

Unitarian Universalism A Welcoming Place for Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender People

Scott W. Alexander

"As a gay man, I know how lucky I am to be a Unitarian Universalist. My congregation honors all aspects of my identity, including my sexual orientation. It's a real microcosm of my ideal of a just society, where differences are celebrated and honesty is accepted and affirmed."

—Roger Jones

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
Sunnyvale, California

"I was raised in a mainstream Protestant denomination that invalidated my life as a lesbian by condemning me and others like me to invisibility. Hoping for a place to explore my spirituality, I left that denomination in pain, confusion, and separation. For ten years I had no religious community in which to live, grow, flourish as a human being. Imagine my delight at discovering in Unitarian Universalism a religious tradition that stands for the inherent worth and dignity of me. My life partner and I were welcomed into our church, accepted as a couple, and our lives were affirmed as ones of worth, importance, and visibility. I am thankful for this community that says yes to me."

—Carole Yorke

Spirit of Life Unitarian Universalists
Oldsmar, Florida

"I began attending the Unitarian Universalist Church because gay persons, both lay and clergy, were accepted in the denomination. Our congregation is working to claim for itself this Unitarian Universalist Association concept of active affirmation. Though being a partner in this process is sometimes discouraging, it is mostly challenging, exciting, and rewarding. We are truly becoming a safe and welcoming place as gays, bisexuals, and non-gays engage in open and heartfelt dialogue and gradually we are transformed."

—Pat Aungst

Unitarian Universalist Church
Bloomington, Indiana

"I have been a minister for over twenty years in the same UU congregation, and my church has been very supportive of my partner and myself. They understand that relationships are relationships, gay or straight. What I really like about Unitarian Universalists is that when they find out you're gay, lesbian, or bisexual, they don't react with shock or horror, sympathy or pity, but as if it's the most natural thing in the world, which, of course, it is for us."

—Tony Larsen

Olympia Brown Unitarian Universalist Church
Racine, Wisconsin

"Three years ago, as a Jew attending a UU Sunday service for the first time with a friend, I could not have guessed that the following month I would become a member, six months later I would feel safe enough to come out as a lesbian, and two years later I would stand up in a service and announce my upcoming holy union service! As a Unitarian Universalist I am free to choose my lifestyle, encouraged to explore my spirituality, and given the opportunity to learn and grow with people who celebrate diversity. I feel that I've truly found a home and a family."

—Leni Brown

First Unitarian Society
Plainfield, New Jersey

"As much acceptance as my partner and I have dared ask for, we've gotten. That's not saying it's always been everything we wanted, but the atmosphere and attitude are of welcoming and encouraging diversity. Unitarian Universalism lets me be me—all of the various parts that make up the whole me."

—Helene Haapala

First Universalist Church
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The living tradition of Universalism extends love and acceptance to all people, and Unitarianism recognizes the inherent good of all persons. At a time when some faith traditions are expressing deep ambivalence about whether to truly welcome bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons and others continue to express open hostility toward anyone who is of a minority in sexual orientation or gender identity, Unitarian Universalism is deepening its long-standing commitment to the full inclusion and affirmation of all persons—without regard to sexual orientation or gender identity.

In June of 1970, the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association passed its first General Resolution supporting the bisexual, gay, and lesbian communities in their struggle for equal rights and acceptance.

Since then, in the face of the widespread homophobia embedded in North American culture, the denomination has repeatedly advocated for persons of a minority in sexual orientation or gender identification—supporting human rights and legal equality for all; creating and funding the Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns (OBGLTC); encouraging ministers and congregations to conduct services of union for same-gender couples; supporting Interweave (Unitarian Universalists for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns)—a membership organization of caring religious liberals; and advocating that openly bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender ministers not face employment discrimination.

The more than one thousand member congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association have been encouraged to include and affirm bisexual, gay, lesbian, and

transgender persons in every aspect of their community life-and an ever-growing number have actively and intentionally done so.

The Unitarian Universalist commitment to become a safe and affirming place for all persons regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity took on new meaning and intensity with the passage of a resolution at the 1989 General Assembly, instituting the Welcoming Congregation program.

Acknowledging that every UU congregation reflects our society's homophobia to a degree, the delegates voted to initiate a sustained and systematic program designed to help congregations create a truly welcoming environment for all persons. In 1996, in order to be fully inclusive, the UUA recognized the need to revise the Welcoming Congregation program to address the concerns of transgender people. These "welcoming congregations" would:

- Be inclusive and expressive of the concerns of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons at every level of congregational life.
- Celebrate the lives of all people and welcome same-gender couples, recognizing their committed relationships and equally affirming displays of caring and affection with regard to sexual orientation.
- Seek to nurture ongoing dialogue between bisexual, gay, heterosexual, lesbian, and transgender persons, and create deeper trust and sharing.
- Advocate for bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, attending to legislative developments and working to promote justice, freedom, and equality in the larger society.
- Speak out when the rights of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people are at stake.

The UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns has created a wide variety of educational and programmatic materials to help Unitarian Universalists address these complex issues-and hundreds of congregations have received and used these resources. Unitarian Universalism, which has long had as its first guiding Principle the commitment to "affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person," has come further than any other North American faith tradition in welcoming and affirming bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons.

And yet the struggle against heterosexism and gender dualism in both the denomination and society at large continues. Unitarian Universalism is working hard to realize the dream of religious communities where everyone is welcomed and cherished, just for who they are.

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