

Preparation for Widening the Circle (February theme) – Welcoming

Diversity and inclusion are hot topics in UU churches. We see the “inherent worth and dignity of every person” as inclusive, but UU congregations are mostly white, relatively well-off, and well-educated. Our church has become more welcoming to some groups like gays and lesbians. But people of color, or with a disability, or who are transgender, or are poor, other groups – are less represented.

Reflecting on welcoming offers insight into our own experiences. To welcome people and see them as they are, we can start by thinking about who we ourselves are. We are all made up of intersecting identities – ethnicity, gender, family, relationship, social class, job identity, interests. We have some identities that have been suppressed – emotions, talents, personal history. We can recall times of being excluded – childhood rejection, or adult experiences of exclusion, perhaps because of gender or age or sexual preference.

People from marginalized groups frequently have experiences of exclusion. Consider being a person of color who hears “You’re really professional,” or “you speak English really well” or “I don’t actually think of you as being Black.” Or being in a wheelchair and hearing “Can you do this activity?” Such experiences are called “microaggressions” or “othering,” because a person is treated like an “other.” Dr. Tiffany Jana and Dr. Michael Baran call them “subtle acts of exclusion.” While a particular action may seem small or nonexistent to the offender, the accumulation over time is damaging.

We may not intend to exclude people, but sometimes through lack of awareness we say or do things that make people feel less than welcome. It might seem welcoming to walk up to someone at coffee hour and say “Hi, I’m Terry, are you new?” But this might suggest that we “belong” and they “don’t” in some way. It’s better to say “Hi, I don’t think we’ve met ... my name is Terry.” *This approach works both for visitors and for people in the church that we don’t know yet.* But what do we say next? The usual “small talk” questions may be subtly exclusionary. A “where are you from” or “how did you hear about this church” question might be “othering” to a person from a different group. A “what do you do for a living” question might not be welcoming to a person who doesn’t have a middle-class job.

You might start with a shared church experience: “What did you think of today’s sermon?” If the person is a visitor, you might offer information: “Is there any kind of group I can connect you with?” You can familiarize yourself with information about church groups to make that part of your practice.

If you feel an opening for deeper conversation, you could use the covenant group “sharing / listening” practice. You might say, “I’d be interested in what kinds of things you look for in a church” and then share – not “I’m an agnostic, what do you believe?” but a 2 sentence story about why you are a UU: “I was raised as ___, but couldn’t believe that anymore. I wanted to explore other traditions.” Or: “I’m not really religious, but I like serious discussions about values and justice.” Many people are searching for meaning and connection, so sharing your brief faith story can be an opening to listening.

Welcoming and listening are spiritual practices. We grow as persons by rich interactions, and our community widens and deepens as well. Shared interests are good, but differences are also good, and different cultures have different styles – conversation, dress, singing, responses in church – and different ways of doing things. Additionally, people from marginalized groups often need their own groups to help each other heal. The goal is a community that feels welcoming and inclusive.

We might hesitate to welcome another person because we are shy, afraid of being rejected. But what would it be like if it were an *expectation* in our church that we walk up to someone and say “I don’t think we’ve met. My name is ...”? We could transform our church and transform one another.

Radical Hospitality ... is about interactions – genuine, creative, dynamic interactions that allow for new and diverse experiences with each other. It’s about meeting each other “exactly where we are.” *Our church’s Sunday Greeter Guide, a source for this document. For info / training, contact the church Director of Membership and Communications, Laira Magnusson.*

We don’t think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking.
Richard Rohr

Our denomination and its congregations reflect the same patterns, behaviors, and attitudes around race and culture that permeate our society at large; we are not magically further along simply because of our liberal theology. *UU Rev. Manish Mishra-Marzetti*

One of the most critical aspects of inclusion is that it must happen actively. When we just passively think of ourselves as good people but don’t do anything to actively include others, that creates passive exclusion. *Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran, Subtle Acts of Exclusion*

After service was over, I did not enjoy the rush to welcome me as folks asked, “Where are you from?” ... “How on earth did you hear about Unitarian Universalism?” ... I was reminded, even as I was welcomed, that I was the other. *UU Rev. Mitra Rahnema, reflecting on first visits to a UU church*

When people of color are together, there can be healing. In integrated spaces, patterns of white dominance are inevitable ... even when white people are doing the work of examining their privilege. *Kelsey Blackwell, Why People of Color Need Spaces Without White People*

Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.
bell hooks

Questions to Ponder

1. What are your various identities: color or ethnicity, gender, sexual preference, appearance, social class, interests, family, education or job ... ? What identities have been suppressed, or are identities that you rarely share because people might see you as “other”? (Perhaps for reflection only).
2. Consider a time when you felt excluded from something that was important to you. What did it feel like? How could people have made you feel included?
3. Have you ever made an unconscious assumption about someone based on skin color, age, gender, appearance, or some other characteristic? How can you become aware of your own biases?
4. Have you experienced situations when you saw that someone was being excluded? How did it make you feel, and what did you do? What other things might be done in such a situation?
5. What would you like to do or to be to widen your own circle – of acquaintance, of experience, of creativity – whatever that might mean to you? What about the potential discomfort?
6. Have you been part of a diverse group that worked together successfully? How did that work?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on how you came to this church and why you have stayed. For the Gathering, the sentence is “I go to this church because ... ”