

Beyond the Partisan Divide

Small Group Ministry Sessions

Session I. Will it Matter? Considering Partisan Bias in Congregational Life

Chalice Lighting

Reading 576 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, “A Litany of Restoration” by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley (shared responsively)

Check-In

How goes it with your spirit?

Centering

Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let this moment of silence ease your soul.

Readings

When I aged into the youth group, in my home Unitarian Universalist congregation my parents lessened then ceased their participation. My parents politically associate as Republicans. They loved our Unitarian Universalist home congregation. They grew wise in the embrace of the members and ministers, but overtime, began to feel more and more estranged and uncomfortable. I learned, long after they ceased participating, that they no longer felt welcome, that they could no longer bring their full selves to the altar of worship or the circle of fellowship. I bring up the topic of partisan division and bias in congregational life not to place blame, or dwell on the tedious and tenuous issues, but to announce my wholehearted belief that Unitarian Universalism is the faith for our time, a time that needs us to cross borders and break through barriers. I reflect often on this bias in my ministry, because I believe that we are not separated by the labels of our chosen party but by the unholy authority we give those labels, to speak for us and to split us one from another. —*Rev. Anya Sammler-Michael*

Other churches can say that their ecclesiology involves obedience. Other groups can say that they exist for the promulgation of a specific worldview or political perspective. Other places can be the sole haven of liberalism in your county, but only our congregations can be an actual home for the spirit not in spite of, but because of, our diversity. The church exists so that we might make promises to one another, and one of those promises is that I will get myself out of the way long enough to make some room here for you as well.

In spite of all of our incompleteness, our fraying goodwill, we are made whole by the wide-open welcome to which we all are called and by the promises we must continually make. The purpose of the church is to make and live out a promise which says that those unlike me, politically or otherwise, are fully as human and as worthy of respect as I am. That’s the kind of community we are called to create, one in which we may not only tolerate, but indeed grow to deeply love those we might otherwise never have chosen as friends. —*Rev. Nancy McDonald Ladd*

I am one of the founders of Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Sterling VA. I grew up an Irish-Catholic in Boston.

When I stumbled across Emerson's writings I was shocked to find how they resonated in me and then sought out a UU church. The concept of a free and responsible search for truth and meaning was wonderful and the fact that I could join others in a church setting to do so I found nothing short of amazing. I saw enough that I settled in as a UU.

I am a believer, supporter, and fighter for human rights—most especially gay rights, women's reproductive rights, and immigration rights. I have held signs and engaged in conversations at my neighborhood polling places trying to prevent the VA anti-gay constitutional amendment. For these things, my non-church friends and neighbors around the Washington DC beltway think I am a crazy liberal.

But I also believe that the greatest issue facing the US is the impending collapse of our economy—and that the way to fix it is primarily through lowering spending. For the latter and other positions on issues seen as "conservative" I am deemed a crazy conservative by my UU church friends. The difference is: at church it hurts. —*Paul Roche*

Questions:

- Have you ever been hurt in your Unitarian Universalist congregation by a comment (from the pulpit, in a class, or in a social situation) that made you feel that you were not fully welcome? Please share your story.
- What does it mean to you to respect the *full humanity* or the *inherent worth and dignity* of all people?
- Is partisan division made more acute by the "unholy authority we give our partisan labels, to speak for us and separate us, one from another."
- How does a partisan atmosphere carve division in your life - splitting you off from those you do or might otherwise love? How can this loss be remedied?

Invitation to Active Listening

Each person is granted the space to share as they are moved without interruption or cross-talk. Should time be a factor, individual sharing can be timed and 5 or 10 minutes can be allotted per person.

Closing Words

(reprise, Bowens-Wheatley)

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened, and that does matter.

In this spirit, we build community and move toward restoration.

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Session II. Ecclesiology: The Purpose of the Church

Chalice Lighting

By Rev. John Gibb Millspaugh; used with permission.

Read responsively:

All too often, we pace the geometries of our walled gardens,

Believing we are traversing the whole of creation.

With spirits of discovery, let us uncover the mysteries nested in our routines,

With the eagerness of children, let us seek out the secrets unfolding in our peripheral vision.

Let us behold each fellow creature with reverence;

Let us greet each day with praise and thanksgiving.

For life is a gift of incomprehensible magnitude;

Our lives are voyages with unknowable destinations.

Along the way, let us meet, kiss, challenge, and support one another,

Let us fashion a network of mutuality and extend it into the larger world.

In these ways, we forge lives of goodness and beauty;

In these ways, we know the life of prayer.

Check-In

How does it with your spirit?

Centering

Find a stillness, hold a stillness, let this moment ease your soul.

Reading:

Ecclesiology is, more or less, a rather fancy word for “the purpose of the church.” It’s a question of what we exist to do—and there are plenty of ecclesiologies that center on the individual getting what they want, hearing what they want, affirming what they already affirm. Those very individualistic ecclesiologies are very common in Unitarian Universalism today, but are not altogether reflective of our shared history. As Unitarian Universalists, we trace our ecclesiology back to the 16th century when the Protestant Reformation took the whole concept of church and turned it upside down.

Our forebears were a part of the most radical wings of that reformation, the people who challenged the whole concept of church hierarchy. It was our forebears who insisted that the core of our gathering is not obedience to external temporal authority, but a commitment to a way of being together in relationship to God, a God experienced not only in isolation, but in community. At the core of these communities was a covenant, a promise between people and the spirit that connects them in ways that transcend their isolation.

A covenant is not a promise made by oneself. It's made in community. It's made between people, among mighty forces, pointing toward a purpose that unites them even and especially in the face of their diversity of opinion, of theology, of belief. At our core, we are a relational group committed to making promises. And that means a promise that there is room for different voices. There is room for disagreement. There is room for challenge and honesty and actual non-sectarianism of both the political and theological varieties.

Other churches can say that their ecclesiology involves obedience. Other groups can say that they exist for the promulgation of a specific worldview or overtly partisan political perspective, but only our congregations can be an actual home for the spirit not in spite of, but because of, our diversity. The church exists so that we might make promises to one another, and one of those promises is that I will get myself out of the way long enough to make some room here for you as well.

In spite of all of our incompleteness, our fraying goodwill, we are made whole by the wide-open welcome to which we all are called and by the promises we must continually make. The purpose of the church is to make and live out a promise which says that those unlike me, politically or otherwise, are fully as human and as worthy of respect as I am. That's the kind of community we are called to create, one in which we may not only tolerate, but indeed grow to deeply love those we might otherwise never have chosen as friends.

Questions

Beyond your mission statement (or perhaps captured in it), what, to your mind, is the highest purpose of the gathered Unitarian Universalist community?

Can you name a time, in community, when you have disagreed in love? What were/are the characteristics of the relationship that made such disagreement and such love possible?

This is a time of high stakes advocacy in both environmental and anti-racism efforts. How might you imagine showing up for racial and environmental justice in a way that makes room for honest difference of political perspective?

Invitation to Active Listening

Each person is granted the space to share as they are moved without interruption or cross-talk. Should time be a factor, individual sharing can be timed and 5 or 10 minutes can be allotted per person.

Closing Words

The geometries of our own walled gardens have never been enough to contain the fullness of our spirits.

So let us meet, grapple, greet and seek after justice.

Let us weep and laugh and tell the truth even when it is difficult.

Let us fashion a network of mutuality that overcomes the alienation of our days.

And in this work, let us build the congregations we were always meant to become.