

# **Unitarian Universalism, A Religious Home for Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender People**

*Barbara L. Pescan*

"I have been extraordinarily lucky. In living my life as an openly lesbian woman, I have gained far more-ininitely 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 bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender 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 gay and lesbian clergy. Unitarian Universalists have long called for the full inclusion of lesbian and gay 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. This is particularly evident in the body of resolutions passed pertaining to the rights of lesbian and gay persons.

Since 1970, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has enacted a total of fourteen resolutions in support of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender persons 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.

The resolutions passed between 1977 and 1996 charge us to address congruity with our own Principles, issues of legal equity (including advocacy for those with HIV/AIDS, in 1986), and affirm services of union (1984). In 1996 the UUA made history by being the first mainline denomination in the US to adopt a position supporting legally recognized marriage between members of the same sex.

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, lesbian, and transgender 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. The UUA has also implemented "Beyond Categorical Thinking," an equal opportunity program designed in part to settle bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender ministers in our congregations and to address bias, especially in the process of searching for a minister. Where has this brought us?

This twenty-year history of affirmation and advocacy is just the beginning. The women and men 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 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 bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender issues, our growing body of resolutions guides us. More and more people in our congregations are speaking out. More and more of us are willing to take a stand in the face of willful or ignorant homophobia. 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.

"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

### **Where does this lead us?**

We are not finished. Remember when you realized that homosexuality wasn't the problem-homophobia 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 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."

—Sean Dennison  
Berkeley, CA

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