

The Experience of the Holy

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This exercise was originally developed by Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs in 2007 and refined by the Unity Consulting team for the UU University Governance Track in 2008. You can see Unity Consulting lead it at UU University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0_8rRt4b2o. This exercise also appears in *The Nested Bowls: The Promise and Practice of Good Governance* by Laura Park, Managing Director of Unity Consulting. Permission granted to copy, use, and adapt this exercise as long as this paragraph of attribution and permission, plus the attribution in the footer, stays with the exercise.

Introduction

This script steps a facilitator through the process of leading The Experience of the Holy. This exercise helps the governing body of religious institutions (congregations, professional organizations, social justice networks, etc.) answer the question:

*What timeless, transcendent qualities of our religious community
will we embody in all we do?*

Unity Consulting (www.unityconsulting.org), a program of Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, MN, helps the boards of religious organizations identify three to five words or very short phrases that answer that question. These shared core values fill the largest bowl in our Nested Bowls metaphor, and the touchstone they provide shapes everything the institution does.

Usually the board recruits volunteer facilitators to hold multiple sessions of this exercise, on different days and at different times, so that as many people as possible can participate in it. In addition, with volunteer facilitators leading the sessions, board trustees are free to wander and listen. As described in *The Nested Bowls*, trustees “sit close to several groups and hear as many stories as they can. They sit among several groups and listen for common words and themes. They watch the room as a whole to see where the energy of the room is going. They make note of the times when the whole room turns to a particular idea and says something like, ‘Yes, that!’”

The data emerging from this exercise—flip charts from each group of 4 listing three values all four of them would want to pull forward into the future of the religious institution—then goes to the board for analysis and the final discernment of the institution’s core values.

It’s worth noting that this exercise is usually part of a longer workshop that gives a board data to discern mission and ends in addition to core values. *The Nested Bowls* book gives more details about that work. The book also gives more information about the theology that undergirds this exercise and the work of discerning values, mission, and ends.

The script starting on the next page gives you some exact verbiage you can use, but please don’t read the script to people. Instead, practice leading the exercise until you can say the material in your own words. In the right-hand column, you’ll find suggested PowerPoint slides (or flip charts) to help participants keep track of what’s happening in the exercise, plus other supplies you might find useful.

<p>This exercise takes about 40 minutes. Here’s what you’ll do as you facilitate this exercise:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give participants an exercise to introduce themselves to one another and get comfortable together. (not scripted and not included in the 40 minutes) • Put the Experience of the Holy in a Unitarian Universalist context. • Tell your own story of your experience of the holy • Explain the exercise instructions • Keep everyone on track in the exercise • Ask each group to speak aloud the three values words the group chooses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Note to facilitator: Start with an opening reading and light the chalice. Possible opening readings: <i>The Way It Is</i> by William Stafford, <i>Fire</i> by Judy Brown, <i>I Call That Church Free</i> by James Luther Adams (#591 in <i>Singing the Living Tradition</i>). Do an exercise to have participants introduce themselves to one another and get comfortable together. Also, make sure to explain why the board is asking people to participate in this exercise at this time. • This exercise is designed to help us articulate together our core values as a religious community, to identify what timeless, transcendent qualities of our religious community we want to pull forward together into the future. • And because we’re talking about the qualities of a religious community, we want to connect those values to the religious experience and ask you to tell a story about a time you had an experience of the holy. • Let me unpack what I mean by an “experience of the holy” a little. This phrase comes from the deep importance we attach to individual experience in our Unitarian Universalist tradition. “Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder. . .” is the first source of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition, and we value the unique experiences and perspectives each individual brings to our communities. • Note to facilitator: for more background on our first source, the Wellspring curriculum recommends the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Everyday Theology” by Sara Smalley http://wellspringreadings.weebly.com/everyday-theology.html • “Things Commonly Believed Among Us” by William Channing Gannett” https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop3/175717.shtml 	<p>Chalice and Matches PowerPoint: Welcome Slide</p> <p>PowerPoint: Values Question</p> <p>PowerPoint: Experience of the Holy</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Primal Reverence” by Rev. Kendyl Gibbons: https://www.uuworld.org/articles/primal-reverence • “Holy Now by Peter Mayer. Music and lyrics at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KiypaURysz4 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ralph Waldo Emerson brings together experience and holy and says it this way: “Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe?” He’s pointing to that which is larger than us, that which expands our hearts and minds, that which we want to set apart and revere for the wonder of it, or as the late Rev. Forrest Church said when defining God, “Call it what you will: spirit, ground of being, life itself; it remains what it always has. . .an awe-inspiring, mind-bending mystery.” • Some of these experiences of the holy, of our original relation with the universe, of the awe-inspiring, mind-bending mystery, happen at church. Many, many others do not. (Note to facilitator: tell your story as an example. Tell someone else’s story, as you have their permission, as another example). • Take a couple minutes for silent reflection: what’s your experience of the holy? • Now I’d like you to find a partner. I’d encourage you, if you’re willing, to work with someone you may not yet know well. Go ahead and pair up. • Note to facilitator: The chart on page 7 shows how to group participants at the beginning of this exercise and what groups you want at the end of this exercise. Note that you’ll often need to start with groups of 3 and end with groups of 5. Try to form groups of 3 with people who work more quickly. Ask the groups of 3 to do slightly shorter stories. • I’d like you to take four minutes and tell your partner your experience of the holy. Then take four minutes to hear your partner’s story. Give the gift of your full attention. Don’t interrupt, don’t give advice, don’t use your partner’s experience as a chance to launch another related story of your own (“That reminds me of a time when I . . .”). Be a gracious container to hold the story they give you. • After you and your partner have shared your stories, take eight minutes to consider the values embedded in your stories. Start by each of you listing the values you see in your partner’s story. When you make your lists, use words or very short phrases that capture the quality of your partner’s story that seemed to make it a holy experience. Does your partner’s story speak to an underlying value of independence? Reverence? Empowerment? Authenticity? Wonder? Freedom? Generosity? 	<p>PowerPoint: Exercise Instructions</p>
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- Then, from your list of all values, choose three values that you would *both* want to pull forward into the future of this religious community, three values that connect your stories to your sense of our congregation's (organization's) center and purpose.
- Don't agonize over your list of three values, but do talk deeply about what the words evoke for you, listen carefully to what's meaningful for your partner, and choose three that speak powerfully to both of you.
- Then, pairs will form groups of 4. In your group of 4, each pair shares their list of three values, and then the groups of 4 chooses three values *all four of you* would want to pull forward into the future of our religious community. You'll have nine minutes to do this work, so again, don't agonize, but do talk deeply and listen carefully about what really matters to each of you.
- Again, pairs tell each other their stories, make a long list of values, and pick three together. Then pairs join another pair, share their lists and the group of 4 puts together one list of three values they all want to bring forward.
- I'll wander around and give the groups of 4 a piece of flip chart paper to write your final list of 3 values words.
- I'll let you know when it's time to move on to each part of this exercise, and when we come back together, we'll hear your values lists.
- _____ (board member) and I will be wandering around and listening to as much of your conversations as possible, working to get a sense of where the energy is in the room overall. Please forgive us as we drop in and out in our attempt to hear as much as possible.
- What questions do you have? (**Note to facilitator:** use this open-ended version of this question, even if it feels odd, because it will encourage people to ask their questions.)
- Go ahead and get started!
- **Note to facilitator:** keep track of the time and let participants know when it's time to switch storytellers, time to list and discern values as partners, time to form groups of 4, and time to return. Catch pairs if they finish early and help them move on to building their values list or join them up with other pairs that are done early—no one needs to take up the full time before moving on to the next item. Pass out flip chart paper to the groups of 4 when they form. You will no doubt need to push people to move along in their work. You'll also need to help people translate

**Flip and Markers:
Write 3 Values**

**PowerPoint:
Start timer**

<p>“thing” nouns like music or children into “qualities” nouns like transcendence, wonder, delight, connection, or many others. If you have the opportunity, ask people to expand on the word “connection” because it comes up so often and can be a little vague. What do they mean by that particular word? You may also need to help individuals let go of words or phrases their group as a whole does not also want to pull forward into the future. The task here is to find three words or short phrases that everyone in the group feels would be a powerful underpinning of the religious community. Also note that these stories can bring up strong emotions—have tissues available.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let’s come back together now. Could I have each group just read the three values words on your flip chart—just the three words. • What comments do you have on these lists? We have time for one or two reflections. • Note to facilitator: you’ll only have a couple minutes for comments. Hopefully, you’ll get a comment on the overlap between them, how certain words appear on a number of flip charts. You may get a comment that the meaning of the words got lost as they refined and focused the list down to just three words. You may want to tell people that the meaning of values statements doesn’t come from extensive explanation, it comes from the conversation that led to their creation, from the process of creating meaning around certain words, from the combination of words together that gives a unique understanding of an organization’s focus, and from giving them more meaning from your actions as you work to embody those values. You may also want to mention how it will never be possible to be everything to everyone—so the process of discerning what you will stand for at core is immensely valuable in focusing resources on what really matters and helping the institution live into those values. • Let me tell you what happens next. Our board will analyze all of the flip charts emerging from these sessions, plus their notes and observations, and each trustee will present three words or short phrases they see as critically important to consider as a core value of our congregation (organization). Then they’ll group this list of words into categories of similar words and consider which word or phrase from each group best captures the concept that emerged from these sessions. They’ll refine this shorter list of words into a set of three to five words or short phrases at the very heart of who we are and who we’re trying to be in the world. • Note to facilitator: finish by saying when the group can expect to see the final version. Pass out a session evaluation for people to complete, if you wish. Leave them with a closing thought from Margaret Wheatley in her book, <i>Turning to One Another</i>: “There is no power greater than a 	<p>Tissues</p> <p>PowerPoint: Dark Screen</p>
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<p>community discovering what it cares about.” Or perhaps read an excerpt from adrienne maree brown’s book <i>Emergent Strategy</i> (consider starting at Kindle location 889 with the words “I want a future where we are curious, interested, visionary, adaptive.”) Extinguish the chalice.</p>	<p>PowerPoint: Thank you screen with quote Evaluation (if you wish)</p>
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How to Group Participants

Total # of People	Start Values Section with	End Values Section with
1 or 2	Ask participants if they'd prefer to reschedule	
3	1 group of 3	1 group of 3
4	2 pairs	1 group of 4
5	1 group of 3 1 pair	1 group of 5
6	2 groups of 3	1 group of 6.
7	1 group of 3 2 pairs	1 group of 3 (the same group that started) 1 group of 4
8	4 pairs	2 groups of 4
9	1 group of 3 3 pairs	1 group of 4 1 group of 5
10	2 groups of 3 2 pairs	2 groups of 5
11	1 group of 3 4 pairs	1 group of 3 (the same group that started) 2 groups of 4
12	6 pairs	3 groups of 4
13	1 group of 3 5 pairs	1 group of 5 2 groups of 4
14	2 groups of 3 4 pairs	2 groups of 5 1 group of 4
15	3 groups of 3 3 pairs	3 groups of 5
16	8 pairs	4 groups of 4
17	1 group of 3 7 pairs	1 group of 5 3 groups of 4
18	2 groups of 3 6 pairs	2 groups of 5 2 groups of 4
19	3 groups of 3 5 pairs	3 groups of 5 1 group of 4
20	10 pairs	5 groups of 4
21	1 group of 3 9 pairs	1 group of 5 4 groups of 4
22	2 groups of 3 8 pairs	2 groups of 5 3 groups of 4
23	3 groups of 3 7 pairs	3 groups of 5 2 groups of 4
24	12 pairs	6 groups of 4