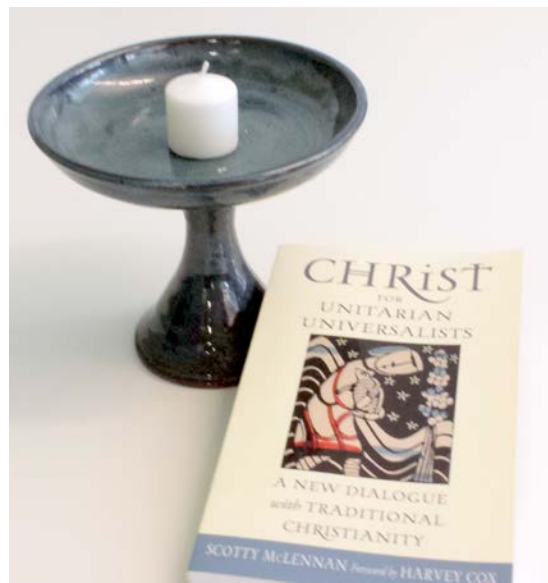


**Discussion Guide for Multifaith Families  
and Activists in Multifaith Coalitions**  
by Gail Forsyth-Vail



# **Christ for Unitarian Universalists**

By Scotty McLennan



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# Introduction

In *Christ for Unitarian Universalists* (Skinner House, 2016) author Scotty McLennan explains his Christian Unitarian Universalist faith. He encourages readers to explore ways in which Christianity can be fully compatible with Unitarian Universalist commitments to reason and doubt. He invites engagement and dialogue with both liberal Christians (including UU Christians) and those who hold orthodox or evangelical beliefs.

This discussion guide provides a framework for examining intersections between Unitarian Universalism and Christianity. It prepares participants for conversations about faith, beliefs, and values with Christians with whom they share justice-making work or familial or friendship bonds. Here are some examples of who might use this discussion guide:

- Congregations and individuals doing interfaith work with Christian partners for racial, environmental, or economic justice
- Individuals with extended-family members who are committed Christians
- Families in which parents and significant caregivers hold both mainstream Christian and Unitarian Universalist views
- Theologically questioning young adults
- Congregational staff and lay leaders preparing for Easter worship and programming

Included are three 60-minute sessions which you can adapt to provide family, small group, congregational, cluster, or district programming for adults of all ages and life stages; for campus groups; or for young adult groups.

## Goals

- Provide a framework for responding to *Christ for Unitarian Universalists*, so that participants may share reactions and reflections in a safe and trusting community
- Invite participants to explore how some of the wisdom, beliefs, and traditions of Christianity intersect with Unitarian Universalist faith
- Invite participants to engage with others about how faith—Christian and non-Christian—guides their life and work
- Help participants identify what they have learned about Christianity from the book and what they would like to explore further

# Session 1: Jesus and Christ

## Materials

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook, enough copies for participants to share

## Preparation

- Set out the chalice and hymnbooks.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint and post:
  - We promise to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
  - We promise to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
  - We promise to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
  - We promise to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment.
- Title one sheet of newsprint “Jesus” and a second “Christ,” and set aside.

## Opening and Covenant (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and invite them to locate the Unitarian Universalist Principles and Sources in the front of the hymnbook. Light the chalice and share the Sources aloud. Then, go around the circle and invite each participant to share their name and something about why they have chosen to be part of this discussion group.

Call attention to the posted covenant points. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, amended, or added. Write the changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

## Sharing: The Story of Jesus Christ (15 minutes)

Ask, “What is the story about Jesus Christ that you know and where did you learn it?” Allow a couple of minutes for participants to find their story. Then, invite them to respond one at a time without interruption. Tell participants that they may pass if they choose or defer their answer until after others have responded.

## Activity: Brainstorming Words and Images (20 minutes)

Post the two sheets of newsprint and invite participants to brainstorm words and images they associate with “Jesus” and with “Christ.” Say that while some of the words and images may result from their reading of McLennan’s book, others may come from personal experience or encounters. Encourage people to explain a bit about each image or word they propose. When the brainstorm is complete, ask:

- As a Unitarian Universalist, which of these images or terms do you find helpful?
- Are there images or terms that you find challenging?
- Are there images or terms you want to explore more deeply as part of your spiritual journey?

## Discussion: Pre-Easter and Post-Easter (10 minutes)

Say, “McLennan explains that there is a pre-Easter, historical Jesus whose teachings are familiar to most Unitarian Universalists. There is also a post-Easter Christ who is a mystical, living presence who lives on in the hearts and minds of his followers, and who companions, comforts, and challenges people in their daily lives. This Christ is a central figure for Christians, including Unitarian Universalist Christians.” Ask:

- Was the difference between the historical Jesus and the Christ of Christianity new to you?
- Does the idea of pre-Easter and Post-Easter Jesus help you to better understand the faith of Christians (including, possibly, you) in your congregation, your family, or in social justice-focused groups with which you are associated?

## Closing (5 minutes)

Say, “Throughout the book, McLennan explains why he is both Unitarian Universalist and Christian, noting that as a UU he is part of a faith that affirms direct experience as well as a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. In the book, the author shares some thoughts from Erik Walker Wikstrom (p.2). We will use this passage as a closing reading.”

*He [Wikstrom] has had trouble comprehending the question that many asked him, about how a Unitarian Universalist can be a Christian, since he can't imagine, for himself, any way of being a Christian without being a Unitarian Universalist. That's because he understands our faith as always being exploratory and experimental, encouraging us to question and scrutinize everything and to receive as truth only what we learn for ourselves. He treasures his Unitarian Universalist freedom to draw on many of the*

*world's traditions in trying to answer the great existential questions. He writes, "Only through this freedom could I have found the doors of the Christian tradition, which had once seemed so tightly closed, to be open and inviting once again."*

Tell participants that next time you will talk about Christmas and Easter. Invite them to reflect on their own stories and thoughts about these observances.

# Session 2: Christmas and Easter

## Materials

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1
- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook, enough copies for participants to share
- Optional: Computer with Internet connection and speakers

## Preparation

- Set out the chalice and hymnbooks.
- Post the covenant.
- Optional: Online, locate the [YouTube video](#) of children singing “Now the Green Blade Riseth” or another recording of the hymn. Set up and test equipment and queue the video clip.
- Optional: Recruit an accompanist or song leader to lead the closing song.

## Opening (10 minutes)

Welcome participants and review the covenant from Session 1. Invite them to share anything that they have been mulling after the previous discussion. Tell them that today’s conversation will focus on two important Christian observances: Christmas and Easter. Explain that the opening words are a reading from our Unitarian Universalist hymnbook that many congregations share at Christmastime, written by mid-20<sup>th</sup> century religious educator and theologian Sophia Lyon Fahs. Light the chalice and share Reading 626 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Ask, “What do you think makes this reading so loved by Unitarian Universalists?”

## Discussion and Sharing: Christmas (20 minutes)

Say, “McLennan explains that an important aspect of Christmas for many is incarnation, the idea that someone with special spiritual gifts was born as a human being in lowly circumstances. The story of Jesus’ birth holds wisdom for many.” Ask:

- Do you attend services at a Unitarian Universalist congregation at Christmas? If you do, what message or experience are you hoping to find?

- Are there parts of the nativity story that hold particular meaning for you? Or metaphors that are helpful in your own spiritual life?
- Does any spiritual nourishment you receive from Christmas help you to better understand the Christian faith? How so?

As time allows, invite participants to explore the Christmas carols section of *Singing the Living Tradition* (Hymn 227 through Hymn 258). Ask:

- Which carols or hymns are particular favorites? Which touch or move you spiritually or emotionally?
- Can you identify why a particular piece is a favorite?

## Discussion and Sharing: Easter (25 minutes)

Share this quote from the book, p. 91:

*The Christian message is that God is love and Jesus the Christ came into the world to manifest that love even unto death. Easter is the joyful surprise that even when things look as bleak as they possibly can—following the crucifixion that takes place on Good Friday—love has the power to rise again and transform the world.*

Invite participants to recall McLennan’s stories of everyday resurrections when love transforms despair to hope. Have they ever witnessed or experienced what could be described as a “resurrection,” a return from despair? Allow a minute or two of silence for participants to find their story, and then invite them, one at a time, to share a story without interruption.

Then, lead a conversation using these questions:

- What experiences have you had with the Easter story of Jesus’ resurrection?
- How is Easter observed in your Unitarian Universalist congregation? What stories are told and what hymns are sung?
- Have you witnessed the Easter story used as metaphor for transforming either an individual life or a community’s life?
- How does the Easter story challenge or affirm you spiritually? Did the book change your feeling or thinking about Easter in any way?
- In what way can your family, your community, or your justice-making group make room both for those for whom resurrection is a central part of faith and those for whom it is not?



## Closing (5 minutes)

Invite participants to turn to Hymn 266 in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Share the history of the hymn: The words were written by John C. Crum in 1928 and set to a 15<sup>th</sup> century French carol melody. The hymn appears in many Christian hymnbooks as well as in our own. Invite participants to silently read the words. Then, either lead the group to sing it aloud with you or play the video you have chosen.

Extinguish the chalice. Explain that the next session will invite conversations about faith, values, and commitments between Christians and those who are of a different faith, or no faith.

# Session 3: Shared Values, Different Beliefs

## Materials

- Chalice, candle, and lighter or LED battery-operated candle
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Covenant from Session 1
- *Singing the Living Tradition*, the UUA hymnbook, enough copies for participants to share

## Preparation

- Set out the chalice and hymnbooks.
- Post the covenant.
- Write on newsprint, and set aside:
  - How do spiritual teachings from the Christian tradition, one of our Unitarian Universalist Sources, fit into your own UU faith?
  - What values do you have in common with those in your life who are Christian?
  - What more do you want to know about the faith commitments of those people in your life who are Christian? How might you go about asking them?
  - What changes do you envision happening in your family life or in the life of a justice-making group when Christians and those who are not Christian can talk with one another about both shared values and different beliefs?

## Opening (10 minutes)

Welcome participants. Light the chalice and share this biblical text, excerpted from the Beatitudes (Matthew 5: 1-9, New Revised Standard Version):

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up to the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

Ask participants to ponder for a moment which, if any, parts of these Christian teachings offer helpful wisdom for their personal lives or for their work for justice in the world.

## Discussion and Sharing: Communion (20 minutes)

Share this passage from page 7 of the book, where McLennan explains the meaning of the phrase “Body of Christ:”

*The Apostle Paul uses the term “body of Christ” to describe the Christian community as a whole. In his first letter to the Corinthian Christian congregation, Paul writes, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Writing to Christians living in Rome, he says, “For as in one body we have many members and not all members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.”*

Say, “He goes on to explain that Communion is a symbolic, ritualized way of reminding themselves and each other that they are bound together as one community.”

Lead a conversation using these questions:

- When, if ever, have you observed or taken part in a Christian communion? What did you understand about the ritual’s meaning at the time? Did you have an emotional or spiritual response to communion?
- Has the book changed your perception of communion or helped you to understand your own experience?
- How did your thinking about the phrase “body of Christ” shift when you learned/read that Martin Luther King used the phrase “beloved community” to mean roughly the same thing, i.e., that we are all connected to one another?
- What Unitarian Universalist rituals, ceremonies, or traditions affirm the same sense of connection to one to another?
- How does that sense of connection, or oneness, undergird your spiritual practices and/or your justice work?

## Reflection and Sharing: Faith Commitments (25 minutes)

Invite participants to call to mind their reasons for reading the book and for participating in a discussion group. Ask: "Are there loved ones who are Christian with whom you would like to have deeper conversations about faith? Are you involved in a justice-making group or movement that includes people whose Christian faith calls them to the work? Are you curious about Christianity and exploring it as a spiritual path?" Allow a moment or two of silence. Then, post the questions you have written on newsprint and read them aloud. Allow a minute or two of silence. Then, ask participants to respond to one or more of the question, each in turn, without interruption. Remind participants that they have the right to pass if they are not ready to speak.

## Closing (5 minutes)

Thank participants for being part of the discussion group. Invite each person in turn to offer a closing thought, a word or phrase about their experience in this group.

Offer these words from page 220 of the book as a closing:

*I see Jesus as a religious pluralist. He described loving your neighbor as yourself with the example of a hated follower of a different religion, a Samaritan. He saved the life of an adulterous woman he'd never met before. He fed five thousand people with words of institution that sounded like communion, even though the vast majority were not his followers. He communed with Roman soldiers and ate with tax collectors...May we too be pluralists in our own religious and philosophical commitments, seeing pluralism as intentional commitment, imprinted by action. May we choose to step onto the side of pluralism, make our voices heard, and work to save the world with our bodies, hearts, and minds.*

Extinguish the chalice.