

Can We Find a Home Here?

Answering Questions of Interfaith Couples

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If your life partner is someone who comes from a religious tradition different from your own, you are already familiar with the joys and challenges of creating intimacy across cultural boundaries. Because religious identity is closely tied with a person's larger cultural background, many of the day-to-day differences you and your partner encounter may have little to do with religious belief or practice. For many interfaith couples, these differences in styles of interaction and approach to life are part of their initial attraction to one another, and they learn to negotiate them early on in the relationship. Differences in religious belief and practice may not be a big issue at the beginning of the relationship, but at some point most interfaith couples must wrestle with the issue of family religious identity, especially if the family expands to include children.

At this point, couples need to take a closer look at several questions:

- How important is my own religious tradition to me?
- How important is it for my family to share one religious tradition?
- How do I feel about embracing my partner's religious tradition as my own?
- Can we find a religious home that feels comfortable to both of us?

In trying to answer that last query, many interfaith couples have found their way to Unitarian Universalist congregations. Here are some often-asked questions in the search for religious common ground.

What Are the Basic Beliefs of Unitarian Universalism?

Unitarian Universalism is a non-creedal religion: We do not require our members to adhere to a particular statement of belief. We place strong emphasis on freedom of belief and the right of each individual to pursue his or her own path in the search for ultimate truth. The individual pursuit of truth, however, does take place within a larger context. Our congregations have adopted a set of seven principles that outline our most basic shared values and our mutual expectations about how we will interact with one another and with the larger world. In these principles, Unitarian Universalists affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Within this framework, we encourage individuals to articulate their own beliefs and to follow their own spiritual journeys.

Can Both of Us Be Accepted Equally Within Unitarian Universalism?

Unitarian Universalist congregations are open to people of all backgrounds. Although each Unitarian Universalist congregation is different, worship services in most of our societies draw on a wide variety of religious and other sources for inspiration. We welcome each of you, no matter what your religious background is.

A question for you to ask yourselves is whether Unitarian Universalism speaks to your religious needs and desires. What are you looking for in a religious community? Do our principles, our style of worship, our way of being together, provide a context where your religious life can flourish? The best way to find out if a congregation will feel comfortable to your family is for you and your partner to attend a number of services. You also may want to meet with the minister, sit in on some of the religious education programs, and take a closer look at the congregation's hymnal as you try to determine whether the congregation will be a good fit for your whole family.

Do I Have to Convert to Become a Unitarian Universalist?

Religious conversion means giving up one faith to take on another. If you become part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we do not ask you to give up the religious convictions of your heritage. We do ask you to bring those convictions with an open heart and an inquiring mind, knowing that others in the congregation bring their own ideas and beliefs that may not be the same as yours.

You may decide that you want to make a formal commitment to being part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. If you do, you can become an official member by signing a membership book and, in some cases, by having the governing board vote you into membership. Membership generally means that you are able to vote in congregational meetings and that you have made a formal commitment to contribute to the life of the church. You may also become active in a Unitarian Universalist congregation without becoming an official member.

What Will Our Children Learn in Sunday School?

Our Sunday school curricula cover a wide variety of topics, including Unitarian Universalist history and principles, the Bible, world religions, images of god in different cultures, social justice, the wonder of the natural world, and ethical decision making. Sunday school classes present various viewpoints on the issues they address and encourage young people to develop their own thinking about religious questions. Because each congregation makes its own decisions about the curricula it uses, religious education programs vary from church to church. To find out more about a congregation's Sunday school offerings, try talking to a member of the committee that is responsible for religious education programming.

How Do Unitarian Universalists Handle Child Dedications, Weddings, Services of Union, Funerals, and Other Rites of Passage?

Individuals or families planning a wedding, service of union, funeral, or child dedication will usually meet with a minister to discuss their thoughts and desires. The minister will put together or work with people to design a service that meets their needs and fits within the Unitarian Universalist tradition. Unitarian Universalist services are often personalized with elements drawn from numerous sources.

Some churches will create a rite-of-passage service for a particular group within the congregation. Many of our congregations now have services for adolescents in middle or high school who are making the transition from childhood to young adulthood. These services are usually put together by the parents or other interested adults working in close cooperation with the young people.

If We Become Part of a Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Will Other Congregants Understand Our Situation?

You will find other interfaith couples in almost any Unitarian Universalist congregation that you become a part of. Many congregations have classes or groups specifically designed to help interfaith couples look at the challenges of their particular situation. In addition to other interfaith couples, each of you is likely to find individuals in the congregation who share your religious background. Because we draw people from so many different faiths, and because we also encourage individuals to explore their own religious paths, our congregations are in some sense interfaith congregations. As we make decisions together about our shared religious life, we face some of the same communication challenges that interfaith couples face when they make decisions about their religious life as a family. We welcome you to join us as we strive to worship and work together with respect, openness, and understanding.

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