

**We Are: A WELCOMING COMMUNITY:**

Welcoming Newcomers and  
Remembering that We Are All Newcomers Some of the Time

A few years ago this congregation went through a special program to be certified as a Welcoming Congregation to LGBTQ persons, and I think we continue to do pretty well at that. Today I would like to have you think about how well we welcome everyone who comes to our doors. At some point we each have been newcomers, and many of us could tell stories about how well or poorly we were greeted. One of the suggestions for learning about how effective programs to greet newcomers are is to go to visit other congregations and see what they do and how it makes the visitor feel. Some church-growth gurus say that the decision to come back for many visitors is made within minutes or even seconds of driving up to a new church. If a church has greeters in their parking lot to point out convenient places to park and to tell people which door to enter and where to find more information may be a deciding factor for many visitors. Having ushers give visitors an order of service and seat them next to somebody friendly can also make a huge difference. Think about the ways that we welcome people and help them to feel included in the Sunday morning experience. How are we doing? There will be a time to share responses a little later, but please also share your thoughts with me or Mary Bullard via e-mail.

One of our limitations of course is that we only have a tiny parking lot, but wouldn't it be nice to have someone out at the curb telling people where they can park? Even longtime members could sometimes use assistance in that area. What are the other ways that we can be more welcoming to the many people that visit each year? What could we do to encourage more visitors to come back? I suppose first we have to address the question of why we want to have more people join us.

We are a very pleasant small congregation. We get along well with each other. We have no trouble sitting in our accustomed place each Sunday. We are comfortable with each other and with the size of the congregation. This congregation provides most of the things we expect from a congregation. We know everyone and they are like an extended family for most of us. It is sort of like the bar on that old series, “Cheers,” where everyone knows your face, but without the alcohol. Newcomers can stir things up, sit on our barstool or in our booth, make us try different drinks and foods, push us to do things in different and unfamiliar ways. It can be downright annoying when newcomers think they know better than us and want us to change how we have always done things.

We were newcomers once. How did we become the conservators of the tradition? How did we become the ones who have ‘always’ done things this way? Now, there are a few here who have been here many decades, some grew up in this congregation, but none of the founders of the congregation are around any more. That is one of the benefits of being beyond the first century as an institution, that nobody can really claim that things were always done in any certain way. In Unitarian Universalist churches, it is sometimes surprising that we manage to have the second annual anything, but if we do, the way we did it last year was the way we always did it!

People come and people go, some move to town and start looking for a religious home. Some leave for work or due to other life changes. Children are born and old people die. Even a comfortable, stable congregation has to bring in some newcomers every year to balance those that leave. And it does not get cheaper to run a congregation year over year. Even stability in membership size requires that newcomers join and that pledges increase to maintain the health of any congregation. In a small congregation with lots of older members, we may become more conscious of the need to replace those who can no longer lead committees or work groups, drive to evening meetings, or serve on the board.

Not that we ever want to think about newcomers just as sources of income or service. Newcomers are important to the institution more because they will force us to try new things and for the life that they will bring. But we will not get many newcomers by advertising opportunities to serve on committees. We need to think about what we have to offer newcomers and we need to have a better idea of the message that we want to send to this city and the world.

Newcomers come for many different reasons, such as moving to a new place or seeking a new community after a loss or divorce. Everyone has their own story. One of the things that I particularly like hearing newcomers share is the story of what led them to our doors. Each of us who has been in this movement for a while also has a story to share about what brought us here and what keeps us here.

The world is changing, has always been changing, and will continue to change in ways that are ever more challenging for those of us that find meaning in Unitarian Universalism. Some ask what relevance any church has in this current age, especially churches that work hard to assert a kind of religion that is no more tenable. Our religion has always been rational, changing to fit the newest understandings of the earth and cosmos, asserting only those things that make sense in the world as we now understand it, inviting believers to discover their own truth through religious exploration, calling people to join together by our shared values and principles rather than demanding shared belief in unseen and unprovable deities.

We do not welcome visitors into shared creed or dogma, but into shared exploration and discovery. We welcome fellow sojourners who are seeking to make sense of this crazy world and find meaning in human life. Our history is more one of sharing questions than of finding final answers. We are perennial seekers though we may sit comfortably for a time here with other sojourners. We remain suspicious of ultimate answers and those who preach them. We are churches of doubting Thomases and religious communities without a unified religion.

Our commonality is in our common quest, our shared search for meaning, our hope of a better tomorrow. We are grounded in this world and largely unconcerned about what may lie beyond death. We hold many differing beliefs and are enriched by opportunities to share our stories, our thoughts, our beliefs. Our message is to welcome others into the journey, encourage all persons in their own search for meaning, to hope for a better world here by the acceptance of all persons and their beliefs so long as those beliefs and their practice does not harm others.

Perhaps even more than freedom, inclusion, or community, we offer newcomers a sense of hope. We are a hopeful people, hopeful that answers will be found, that we each can discover a sense of meaning, that the fears of the worst in this time of upheaval will not be realized. We are also realistic, knowing that it is the work of our hands, hearts, and minds that will make the world better. Things will not improve unless we can join with all peoples to make them better. And if our hands, hearts, and minds are tired, worn out, still we can offer the message of hope that has inspired our lives, including and inviting others into the great quest for meaning. By our words and our deeds, by our offerings and bequests, by our welcoming greetings and sincere acceptance, even a small church like this can make a difference.

And so, when we welcome newcomers into our community, into our journey, into our life, we are offering them all that we have discovered and encouraging them to search out their own truths for the future. We do not seek to bind others into ancient creeds or doctrines, but to open their eyes and our own to new possibilities for futures yet unknown. This is our quest, our hope, our dream.

As we open our doors to greet newcomers, how do we convey that sense of hope, that encouragement for the journey? What words of greeting and acceptance do we offer to those who risk and dare to enter our doorway? How do we invite them into the great journey, while also recognizing that they may carry wounds from past religious experiences and push us to stop doing things the ways we have always done them?

How do we truly accept the inherent worth and dignity of every person who walks into our congregation? And how do we express to them our hope and encouragement for their own journeys when we may be tired and world-worn? This is our challenge, to find enough vitality to open the doors of welcome to newcomers, to open our hearts and minds to their ideas and encourage them to find a place in our midst. And so, this is the question for today, what can we do to be more welcoming, how can we invite the newcomer to share our hospitality?

When did you last invite a friend or acquaintance to come visit our church? Would you invite someone if we schedule a Bring-a-Friend Sunday? Have you ever told someone that they sound like a Unitarian Universalist and then invited them to find out what that means by visiting our church? We have things to offer in our congregations that people cannot find anywhere else, yet we are among the best kept secrets in the religious spectrum. How can we become a better known part of the religious choices in our city and the world? What can we do to become more visible?

I want to address one more thing briefly before I open the floor for your responses. There is an important part of being a welcoming congregation for LGBTQ persons as well as everyone else that happens after the first or second visits and even after the newcomer class. How are we including people in the life of the congregation so that they will become active and remain active? Smaller congregations sometimes have a tendency to ask people to do so many things that they get worn out before they are really engaged, while at other times it is hard for new people to break into the leadership or really make a difference. It takes some careful intentionality to help people assimilate as quickly as they feel comfortable without pushing them to do too much too soon. Each individual brings different gifts as well as presenting different needs. Not everyone is ready to join a committee in their first year, but all will need encouragement and according to the church growth gurus, if they do not make some friends they may not last beyond the first year, anyway. Social events and study groups can help people assimilate.

Well, I have posed a number of questions and suggested some things about inviting, welcoming, and assimilating newcomers, and about getting our message out, but now it is your turn. What would you like to say about how we are welcoming or how we might do a better job of welcoming others into our community? Please come up to one of the mics in front or be really loud!

Thanks for sharing your ideas about welcoming others and our message! May we all continue to learn from each other, no matter how long we have been around!

Blessed Be, Shalom, Salaam, Namaste, and Amen!