

# Making a Home in Unitarian Universalism

*We are all on a lifelong faith journey. What an adventure!*

Your journey has brought you to a Unitarian Universalist congregation or community. You may have just signed the membership book. You may have been a part of a UU community since birth and seek new ways to become involved. Meaningful engagement will help you find your unique role in your faith home.

Unitarian Universalism is the religion of the open mind, loving heart, and helping hands. Bringing your heart, hands, and minds to your work with the congregation will turn the congregation from just a roster of interesting people with stimulating ideas to a real faith home. Have you ever established a new home? What actions did you take to turn a house into a home? Did you put your name on the mailbox, place your favorite books on the shelf, paint the walls? Claiming the congregation as your faith home requires the same kind of attention. Here are suggestions to help you settle in:

## Live with a Loving Heart

- Worship with the congregation. This is different from “attending worship.” Worship is not a spectator sport. It is the process by which we define and celebrate that which is of worth to the congregation. Come prepared to actively participate, whether you are offering the hand of friendship, singing a hymn, or discussing the sermon with a new friend after the service. Bring your whole self to worship . . . and bring it often! Regular attendance will build relationships and help you deepen your understanding of Unitarian Universalism.
- Be welcoming. Do you remember the first person to make you feel welcome? Become that person for someone else. It can be as simple as holding the door open for someone, sharing a hymnal, or saying hello to a child and calling them by name. Once you are more comfortable, introduce yourself to more people, join others for lunch or volunteer to be a greeter. Look for new faces to greet but do not assume a new face is a visitor; they could be a long-term member unable to attend recently.
- Share your truth and ask others to share theirs. Seek opportunities for deep conversation, perhaps at coffee hour, during a webinar, or in a religious education program. One of the biggest advantages of being an individual in community is that you get to hear the stories of others and learn from their experience. It might be quite different from yours. The loving heart is ready to listen deeply, open to the possibility of new truths, and willing to be transformed. This calls for staying present and engaged, even when you do not agree with others. Remember that there is seldom one right answer, but together you can solve almost any problem.
- Practice generosity and gratitude. Studies show that happy people rate themselves as generous and full of gratitude. The two are linked: When you realize the abundant blessings in your life, you will be more generous, and when you give of yourself to others, you realize your worth and are grateful. You will find many ways to be generous with your time, talent, and treasure. Try to contribute all three of these. Discern the best uses by matching your gifts with the community’s need.

## Live with Helping Hands

- Volunteer at the congregation. Co-creating the faith takes many hands. Find a volunteer opportunity that matches your interest. Teach a religious education program for children or adults. Accompany youth to a conference as an advisor. Make a flower arrangement for the altar. Participate in a grounds workday. Be a lay worship leader. Canvass. Update the congregation’s website and social media presence. Host a movie night. Support leaders by being a good team player and following through on your commitments. Don’t be afraid to

step into leadership when you are called or needed. When leading, seek additional training, delegate duties, and nurture new leaders.

- Provide financial support. The congregation has many financial needs. Ask about the yearly budget and the guidelines for pledging. Match the guidelines to what you can pledge and keep your commitment. Giving should be not a burden but a joy. Your financial gift keeps our liberal religious faith alive to be found by others who need it, just as it was there for you.
- Know and support the mission of the congregation. Ask how you can help further the mission. It makes a difference when you understand what you are working for.
- Take your UU values out into the world. Volunteering for community service or a social justice campaign provides helping hands to the world and is core to our faith. The real test of faith is not how well you keep it among like-minded people but whether it sustains your life in the world. Hold the congregation's banner during the Martin Luther King Day march. Rally at the statehouse for the rights of LGBTQ people. Sign an online petition or serve a meal at a local soup kitchen. Help children create holiday cards for troops abroad. If you need suggestions, attend a meeting of the social justice committee, look in your newsletter and on your website, or ask a staff member.

### Live with an Open Mind

- Learn about our faith at all levels. Start at your congregation or UU community. Get to know leaders and staff. Learn about your congregational governance. If you are a voting member, be informed about the issues, look at all sides, attend congregational meetings, and vote. Visit your district's or region's website, attend their conferences, meet new UUs, and find out how other congregations operate. Learn about the Unitarian Universalist Association at [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org). Find out about resources for congregations, trainings for lay leaders, and the work of the UUA in the world at large. Ask how your congregation engages with the Association. Is there a part for you to play?
- Learn UU history. Unitarian Universalism is a small denomination and its history might be less known than others, but its history is rich. Presidents, scientists, educators, humanitarians...Unitarian, Universalists, and UUs have found a myriad of ways to live out their faith in the world. Some of our history will make you proud. Some may embarrass you. All of it is part of a legacy to which you may now lay claim. And guess what? As co-creator of our living faith, you are creating the legacy for future generations. What will your legacy be?
- Engage in theological reflection and conversation. UUs embrace lifelong learning, including faith development. Look around: You are surrounded by people with all manner of theologies and beliefs. Be curious and open to new learning. Find out not only what they believe but why they believe it. Reflect upon what their belief means for you. What remnants from your religious past are you bringing with you along the rest of your journey? In religious education programs, you will engage in such questions. Participate as a learner or a teacher. Teaching children and youth is a great way to learn more about Unitarian Universalism. Talking to your minister or offering a sermon from the pulpit are other steps you may take in faith development.
- Be connected to the larger community. Join an interfaith organization that needs a liberal religious perspective. UU minister Forrest Church described the world as a cathedral with innumerable windows. The windows are different religions. Light shines through them all, but differently. Experience the light of others. Share your light.

### Expect Both Positive and Negative Experiences

Our foibles are part of what makes us human and UUs are as human as anybody else. You will, however, be less likely to have negative experiences if you can spot the signs of unhealthy behavior. Some of these include:

Fear of change

Fear of conflict

Gossip and triangulation

As a good member, you can model healthy behavior. Share your opinion, even when it differs from the majority. Examine any anxiety about change and seek ways to manage it. Do not participate in gossip; encourage people with complaints to openly air their opinions. Tolerating unhealthy behavior in yourself and in others will undermine the ministry of your faith home.

Feel ready? Keep the suggestions offered here in your backpack as your journey continues. Remember that “it is only in adventure that some people succeed in knowing themselves” (Andre Gide).

CONNIE GOODBREAD is congregational life staff for the Southern Region of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

RICHARD SPECK is retired from full-time Unitarian Universalist ministry and is a former district executive of the Joseph Priestley District of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations.

#### For Further Reading

The following books and packs of this pamphlet are available from inSpirit: The UU Books and Gift Shop at [uua.org/bookstore](http://uua.org/bookstore)

Margaret L. Beard and Roger W. Comstock. *All Are Chosen: Stories of Lay Ministry and Leadership*. Skinner House Books, 1998.

Peter Morales, ed. *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Skinner House Books, 2012.

Tom Owen-Towle. *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Skinner House Books, 2004.

Erik Walker Wikstrom. *Serving with Grace: Lay Leadership as a Spiritual Practice*. Skinner House Books, 2010.