

## **INTRO TO WHO WE ARE AND WHAT UUS BELIEVE!**

*a.k.a. UU 101 Thoughts for Seekers*

Even if you are completely new to Unitarian Universalism today, you may have already noticed that we are not your ordinary church. We have no creed, no dogma, no doctrine, and no unifying theological belief. We do not pray in the way that many churches do. We are happy to welcome and include Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Pagans, Humanists, Atheists, Agnostics and anyone else whose beliefs and practices are compatible with the values expressed in our Unitarian Universalist Principles, which are not by the way any test of belief but only a statement about what UUs most commonly believe. In our religious community, we talk more about social justice than about Jesus, even though many of us believe Jesus would agree with our efforts. We also talk about spiritual growth and faith development as something individuals work at without reference to any specific religious/spiritual tradition. Our members are quite welcome to follow a specific religious or spiritual tradition if they are so moved, but we only strive to provide some introductions to a number of paths rather than to make any such path obligatory.

We are sometimes accused of either believing nothing or allowing any beliefs, but neither accusation is really accurate. Anyone failing to respect and value the inherent worth and dignity of every individual is violating our first Principle while anyone not striving to respect and protect the interdependent web of all existence would be failing to uphold our seventh principle. Similarly, those not seeking justice with compassion or not seeking to learn and grow would not be trying to live up to our other Principles. If persons are striving to live in accord with our values they would do well here, but if not they would soon recognize the clash of values. Unless someone is extremely disruptive, we would rarely ask them to leave, but many decide that another tradition will better suit them, often one that does not expect so much individual work.

Many people come to Unitarian Universalism after having explored several other religious traditions. For some we are a resting place on an ongoing journey of spiritual enlightenment. Many UUs continue to explore Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Humanism, or one of the Pagan traditions while being actively engaged with Unitarian Universalism. If we were a larger congregation, we would likely offer ongoing gatherings or studies of several of the traditions from which we gather wisdom, and efforts to study or explore any of those traditions would be and are welcomed by many as they arise.

We have a special commitment to welcoming LGBTQQIAA persons, for which we have made the effort to study and declare ourselves a Welcoming Congregation. For the last several years, we have had a rainbow flag out front on the side of the building, and we expect to put it back up as soon as the construction and painting is completed. We have and have had several LGBTQQIAA members & friends and they remain a strong segment of this congregation, and our board and committees.

We also strive to welcome persons of color and persons with differing abilities. This is our commitment, and we need to periodically assess whether we can be more welcoming to everyone but especially to a number of groups who may not feel as welcome in a protestant-like service with a lot of music by old dead white guys. We would love to welcome more younger families, as we tend to be older and mostly grey-haired. As a small congregation we have not been able to offer programs for all the age and interest groups we would like to serve, but we also welcome ideas and volunteer efforts in almost every area!

The theological understandings behind Unitarianism and Universalism came from the earliest days of Christianity, and a more Unitarian perspective likely dominated until the Council of Nicaea in 325, when it was voted heretical and the Trinitarians came to dominate. A Universalist understanding in which all souls would return to a loving God appeared periodically throughout history but was also voted heretical in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century.

Historically, American Unitarians mostly came out of New England Congregational Christianity in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century after embracing an anti-Trinitarian perspective more like Judaism which did not hold Jesus to be equal to God. William Ellery Channing largely defined Unitarian Christianity in his sermon of that name at the Ordination of Jared Sparks in Baltimore in 1819. Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson was a Unitarian Minister before he began speaking on the Lyceum circuit. Henry David Thoreau was Emerson's friend and walking companion and set up his cabin on Emerson's land at Walden Pond. Both are particularly beloved forebears embraced by many UUs.

Transcendentalist and Abolitionist and most noted Preacher of his day, Theodore Parker spoke to thousands weekly in Boston from the mid-1840s until his health failed due to TB in the late 1850s. Parker advocated action on abolition and many other justice issues of the day. Many of the fathers and mothers of American history were Unitarians, including 5 early Presidents. By the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, out of the despair following the First World War, many Unitarians sought to understand human values without reference to God, to show that people can be good without God. A majority of the authors and signers of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933 were Unitarian Ministers.

Universalism was carried to the New World by a Quaker, a former Methodist Lay Preacher, a physician and others. Universalism had much in common with New England Trinitarian Christianity in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century but added a more positive perspective of a loving God. From the writings of Hosea Ballou in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, Universalism came to hold a largely Unitarian perspective on the role of Jesus. Both Unitarianism and Universalism were exploring and learning from Eastern traditions by the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and both participated in the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. From the start Universalism was concerned with social justice concerns including abolition and suffrage, education and health care. Unitarians also often were on the cutting edge of social justice issues.

As the two most liberal branches of American Christianity, there were discussions of merger several times beginning in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, before Unitarian Universalist merger was actually accomplished in 1961. Both the Unitarian and Universalist youth and women's organizations merged before the larger association. Both the Unitarians and Universalists had also established a Social Justice arm around the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War, and these merged to form UUSC, the UU Service Committee. A few congregations did not join the merged association, and though most member congregations became Unitarian Universalist, some did not immediately lengthen their name and a few became Universalist Unitarian. Today there are a few dozen over a thousand UU congregations, almost all in the United States, and with the largest concentration in Massachusetts and New England.

Our largest UU Congregations include those in Tulsa, San Diego, Dallas, and Portland, but none in modern times has gotten much larger than a few hundred over a thousand members. The average sized UU congregations have between a hundred members and two hundred members. About a third of our current congregations were started in one of the waves of the Unitarian Fellowship Movement which started after World War II, and which allowed congregations to become members of the association without a Minister or much structure in place. Smaller congregations today are often referred to as Fellowships today due to that history. Many of the congregations forming in the 1950s did so in part as a result of McCarthyism, which looked with suspicion on anyone not belonging to some kind of church. Even today there are a few congregations which identify as UU Christian and even offer Communion on a regular schedule. There are also membership organizations of UU Christians, Jews, and Humanists.

Because most of the decisions affecting Unitarian Universalist congregations are decided by the congregation, each one has its own peculiarities and none are exactly alike. The UU Association can speak for the congregations only as far as statements, resolutions, and other decisions voted upon at our annual General Assembly.

Unitarian Universalist Ministers are fully credentialed by the UUA through a multi-year process including satisfactory completion of a year-long internship, presentation of evidence of knowledge and practical use of a range of Ministerial skills, graduation with a Master of Divinity from an accredited Theological School, and three years of successful Ministry to a congregation or other approved setting. Ministers in Probationary Fellowship are cleared to enter the search process when all but the three years of experience are completed. In the search process, Ministers and Congregational Search committees exchange packets of information and may schedule weekend visits including preaching at a neutral pulpit before agreeing upon a candidating week in which the candidate will preach twice and meet with most everyone in the congregation before a vote of the congregation is taken to call the Minister after the second preaching date. Called Ministers remain in office until they resign or are voted out by the congregation. Any UU congregation may vote to ordain a candidate for Ministry according to the congregation's process. Other staff members are hired according to the congregation's process.

Unitarian Universalist Congregations and Ministers have many freedoms not enjoyed by other religious congregations. Ministers are guaranteed the freedom of the pulpit, which allows them the freedom to share what they each believe is right, true, and appropriate. Congregations have the right to choose and contract with their own minister, and have few obligations to the association beyond those which they choose to offer. For those coming from a highly organized religious community, such as Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran or Presbyterian which hold allegiance to the Pope or a Bishop, Synod or Presbytery to be obligatory, our way of being may seem strange, but it works for us.

I hope this introduction to Unitarian Universalism has given you a little sense of who we are and from whence we came. We have been on the American Religious landscape as long as the United States have been here, and we strive to learn from the native peoples who have been here far longer. We are an inclusive & accepting group to those of good will.

We recognize that we do not have all the answers, and in fact have often had more questions than answers. We value the wisdom of science and philosophy along with the teaching of the many religious traditions. We strive to treat all persons equally and respectfully without regard for differences of skin shade, gender, age, or ability. We seek to welcome all persons, though we will not encourage those whose beliefs and practices are incompatible with the values within our principles to remain. We hope to encourage all persons to continue to progress along the pathways of their journeys of life and faith.

Those of us who regularly gather here have found a community which meets many of our needs, but we are open to the changes that may come as new members and friends join us. This community has served the people of Stockton and San Joaquin County for more than a hundred years and it is our hope that it will continue to do so long into the future. Among the most important ways that we serve is by offering a place where people can be their true selves, sharing their real beliefs, voicing their concerns, and sharing in the work of maintaining such a community.

We give our thanks to you for visiting with us today and hope you will join us again. If you think you may find what you are seeking in our company, we are especially glad to welcome you, and if not we wish you well for your journey, wherever it may take you! As we close this service today we offer up our hopes for peace, justice, and love throughout the universe!

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