

WHOSE ARE WE?

A Curriculum

for

Unitarian Universalist Congregations

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Notes to Facilitators About the Revised Curriculum:

1. The “We” in the “Whose Are We?” refers to the participants in the sessions in the context of a Unitarian Universalist congregation and tradition.
2. We encourage you to allow time for people to reflect on what they have written, spend time in silence, and take meditative walks. Allow spaciousness in your time together. We don’t expect that you will ‘finish’ the work during your initial sessions with your participants. This begins what we hope will be an ongoing practice in the participating congregations.
3. We have outlined in the following materials, the opening and closing worship sessions from our initial Minneapolis training experience. You are invited to provide and try other worship experiences. Most importantly, we found the times we were able to be together as a whole in various forms of worship were most valuable in bringing us to the “we” of our covenant. These were the times people prayed aloud for one another, moved together, chanted and sang together and sat in silence together. We cannot emphasize enough the importance of building these experiences into your time with your participants.

Again, let us say how grateful we are to have participated in this project. We will be eager to hear how it goes. Know that we personally remain available to you to help in any way we can.

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INTRODUCTION: SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The following sermon by The Reverend Sarah Lammert tells the story about how “Whose Are We?” came into being. Following the sermon, you will find the objectives that were listed in the grant proposal and resulted in the funding of the “Whose Are We?” project. They are included in this introduction in the hope that everyone who participates will understand more fully that this is the beginning of an ongoing project. The competencies and opportunities for deep and open conversation will be continuing goals for the project going forward.

SERMON: *Whose Are We?* By The Rev. Sarah Lammert, February 1, 2009, Unitarian Society of Ridgewood, New Jersey

I’m sitting in row 14f, reading a book in which the atheist character likes to have conversations with the God he doesn’t believe in. I look up at the exit door above me and wonder if I could get it right if we land in the Hudson today, and could there be two miracles like that anyway? A man behind me in uniform gasps in awe at the sunset rolling out to the west over a carpet of cotton ball clouds, the sky lit up in a pink orange golden hue. Flying over the earth I wonder, “Whose Are We?”

“Whose Are We?” This is a question that has gained some traction for me lately. In December, I was one of sixty-five individuals lucky enough to be included in a summit meeting held by the Unitarian Universalist Association. We were all leaders representing various constituencies within our movement – in my case the UU Ministers’ Association – and we had gathered to imagine the future of ministerial formation, both lay and professional, for Unitarian Universalism. The findings of this gathering will serve to help direct the financial and staff resources of the UUA in terms of lay leader training, theological training, and continuing education for our ministers.

We started with a worship service, and the very first words uttered were those of Rev. Jon Luopo, the minister of the University Unitarian Church of Seattle. He told this story:

It seems that in Seattle the interfaith clergy organization has a tradition of asking senior colleagues to share their life odysseys. On this particular occasion, a Roman Catholic Priest was telling his story, and he said that his life had been in large measure a failure. He remembered the heady days of Vatican II and how hopeful he and his generation of liberal priests had been that real change was coming to the church he loved so dearly. And yet, these many years later

he felt that the church had if anything become hardened and deeply conservative, and his dreams had not been realized.

Now, this priest was someone who was valued among his interfaith colleagues, and they were somewhat hurt and stunned by his revelation. And yet, one colleague noted, despite the severity of his words, his demeanor seemed quite peaceful and content. “How can you claim that your life was a failure, and yet appear so calm and serene?” “I know whose I am,” replied the priest. “I know whose I am.”

Whose are we? Whose are we, we who claim so many diverse approaches to what is of ultimate truth, and yet gather as a unified one? Whose are we? What or who do we serve, beyond the narrow interests of ourselves? What transcends our small individual being, connecting us to the pulsing life of the universe we are a part of? Is it energy, is it God, is it Love or Justice, is it the people who surround us, the cloud of witnesses whose lives passed before us? Whose are we?

This question, in Seattle, became a major thread in the conversation about the future education of our ministers and laity. Strangely, I found myself the convener of this conversation, although there were many present who were more expert than I in such matters. I didn’t know where to start, so I asked everyone to sit in shared silence for five minutes. “It is easy to lose sight of the fact that we belong to something beyond ourselves,” I offered tentatively. “There is something larger than us (or something which both transcends and includes us), yet we find that this is difficult to express.” “Yes,” agreed a colleague, *“and sometimes it is something that congregations find difficult to hear. The language that we use to express some of the experiences and concepts (and how we understand our own theology) can be frightening, trigger baggage, invoke reactivity in our congregations. Unitarian Universalists love diversity,”* he added, *“it’s difference we don’t like.”* “We tend to have a spiritual don’t ask don’t tell policy,” added another colleague.

On Friday, I sat at a table in the back corner of this room, amazed as the first Bar Mitzvah in the history of the Unitarian Society of Ridgewood unfolded around me. Many of you know Edith Mayer, one of the new members we celebrated today, a woman who personally witnessed Kristallnacht at age 15, saw her temple burned before her eyes, was sent to three concentration camps in as many years, and somehow survived the horror of the Holocaust although most if not all of the rest of her family were killed. Because Edith has been diagnosed with end-stage cancer, her family became determined to grant her fondest wish – to see her grandson Bar Mitzvah’d before she dies.

Now, Max is only twelve and has not been raised in a religious household, nor has he been attending Hebrew School. This didn’t fit with the requirements for Bar Mitzvah at area

synagogues, so the family searched for and found a wandering minstrel Cantor, the wonderful Cantor Debbie, who was willing to teach Max what he needed to know over webcam and flew up here from Florida to preside over this ceremony on Friday. It was a beautiful night, full of poignancy and love. At one point Edith, herself, got up to offer a toast to her grandson. *"I didn't think I would live to eighteen, much less live to see my grandson have his Bar Mitzvah,"* she said. Max too spoke, promising to tell her story.

There were tears of pain and loss, but also a deep sense of continuity with the past, broken as it was. There was also a sense that the generations that came before passed what is most essential down, that the generations to come might have beauty and wisdom and something larger to live into and be a part of. "Thank God for Unitarians," said one of the guests, acknowledging that it was our community that had made this meeting of cultures and traditions in such an authentic but also decidedly nontraditional manner possible.

Whose are we? Each of us comes from such different roots, each with such different stories. Some of us resonate deeply with Judaism, carrying the bones of the Torah inside of our DNA. Others, like me, can still recite the Lord's Prayer from memory although we have left behind the Christian story as central to our spiritual lives. Still others among us were schooled in Hinduism, Islam, Humanism, or an amalgam of traditions and beliefs. Whose are we, and what draws us together?

On Tuesday and Wednesday I sat at Starr King School for the Ministry, my alma mater, for a two day gathering of interns and their supervisors. Above me, festooning the beams of the Starr King Fireside Room, were the symbols that Ken Patton had fashioned for his Charles Street Meeting House in Boston. Before coming here to Ridgewood to serve as minister from 1960-1986, Ken had attempted a grand experiment under the auspices of Universalism in Boston. The Charles Street Meeting House was to be his temple – a home for a "unitive, naturalistic-mystical-humanistic World Religion" that would celebrate the evolution of humankind and religion itself.

Immediately upon being called to this experimental pulpit, Ken began refashioning the worship space, something he would later also take on in this building. He arranged the seating so that it would be a church in the round, reflecting a microcosm of the universe, a place for the democratic exchange of ideas and shared inspiration. Ken then helped to create two large murals – one of the "Great Nebula Andromeda" and the other of the "Atom". The atom represented the particular, while the nebula would be the "window into the universe" beyond the four walls of the church. And along the walls, Ken created and hung copper symbols, now housed along Starr King's beams, of art, of science, and of the world religions.

Looking up from my chair, I could see many of these symbols – a snake coiled there, the Latin Cross there, the Muslim Crescent, a simple Circle, a Spiral, a Chinese character, a Hindu ohm. For Ken, honoring all the many ways that human beings attempted to express what is of ultimate importance was a means of allowing one world religion to emerge which would have a harmonizing effect on humankind.

The future of the human venture depends on enough people becoming universal in their imagination, their learning, and their compassion....

The continents are all surrounded by one great body of water—not seven oceans, really, but *one* great ocean. There is only one atmosphere that blows about the whole earth, and the air that is over Boston now may be over Cape Town in a short time. The earth is one globe, one mass of soil and rock. How silly we are to think it is divided by the way it juts up above the surface of the one ocean. This *is* one world, so defined by the vast space of the universe that surrounds it.¹

Unfortunately, Ken’s dream for the Charles Street Meeting House never was realized, as denominational politics, a scarcity of resources, and perhaps Ken’s own limitations as a community builder (he always said he was a poet more than a minister) combined to do in this grand experiment. The Meeting House was sold in 1961, just a year after Ken and his family moved here to Ridgewood. The symbols which Ken so carefully crafted now serve to inspire a whole new generation of aspiring ministers, and perhaps Ken’s message becomes instilled in them, became instilled in me, as we learned in the company of these symbols of humanity’s greatest stories and best wisdom. And perhaps we in Ridgewood continue his legacy as we wrestle, reaching for unity through our vast diversity of experience, of identity, of being, of belief.

So, whose are we? Whose are we as we dream, as we fail, as we dream anew? Whose are we as we grow, as we live our daily lives, as we encounter grave challenges of health and fiscal well being, as we wonder what the future will bring? Whose are we as we raise our children, as we release them into the world, as we mourn those we love who die, as we ourselves face the fact of our own mortality? Whose are we in a world that seems upside down, filled with violence and depravation and oppression? Whose are we in world that is at the same time brimming with beauty, potential, freedom, and love?

“She says when she can’t pray she calls up prairie grass.”² Some of us look to nature in this way. “God speaks to each of us as God makes us. Then walks with us silently out of the night.”³

jm¹ Patton, Ken, *A Religion for One World*.

² “Epiphany” by Pem Kremer

³ From “Book of Hours: Love Poems to God” by Rainer Maria Rilke

Some of us imagine the Divine in this way. *“When we all serve one another, then our heaven is begun.”*⁴ Some of us look to humankind for greater meaning. And some of us lose ourselves in music, in the arts, in silent meditation, finding there the larger tapestry of which we ourselves are *merely a strand*. However we name the transcendent, however we speak to this great presence, however we honor it or envision it, kneel humbly in its presence or stand tall, holding out our hand, our lives are contained in something larger – something that comes through us, lives with us, and connects us to a greater whole.

If we cannot make ourselves vulnerable enough to speak of such things, if we muffle one another’s expression of the holy, or of that which stirs us and moves us to want to love more fully, we do damage to one another as whole human beings. If we ignore the transcendent, never pausing long enough to fill the cup of our being, we do damage to ourselves as whole human beings.

Whose are we? Ponder such things in your heart. Serve what is good. Love what is true. Take time for spiritual practice. Do justice. And when you cannot pray, call up prairie grass, *responsive to the slightest shift of wind, full of infinite charge, All One.*

⁴ “Come Though Fount of Every Blessing” [Singing the Living Tradition](#) # 126 by Robert Robinson.

From the “Whose Are We?” Project Grant Proposal:

Some of the specific outcomes we anticipate include:

- UU clergy will become more comfortable and articulate about the theological and spiritual aspects of Unitarian Universalism, and share this with their congregations through their preaching and teaching.
- UUMA chapters will provide small groups for spiritual discernment, practice and support. This will develop intimacy among colleagues and a forum for sharing the journey of ministry at a deep level.
- UU congregations will benefit from a clearer theological and spiritual grounding for the work of building the beloved community and creating justice in the larger world. This will in turn lead to growth in depth and numbers, as visitors can find a clearer and more compelling articulation of what our religious movement has to offer. We will be able not only to talk about who we are as Unitarian Universalists, but what larger purpose(s) we serve.
- This work naturally ties in with UU commitments to countering oppression and building multicultural competencies.
- UU clergy will feel more confident and competent to develop creative ways for congregations to experience spiritual retreats, spiritual discernment groups, UU theological identity classes, spiritual practice groups, etc.

A Word about Language

During this time together, we will be having a conversation with one another about the things we hold closest to our hearts and the commitments we make with our very lives.

As Ministers we have been trained in the languages of theology, psychology, sociology, and justice making. We have been schooled in the dynamics between minister and congregation and how to marshal those dynamics for good and for growth. In our time together we will be invited to set aside our training and our schooling and our capacities as ministers. Even though we have many ways of knowing and doing, this time will be an exploration of what it might mean to be ‘broken of our knowing’ so that we can receive the gift

of reconsidering our vows, whether made explicitly in our Ordination, or implicitly as Unitarian Universalist Ministers in Fellowship with one another, our Free Church Tradition and in our liberal covenant with The Holy.

While we will be considering our own journeys as authentic resources for our conversation we will be invited to consider the larger journey we are taking together. In addition we will find our place in a large narrative of liberal religion that will help us speak of “Whose We Are.” To do this, we will be invited to speak metaphorically (i.e. “It is like...”).

Kendyl Gibbons says,

The ability to conjure metaphors, either verbally through poetry, visually in the mind’s eye, or in narratives that encode a larger story, is what makes possible our most meaningfully human lives. It informs the success of our relationships, from the intimacies of marriage, to the covenant community of memory and promise in the local congregation, to our responsible citizenship in the global context, and our ability to imagine our place in the universal order of things. The religious imagination is what sustains us individually in moments of personal distress and public tragedy, as well as through the discouragements and challenges of working to make real the world we envision together.

(From Introduction to *Reaching Deeper* by Laurel Hallman p. ix)

Like most important conversations, ours will attempt to evoke truth rather than define it. While we will be encouraged to speak about our own experiences, we will also be urged to go beyond our own individual experiences to find our mutual commitments. *That to which we belong* has many facets, and casts us into a story larger than ourselves, our congregations, and even our association of free congregations. In every conversation we will practice spaciousness, for ourselves and for one another, allowing time for truth to settle into the spaces between and among us.

For some, even with all our training, this may be a new way of being together. Whatever our individual language of transcendence and commitment, we invite the participants to listen to one another with a *third ear* and to speak from *the heart*, in the context of our historical and ongoing liberal religious tradition and vision.

There are two distinct traditions of spiritual practice. One is *unmediated* which focuses on ‘empty mind’, ‘being part of a whole’, experience without naming. We often refer to it as mystery beyond all our naming. This tradition provides doorways to emptiness, acknowledging that one’s *oceanic connection* to the whole is beyond human capacity to name.

The other distinct tradition of spiritual practice is to approach the Holy through words, images, liturgies, song, wondrous knowledge, and repeated practice. These practices are, of necessity, partial. They can fall into concretization (substituting the literal for the partial) but often serve as a helpful way to find connection with the Holy.

This time together will emphasize conversation, journaling (in whatever form you wish to take), writing our yearnings, speaking our hopes and our limitations. It will be more characteristic of the second way of spiritual practice than the first, mostly because of our setting and our congregational connections. If you are new to a spiritual path, it would be good for you to take note of which path is more suited to your temperament and way of being in the world. As you plan ways to continue this practice and strengthen your larger commitments, you may wish to take these two different ways of being into account.

A Note to Leaders in Congregations:

We hope that you can come to this experience with anticipation of perhaps a new grounding, purpose and vision for our ministry.

In these sessions, we urge a 'radical hospitality' not only to one another, but to ideas, emotions, areas of personal exploration, larger calls, theologies that at first impulse we might wish to reject or confront because we are uncomfortable with them or believe they are insufficient.

We expect that the "Whose Are We?" exploration will not add one more task to our already full plate as leaders, but will be a place to ground our hopes, expand our vision of possibility, liberate our spirits and serve as a compass which helps us determine our priorities amid all the demands for our time and attention.

Burton Carley and Laurel Hallman

Whose Are We? Module One: *Whose Am I?*

PURPOSE: BEFORE WE MOVE TO WHOSE ARE WE THIS MODULE TAKES TIME TO NAME WHOSE AM I--BEARING WITNESS TO THE POWER OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS. IT ALSO ALLOWS EACH OF US TO HAVE THE EXPERIENCE OF BLESSING THOSE RELATIONSHIPS.

The spirit
 likes to dress up like this:
 ten fingers,
 ten toes,

Shoulders, and all the rest
 at night
 in the black branches,
 in the morning

in the blue branches
 of the world.
 It could float, of course,
 but would rather

plumb rough matter.
 Airy and shapeless thing,
 It needs
 the metaphor of the body,

lime and appetite,
 the oceanic fluids;
 it needs the body's world,
 Instinct

and imagination
 and the dark hug of time,
 sweetness
 and tangibility,

to be understood,
 to be more than pure light
 that burns
 where no one is –

so it enters us –
 in the morning
 shines from brute comfort
 like a stitch of lightning;

and at night
 lights up the deep and wondrous
 drownings of the body
 like a star.

*Poem by Mary Oliver
 from Dream Work*

Douglas Steere, a Quaker teacher, says that the ancient question, “What am I?” inevitably leads to a deeper one, “Whose am I?” – because there is no identity outside of relationships. You can’t be a person by yourself. To ask “Whose Am I?” is to extend the questions far beyond the little self-absorbed self, and wonder: Who needs you? Who loves you? To whom are you accountable? To whom do you answer? Whose life is altered by your choices? With whose life, whose lives, is your own all bound up, inextricably, in obvious or invisible ways?

The Rev. Victoria Safford

Let’s start with our most basic sense of who or what lays claim to our hearts and lives. Who or what lays claim to our days? Say simply what comes to mind.

Whose are you? Exercise

Need bell, or a person with an iPhone with a gong app, movable chairs, watch or timer.

Sit in pairs facing your partner

1. One asks, "Whose are you?"
2. Partner responds with a short phrase or word that comes to mind
3. Questioner says, "God be merciful. Whose are you?"
4. Partner responds again with a short phrase or word that comes to mind

Questioner does not react or respond to what is said, but simply receives.
Responder does not 'fill' with extra comments, even if there is silence between the question and any answer that may emerge.

If both people fall into silence, simply wait attentively until the bell is rung.

Continue in this way until bell rings. (*Leader: ring bell after 5 minutes*)

When the bell rings, reverse roles. (*Leader: ring bell after an additional 5 minutes*)

Leader:

Any surprises?

We have named and blessed the commitments of our lives. It is good to bear witness to and to receive acknowledgement of the relationships that are essential in our lives. Blessings confirm the reality and significance of whose we are.

Journal Assignment: Write or draw as a marker for yourself, anything you might say that could be parallel to the priest's comment in the story that introduced our worship (in Sarah Lammert sermon, p. 6). Something that is your purpose or *Call* that is beyond your present ministry or circumstances. What possesses you? Who tells you who you are? To whom or what do you belong, in the sense that the Priest belonged, even when his church failed his hopes, and the purposes of his priesthood seemed unfulfilled. What, if anything or anyone, sustains you when you are discouraged about your own ministry or when your church or tradition fails your hopes?

LEADERS NOTE: Give permission to the participants to write or draw, or mind-map freely what comes to mind, or create your own way to mark your response to this question. We hope to add depth and breadth to this perception in this time. It is intended to be a marker of the beginning. (It is not a test). In the times we talk together assure the participants they can choose their own level of disclosure. Assure the participants to -- record freely, speak comfortably.

This ends the first module. The journal assignment can be given as a transition from the First to the Second Module. Depending on your scheduling it can be given as a spacious time between modules, or as a topic for an evening or morning meditative time.

Whose Are We? Module Two: *Who or What Calls Me?*

PURPOSE: TO NAME THE ONGOING PURPOSE IN OUR LIVES THAT MOVES US FORWARD AND REMAINS A CONSTANT EVEN WHEN EVERYTHING ELSE CHANGES. ARTICULATING AND EXPRESSING THAT PURPOSE, AND IDENTIFYING ITS CONTINUED MOVEMENT IN OUR LIVES, IS ESSENTIAL TO MAKING GOOD CHOICES. WE START WITH THE EXPERIENCE OF PURPOSE AS INDIVIDUALS AND BEGIN TO SEE WHAT WE HAVE IN COMMON AS UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS.

You have a journey to make, a sacred journey, that I hope you'll eventually come to understand as a path to follow. This will be the most important thing you've ever done. Call it the "call of God," call it the "call of the Spirit," call it the "call of the Great Mystery," call it a "catastrophe," call it whatever you like, but a "call" of some kind is hidden within the troubles. The purpose of this call may be to draw out something hidden and wonderful within you, and if you don't mind me saying so, to bring about your awakening from a kind of spiritual slumber. I should tell you now: the journey ahead may not follow a very straightforward path, with clear-cut steps to take and easily identifiable problems to solve. Why? Because the foundation of your life, the core of who you believe yourself to be, is shaking quite a bit. It doesn't really matter how secure or insecure you believe that foundation is. It is unnerving and outright scary when this happens. At the same time, all those doubts about yourself and questions about God are evidence of a Great Mystery at work within you.

A Deeper Faith by Jeff Golliher, p. 12-13

LEADERS: Tell about your experience of your Call to Ministry or your Call to the Purpose of your life, or the Purpose you name, generally, of your life. *Take five minutes each to model the limits of the time.*

PAIRS: *Leader says: Think for a few moments about this question. Then, at the bell/gong the first person speaks for five minutes, uninterrupted. At the second bell/gong, the second person speaks for five minutes, uninterrupted.*

QUESTION: Tell your partner about your experience of Call to Ministry or your experience of naming or knowing the Purpose of your life.

JOURNALING: Write/draw reflections on the following questions.

QUESTION: Where did your Call/Purpose come from? What was its Source? If you describe it as a Voice, was it from within or outside yourself? Or both. How has your ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, race, or age shaped it; how has it been affected by the claims that come to us from the future, which are not yet realized.

GROUPS OF FOUR:

Sit in silence/wait for gong

(30 minutes)

Speak reflectively and attentively about the shape of your *Call to ministry/your Purpose*.

LARGE GROUP:

Take time for some brief sharing in the larger group. Did you find any common threads as you talked with your partner and in your group of four? Were there any surprises? (Leader may wish to scribe common threads and surprises.)

| | | |
|-----------------------|------------|--------------------------|
| <i>Utopian ideals</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Political reality</i> |
| <i>Righteousness</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Tolerance</i> |
| <i>Independence</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Communion</i> |
| <i>Personal</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Covenantal</i> |
| <i>Journey</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Home</i> |
| <i>Fear</i> | <i>and</i> | <i>Love</i> |

LEADERS give examples from your own experience.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT THE DESIRE TO RESOLVE THESE TENSIONS CAN SOMETIMES DISTORT OUR ANSWER TO “WHOSE ARE WE?”

INDIVIDUALS: Take time to reflect on one or two tensions you “live into” in your ministry, purpose or call.

WHOLE GROUP: *Name some of these tensions.*

INDIVIDUALS: Write/draw a prayer about one or more of these tensions in your life.

WHOLE GROUP: Individuals read aloud/describe your prayer as you are moved to do so.

LEADERS conclude with a prayer that recognizes the tensions in our ministry and purpose and asks that we might have the grace to support one another as we live within them.

...Our real journey in life. . . is a matter of growth, deepening, and of an ever greater surrender to the creative action of love and grace in our hearts. Never was it more necessary for us to respond to that action. I pray that we may all do so.

Thomas Merton.

Whose Are We? Module Four: *Our Covenants*

PURPOSE: WE MOVE THROUGH THE PRIMARY RELATIONSHIPS WE ESTABLISH THROUGH OUR COVENANTS AS MEMBERS OF A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION. WE RECOGNIZE HOW THESE RELATIONSHIPS ARE AT WORK IN OUR LIVES NOW.

*Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest of truth is its
sacrament,
And service is its prayer.*

*To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall
Grow into harmony with
the Divine—*

*Thus do we covenant with each
other and with God.*

*Arranged by L. Griswold Williams
in Singing the Living Tradition #471*

READING: by Alice Blair Wesley

The Pilgrims ought to be especially important to American Unitarian Universalists. They are our spiritual ancestors. We misapprehend our own identity and miss out on a great richness if we do not understand our derivation from their extraordinary spirit. I believe we could much diminish the fruitless and sterile individualism among us and instead foster together far richer varieties of authentic individuality in community if we could, through the seventeenth-century Pilgrims, set about reclaiming, for today, a fresh, dynamic commitment to the spirit of the covenant of the free church.

.....

The center of the free church, the heart of the whole thing, is a promise of fidelity, a covenant, which each member freely makes upon joining. Actually also, each member begins again with, or renews or renegotiates, his or her promise many times in the course of the life of the church, in the privacy of renewed conscience or spiritual growth.

Too often our promise, or covenant, is implicit, not consciously explicit. But it doesn't really matter whether it is verbalized. It matters whether it is faithfully meant.

Alice Blair Wesley in Redeeming Time, Walter P. Herz, ed., p. 3

LEADER:

The church is at the intersection of the covenant where the sacred and the human meet, where the eternal and the temporal make contact. In that crossing place the people turn aside and respond to the call of the Holy. There are many names for that reality that calls us into relationship, and many practices or paths to it. This source that is greater than us and not of our making, this gift and power that makes possible covenant, can be called universal love, the Spirit of Life, the Oversoul, God, Goddess, Ultimate Reality, the Holy, the Ground of Being, Creative Power, Mystery.

Burton Carley, *We Covenant*,
November 2007 Prairie Group Paper

LEADER:

Our primary covenant is with the God of our experience. This is a moving, changing, dynamic relationship.

I call that church free which enters into covenant with the ultimate source of existence,
That sustaining and transforming power not made with human hands.

James Luther Adams
Responsive Reading #591
Singing the Living Tradition

JOURNAL:

How would you describe your relationship with the God of your experience?
(Leaders note: If people say "I have no relationship with God" suggest they write about that.)

PAIRS: (5 minutes each) Tell your partner how you have answered the question.
You can say, "It's like. . ."

LEADER:

We have three basic covenants as Unitarian Universalists.

1. The Covenant of our Call to participate in ministry or to recognize our purpose in life as a Covenant and to grow in spiritual maturity.
2. The Covenant with our Congregation
3. The Covenant with our Association of Congregations

JOURNAL: (30 minutes)

What is being faithful to my Call asking of me now?

PARTNERS: (10 minutes silence, 5 minutes each)

Our congregation is gathered not around a common creed or statement of belief but upon the promises we make to one another in our covenant. It may also be called a statement of purpose or bond of union. (The group may read together the covenant of their church.)

What is being faithful to the Covenant with your Congregation requiring of you now?

GROUPS OF FOUR: (10 minutes silence, 5 minutes each)

LEADER: What is being faithful to the Covenant with our Association of Congregations requiring of you now?

GROUPS OF FOUR: *How can we walk together in the bonds of love as we struggle with what is Covenantal and Liberating? What would allow us to be safe together as emotional, embodied, flawed and forgiven people?* (One person in each group scribes main points.)

WHOLE GROUP: One person from each group name one way we can be together. (Leader scribes on newsprint.)

HYMN #126 *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*, Singing the Living Tradition

LEADER CLOSES WITH PRAYER (an example)

Oh God of our troubled and aspiring lives

Help us to be present to one another as we live in the tensions of our covenants.

Help us to be gracious and loving in hearing the troubles and challenges of one another.

Help us always to express your love in the life of our church and the ministry we engage in.

In the name of all that is Holy we pray. AMEN.

Whose Are We? Module Five: Faithfulness

PURPOSE: To explore the possibilities in the faithfulness of covenants practiced together. To know whose we are as a people on different paths, but within the same tradition.

Covenant is trans-generational. We understand the context of the present through the lens of the past, and cast our vision for our ministry into the future.

Like all relationships, the covenantal promise is to live fully in the relationship (the “we” rather than the “I”) and to deepen the practices of confession, forgiveness, reparation and reconciliation.

PAIRS: Where are these practices present in your ministry or lives?

WHOLE GROUP:

Were there any surprises in your conversation?

This work requires spiritual depth because, alone, our ministry can devolve into ideology, idolatry, and ego. It is always done in the context of a larger Call than one’s own, and a faithfulness larger than our personal loyalties.

READING: by Yvonne Seon, *Been in the Storm so Long*

...transcending boundaries is hard work. For one thing, I’ve created more of them since I was young, and I’ve built them higher and stronger than they once were. For another thing, I’m much more self-righteous and much less humble than I was then. Sometimes, when I am at my best, I remember that the “other” I distinguish myself from could be me in another time, another place, another circumstance. Then, I remember the words of a colleague who observed that it is “my racism, my sexism, my homophobia” that I am called upon to address. So, I take a few deep breaths and begin to release the fears that are the boundaries between me and my fellow humans.

READING: by Parker Palmer

The power for authentic leadership, Vaclav Havel, (playwright, dissident, prisoner, and (former) president of the Czech Republic) tells us, is found not in external arrangements but in

the human heart. Authentic leaders in every setting—from families to nation-states—aim at liberating the heart, their own and others', so that its powers can liberate the world.

Parker Palmer in *Let Your Life Speak*
p. 76.

LEADER: The life of liberal faith is lived 'without blinders'. Liberal contemplatives practice a spiritual discipline, not to escape reality, but to experience it with open-hearted receptivity. Only then can we be faithful to the spirit that liberates and loves, forgives and renews us in our work.

Activists in the world need a core of spiritual strength from which to work. The tasks require that we covenant with others to accomplish more than our own small aims, as well as see our actions in a context larger than our own lives.

PAIRS: (5 minutes each)

What do you find are sources of your strength in your ministry or your life's purpose?

WHOLE GROUP:

Ask volunteers to share stories of times they have received strength from unexpected places.

CLOSING: From David Whyte's *Self Portrait*

It doesn't interest me if there is one God or many gods. I want to know you belong, or feel abandoned. If you know despair or can see it in others. I want to know if you are prepared to live in the world with its harsh need to change you. If you can look back with firm eyes saying, this is where I stand. I want to know if you know how to melt into that fierce heat of living, falling toward the center of your longing. I want to know if you are willing to live, day by day, with the consequence of love and the bitter unwanted passion of your sure defeat. I have been told, in that fierce embrace, even the gods talk of God.

Whose Are We? Module Six: *Discernment Together*

PURPOSE: TO PRACTICE SPEAKING ABOUT THE MOVEMENT OF THE SPIRIT IN OUR LIVES WITH PEOPLE WE TRUST. TO EXPERIENCE PRAYING FOR ONE ANOTHER IN SMALL GROUPS.

*My eyes already touch the sunny hill,
going far ahead of the road I have begun.
So we are grasped by what we cannot grasp;
it has its inner light, even from a distance—
and changes us, even if we do not reach it,
Into something else, which hardly sensing it, we already are;
a gesture waves us on, answering our own wave...
but what we feel is the wind in our faces.*

*Rainer Maria Rilke, A Walk: Muzot, March 24.
Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke, p. 177*

LEADER:

Discernment is the process of sorting out the various elements of our lives to find our deepest purposes. We usually use the word ‘discernment’ when we want a significant life-decision to be in keeping with our deepest calling. In traditional religious language, discernment is the practice of seeking to know God’s purposes or intentions in our lives. It calls us to pay attention to the movement of our lives.

Discernment, for us, is a continuous practice that takes more than immediate decisions into account; we can broaden the definition of discernment so that it becomes a quality of wisdom and a way of living our whole lives, in authenticity, in covenant with others and with God.

A DISCERNMENT GROUP EXPERIENCE: (each group needs a bell and a volunteer time keeper)

Gather in groups of four.

5 minutes of silence together.

15 minutes: First person speaks uninterrupted on “the movement of his/her life”, about Presence as he/she has experienced it in the previous month, about

“interior glances” and what they have revealed, about his/her spiritual practice in the previous month.

Silence

Clarifying questions (this is not a support group, nor is it an advice-giving group.) The group does focus on the movement of each person’s life and their accountabilities to their covenants, promises, and Call.

Each person prays (aloud) for the person who has just spoken. The language is one of gratitude, blessing and seeking.

Silence

15 minutes: Second person speaks. Pattern is repeated until each person has spoken.

The process takes two hours. The groups meet monthly. If these are collegial groups, the closing prayer can be for each minister’s congregation/agency of service in the world. It can include prayers for our liberal religious movement, and larger political issues in our time. It can simply include prayers that we might be faithful to the One/the Many “Whose We Are”.

(This process was originally developed by Rosemary Dougherty at Shalem Institute and has been adapted for our use.)

CLOSING WORSHIP: WHOSE ARE WE?

OPENING WORDS

We are here to abet creation and to witness to it,
to notice each other's beautiful face and complex nature
so that creation need not play to an empty house.

Annie Dillard

*HYMN *Sing Out Praises for the Journey* #295
Singing the Living Tradition

*RESPONSIVE READING *I Call That Church Free* #591
SLT

MEDITATION:

We began our time together by blessing our spiritual partner with the gift of deep listening. The purpose and power of our covenant, the bonding that makes the many one offers the grace and blessing that moves us deeper in response to the call we received to be engaged in holy work. In that work, in our own inner lives, we need to experience the “deep down freshness” of that power. Thus we are renewed to discern once again what is required of us in relation to our call to our life's purpose.

So let us open up our spirit to reconnect with what called us. Let us search our hearts and recommit ourselves to the power that holds us.

You are invited to come forward to us to be blessed in your recommitment. For those who remain seated, hold those reaffirming their commitment in your hearts, and all of us in this time.

(Note to leaders: The ministers recognizing and blessing the renewal of call and purpose wore stoles. People come forward individually. Taking the hands of the person the minister asks:)

Do you rededicate yourself to the ministry that is your calling?

LETTER TO YOURSELF:

Take time now to write a letter to your future, reflecting on this experience with members of your congregation. Imagine how you, and your participation in covenant and ministry will be changed. We will provide paper and envelopes. When you are through, please address it to yourself. We will mail it back to you some time in the future, when we hope you have forgotten you wrote it!

EVALUATION: DON, CAN YOU ATTACH THE EVALUATION HERE?

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RESOURCES

LANGUAGE

Robinson. Christine and Alicia Hawkins. *Heart to Heart*, Skinner House Books. 2009. Pages 38 – 41.

Why use the word *God* at all, if it is such a slippery thing as to need warnings and explanations? Simply because without words, we can't even think, much less communicate. An example of this phenomenon is found in an isolated culture of hunter-gatherers in New Zealand that uses the same word for the colors blue and green. Because of this, they have great difficulty when presented with the task of sorting blue and green objects by color. They are born with eyes like ours, capable of seeing blue and green as different colors. But without words for the different colors, they don't really "see" them. It is the same for us. As difficult as this word *God* is, if we don't use it (or a good substitute), we'll not be able to think about a part of our lives that most people intuit as existing.

If the word *God* is spoiled beyond redemption for us, we can substitute other words, such as *Goddess*, *Higher Power*, the *Divine*, *Theos*, or *Great Spirit*. Some people use the word *Goddess* in conversation, as in, "We'll have to leave that to the *Goddess*." This is not simply a matter of cherishing the feminine connotations of the word, which are often lacking in our "god" words; it is also a way of alerting listeners to the possibility that theological creativity is allowed in this conversation.

It is useful to remember that our images of *God*, while useful and necessary, are at best partial truths and will lead us astray if taken too literally or set too concretely in our minds. We must each find the definitions, images, and poetry that make sense to us. So here are but a few of the ways *God* is thought about by many religious people in the world.

Pagan Ideas of Divinity. Generally speaking, pagan theologies such as pantheism, panentheism, and Goddess worship place special emphasis on this earth, this life, and the sacredness of life, our bodies, and the natural world. Pantheists believe that *God* is the sum total of everything, material and immaterial, in our universe. In this view, everything is holy, even things we might think are not good, such as the lightning that strikes and kills our favorite tree. Panentheism says that *God* is *in* everything, but is also present beyond the material universe. There are as many definitions of Goddess as of *God*, but all Goddess theologies explicitly acknowledge and honor the feminine. Traditional, indigenous faiths the world over speak of a *Great Spirit* or a *Mother Goddess*. Modern neo-paganism has attempted to reclaim these definitions of divinity, which had been discredited by patriarchal philosophy and religion over the ages.

A Higher Power. In an attempt to bring spirituality into their programs without entangling people in theological arguments, 12-Step programs such as Alcoholics Anonymous use the term *Higher Power* to denote a divine force that can be defined in many ways. Many people use this term to express a kind of power that exists outside of us, but is mostly manifest within us, and encourages us to become our own higher selves. This higher power is the force that many

experience when in dire straits, whether from addiction, illness, grief, or fear, and which gives access to strength, wisdom, and peace that seems to come as a gift from outside ourselves.

Divine Power with Limits. People often think of God as all-powerful. But this raises a serious theological issue, sometimes called the problem of evil: If God is good and all-powerful, why do bad things happen to good people? To resolve this issue, most religions consider divine power to be limited. Orthodox Western religions maintain that God's power is limited by human free will. For instance, God cannot prevent us from deciding to do evil. Some theologies say that the divine being who created the world also created the laws of nature, and those laws limit divine power. God could not have prevented the earthquake or the accident, as those tragedies proceeded according to the laws of nature. Persons who believe that God's power to control events is limited often take solace in the thought that, while God could not prevent their difficulties, God's comforting spirit is with them in those difficulties. Finally, many people believe in a God or transcendent force that has persuasive power over our consciences rather than power over material things like viruses or tornadoes. These are the people who might say, "God has only our hands to do good in the world."

The God of Liberation. The God of liberation theology desires each person to have the maximum possible opportunity for a fully human life. This is a God who sides with the poor and oppressed wherever they are found and nudges all people toward acting for justice and making peace. Liberation theology began as a Catholic movement in Central and South America.

The Human as the Highest. Humanists believe that the highest and best we can know in this universe is humanity, with our grand ideals, marvelous minds, and great potential. They say that divinity is within the human being and nowhere else. Most humanists don't like to use the word God, but they still have a theology, which is a theory or belief about the highest and best.

The Unfinished God. In process theology, a twentieth-century British-American development, the essence of the divine is creativity. Divinity is that which brings the new into the world, not only through the creation of the universe but through evolution, new ideas, and greater love of humanity.

Atheists and Agnostics. Some people look as deeply and clearly as they know how into life and its meanings and find no hint of a God by any definition, anywhere. They find that the laws of nature and human nature provide satisfying answers to their questions and experiences. They have "no need of that hypothesis," as the mathematician and astronomer Laplace reportedly said to Napoleon. They may feel a sense of freedom and joy that this natural world and the people in it are sufficient to the needs of the day and that the intricacies of the world provide plenty of discovery and meaning for a richly lived human life. If they are quite sure that there is no God, they are atheists. If they feel they don't know for sure but lean against believing, they are agnostics.

Living with Many Names. Many images and understandings of divinity can be found in the world's scriptures, poetry, and theologies. How do we all get along? How can we talk to each

other when the meanings behind our words are so different? We do that by being always mindful that our images and understandings are at least approximations of an infinite truth that simply cannot be captured by finite beings. When we remember that fact, our regard for persons with visions and words that differ from ours is not a grudging tolerance but an open-hearted curiosity about yet another way of understanding the divine.

CALL

Scoval, Carl. *The Impossible Call*, UUMA Massachusetts Bay District Clergy Meeting, October 4, 2000, in *Unitarian Universalist Christian*, pp. 94-95.

Regardless of our theologies or styles of ministry we all stand between our people and that to which they still aspire. We feel in our roles as clergy the yearning and the distance, the guilt and the idealism, the “ought” and the “can’t”, the kinship and the distance which our people feel toward the divine. When they think that we represent the ideal, their admiration is terrifying. When they discover we have failed, their fury and disappointment is just as intense.

This position on the boundary is inherent in our role as clergy and the task of just standing there is, I suggest, not just heavy but impossible.

“Oh, great!” you must be thinking, “I’m so glad I came in time for worship today, just what I needed to set me up for the coming year.”

Why do I say this to you this morning?

Because it has struck me so powerfully in my retirement and because no one except Eliade ever suggested to me that the hardship of our work has existential as well as social and personal roots.

If we were the perfect cleric in the perfect parish, it might be otherwise, but for the time being (which is the only time we have) we, the imperfect, are called to the imperfect, and before them to embody, incarnate, live out the tension between these two realms. And we deny this truth as the price of either arrogance or triviality.

It’s just as Merton said to his brother monks.

“The true monk is one who, finally realizing that he is engaged in the folly of meeting an impossible demand, instead of renouncing the whole thing, devotes himself even more completely to the task.”

Merton, who broke rules, disliked the choir offices, irritated the abbot and was often in trouble, deplored such priests because he felt that they had betrayed the true monastic ideal, that is, painfully and confusedly to live out God’s love in an unloving world. Merton called monks to their vocation not their profession.

The real monk so lives his vocation that he becomes his vocation.

And so does the nun or religious of whatever faith. And so with us.

The great danger and the great temptation of our calling is that we become professionals, men and women with skills and roles and status and perks and boundaries and not much more, men and women who have abandoned the boundary between the holy and the human.

When we do this we become, to use a Berry Street lecture title from thirty years ago, “technicians of the sacred.”

If we are simply professionals, we will doubtless be well-paid and possibly respected, but we will have traded our calling for a job and our vocation for a trade.

Saint Paul knew the snares of this work when he wrote that poignant phrase in our first lesson: “lest in preaching to others I become myself a castaway.”

Yet who can blame the professional if our vocation is “impossible?” How is it possible to bear the impossible?

(This sermon, you can see, is my bid for homiletic chutzpah.)

For myself this has been a lifelong lesson which I am, quite obviously, still learning. It is a lesson learned not in that tiny corner of our brains which deals with concepts and abstractions but in the neurons, muscles, bones, and fiber of our existence.

We can live with the impossible demand and we can stand on the boundary if we realize that the holy will happen with us or without us, sooner if we do not get in the way.

At this point I don’t know if I’m speaking as a Taoist or a Christian but I think I’m speaking as both.

To quote Merton, the true monk is “aware that because he cannot meet the demand, the demand will be met for him.”

What we need to do above all (and this is the theological basis for the non-anxious presence) is to trust that the Holy is working its way in the ways of our world.

If we trust the flow, the force, the Tao, the ways of God, we will work with the tide, not against it, regardless of the seeming setbacks in history and our careers, regardless of the hopelessness of our impossible dreams.

This means that we give up hoping and trying to succeed in our churches and ministries, for what we call “success” is almost always a projection of our distorting egos.

I pumped for twenty years for the development of the crypt underneath the sanctuary at King’s Chapel and struck out. I finally realized that it was the right idea at the wrong time. Someday the crypt may be developed, and if it isn’t the world won’t end or at least King’s Chapel won’t because of it.

(Most of the horrors we see in history, including those in Ruanda and Yugoslavia, are created by idealists who push a partial good as God’s own will.)

Our task as people at the boundary is to trust the ways of the holy in the world of the human and to know that sooner or later, and best without our pushing, good things will happen.

Look, I don’t know about you but I need a cup of coffee and a break from even as good a thing as worship. Thank you for listening and asking me to speak, and I’m grateful for whatever you got out of this.

COVENANT

Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches by Conrad Wright. (pp. 25-27, excerpts)

—what do these words mean in a denomination like ours, which includes considerable diversity of theological opinion, and which prizes tolerance of diversity?

The words come from the third chapter of Amos: “Can two walk together except they be agreed?” It is a verse of interest to us historically, for it was frequently cited by the orthodox opponents of our liberal ancestors at the time of the Unitarian controversy (1805-1824). The response by the liberals has had a lasting importance, since it has helped to shape our tradition down to the present.

. . . The Orthodox asked: Can two walk together except they be agreed? . . . Their answer was *No*—it is not possible to walk together with those who have diverged so radically from historic Christian doctrine.

The liberals responded by . . . answering *Yes* (to Amos’ question). It is possible to walk in Christian fellowship despite theological differences. A Christian character is what makes a Christian, not the subscription to creeds that express doctrinal subtleties remote from practical living. . . .

Thus very early in our history as a separate religious body we insisted that creedal statements are not the proper basis for religious fellowship; more than that, that theological diversity is not only to be tolerated, but to be embraced as a good thing.

. . . .

In short, to Amos’s question: Can two walk together except they be agreed? the liberals reply: Yes, they can walk together despite disagreements. And liberals often go a step further, to say that diversity of opinion is a good thing, which can be a source of creativity, even of life itself.

Adams, James Luther. From *The Essential James Luther Adams*, George K. Beach, ed. Skinner House Books, Boston. 1998, pp. 38 – 41.

(A tenet) of the free person’s faith is that the achievement of freedom in community requires the power of organization and the organization of power. The free person will be

unfree, will be a victim of tyranny from within or from without, if his or her faith does not assume *form*, in both word and deed. The commanding, transforming reality is a shaping power; it shapes one's beliefs about that reality and when it works through persons it shapes the community of justice and love.

There is no such thing as poetry without poems, art without paintings, architecture without buildings, and there is no such thing as an enduring faith without beliefs. The *living* spirit, says the poet Schiller, creates and molds.

There can be no reliable faith for the free unless there are faith-full men and women who form the faith into beliefs, who test and criticize the beliefs, and who then transform and transmit the beliefs. This process of forming and transforming the beliefs of the free faith is a process of discussion; it is a cooperative endeavor in which people surrender to the commanding, transforming reality. The only way men and women can reliably form and transform beliefs is through the sharing of tradition and new insights and through the cooperative criticism and testing of tradition and insight. In other words, people must sincerely work with each other in order to give reliable form and expression to faith. This is the only way freedom *from* tyranny can be fulfilled in freedom *with* justice and truth.

Belief in merely individualistic, fissiparous freedom of faith can lead only to vapidty, to a faith in "I know not what," to faith in the arbitrary.

Faith in the knowledge about the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality cannot be "just any faith." If it is to make a difference, if it is to enable us to distinguish between ourselves and Nazis, then it must have a definite, particular form. Religious liberals who say that religious liberalism encourages people merely to think as they please no longer believe there is a commanding reality. They have become "faith-fully" neutral, and this neutrality is only a halfway station (if not already a camouflage) for an unexamined faith, for an unreliable, destructive faith. Neither the vague nor the neutral "faith" can be overcome except in a faith-full community.

The free church is that community which is committed to determining what is rightly of ultimate concern to persons of free faith. It is a community of the faithful and a community of sinners. When alive, it is the community in which men and women are called to seek fulfillment by the surrender of their lives to the control of the commanding, sustaining, transforming reality. It is the community in which women and men are called to recognize and abandon their ever-recurrent reliance upon the unreliable. It is the community in which the life-spirit of faith tries to create and mold life-giving, life-transforming beliefs, the community in which persons open themselves to God and each other and to commanding, sustaining, transforming experiences from the past, appropriating, criticizing, and transforming tradition and giving that tradition as well as newborn faith the occasion to become relevant to the needs of a time. These roots of faith grow in the individual as one participates in the worshiping, educating, socially active fellowship of the church. And certainly if they do not grow in the individual they will not grow in the family, if they do not grow in the family they will not grow in the community, and if they do not grow in the community they will not grow in the nation and the world.

Now the idea of forming a community of such a faith is a bold venture. It means that women and men must be willing not only to recognize their frustration of the transforming reality, but also to re-form themselves and their faith. As we have suggested, not every kind of

freedom is permissible in this kind of community. Doctrinal tests are not the way to determine the character of the community, but if the community possesses no recognizable form and criterion (except that it offers absolute freedom) then it will be utterly undependable. It will degenerate into faith-full and ethical neutrality.

An example of this degeneration recently came to light in a prominent congregation. The minister had been preaching vigorously and calling for action against race discrimination. Certain members of the board of trustees in the church did not like this sort of interpretation of our common humanity; apparently they thought that freedom of faith should permit freedom to believe in race discrimination. They called their minister to task and charged him with jeopardizing the principles of a free church. He was wrong, they said, in saying that the church must stand unambiguously against race discrimination. Some people in the group made this assumption, they admitted, but some did not. Therefore, if the church was to remain a free fellowship, these different ideas about race discrimination should be given equal respect. Otherwise, freedom of faith would be violated! In effect these “Christians” wanted their church to go the straight and narrow path—between right and wrong. They repudiated the “faith for the free” by trying to conceal injustice behind a simulated ethical neutrality.

A faith that creates no community of faith and a faith that assumes no definite form is not only a protection against any explicit faith, it is probably also a protection for a hidden idolatry of blood or state or economic interest, a protection for some kind of tyranny. It is not the faith of the free. The faith of free persons must tangibly make them free in a community of human dignity and equal justice.

DISCERNMENT

Broadly understood, spiritual practice includes the following:

A daily practice. Setting aside a time, a place for regular practice, which can vary according to one’s own personal theological orientation or liturgical practice. Jack Kornfield says that the basic discipline is to “put one’s rear on the pillow.” This is not necessarily to be understood literally, since many good spiritual practices contain movement. It does give expression to the basic necessity to “just do it.”

Have a practice partner. Ideally, this person would be a colleague with whom you share ministerial covenants and commitments. Agree to meet or talk by phone once a month about your practice, what you are experiencing as difficulties and blessings in your journey. It is less about the content of your days as it is about the movement, and experiences of ‘interior glances’ during the time since your last conversation. If you are memorizing scripture, poetry or prose as a practice, it is also a time to reflect on how it is speaking to you.

Have a spiritual director. You can find a spiritual director through Shalem Center for Spiritual Formation www.shalem.org or the UU Spiritual Director’s Network www.uusdn.org. Often a local convent or monastery can provide names of Spiritual Directors. A spiritual director can help ask the larger questions which can help you trace the movement of your life over time. They can help you remember what you have said long after you have forgotten you have said it.

Be part of a Discernment Group. This is a group of four to five people, including you, that meets monthly in the form outlined in the text of this booklet.

Take occasional retreats. Talk with colleagues about retreat centers in your area. These can be guided retreats taken as an individual (meeting with a spiritual director once a day), or part of a larger group moving through an experience together.

All these practices will move you out of the issues and responsibilities of your ministry and refresh your perspective on your larger promises and covenants.

ADDITIONAL MODELS FOR UUMA CHAPTER SPIRITUAL DISCERNMENT GROUPS

1. The Northern Reflecting Pool

For the past 7 years a subgroup of the New Jersey UUMA Cluster has been meeting called the Northern Reflecting Pool. The group is open to all members of the Metro NY Chapter, but the majority of members live within the northern part of NJ. Our mission is simple “Be Excellent to One Another.”

The group meets monthly. Membership is opened each year for about a month in September, and then closes again for the year. Numbers of members have varied from 6-9. Area intern ministers are encouraged to participate.

We gather at 10:00 a.m. for coffee, followed by our time together. The format is:

Invocation

Brief Check-In - ...a word that describes your spirit as you enter this space.

Reading

Silent Meditation (15-20 minutes)

Song

Deep Check-In: (8 minutes each)

A topic is suggested but people stray from it at will. Some examples: What Are You Waiting For? “What Do You Feel Hopeful About?” “Wake Up!” “What/Whom Are You Called to Serve?”

Closing Words

Business: Scheduling etc.

Lunch out together. This social time is just as important as the more focused time we spend together and allows us to follow up on a topic of interest. Sometimes people request advice about a professional or personal issue during lunch.

2. UU Western Crescent

The UU Western Crescent is the group of churches on the outlying western region outside of Chicago that roughly (at best) form a crescent shape.

We meet approximately every other month. Membership is open and we average about 6, but have been as large as 10. Intern ministers are encouraged to attend. We gather at 11:00 or 11:30 a.m. and usually bring our own lunch. We usually end by 1:30 p.m. We follow a similar format - albeit loosely - as the format is up to the host. Something typical for us is...

Lunch and loose conversation

Invocation

Brief Check-In

Reading

Deep Check-In OR people bring questions OR someone brings up a thorny issue/personal dilemma

Song

Closing Words

Business: Scheduling. Who will host next? Announcements, etc.

3. “Sparks for Growth”

Four years ago, a group of ministers serving midsize to large congregations in the Pacific Central District were gathered together by then-minister of our UU Church on the Monterey Peninsula, Rev. Beth Miller.

Beth had pulled together a district presentation on Pastoral-to-Program size transitions focusing on the work of Alice Mann, and was looking for a group of colleagues with which to go deeper into the theories. She posted an open invitation for colleagues serving mid-sized and larger churches to gather for an inaugural retreat. We are all ministers who have a deep passion for growing Unitarian Universalism, so it was natural that we dubbed ourselves the “Sparks for Growth” group.

We meet three times a year for a day and half at a beautiful retreat center. We rotate responsibility for worship and program. This group has met a deep need for each of us and has become a precious collegial support group, as well as a place for very practical and relevant continuing education.

Our gatherings center around nourishing worship and deep check in. Our program segments focus on the issues that are alive in our congregations, with a focus on congregational health and vitality. We have done the work of articulating the theology which undergirds our passion for growth, and we have also looked at the barriers to growth that exist in our churches. We have continued our study of pastoral to program size shifts, and we have learned about lots of other aspects of congregational life and leadership. We have created a “Sparks for Growth” pulpit exchange, and have preached in one another’s congregations. A group of “Sparklers” traveled together for two years in a row to the Festival of Preaching conference, and were able to spend time together there, as well.

During our second year, we wanted to share our wonderful learning and inspiration with our congregations. We each chose 4-5 lay leaders and invited them to a weekend retreat in the redwood trees, where we worshipped, shared growth theory with them, and created meaningful congregational connections. (A participant from my congregation reflected, with tears in her eyes, “Before I attended the ‘Sparks’ retreat, I thought of myself as a member of UUSM. Now I understand myself as a Unitarian Universalist; I am a part of something much larger.”)

Other ministers in our district have seen how important this group has become to the participants and have wanted a similar experience. This led us to offer to provide support for the forming of other such groups. We led a district UUMA retreat this past February which was based on the “Sparks” meeting model, so they’d have a taste of the way we meet. Then we led

a process where they identified areas of commonality around which similar ministerial study groups could be formed. There are two other focus groups now beginning using the “Sparks” group format.