

## Worship in UU Congregations

Worship is our shared Unitarian Universalist practice of exploring, connecting to, and creating the ways that our individual lives fit into a larger whole. Not all UUs share the same beliefs or opinions—our religious tradition doesn't expect or require consensus—but our shared worship forms a vessel for us to find meaning together. By devoting ourselves to a regular time of encountering and engaging that which is greater, wiser, and more compassionate than our individual selves, we create opportunities for transformation and healing.

Our UU congregations gather for worship in sleek, modern buildings of glass and steel; in white-steepled churches with nineteenth-century pew boxes; and in secular spaces that become sacred space once a week. A congregation's physical worship space, as well as its history, music, and leadership, can shape its culture of worship. As a result, the style and tone of UU worship can differ markedly even within the same city.

For example, while our Sunday morning services tend to follow a similar format, services created by and for youth and young adults push against traditional expectations. Another example is how our renewed collective commitment to racial justice is reshaping our approach to worship. Congregations steeped in traditional White Protestant styles of worship, or enmeshed in primarily white communities, find themselves challenged and excited as they explore new ways of living into an authentic embodiment of Unitarian Universalism.

Across these varied and evolving practices, the constant is relationship: our worship elements each have a relational purpose, connecting us to our faith, our values, or the sacred mystery in which we live.

One way that worship becomes both a collective experience and an embodied one is through **music**. In any given service, you might experience a jazz improvisation on brass and keyboard, the bone-deep rhythm of a djembe drum, or the soaring chords of a Handel oratorio. Our music professionals and other worship leaders choose music that will evoke a particular spirit or mood. From the prelude to the last strains of the postlude, you may be drawn into solemn listening or invited to sing, clap, and move your body.

The **chalice lighting**, a hallmark of most Unitarian Universalist worship, is a powerful visual symbol. Some UUs would say that the flaming chalice creates sacred space, while others consider the chalice a connection to our roots or to our UU kin around the world. However the flame is lit—and regardless of whether it is lit by a child, a family, or the minister—it's a unifying emblem for Unitarian Universalists both in and out of worship.

In order to foster a sense of multigenerational belonging, many congregations invite the children forward for a **message for all ages**. The children then often leave the worship

space—usually with a song—to engage in their religious exploration program elsewhere.

Unitarian Universalists are driven by relationship: our relationships of care and concern with one another within the congregation; our relationship with the human family beyond the congregation; and even our individual relationship with Mystery, or Wisdom, or God. All of these relationships may be further invoked during a time of **centering and grounding**.

Some of our congregations begin this centering time with an opportunity for individuals to name—either out loud, in written form, or by silently lighting a candle—the celebrations and griefs that demand the collective attention of the congregation. Many UUs cherish this public sharing of **joys and sorrows**. For those in pain, the collective witness of that grief can provide healing and comfort. For others, sharing their joy is a way of strengthening the strands of familiarity and friendship with one another.

Whether or not a congregation invites individuals to name the burdens and celebrations of their lives, nearly every UU worship service includes a combination of **silence and spoken meditation or prayer**. As with other terms of reverence and spiritual practice, we UUs encourage people to use different terms for this moment according to their beliefs and practice. Whether it's called meditation or prayer, it's an invitation to align our full attention with something greater or something internal so that the wisest voices—the most important voices—can arise from the clatter and chaos between our ears.

Most Unitarian Universalists have come to expect their worship experience to center around the **reading** of a text and the delivery of a **sermon**, most commonly by a minister. As recently as a century ago, that text was usually Christian scripture; today, the sources for UU worship services can be creative and expansive. This is true of both content—on any given Sunday the liturgy might draw from contemporary poets, science fiction, a sacred text of another religion, or pop culture—and form, as more congregations include digital media in worship, such as a slam poetry performance or a music video.

It's not unusual, in fact, for UU worship to lift up or refer to other faith traditions. We understand our faith to be an elastic, curious one—although we take pains to discern the difference between “appreciating” another tradition and appropriating it irresponsibly.

UU worship leaders balance this freedom and creativity with their responsibility to weigh words carefully, to take bold and faithful risks, and to discern when to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.” From the clergy's perspective, the purpose of a sermon isn't to entertain or inform, but to inspire or challenge the congregation. Over the course of a season or year, sermons invite free-thinking people to reflect on life's most demanding questions, to wrestle with our pain and doubts, and to discover our deepest truths.

At some point in our worship, you'll likely be reminded that Unitarian Universalist congregations are self-sustaining and that generosity is a core spiritual value. The offering is an opportunity to practice stewardship of the congregation's budget, ministries, and programs. Sometimes the congregation designates the **offering** to a local nonprofit, charity, or UU cause, allowing us to help build the Beloved Community beyond the church walls.

Rev. Alice Blair Wesley sums up the legacy and imperative of our faith this way: "We have found that there is always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world."

Worship is part of that learning. As with all aspects of congregational life, Unitarian Universalist worship is grounded in the active process of maintaining relationships of respect and mutuality. Like any relationship, those connections are alive and changing, never fixed. Something greater is created: a narrative about the people who have gathered, the values that enliven and challenge us, and our understanding of a responsibility to carry that message out into the world.

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### **Unitarian Universalist Worship Materials Collections**

WorshipWeb, [uua.org/worship](http://uua.org/worship)

The following are available from the inSpirit Book and Gift Shop at [uua.org/bookstore](http://uua.org/bookstore):

*Lifting Our Voices: Readings in the Living Tradition*

*Singing the Living Tradition* (hymns and readings)

*Las voces del camino: Un complemento de Singing the Living Tradition* (hymns)

*Singing the Journey: A Supplement to Singing the Living Tradition* (hymns)