

Creating a Discussion Group for [*Coming Out in Faith: Voices of LGBTQ Unitarian Universalists*](#)

Susan A. Gore

Group discussion for *Coming Out in Faith*, edited by Keith Kron and Susan A. Gore, may be organized in several different ways. Open, heartfelt conversations that occur in safe spaces are fundamental to any form of using this guide. Freedom to ask questions is a critical part of the process, as is listening mindfully to understand where a question is coming from, not just how to respond to it. Different people have different experiences and understandings. Hearing as many of those viewpoints as possible is key to learning about topics as personal and richly complex as sexual orientation, gender identity, and faith.

While each person brings their unique experience to the group, it is also assumed that group members will read the sections of *Coming Out in Faith* that are the basis for each discussion. Many congregations have bought a copy of the book for their libraries. It also can be purchased from inSpirit: The UU Book and Gift Shop [here](#) or as an eBook from Amazon [here](#).

This guide to creating a discussion group offers suggestions, not directives. Feel free to use the parts that work and adapt or leave out the parts that don't. There may be questions or experiences not reflected in *Coming Out in Faith* that are especially meaningful for your group to consider. Connecting with others and reflecting on the intersection between being LGBTQ and a person of faith is the most important part of this dialogue.

Setting the Tone

Most UU-based discussions include opening and closing rituals to mark the space as sacred. Lighting a chalice at the beginning and extinguishing it at the end are simple ways to accomplish this. Adding a reading, song, and/or check-in at the beginning and end is often useful. It is also important to be respectful of the time set aside by individuals and the group by starting and ending at the agreed-upon times.

Here are some suggestions from *Singing the Living Tradition*:

Songs

- #1 May Nothing Evil
- #119 Once to Every Soul and Nation
- #188 Come, Come Whoever You Are
- #194 Faith is a Forest
- #318 We Would Be One
- #325 Love Makes a Bridge

Readings

- #420 Annie Dillard
- #494 W.E.B. DuBois



#686 Mark Belletini
#694 Frederick E. Gillis
#698 Wayne B. Arnason
#709 James 1

Group Facilitation

In general, having someone recognized as the facilitator for each discussion is helpful. That person can help the group avoid verbal “traffic jams,” pose follow-up questions, and encourage individuals who have not spoken to share their views. The same person may facilitate each session, or it may be someone different each time. The key is that whoever facilitates steps away from sharing their own comments to ensure the group dynamic is free-flowing, respectful, and informative.

Creating a Safe Environment

Free-flowing, respectful, and informative discussion is most likely to occur when everyone in the group feels safe. Within UU circles, setting agreements or a covenant about the discussion up-front is typical.

Here are some items that are often included in small group covenants. If your group already has a covenant, you may want to consider adding some or all of these to your covenant. Or they may serve as a starting point for a new group developing its covenant for the first time.

- What is said in this group stays in this group. What is learned in this group leaves this group. In other words, we will observe confidentiality, but we will share the wisdom we gain with others.
- We will speak only from our own perspectives and experiences and not assume the perspectives and experiences of others. We will leave space for others to speak for themselves.
- We affirm everyone’s right to their experiences and opinions. And when we disagree, we will do so respectfully.
- It is fine to participate in discussion by listening; no one is required to share.
- We promise to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.

Some Options for Group Discussion

1. The essays in *Coming Out in Faith* are ordered chronologically, so one approach is to compare and contrast the experiences of older versus younger authors. How have the expectations about self-identification—being “out”—changed from the 1950s, when Ed and Al met, to the early 21st century, when Rowan McDowell Thompson described her experiences? How have those expectations and experiences *not* changed?
2. There are representatives from each of the five identities included in the LGBTQ acronym. If you read the essays by lesbians, for example, and compare them to each other, what is similar in their experiences? What is different, at least for the authors in this collection?
3. What similarities and differences appear as you compare the essays by Drew Johnston and Sunshine Jeremiah Wolfe, who identify as queer and genderqueer, respectively, with those

who prefer to be known as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender? Among transgender contributors, Kathleen Robbins identifies clearly as lesbian, while Drew and Sunshine do not. What do you make of this, especially in the context of understanding sexual orientation and gender identity?

4. Essays by people with different abilities are missing in this collection, although the editors put significant effort into engaging such authors. How might the experiences of “differently abled” LGBTQ people be similar and/or different from “temporarily able” LGBTQ people? How might the experiences also differ at the intersection of being LGBTQ and a person of faith?
5. A rather different approach might be discussing how the use of photographs of the authors affected your reading. What assumptions or stories popped up as you compared the “early” pictures most authors provided with their “current” appearance?
6. The editors posed four questions to each author as context for their writing. How would you answer each of them?
 - How has Unitarian Universalism affected your life as an LGBTQ person and/or ally?
 - How do UU churches still struggle with understanding the lives of their LGBTQ members and LGBTQ issues beyond the sanctuary or minister’s office?
 - How do you take your faith into the wider world as an LGBTQ person and/or ally?
 - What can we (your congregation, the UUA, Unitarian Universalism) do better?

Now What?

Discussion of topics such as those outlined above is intrinsically worthwhile and rewarding. AND, in our busy lives, “just talking” is often less motivating than having or creating a plan to “do something” about the insights that accompany learning about the lives of LGBTQ UU people of faith. Planning may be on an individual level or group level. One really easy action is to take an LGBTQ person—particularly someone you don’t know—to lunch and ask them about their life.

Coming Out in Faith also references a variety of resources that offer further information and programs related to LGBTQ lives, as well as resources for allies. In light of these resources and suggestions:

- What is *your* congregation doing relative to LGBTQ issues?
- Is there an LGBTQ group within your congregation that meets regularly?
- Does your congregation celebrate National Coming Out Day or June Pride Month?
- Is there activity going on beyond your congregation that you may want to join? For example, twenty-two states have “Religious Freedom” laws that permit businesses to choose whom they serve based on “sincerely held religious beliefs.” Several of the organizations listed in the resources section of *Coming Out in Faith* have initiatives to repeal these laws. How might you and/or your congregation support changing these laws?

In the introduction to *Coming Out in Faith*, the editors state, “Our fiercest hope is that this collection will serve as a catalyst for others to share their stories with their friends, families, and faith communities, celebrating how far we have come and giving hope for how far we can go, in faith.” May it be so.

If you want to share *your* story, or you would like to have one or both editors speak at an event, please contact Susan Gore at susangphd@gmail.com.