

## **A LEARNING COMMUNITY**

Like most Unitarian Universalist congregations, we tend to be very interested in and committed to education. Many of us have advanced degrees and I expect that all of us hope that our children will be well educated and successful in life. To that end, we encourage and support schools at every level and we also make religious education a priority in the congregation. UU adult programs and classes are better attended than those of many religious communities, though attendance at children's religious education programs is more sporadic especially for busy families. In many years, this Sunday in September would be a volunteer leader dedication and start-up for Religious Education in the beginning of the church year. Because we are in a time of transition in our Religious Education program, I want to share some more general thoughts about Religious Education this morning. I hope you will all stay after the service to participate in the town hall discussion of Religious Education here at First Unitarian Universalist, and that if you cannot stay, you will send me your thoughts!

Ministers of Unitarian Universalist congregations are required to have academic training at the Masters Level from accredited seminaries, and many have more than one Masters degree or a Doctor of Ministry or Ph.D. or Th.D. The robes most of us wear are more Academic robes than clerical garb. This is also true for most mainstream Christian Ministers, such as Methodists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and UCC Ministers. A Master of Divinity is generally considered a terminal degree and takes at least 3 and usually 4 years to complete including a year internship beyond the Bachelors level. We expect our clergy to be well trained in order to deal with all they may face in a local congregation, one factor of which is that many of our members are highly educated, intelligent, and

capable. In any congregation, there are likely to be one or more individuals who can do any particular task of ministry better than we can. Ministers are generalists, expected to preach, teach, speak prophetically, counsel wisely, administer responsibilities effectively, and accomplish other tasks as needed. It is our ability to accomplish most tasks well rather than to do all perfectly for which we are chosen.

Over recent decades, Religious Education has become a specialized ministry within churches as fewer volunteers have been available to take on leadership in this area as more women have needed to join the workforce and society has become busier for families. There are some Ministers who specialize in Religious Education, but most Religious Educators are not ordained. Most UU congregations have someone paid to lead in Religious Education, usually with the title, Director of Religious Education. Most DREs organize the program, recruit and train volunteers, and administer the Religious Education program. Some, especially those working full-time, direct adult and youth programs as well as Children's Religious Education.

Because we value education, and because it is hard to find volunteers to direct Religious Education programs, we hire persons for at least that role, if not also hiring teachers and childcare workers. Our support for Religious Education programs may be practical, in wanting our children to learn about religious traditions or so they may have answers to religious bullies on the playground who may demand to know if they are saved or what they believe. Our hope for religious education may be that all family members learn more about various religious traditions, ethical positions, justice concerns, or ways to express the values within our UU Principles. Whatever specific desires we may have for our Religious Education program, most of us would agree that it is important.

Most churches do not have a part-time DRE who also holds a Ph.D., and most applicants for our DRE position probably will not have a Ph.D. or even a Master's degree. For a half-time position, we may find the best applicant has no degree, but is competent, creative, and self-educated. Lisa has served this church well, but understandably has resigned to pursue academic employment in her field of specialization. We wish her well, and thank her for giving us this transition time to adjust to her leaving the position.

As a small congregation we have the challenge of a small busy pool of children and youth who show up sporadically, so it is hard to plan or recruit staff for multiple classes. Our DRE often ends up serving as teacher as well as program director, using very different skills! We try to use adult volunteers who do not have children currently in the program, but many older adults feel like they have served their time and may not be excited about spending time with energetic free-thinking UU children. You might be surprised how much fun you would have with the kids if you tried, though they may push you out of your comfort zone! Even after we hire a new DRE, we will still need volunteers to help out even as little as once, but if possible on a recurring basis such as once a month. With such a small program, you can just help out once in a while or share some passion once or several times.

I just heard about a nearby high school that requires students to take a class on world religions to increase tolerance and understanding as well as to educate students about the different religious traditions around the world. Apparently there is even some discussion about making such a class a California standard. What a wonderful idea! That is exactly what many of us would like to offer to our UU children here at church. I would also like to see our children learning more about our own Unitarian and Universalist history and building relationships with other UU kids.

I grew up in a loving, accepting, United Methodist Church, but I wish I had learned about Unitarian Universalism sooner. It is not just our acceptance of many beliefs and our welcoming of all persons that are important. We also have a rich theological, philosophical, political, social justice, and literary history to discover. Our UU religious forebears made a difference from the founding of this nation and through all its history. Though many people trace our history only as far back as the 16<sup>th</sup> Century and Michael Servetus, the philosophies behind our traditions are as old as Christianity or older. In addition to all the challenges of our modern world to explore, we have lots of Unitarian Universalism to help UUs of all ages discover.

There are also other wonderful topics and themes to explore in Religious Education classes for all ages. While younger children may be learning religious stories from the Bible and other sacred sources, youth may be exploring ethical challenges and exploring the similarities in core teachings of many religious traditions. Adults might be exploring their dreams or important philosophical and religious ideas and practices or developing their own theology! One of the greatest things about Unitarian Universalism, is that the entire interconnected and interdependent web of existence is our primary source. We can explore the natural world and all the religious and philosophical developments of human history. Our Principles limit some beliefs and practices on the basis of the health and well being of ourselves and others, but there is nothing off limits for our exploration and discovery.

The pursuit of knowledge is important for just about every Unitarian Universalist, but the wisdom that comes from exploring the meaning of events and ideas is even more important for our world. This isn't just some grand trivial pursuit game we are playing with our lives. What we discover in our pursuit of wisdom might make a difference in our own lives, in the lives of our family members, in our congregations, or in the world. Most of us are interested in those deeper meanings that we discover along the way during our life's journeys.

Often it is those discoveries in our journeys that bring us to Unitarian Universalism, and though we may sit comfortably here for a while, it is that process of exploration that gives ongoing meaning to our lives and life to our religion.

One of the most important things about Unitarian Universalism is that we don't tell people what to believe. Within the boundaries of our Seven Principles and the guidance of our Living Traditions, we encourage people to explore and discover their own truth and meaning, to come to their own set of beliefs. In a world full of religions and groups that do tell adherents what to believe and what to do, our acceptance and encouragement for the journeys of individuals is a great gift. We try to offer enough classes to help people progress on their journeys, but we can always use more volunteers to cover the wide-ranging interests of Unitarian Universalists of all ages. That is part of what we are trying to accomplish with our new UU Thursdays programs, which will continue to develop as we explore the level of interest we get this fall.

While the DRE will be the primary staff person exclusively focusing on Religious Education, I also see Religious Education to be one of the most important of my roles as Minister. I tend to be more effective in leading youth and adult groups and classes, but I am hoping that our new DRE will have some level of involvement with all ages even if he or she focuses on children and younger families. (If any of you know likely candidates, I do hope you will pass that information along to me!)

While we will be looking for a new part-time staff person, I also want to remind you that we are all responsible for religious education, first for ourselves but then for our families and the congregation. If religious education is as important as we tend to say it is, we each have a responsibility to make it available in our congregation. We each have things to learn, but we each also have things to teach. Some of us are more skilled at teaching, and we have many differing interests, but even those not comfortable teaching can help in supporting our Religious Education program.

At times we will need drivers, counselors, artists, musicians, assistants, people to provide snacks or meals, coordinators, organizers, callers, and people to handle various other tasks. Even though our program currently is small, there are still many needs and opportunities!

Particularly in Unitarian Universalist congregations, we depend upon our lifespan Religious Education programs to teach about our tradition and about how we view other traditions, to invite newcomers into our tradition and congregation and to give them opportunities to engage in dialogue and fellowship with longer time members, and to give members and friends the opportunity to explore their teaching and general leadership skills. I hope and expect that our Religious Education program will continue to fulfill these many roles, and that you all will find some time to volunteer to help our program grow stronger and more effective. Thank you to all who have been helping and who have helped over the years! Thank you also to those who are now considering volunteering!

Our search for a new Director of Religious Education begins in earnest today, but the responsibility for our Religious Education Program is a continuing one that we all share. I invite and encourage you to think about what you might be able to offer and to let me know. I encourage you to stick around for a time after the service to share ideas and concerns, I challenge you to help expand our religious education offerings in days ahead, and I invite you to participate in all the programs we will offer.

So may it be. Amen!