

Unitarian Universalism

A Religious Home for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer People

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“I have been extraordinarily lucky. In living my life as an openly lesbian woman, I have gained far more—infinitely more—than I have lost. One factor tips the balance: I was raised as a Unitarian Universalist. I was raised with Sunday School lessons that taught the beauty of difference, in a faith that nurtures self-respect, dignity, and courage. Most of all, I knew and continue to be affirmed in the truth that no matter what I lost or will lose in coming out, I won’t lose my church. I know I am loved not in spite of who or what I am, but because of who and what I am. And that has made all the difference.”

—Reverend Kim K. Crawford Harvie

Senior Minister

Arlington Street Church, Boston, MA

WHAT DO WE STAND FOR?

The Unitarian Universalist approach to spirituality is basically different from that of religions based on a creed or received revelation. In our search for religious truth, we weigh the religious voices and visions of every place and time on a balance with our own voice and vision. We search the gathered wisdom of humankind—reason and intuition, the arts and science—and we search our own experience. We enter the combined religious traditions of the Unitarians and the Universalists, offering the life-truths of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people. If you are looking for a place where minds are free and the issues of our lives and times are examined openly, then you may belong in a Unitarian Universalist congregation.

Because we are not accountable to some received version of the truth, or to a central authority, we are always testing the value of our own thoughts. We find as much challenge in the questions as we find comfort in the answers. And we are open to changing our minds and hearts as we discover new knowledge. Ours is a tradition of strong, prophetic voices calling for a larger vision of life. Compared to other denominations, we have by far the highest percentage of openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer clergy. Unitarian Universalists have long called for the full inclusion of LGBTQ people in religious community and in society at large. Each year the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association votes on a number of resolutions intended

to affect the manner in which its staff, member organizations, congregations, and individual Unitarian Universalists address the social issues of the day. These resolutions often place the Association at the leading edge of social change.

Since 1970, the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations (UUA) has enacted more than twenty resolutions in support of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people and their lives. Beginning with resolutions calling for educational efforts and non-discriminatory hiring practices within the UUA (1970), the Association has struggled to become more congruent with its own Principles and Purposes.

These resolutions have addressed a variety of equity issues. In 1996 the UUA made history by being the first mainline denomination in the U.S. to support legally recognized marriage between members of the same sex. For a complete listing of UUA social justice statements, go to www.uua.org/statements.

One resolution (1989) funded the development of a program by which a church or fellowship could become a “Welcoming Congregation”—one that is proactive about affirming the presence of bisexual, gay, and lesbian persons. The UUA now offers additional web resources for congregations to renew their welcome with today’s more expansive understanding of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression. The UUA also offers congregations “Beyond Categorically Thinking,” an equal opportunity program designed in part to settle lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer ministers in our congregations and to address bias, especially in the process of searching for a minister.

WHERE HAS THIS BROUGHT US?

This more-than-forty-year history of affirmation and advocacy is just the beginning. The people who brought these resolutions to a vote have often acted with the support of their local congregations and sometimes in painful awareness of the opposition to these views. Moving these resolutions from words to deeds depends upon the presence and loving vigilance of all who work for justice.

We are proud of this record as a manifestation of the efforts of so many Unitarian Universalists over the years. As we continue our efforts on behalf of all those who are still denied the full rights of their humanity for reasons of sexual and affectional orientation and gender identity and expression—and for reasons of race, sex, age, economic status, or physical disability—this record of resolve is an inspiration. But is Unitarian Universalism completely free of homophobia? Of course not. Still, whenever Unitarian Universalists are called upon to take a position on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer issues, our growing body of resolutions guides us. People in our congregations have been on the forefront of the marriage equality movement and regularly take stands in the face of willful or ignorant homophobia and transphobia and work against bullying and violence in their communities and in the society at large. And we’re willing to make public, as part of our religious practice, what we believe—that the human family is one, and that the love that binds us is greater than the fears that divide us.

WHERE DOES THIS LEAD US?

We are not finished. Remember when you realized that homosexuality and/or transsexuality wasn't the problem—homophobia and/or transphobia was? The leap of consciousness we take when we understand that must be followed by other leaps of consciousness. Gulfs of misunderstanding and grief separate the races and genders. Frustrations isolate people with disabilities. And indifference marginalizes the young and the old. Those of us who have been baptized in the fire of our own homophobia and/or transphobia, and who have found our way back to self-love despite all “the forces ranged against us and within us” (Adrienne Rich), have a responsibility to be a bridge to those still seeking, still angry, still frightened, still excluded.

Unitarian Universalist spirituality comes full circle when you understand that whenever you enter the doors of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, you may not lock them after you. It is a radical understanding of our Principles and of the strength of the human spirit that we expect ourselves never to tire, never to cease working for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations—even when we have found our home inside the doors, especially when we have found our home inside. It is incumbent upon us to push the boundaries of the word “we” to see who it has come to include. We belong here. We belong here not only to receive the comfort of being accepted, but also to speak out for those yet awaiting welcome.

“Each time I tell my story in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, I am met with openness, respect, and caring. Even though many Unitarian Universalists are just learning what it means to be transgender, their response goes well beyond tolerance. Unitarian Universalists consistently yearn to understand, to appreciate, and to welcome my whole story. It is in their company that I have learned that being transgender is a gift.”

— Rev. Sean P. Dennison
Salt Lake City, UT

“When I attended a gay men’s conference at a Unitarian Universalist camp, I discovered a covenantal community that has embraced my essential nature and its expression as good and whole. In my congregation I am valued and have been welcomed, as a religious education teacher and youth group advisor, to model living ‘outside the box’ for fifteen years. I have found a spiritual home that seeks to create a safe, nurturing space for all.”

—Brian A. Geenbaur
Cambridge, MA

Rev. Barbara J. Pescan is a retired Unitarian Universalist minister.