

HOPES, DREAMS, & IDEAS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

As I think and plan for the church year, this would normally be the start of Religious Education, hence a time to dedicate leaders and send children off to their classes. As most of you know, our last DRE, Tony, has not been able to fulfill the requirements of that position for some time. As we move forward to find new leadership for Religious Education, the RE Committee and I wanted to take some time to get input from the congregation to augment the responses from committee members, most of whom are parents of children. In order to accomplish that, I want to share some thoughts about Unitarian Universalist Religious Education, then invite you to respond with your hopes, dreams, and ideas!

As most of you know, I was not raised as a UU, rather I grew up attending Methodist Sunday School, then was actively involved in Jr. and Sr. High United Methodist Youth Fellowships before I went to college and seminary to be ordained as a United Methodist Minister. I came to UUism as a Minister, so I did not experience what it was like to grow up UU. I did, however, watch my kids as they experienced their youth and young adulthood as UUs and all of them still generally identify as UU. I also have been involved in leading and supporting youth and youth camping ministries during my years as a UU Minister, serving as a leader and camp dean at Camp de Benneville Pines, SWUUSI, Lake Murray, UbarU, and as a Ministerial Representative to the District RE Committee in the Southwest Conference. Though I feel more comfortable and competent working with Jr. and Sr. High Youth and adults, I have been interested in Children's and Youth Ministries throughout my Ministry. I mention this only to help you understand that I have been as frustrated as any of you by our difficulty in keeping a strong religious education program going for our children and youth.

As you may have noticed, the impact of religion generally in the United States has been decreasing over the last few decades and may soon match the situation in much of Europe, in which church attendance is minimal, churches are more museums than centers of cultural life, and religious beliefs have little or no direct impact on modern life. Whether that will happen here will likely depend on whether churches are able to stay relevant by changing to match or at least be in dialogue with the changes in culture.

The alignment of some religious groups with the NRA and the Republican Party, even in the face of the amorality or immorality of those groups may hasten the demise of those religious groups while making all religious groups at best suspect of hypocrisy. The current administration and the current situation do not bode well for any religious community that really wants to be relevant while holding to beliefs influenced by Jesus, Abraham, Mohammed, Buddha, Confucius, or any other well-known religious exemplar of old. For religion generally, these are not the best of times, and the fundamentalist branches of many traditions are hastening what may be the downfall of several traditions.

Some Unitarian Universalists may recognize the inherent opportunities now available for a more rational and scientifically oriented faith tradition such as UUism. As some myths and legends are revealed as at best allegorical, those who would place science at the center of their worldview might be thought to gravitate to a movement such as ours. That may be prevented by the countervailing tendency within our movement to become more spiritual in either a pagan, New-Age, or mystical Christian sense. The modern attempt to separate spirituality from religion seems to me likely to fail in its absence of grounding in the traditions from whence it appeared. Attempting to wipe away the historical origins of a spirituality would at least tend to leave its practices without a reason for doing them any certain way. Not that I have any objection to every individual practicing his or her own spirituality, but it tends to work against any kind of cohesive religious community.

Where churches and religious education programs have always succeeded and still likely can, is in the development of small groups sharing several things in common. It may be beliefs, developmental ages, levels of experience, or abilities to play together, but there must be some commonality for a group to coalesce. Because they have been so important to me, I like to use the example of choirs. A group of people that sings together may have a wide variety of beliefs, ages, or abilities and still become close and important to all or at least most of its members. I suspect choirs are the oldest and most common small group ministries, and one of the best! Religious education classes for children, youth, and adults, along with youth and adult groups for each of those categories also have the potential for being important small group ministries. Many of our members have been involved in Covenant Groups over the last few years and they function similarly. Some committees, groups, and book clubs also can build that level of interpersonal community.

In our religious education efforts, I suspect we have failed more often in building the consistency needed to create community than in the decision of what we have taught or shared. When I was a child, I loved to go to Sunday School because that is where my friends were. Several of them went to different schools, so often I only saw them at church. I complained when my family didn't go to church, and as I got older I often went myself even if the rest of the family was doing something else. Ok, I may not have been the typical kid, but I wasn't the only one, either.

Part of the community I found in Sunday School and later in the youth groups was a stable leadership. The teachers and youth advisors also became friends and we saw them weekly and got to know them as people. Changing teachers and leaders can also be a bit risky if you want to build community. Over the last few years, Mikayla has really helped to hold things together because she is almost always there when the kids come together. They love her, and they know she loves them!

Before I open the floor for your thoughts, I want to put out a few thoughts about why we have RE and how it fits with our worship experience.

Over the years I have been your Minister, we have held several Multi-Generational Services a year in which we try to include children and youth in more significant ways in the adult worship service. We have had older youth share readings, children's and youth musical selections, and other ways for everyone to participate in a shared experience. If we had more older children and youth, those experiences might become bigger and more interesting.

Process: Integrated Worship & Religious Education Themes

One of the approaches some congregations have taken, is to fully integrate children into the worship experience so that every service is multi-generational. In that model, only young children would have childcare while everyone else would be included in the community worship experience. One of my concerns with that approach is in trying to make the ideas I am sharing comprehensible to younger children while still keeping the interest of adults.

Another approach with more flexibility but with coordination between the messages for all ages is to use monthly themes that carry over between worship and classes for all ages. That approach can be used one week a month or every week during the month. It requires extensive coordination between Ministers, speakers and Religious Education staff but could be quite effective and offer families good opportunities for sharing their church experience.

Content: World Religions and UUism & Church Across the Street

As I mentioned, content may not be the most important thing in the success of Religious Education, but the content most often mentioned as desirable is to teach our children and youth about other religions as well as Unitarian Universalism. One of the most successful curriculums for that is the Church Across the Street program which involves periodic field trips to visit other religious communities and learn about what they believe and practice. This program requires a lot of support from families and RE leaders, but can be wonderful in providing lessons important to families. There are many other really good curriculums for all ages available for free to UUs through the Tapestry of Faith program. Our Whole Lives (OWL) sexuality education for all ages remains one of the most innovative and meaningful curriculums.

Theory: Sophia Lyon Fahs and Exploration and Discovery

Back in about the 1950s, Sophia Lyon Fahs, the leader of Unitarian Religious Education wrote many books and curriculums using the concepts of Exploration and Discovery which in many ways continue to set the tone for the best Religious Education programs. Teaching UUs by way of memorization of scriptural passages, or particular beliefs or practices would just not work. At our best, we help each other explore the universe and discover those things that we find to be true and meaningful. This is as true for children and youth as for adults. This is also why we talk about ourselves as learning communities.

Conclusion and Invitation

We want to share our message of inclusion and acceptance with everyone, but especially with our children. The values behind our UU Principles call us to work to shape a better world, to accept each other, to seek to encourage all persons to learn and grow and be the best that they can be. There are many ways to fulfill our calling as UUs, there are many choices we can make. This morning I want to invite you to share your thoughts as we prepare to find new leadership for our Religious Education program.

By our shared wisdom in this wonderful community, may we continue to explore, discover, learn and grow together! So may it always be!

I invite now your Hopes, Dreams, and Ideas for Religious Education!