

Session 1: Theology

Goals

Participants will:

- Explore Liberatory Theologies through the lens of the COIC report and its findings.
- Apply the findings to the context of your community.
- Articulate the importance of Liberatory Theologies to how we live our UU values in our personal and communal lives.

Materials

- Chalice and something with which to light it
- A copy of *Widening the Circle of Concern: Report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change* (2020)
- Newsprint and markers (if in-person) or a computer to post and agree upon covenant and to record contributions in the discussion period.

Preparation

- Read the front matter of the COIC report (beginning with the Preface). Read the first chapter (Trends) and the Theology chapter.
- Identify a recorder for this session.
- Review “[The 8 Guidelines for Equity and Inclusion](#)” from VISIONS, Inc. Prepare to share them with the group when you propose them (be ready to screen share if online; write on newsprint if in person). Decide how much time you will spend on amending and affirming a covenant and plan a process for participants to amend it. Note: You will need to save the covenant that the group agrees to during this session, for use in all future sessions.
- Prepare a chalice and something with which to light it.

Chalice Lighting

Say that you will share a call to worship that was written, by Viola Abbitt, for [The Promise and the Practice](#), a packet for Sunday worship centering voices of Black Unitarian Universalists, published by the UUA in 2017.

Toward a Place of Wholeness

We are Unitarian Universalists.

When we lift up our Seven Principles, some of us think of them as a form of theology—but they are more important to our collective than that:

they do not tell us what we should believe; they tell us how we should *be*.

They tell us how we should act in the larger world and with each other.

We are brought here today by the fact that Unitarian Universalism has fallen short of the image that was presented to the world, and to many of those who embraced this religion.

But we are also brought here today by the truth that Unitarian Universalism has shifted course to move toward a place of wholeness: a place that perhaps never existed for us as a denomination.

It has been a long, and sometimes unforgiving road to today. But we are here today because we are mindful of that past, and because we have hope for the future. We want the practice of this faith to be a fulfilling manifestation of its promise.

Open your hearts. Seek new ways of understanding.

Come, let us worship together.

Light the chalice.

Covenanting

Tell the group that, before diving into the COIC report and recommendations, they must together agree on guidelines for how they will work together to study and implement the report. Say that the guidelines, or covenant, can be viewed as a living document that can be amended and revised throughout the group’s work.

Offer “[The 8 Guidelines for Equity and Inclusion](#)” from VISIONS, Inc., one of the organizations that assisted the UUA Commission on Institutional Change. Invite the group to agree to them as guidelines that particularly work for multicultural organizations. Lead a brief process for amendments to the guidelines that people feel are important. If needed, ask the group to “try on” these guidelines rather than engaging in a long process of reworking them.

Choose someone to record and display the agreed-upon guidelines—on newsprint if meeting in-person; via computer if meeting online. Save the agreed-upon guidelines for use in future sessions.

Discussion

Invite the group to start this discussion by sharing their particular understandings of the meaning of theology and how it contributes to or gives shape to their personal lives. Then, as a group, reflect how you have witnessed Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist theologies expressed, or not expressed, in the programs of your congregation.

Note that this study/action that the group is beginning is neither focused solely on justice nor solely on spirituality. Say that the report raises the point that “Justice-seeking practices cannot be used as surrogates for deepening our spiritual lives” (p.10). The report notes that justice-seeking disconnected from spiritual practices and spiritual reflections may lead down the path of burnout.

Now offer another point from the report: The report discusses our movement’s lack of investment in sustaining our inherited theological tradition and a failure to nurture a fertile ground for its development. We read, “In an age when so many struggle to find meaning, a community formed through a set of commonly held beliefs can form a stronger bond than one formed through antipathy towards rejected beliefs (p.14).” Lead a discussion on the following questions, reminding the volunteer recorder to note responses.

How can we as a community move away from an attitude that puts emphasis on rejected beliefs? How can we embrace a posture of working through honest and robust engagement? How can we move toward commonly held beliefs and practices based on our inherited tradition?

What kinds of programming and activities could help members of our community to gain a rich and deep understanding of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist theologies? In what ways could we intentionally and courageously make space for learning from people often marginalized in our communities?

Say you will next invite the group to address the COIC recommendations presented in this chapter. Lead a discussion using these questions:

- The first recommendation questions a prevalent assumption among UUs: “that you can believe whatever you want and be a Unitarian Universalists.” Our shared faith is a covenantal faith that presents us with a theological container in which we can hold multiple religious belongings and theological understandings. What shift would happen in our communities if we were to be intentional about understanding, interpreting, and sharing with others our views of our movement’s theological container?
- The second and third recommendations call us into an encounter with the liberatory potentials of our theological inheritance. It asks us to acknowledge antioppression work as a theological mandate of our faith. How could such a mandate find expression in our worship? In our congregational life? In our community relations, particularly alongside marginalized members of our faith as well as in the larger community?
- The fourth and last recommendation reminds us of the covenantal nature of our faith. How do you understand the significance of being a covenantal faith for the present and future thriving of the faith?
- Reflecting on the four recommendations in this chapter, what are the barriers to their implementation, and what changes are needed in order to overcome them?

Closing and Next Actions

Invite the group into a closing ritual: Ask volunteers to read aloud the Take-Aways at the end of the Theology chapter. You may extinguish the chalice while participants read.

Remind the group that both study and action are the purposes of this group. Offer a quick check-out. Ask the following questions and invite each participant to take a moment to reflect and then to respond in one sentence to any of these:

What is one idea you want to continue to think about before our next discussion?

What are the short-term actions that we should consider or take to translate this discussion into action?

What are the longer scope actions?

What is an element that makes the hard work meaningful and worthwhile for this group?