universalism as a religion, rather than an ideology or social club.

The root of *religion* means "to bind fast" and is related to the word *rely* which means "to place an obligation on." When we choose Unitarian Universalism as our religion, we claim and are claimed by the tradition — not by structure, sacrament or creed, but by covenant.

The tradition allows each individual and each congregation autonomy, yet membership and association assume responsibility and accountability. To be Unitarian Universalist is to inherit a legacy: its history, traditions, symbols, stories, theologies, ancestors in faith. When we bind to tradition, we steward that past into the present and towards a future. To claim Unitarian Universalism is to be willing to carry forward and build on its gifts and wisdom. We see this reflected in this quote from Unitarian minister and theologian James Luther Adams:

“I call that church free which is not bound to the present, which cowers not before the vaunted spirit of the times. It earns and creates a tradition binding together past, present, and future in a living tether, in a continuing covenant and identity, bringing forth treasures both new and old.”⁶

⁶ from his essay “The Church that is Free”

— BINDING TO TRADITION —

When we bind to tradition, we also attend to that which has come before wherein the legacy might carry with it a shadow side. The practice of binding to tradition requires that we learn some of these histories and where they are incongruent with who we think are or what we think we are about, it is our job to reconcile them. Claiming and being claimed by the tradition thus also assumes willingness to acknowledge the harms the tradition has caused over time and to do our part in repairing — or reconciling — the brokenness of the past.

For example, take a look around your congregation. What symbols can someone see in your sanctuary space? What portraits line your halls? Does what someone can see or learn about Unitarian Universalism or your congregation through your physical space align with what you understand about the tradition? Where there are inconsistencies between who you claim to be and the reality of who you are, how are those made more congruent?

Binding to tradition requires that we endeavor to have congruence and integrity between what has come before and what is not yet, and that we are engaged in the process of reconciling disconnections.

Questions for reflection:

What dimensions of our Unitarian Universalist lineage and legacy are you proud to carry forward?

What part of your congregation's history, symbols, songs, rituals, et cetera needs reconciliation?

How are these — both what you are proud of and what you are reconciling — present in your congregational life today?

Practice: Covenanting



COVENANTING

The root idea of our entire tradition is the covenant. A covenanted free church is a body of individuals who have freely made a profoundly simple promise, a covenant...we need now to do two things: to reclaim and creatively adopt covenants in our free churches, in our own liberal way, for our time, and to invent what we have never yet had, a Covenanted Association of Congregations.

- Alice Blair Wesley, [Minns 2000 Lecture Series](#), #5

Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal, not a creedal or sacramental, religion. Rather than adherence to specific beliefs, we join together within and among congregations around solemn promises. In covenant, we claim our tradition and one another, and in turn we are claimed. It is our practice of mutual accountability that is ever loving, ever trusting, ever forgiving, ever inviting renewal and an expanding circle of seekers.

Not only did our faith ancestors bestow the spiritual technology of covenant on each congregation, it is also the practice by which we form our Unitarian Universalist Association to pursue common ends in mutual trust and support. Our [Associational covenant](#) is inscribed in Article II of our [UUA Bylaws](#).

Unitarian Universalist theologian James Luther Adams named five points in describing the major ingredients or elements of a covenant⁷. Some of these elements are evident in the wording of covenants, others more so in the practice of covenant.

⁷ adapted from James Luther Adams "From Cage to Covenant" (1975) address to Collegium originally published in Kairos (Winter 1976); appears in *Prophethood of All Believers* ed. George Kimmich Beach (Beacon Press, 1986)

People

This seems obvious, but the point here as the late Jewish philosopher Martin Buber said, is that human beings are “*promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking, promise-renewing*” creatures. Covenanting is at the root of our very nature.

Covenant of being

A covenant responsive to a creative, sustaining, transforming power is ultimately not of our own making. It is made by the spirit of life, the source of all, the vision of Beloved Community — however we describe that. The covenant is oriented to “*something we cannot control but upon which we depend, even for our freedom,*” in the words of James Luther Adams.

Covenant is for the individual as well as the collective

In covenant we are responsible not only for our own behavior but also for the character of the whole — the congregation, wider community, society. We are brought out of our separateness and into covenant. In covenant we claim and are claimed.

Responsibility is especially directed toward the marginalized

In covenant we welcome all and seek fundamental mutuality — to narrow the systemic gap between the privileged and those who disproportionately suffer injustice, neglect, suppression.

Trustworthiness — faithfulness, love, & grace

The covenant is not a legal agreement. It depends not on law but love, mutual fidelity, and trust. It is inherently forgiving and when violated seeks restoration and renewal. Unitarian Universalist minister Victoria Safford says of covenant that “*It can't be enforced by consequences, but it may be reinforced by forgiveness and grace, when we stumble, forget, mess up.*” Covenanting is our way of accountability to one another, to our source of being, and to shared purpose.

— COVENANTING —

Far more than words written for an order of service, covenant is a verb, covenanting an ongoing practice. And far more than a one-time individual act of joining in membership, the renewing practice of covenant is our act of commitment and belonging. In some congregations this takes the form of rituals for entering into covenant, as well as releasing from covenant when someone moves away or ministers depart. In other congregations, practicing covenant looks like incorporating into services or meetings “check-ins” on how we are particularly inspired or challenged by elements of our covenant.

The practice of covenant is one of forgiveness and renewal. It requires us to call one another back into covenant when covenant is broken. All too often behavioral covenants are misused as a weapon to call out individuals whom we perceive to be out of covenant. Some congregations use restorative or listening circles to call back into covenant.

[The covenant](#) all of our congregations entered into to form or join our UUA is one of mutual trust and support. Congregations practice and live this covenant with sibling congregations when they:

- regularly seek and offer counsel and support to one another. Imagine congregational boards knowing the challenges, hopes, and successes of their nearest neighbor congregations.
- readily collaborate, partner, and share resources including lending their minister, other staff, and/or financial resources to a neighboring congregation in time of need.
- offer mutual support and share resources through equitable participation in our [UUA Annual Program Fund](#).
- intentionally select, prepare, and support delegate participation in the annual UUA General Assembly, directly engaging in the affairs of our UUA.

The practices of Spiritual Leadership are not easy to sustain. Covenant is the practice that binds the community to nurture and renew the call to Spiritual Leadership and it is the collective community practice that defines Unitarian Universalism. Regularly renewing covenant allows us to clarify the commitments we have made to each other, consider new interpretations, and welcome and orient newcomers into our community of faith.

Questions for reflection:

Name existing practices of covenanting in your congregation.

What is one practice of covenanting that you would like to resurrect or begin anew?
What would be your first step?

How might your congregation more fully live our UUA covenant of mutual trust and support among congregations? What could you imagine possible if you more fully lived this covenant?

Practice: Faithful Risking



FAITHFUL RISKING

Common wisdom has it that most people hate change. But the truth is that change is constant, and in fact, Unitarian Universalist theology is grounded in the reality that *revelation is not sealed, but ongoing*. We are theologically called to an openness to new and deeper understandings of our universe and our place within it.

Not all change is hard and unwanted. Change can also be welcome and joyful — consider welcoming a new child or starting a dream job. When people “hate change,” it is more likely they fear the loss of something valuable to them. In congregations we sometimes want things to be different — *we want more families to attend worship on Sundays!* — but we may not want the change those differences would bring — *I don't want to find strangers sitting in my pew on Sunday morning!* Taking faithful risks can force us to make choices about competing values — in this example, the value of hospitality and welcoming strangers and the value of maintaining a sense of comfort and community. Applying the values of our faith to the practice of setting direction and taking action, while remaining faithful to one another, helps us to practice taking the risks required to live into and share the love and grace of Unitarian Universalism.

Choosing *not* to take risks is always a possible course of action in congregations, but it is not often seen as an active choice. Maintaining the status quo can also be a risky choice. By doing so, our congregations risk being less relevant in a changing world. We risk abdicating our vision of Beloved Community. We risk laying waste our gifts of love and grace that could be doing the work of justice in our congregations and in our communities.

— FAITHFUL RISKING —

Organizing congregational life to align with a sense of mission and faithfully advancing it may require taking some risks. Faithful risking begins in discernment that leads to taking action, then reflecting on the results to examine what is going well and where our action might be leading. With those insights, adapting your original action based on what you are learning completes and begins a new cycle. We call the practice of this cycle “Faithful Risking” to acknowledge that a mission worth aligning around invites change and aims to transform.

Discernment

Congregations, like families, workplaces, and other human organizations, can easily fall into unquestioned habits that keep them from health and vitality. Discernment allows us to enter into ways of being that are more intentional. To act *on purpose*. Practicing discernment allows us to collectively examine mission, purpose, and values and apply them to our present circumstances and choices. It creates space for heart and spirit — and not just head — to inform our actions. Congregations in discernment can weigh multiple alternatives and determine which is more purposeful and faithful.

Discernment is different than decision making. It has roots in the Latin word for *dividing* or *setting apart*. Discernment allows us to separate ideas in order to closely examine them. Collectively it can be a practice of deep reflection that is especially helpful when considering several possible paths. It is also not completed in a single moment of decision. The process of discernment takes different forms in many faith traditions. We offer this model, but you should feel free to find the model that works best for your team.

Discerning a direction triggers a cycle of Action, Reflection, and Adaptation that helps us evaluate if the choice we have made is leading us in the direction we expected and hoped for. The cycle of Faithful Risking includes:

Action

We believe that as people of faith, simply “having the right idea” is not enough. Without translating our ideas into action, our gifts remain undelivered. How can we know whether the idea is relevant or meaningful? Taking action is a way of finding out, of risking something on behalf of living into our mission. When a direction is identified through discernment, a specific *action* must be taken to put our hopes to the test.

Reflection

Meaningful action is rarely a single quick task but rather an intended series of linked efforts over a period of time. We can sometimes hesitate to take action, and at other times we may act freely or impulsively, without paying attention to whether our actions are making — or failing to make — the differences we aimed for. Pausing regularly to *reflect* on our chosen actions is an essential part of the cycle of Faithful Risking. We need to know if the action is beneficial or harmful, and to whom or what? What in the wider environment has changed or is changing that invites us to change what we are doing? What needs adjustment so that the action we take re-aligns with the intentions we have discerned?

Adaptation

Having learned through reflection something about the consequences of the actions we are taking, we adapt. We change and adjust what we are doing and begin again to move toward our intentions through renewed action. With these new actions implemented, we begin again, and after a time, reflect again on where Spirit and our actions are leading us.

At some point it will become clear that the direction we discerned and the action we have taken have run their course, or have achieved their aim. At some point it will again be time for the congregation or its leadership to go back to a practice of deeper discernment about where the gifts of the community and the needs of the world meet.

Congregations that engage the process of discernment take preparation seriously — accessing the time, people, and resources necessary for the task. They also center in faith and look for the spiritual questions at the center of the issue or challenge. Once some possible directions have been identified, we suggest using something like [the Sweet Spot tool](#) to facilitate a collective conversation for comparing options.

This Faithful Risking cycle frees us to take risks and to responsibly experiment to enact our mission; to let go of the desire to plan every step before acting; to release our hopes of being perfect and doing it just right. We are not called to be perfect. We are called to be faithful.

Questions for reflection:

How does a process of discernment differ from a practice of decision making?
What issues in your congregation's life might be fruitful ground for discernment?

What is one thing you could do to shift your congregation toward a faithful culture that supports discernment and risk taking?

What is it in Unitarian Universalist tradition and theology that calls us to take intentional and faithful risks?

CONCLUSION

Our purpose with this paper is to offer congregations concrete orientations and practices to help draw out and support the Spiritual Leadership of all Unitarian Universalists. We cannot do this without the partnership of religious professionals and lay leaders. As with all religious wisdom, what we have described here is neither complete nor completed. This work is and will always be in formation as we individually and collectively live into “the more beautiful world our hearts know is possible.”⁸

To engage with us directly about this work, please [share your thoughts through this form](#).

Please also feel free to [download workshop materials](#) on Spiritual Leadership from our recent workshops.

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⁸ Charles Eisenstein