

UU PRINCIPLES III: COMMUNITY

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Often the top result in surveys where people describe the most important aspect of their congregation is not their shared beliefs nor their works of justice or compassion, but rather the sense of community they share. It makes sense in this fragmented world where people so often move leaving family and friends behind, that people would value the sense of community that they find in congregations and civic organizations. Unitarian Universalist congregations have an advantage in our ability to create community that we are inclusive, accepting, and interested in a variety of beliefs, perspectives, and backgrounds!

This is the third in my summer series on the Unitarian Universalist Principles. In the last two sermons I talked about Justice and Compassion in the UU Principles, in the final two sermons in this series later on in August, I will talk about Religious and Philosophical influences in Unitarian Universalism as seen in our Principles and Statement of Living Tradition. Today I am focusing on Community in our Unitarian Universalist Principles, the movement, and congregations.

The sense of community that extends through the UU movement is helped by our size. With less than 200,000 members in a little more than 1000 congregations, we can easily gather representatives from every

congregation in our annual General Assembly. And of course, since we do not require every congregation to send somebody, but welcome friends, spouses and interested persons in addition to delegates, our General Assemblies have ranged in attendance from 4000-7000 over most of the last 20 years. In June there were more than 4700 UUs gathered in Providence, representing some 600 congregations. General Assemblies are the largest gatherings of Unitarian Universalists, and they generate their own sense of community, sometimes seeming like pep-rallies for our movement.

We only have a few UU congregations with more than one thousand members, a few more with more than 500, a somewhat larger group between 250-500 members, a goodly number under 250 but over 100, and probably a majority of UU congregations having 100 or fewer members. Each UU congregation creates its own sense of community. In larger congregations, there usually are multiple smaller communities within small group ministries, choirs, groups, and classes. With such a limited number of congregations and members, we are far likelier to know each other, or to have friends in common, in this movement than in larger denominations and religious organizations.

Our shared commitment to welcome, accept and respect others provides a strong foundation for our communities. We may hope and work for greater diversity, but we are one of the most homogeneous religious movements due to our tendency to be well educated, white, religiously and often politically liberal, and middle to upper class. And besides that we almost without exception like music by old dead white guys!

We also share an interest in a wide array of religious and philosophical perspectives that we tend to like to discuss. Our diversity is in more subtle religious and philosophical ideas, but our commonality is in our interest hearing about and discussing the variety of perspectives. We tend to be discussion junkies, so that we can easily laugh at the quip that UUs would rather go to the discussion about heaven than to heaven.

That common openness to ideas and discussions helps us to build respectful, tolerant, and accepting community in our congregations. Though we may come from different backgrounds and represent various vocational and academic fields, we find community in our shared interest in the variety of beliefs and perspectives that we bring. We tend to be the tradition with the highest educational attainments in the religious spectrum and we tend to be quite well informed and active politically and in terms of civic involvement. For our small numbers and our tendency in recent decades to work more behind the scenes, we get a lot of moving and shaking done in our communities. We know the movers and shakers and we help to make things happen, which in turn attracts visitors to our congregations.

Our commitments to welcome, accept, and include GLBTQIA persons has also helped to build community and remind us that differences are still not well enough accepted in our society. Those differences in addition to our already wide array of religious and philosophical perspectives makes our congregations very interesting places to be!

Ministering to people with such a wide array of interests, perspectives, accomplishments, and ideas can also be a challenge. UU ministers are typically in the last class of vocational generalists, so we will usually be surrounded by folks who are far better trained to do differing aspects of our work than we are, some of whom may delight in telling us so! One of the challenges to community in UU churches comes with the tensions between persons with high expectations in one or more areas.

It takes work to listen and accept each other even in such diverse and interesting settings as UU congregations. It does help that so many UUs are in the helping professions: psychology, social work, education, and medicine. Many of us have higher commitments to community building! Many churches are good about bringing over casseroles to those in grief or ill, but UUs are good at rising to the occasion to respond to other needs as well. Often UUs will help others with rides to doctor's appointments or to the airport or the BART station!

Of course, the better we know each other, the more willing we are to help out, but often requests are answered by unexpected community members. This willingness to help out others also helps to build up the community. In a real community we become engaged in the lives of our friends, hopefully not to the level of enabling but at a level of mutual caring and sharing. This kind of community is essential for human health, for even introverts need the kind of connection to others that this kind of community provides. This is especially true for those of us who may be far from family or who are new to an area. Even our work friends and community often will not offer us the freedom to be ourselves that a UU congregation will offer.

The Principles only talk explicitly about supporting the goal of world community, but the commitments to respect peoples' inherent worth; support justice, equity and compassion; and to encourage growth; only really make sense in the context of community. None of us are really isolated beings, we function within communities. We cannot grow without growing in relationship, we cannot practice democracy by ourselves, we use our consciences within community, and we embrace interdependence in the context of universal community. We may succeed in taking selfies alone, or in living alone for periods of time, but our individuality is only a temporary separation from community. Who would appreciate our selfies if we did not send them to a community?

There is another aspect of community on which I want to spend a few moments. The community that we build in UU congregations is our responsibility. Sometimes we take it too much for granted, but we each have a responsibility to help create and sustain the community that we share. The most important part of that responsibility is in the respect that we show for others. There has been a tendency to act as if anything goes and that each individual is free to say and do whatever he or she wants in UU congregations. There certainly is plenty of freedom in UU congregations, but we still have the obligation to respect the worth and dignity of each person, and to treat others as we would like to be treated. This responsibility also includes the way we treat volunteers and staff.

If we have disagreements with others, we have a moral obligation to go to the other person and try to work things out, rather than triangulating or talking behind another's back. It is easy to forget that obligation, and probably even easier to forget respect in e-mails to others. The success of our community, which may be the most important thing we offer, depends on our efforts to treat others with respect and acceptance.

This commitment to offer respect and acceptance is what has allowed so many people to be out of the closet in our congregations in ways that they may not be able to be out at work or even amidst their own family. Those who may be afraid to share their liberal beliefs and practices in other settings may be real here. GLBTQI&A persons may not be out to their families or at work, but they may feel safe here to be their true selves. This is a great gift that we offer people, and one we must be careful about away from church. We need to be careful about outing people in public or with those outside the church and should check with anyone before mentioning anything about them outside the church. It is one of the great strengths of our community that so many people say that they feel safe here.

There are some other things that we do that help to build up our community. Sitting down and sharing meals, whether they be pot-lucks or planned meals can help us to connect with each other in deeper ways. Some of our occasional activities like picnics, auctions, parties, and pool parties can also help us to connect with each other. The more things we do together, the more things we discover that we have in common. Studies, classes, and groups can be especially good for building up the community and helping us get to know each other better.

In a small congregation, it does not take long to get to know everybody at least at surface level, but it helps to spend time together to go deeper. Dream groups and classes that challenge us to explore our feelings and beliefs give us a great opportunity to share more deeply with each other. When we go out together on service projects, marches, or demonstrations, we also have a chance to share our beliefs.

The Unitarian Universalist Principles, as adopted in 1985 help to give shape to Unitarian Universalism and our congregations. This congregation, of course has been working on building its community for over a hundred years now, 7 decades more than the current version of the Principles have existed. For newer congregations the principles have helped to shape the sense of community but for older congregations they express what was already present. Either way, community is a vitally important part of this and every congregation. The Principles express community values, values that come from the core of every religious tradition. It is the Living Traditions that I will address in the last 2 sermons in this series, August 20th and 27th. My hope has been to provide some reminders about what binds us together for long time UUs as well as providing some introductory thoughts for newcomers.

I encourage you to think about Justice, Compassion, and Community as you consider our UU Principles and I invite you to join me again in August to look at our Living Tradition and the Principles!

May you enjoy the strength of our community today and until we meet again! So May it Be!