

FRANCISCAN SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM AND CHRISTIANITY:
WHERE DID WE COME FROM? WHO ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING?

A CURRICULUM
ON THE EARLY HISTORIES
OF UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM
IN THE UNITED STATES

BY
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Session 1: Introduction and Overview of the Program

Session Goals

- To develop group cohesiveness
- To provide an overview of the program
- To identify individuals' interest areas
- To determine individuals' experiences with the subject matter

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, participants will be able to:

- Identify the major components of the program
- Articulate their expectations of the program

Session at a Glance

- Welcome and Introductions (10 mins)
- Opening (5 mins)
- Activities
- Mapping (20 mins)
- Participant Expectations (10 mins)
- Program Overview (10 mins)
- Closing (5 mins)

Materials Checklist

Chalice

Candle

Matches

Nametags

Markers

Easel paper

- 4 Pre-made signs entitled: "Strongly Agree;" "Strongly Disagree;" "Strongly Like;" and "Strongly Dislike"

Blue painter's tape

Index cards

Pens

Copies of Handout 1

Copies of Handout 2

Preparation

Read the session plan. Make four signs to post on the walls for the mapping activity: one reading “Strongly Agree;” one reading “Strongly Disagree;” one reading “Strongly Like;” and one reading “Strongly Dislike.” Make sure the signs are large enough to be read from across the room. Make copies of Handouts 1 and 2 for Session 1.

Session Plan

Welcome and Introductions (10 minutes)

1. Welcome participants to Unitarian Universalism’s History with Christianity
2. Introduce yourself, explain how you will be facilitating the program, and provide any background information about yourself that is relevant to the program.
3. Ask participants to introduce themselves, with their names, ages, and how they came to be in the program.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church’s chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry’s: “As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life’s gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love.”
3. Take a moment of silence.

Activities

1. Group Mapping (20 minutes)

Have the group stand in the middle of the room, with all the chairs and tables cleared out so there is space to move around the room. Have signs posted at the ends of both axes of the room. On one axis, post the signs “strongly agree” on one end and “strongly disagree” on the other. On the other axis, post the signs “strongly like” on one end, and “strongly dislike” on the other. Tell the participants you are going to read a series of sentences that either explain experiences (in the church, in life, etc) or ideas. If a participant has had a strong version of that experience or strongly believes in that idea, then they should go to the end of the room by the sign reading “strongly agree.” If they have never had that experience, or do not believe in that idea, then they should go to the side of the room by the sign that reads “strongly disagree.” If they enjoyed that experience, or like that idea, they would head toward the side of the room by the sign reading “strongly like,” while if they disliked the experience or idea, they would travel to the side of the room by the sign reading “strongly dislike.” Similarly, if they have not had the experience, but would like to have it, they would travel to the side with “strongly disagree” but on the end of “strongly like.” If they have not had the experience but would not like to have it, they would travel to the end of the room with “strongly disagree,” but on the “strongly dislike” end of it. All shades of grey exist between and among the poles.

For instance, a participant may feel neutrally about an idea or an experience, and place themselves in the middle of the room, or may moderately dislike an idea and place themselves halfway to the “dislike” sign. Let the participants know that if being forthright about an experience or a statement feels uncomfortable for them, to simply lie or move to a place in the room that does feel comfortable. Avoid calling out experiences you think would be too difficult for your group.

Read the following list of experiences, and/or any others that you have come up with:

- I have been a Unitarian Universalist all my life
- I am new to Unitarian Universalism
- I have been a member of this church for over ten years
- I came to Unitarian Universalism from a Christian Church
- I have never been to a Christian Church
- I was baptized as a Christian
- I experienced racism in Christianity
- I have had positive interactions with Christianity
- I have experienced racism in Unitarian Universalism
- I take communion
- I know where the word “Unitarian” comes from
- I have experienced sexism in Christianity
- I sing hymns
- The United States is a Christian nation
- I have experienced homophobia in Christianity
- I came to Unitarian Universalism to escape Christianity
- Unitarian Universalism has Christian roots
- I have no experience with Christianity
- I read the Bible
- I am a Universalist
- I have read the *Humanist Manifesto*
- I pray

- I have read Channing's "Unitarian Christianity"
- This church is the first church I have attended in my life
- I feel uncomfortable around Christians
- I have experienced homophobia in Unitarian Universalism
- I believe in God
- I have been hurt by Christianity
- Unitarian Universalist churches do not talk about Jesus
- I have experienced sexism in Unitarian Universalism
- I have shopped around to find the right church for me
- I am a history buff
- I meditate
- I have read Emerson's Divinity School Address
- I have told other people what they should or should not believe
- I have been told by other people what I should or should not believe

Bring the group back together, and ask anyone if they would like to reflect on the experience of the mapping exercise.

2. Program Overview (10 minutes)

Pass out Handout 1, and go over it with the participants. Explain to them that the goals and assumptions of this program are:

Program Goals (Handout 1):

- to learn about Unitarian Universalism's History with Christianity;
- to discuss where we have been as a faith and how that impacts our current experience as Unitarian Universalists;
- to develop a better understanding of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist Christianity; and
- to provide the ground for more healthy and constructive relationships between Unitarian Universalists and Christians.

Program Assumptions (Handout 1, cont.)

- We learn about our present when we learn about our past.
- Increased knowledge of our past provides the opportunity for understanding self and others.
- Understanding self and others is necessary for healthy relationships.
- Healthy relationships are the building blocks of the beloved community and of a just society.

Pass out Handout 2 to participants, and read over it with them. Ask if anyone has any burning subjects or questions not covered on the overview, and note them. Then ask participants if they have any special interest in any of the subjects that are on the program, and note them. Keep these notes for the program so you can be prepared for the issues that may come up in each session. Review the times and dates for your sessions.

3. Participant Expectations (10 minutes)

Distribute index cards to the participants. Tell them not to write their name on their card because you will collect the cards anonymously in order to guide the program. Ask them to write down and complete the following sentences:

As we are beginning this program, I am most apprehensive about _____.

As we are beginning this program, I am most looking forward to _____.

As we are beginning this program, the biggest question I have is _____.

Then ask the participants to pair up with another person and read their cards to each other as they are comfortable. Collect the cards.

Closing (5 minutes)

1. Go around the room, and have each participant say their name again along with an adjective that begins with the same letter (for instance, Jumping Jennifer, or Absolute Abbey).
2. Extinguish the chalice, either using your church's chalice extinguishing words, or you can use: "As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world."

Handout 1

Session 1: Introduction and Overview of the Program

Program Goals and Assumptions

Program Goals:

- To learn about Unitarian Universalism's History with Christianity;
- To discuss where we have been as a faith and how that impacts our current experience as Unitarian Universalists;
- To develop a better understanding of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist Christianity; and
- To provide the ground for more healthy and constructive relationships between Unitarian Universalists and Christians.

Program Assumptions:

- We learn about our present when we learn about our past.
- Increased knowledge of our past provides the opportunity for understanding self and others.
- Understanding self and others is necessary for healthy relationships.
- Healthy relationships are the building blocks of the beloved community and of a just society.

Handout 2

Session 1: Introduction and Overview of the Program

Program Overview

Session 1: Introduction and Overview of the Program

Session 2: The Roots of Unitarianism

Session 3: The Roots of Universalism

Session 4: Creedal and Non-creedal approaches in Unitarianism and Universalism in the late 1800s

Session 5: The Rise of Humanism in Unitarianism

Session 6: Closing—Unitarian Universalism’s Relationship with Christianity Today

Session 2: The Roots of Unitarianism

Session Goals

- To increase awareness of the roots of US Unitarianism
- To connect those roots to contemporary Unitarian Universalist issues

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, participants will be able to:

- Articulate a basic sketch of the beginning of US Unitarianism
- Identify one connection between Unitarianism's roots and issues in the present-day church

Session at a Glance

Opening (10 mins)

Activities

Reading: Channing vs. the Calvinists (20 minutes)

Pamphlet War! (15 minutes)

Closing (15 mins)

Materials Checklist

Chalice

Candle

Matches

Nametags

Markers

Paper: sheets of 8 ½ x 11 paper cut in half vertically

Blue painter's tape

Pens

Copies of Handout 3

Preparation

Review the cards from the first session to see if anyone listed issues about the beginning of Unitarianism they would like to investigate. If so, be sure to have background on that issue prepared. Cut enough sheets of 8 ½ x 11 paper vertically that everyone in your group will be able to have at least 6 pieces of the half-sheets.

Session Plan

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church's chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry's: "As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life's gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love."
3. Read the following quote from Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker, the President of the UU Starr King School for the Ministry, in her 2003 address "Under Construction: Knowing and Transforming Our Unitarian Universalist Theological House" presented at *Collegium*:

"Rather than viewing human beings as born sinners, depraved of the capacity to know or do what is good, whose wills are in bondage to evil, and whose destinies are pre-ordained by an all-knowing and all-determining Sovereign God, Channing spoke of human beings as created in the image of God, inherently good, possessing an array of powers of the soul that when unfolded and directed aright enable the human being to grow in likeness to God, to be a manifestation of divinity."
(Parker, "Under Construction," 11)

Have each participant pair up with another participant. Tell them to choose who will be Partner A and who will be Partner B. Then tell them Partner A will have 1 minute to complete the following sentence: "Hearing that quote made me think of _____." Tell Partner B to listen attentively to Partner A. Time them, and ring a bell at the end of one minute. Then tell them that Partner B will have 1 minute to complete the same sentence, as Partner A listens attentively. Time them, and ring a bell at the end of one minute.

Activities

1. Reading: Channing vs the Calvinists (20 minutes)

Explain to the group that Unitarians are the direct descendants of the Puritans. Beginning at the turn of the 19th century, Unitarian theology was a liberal reaction against Calvinist theologies that claimed the essential depravity of humankind. US Unitarianism began with liberal Henry Ware's election to an important post in Harvard Divinity School over conservative objections, and an ensuing pamphlet fight. William Ellery Channing came out as the liberal leader in 1819 when he articulated "Unitarian Christianity" in a sermon by that name. (Robinson, 1985, 4)

Pass out Handout 3 to the participants. Ask for two volunteers—one to read the excerpt from "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," and the other to read an excerpt from "Unitarian Christianity." Before reading the "Sinners" excerpt, explain that it was a sermon preached by Jonathan Edwards in 1741 and is a classic example of Calvinist theology. Also explain that while Edwards and Channing were not contemporaries (Edwards died 20 years before Channing was born, and preached this sermon 60 years before Channing preached Unitarian Christianity), this sermon is a classic example of Calvinist theology. Have the volunteer read it, and then break the group into pairs again, and have them choose Partner A and Partner B. Tell them that Partner B has 1 minute to complete the following sentence, while Partner A listens: "Hearing that sermon made me feel _____." Time them, and ring a bell after one minute. Have them switch, and tell them that Partner A has one minute to complete the sentence while Partner B listens. Again, time them, and ring a bell after one minute.

Then have the other volunteer read the excerpt from Channing's "Unitarian Christianity." Again, break in to pairs and repeat the previous exercise, this time responding to the Channing reading.

2. Pamphlet War! (15 minutes)

Pass out strips of paper (8 ½ x 11 sheets cut in half vertically, so they are about the size of a pamphlet), and markers. Explain to the participants that although these two sermons were not part of the pamphlet war that ensued after Henry Ware's election to the post at Harvard Divinity School, they are good examples of the theology of the two sides: Calvinism versus the burgeoning liberals, who later (in 1918 with Channing's sermon) claimed the name "Unitarians." Tell the group they are going to have their own pamphlet war, and even if it is not as well-read (the pamphlets arguing over theology were best sellers at the time), it will be fun. Ask them to write down a word they believe encapsulates each side's theological position on the pamphlets—one word per pamphlet. They can come up with additional words if they would like, but they need to make at least one "pamphlet" for the Calvinists, and one for the liberals (eventually named Unitarians). Then divide the group in half, and have them go to opposite sides of the room, facing each other. Call one side the Calvinists, and the other side the Liberals. Then have them go back and forth between the sides, saying one word at a time to the other side, like a one-word debate. Alternate, one word per side, until each side has exhausted their words. Then switch sides—the folks who were the Calvinists are now the Liberals, and the folks who were the Liberals are now the Calvinists. Alternate between the two sides again until all the words are exhausted. If it seems appropriate for the group and you do not mind cleaning it up, you can have the participants make their pamphlets into paper airplanes and throw them across the room at one another during the debate. Otherwise, a demonstrative flaring and waving the pamphlets around should provide sufficient dramatic effect.

Bring the group back together. Explain that the New England churches split between this new liberalism and Calvinism, and that in 1820, a legal ruling over a split at Dedham, Massachusetts gave many of the Unitarians involved in split churches control of the original church buildings and properties. This is how many of Puritan churches in Massachusetts became Unitarian.

(Robinson, 1985, 5)

Break the group back into pairs, and again have them choose Partner A and Partner B. While Partner A listens for one minute, have Partner B complete the following sentence: "Doing this exercise and learning about Unitarian roots makes me want to _____." Time them, and ring a bell after one minute. Have them switch, and have Partner B listen while Partner A completes the same sentence in one minute. Time them, and ring a bell after one minute.

Closing (15 minutes)

1. Open the floor for reflection on the activities and the information. How do people feel? Do they have burning thoughts or questions? How does this story relate to Unitarian Universalism today? Give time for processing and reflection.
2. Extinguish the chalice, either using your church's chalice extinguishing words, or say, "As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world."

An Example of Calvinist Theology

Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” Sermon, 1741

“...There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of; there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

You are probably not sensible of this; you find you are kept out of hell, but do not see the hand of God in it; but look at other things, as the good state of your bodily constitution, your care of your own life, and the means you use for your own preservation. But indeed these things are nothing; if God should withdraw his hand, they would avail no more to keep you from falling, than the thin air to hold up a person that is suspended in it.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell than a spider’s web would have to stop a falling rock. Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to bondage because of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain a flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God’s enemies...”

(Edwards 2003)

The First Public Claim of US Unitarian Christianity

William Ellery Channing, excerpts from “Unitarian Christianity,” 1819

“...We believe in the moral perfection of God. We consider no part of theology so important as that which treats of God’s moral character, and we value our views of Christianity chiefly as they assert his amiable and venerable attributes.

... We conceive that Christians have generally leaned towards a very injurious view of the Supreme Being. They have too often felt as if he were raised, by his greatness and sovereignty, above the principles of morality, above those eternal laws of equity and rectitude to which all other beings are subjected.

We believe, that in no being is the sense of right so strong, so omnipotent, as in God. We believe that his almighty power is entirely submitted to his perceptions of rectitude; and this is the ground of our piety. It

is not because he is our Creator merely, but because he created us for good and holy purposes; it is not because his will is irresistible, but because his will is the perfection of virtue, that we pay him allegiance. We cannot bow before a being, however great and powerful, who governs tyrannically. We respect nothing but excellence, whether on earth or in heaven. We venerate, not the loftiness of God's throne, but the equity and goodness in which it is established. We believe that God is infinitely good, kind, benevolent, in the proper sense of these words; good in disposition, as well as in act; good, not to a few, but to all; good to every individual, as well as to the general system..."

(Channing 1957)

Session 3: The Roots of Universalism

Session Goals

- To increase awareness of the roots of US Universalism
- To connect those roots to contemporary UU issues

Learning Objectives

After completing this session, participants will be able to:

- Articulate a basic sketch of the beginning of US Universalism
- Identify one connection between Universalism's roots and issues in the present-day church

Session at a Glance

Opening (10 mins)

Activities

Who is saved? (15 minutes)

Reading: The Winchester Profession (10 minutes)

Similarities and Differences in the Origins of Unitarianism and Universalism (15 minutes)

Closing (10 mins)

Materials Checklist

Chalice

Candle

Matches

Markers

Easel paper

- o 2 pre-written pieces entitled "Similarities"
- o 2 pre-written pieces entitled "Differences"

Blue painter's tape

Pens

Copies of Handout 4

Preparation

Review the cards from the first session, and see if anyone listed issues about the beginning of Universalism they would like to investigate, and have any relevant background material prepared. Prepare and post the similarities and differences easel paper on the wall.

Session Plan

Opening (10 minutes)

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church's chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry's: "As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life's gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love."
3. Invite the group to sing a couple of rounds of the chorus of "When the Saints Go Marching In":

Oh when the saints, go marching in
When the saints go marching in,
Oh Lord I want to be in that number,
When the saints go marching in

After singing, ask the group what the song brought up for them and discuss it for a couple of minutes. Then explain that although the song is a Spiritual and not a Protestant hymn, it shares the idea that only some people will be going to heaven. Calvinism taught that some people would go to heaven and not others, and that God had predetermined those who would be saved and those who would be damned. According to this belief, humans could do nothing about God's selection. The role of the church was to identify these people, "the Elect," and shelter them. Universalism was the theological movement rebelling against this idea. Universalists claimed that a loving God would save all people—universal salvation, or "Universalism."

Activities

1. Who is saved? (15 minutes)

Explain to the group that on Sundays in a Calvinist church in New England in the 18th century, the minister would go through the crowd and identify "the Elect" in the church pews. Choose a number, 1-20, and ask the participants to guess it. Have whoever is closest to the number act as the "minister" for this exercise. Have the rest of the group sit in the chairs you have arranged as "pews" (you can join them if you like). Then have the minister go around, put their hand over each participant's head, and announce "Elect!" or "Damned!" as they choose. After the first round of this, go around the group in a circle, including the person who played the minister, and have them share one word about how they felt during the exercise. Switch ministers a few times and repeat the exercise if it feels right, but do not push it if people are getting upset. After the exercise is complete, ask the ministers to share how they made their decisions about election vs. damnation. What sort of reasons for identify a person as saved or damned does the group think Calvinist ministers had?

Then explain that the first Universalists were ministers who started rebelling against this Calvinist doctrine of the elect. Their liberal message was one of universal salvation. John Murray was the first Universalist leader. He arrived in the United States from England in 1770 and preached universal salvation. He established his Universalist Church in 1779 in Gloucester, MA. However, the majority of early Universalist leaders came to Universalism through their own reflection, and often through Baptist evangelicalism. Caleb Rich is one such early leader who formed the first Universalist society in the United States in 1774. (Robinson, *Unitarians and Universalists*, 48-50)

2. Reading: The Winchester Profession (Handout 4) (10 minutes)

Distribute Handout 4 to the participants, and select three volunteers to read each of the three articles. Explain that the Universalists set their creed in 1803 in Winchester, New Hampshire. It was called the “Winchester Profession.” Have the volunteers read it.

3. Similarities and Differences in the Origins of Unitarianism and Universalism (15 minutes)

Explain that immediately following the Winchester Profession, American Universalist leader Hosea Ballou published *A Treatise on Atonement*. Ballou was (and is) recognized as Universalism’s theological leader in the 19th century. Ballou’s *Treatise* challenged the idea that Jesus’ death on the cross was required to appease an angry God. Rather, Jesus was evidence of God’s enduring love for humanity, and human beings were the ones transformed by Jesus, not God.

Then refer to your four posted pieces of easel paper on the wall, two with the title “similarities” and two with the title “differences.” Ask the group to remember last session, and the origins of American Unitarianism. After having read the Winchester Profession and having heard some of Hosea Ballou’s *Treatise on Atonement*, ask them what they notice as similarities between the beginnings of US Universalism and US Unitarianism. What do they notice as differences? As the group comes up with them, write them up on the easel paper.

Then repeat the exercise for the similarities and differences between Unitarianism and Universalism at its origins, and Unitarian Universalism today. What is similar between then and now? What is different?

Closing (10 minutes)

1. Open the floor for reflection on the activities and the information. How do people feel? Do they have burning thoughts or questions? Give time for processing and reflection.
2. Extinguish the chalice, either using your church’s chalice extinguishing words, or say, “As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world.”

Handout 4

Session 3: The Roots of Universalism

The Universalists' Creed

The Winchester Profession, 1803

Article I: We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II: We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III: We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practice good works; for these things are good and profitable unto men.

(Whittemore 1840)

Session 4: Creedal and Non-creedal Approaches in Unitarianism and Universalism in the late 1800s

Session Goals

- To understand the roots of Unitarianism's Non-creedalism
- To understand the roots of Universalism's Creedalism
- To connect those roots to contemporary UU issues

Learning Objectives

After this session, participants will be able to:

- Explain the difference between Creedalism and Non-creedalism
- Articulate the origins of Unitarianism's Non-creedalism
- Articulate the origins of Universalism's Creedalism
- Identify one connection between these first decisions on creed and contemporary UU issues

Session at a Glance

Opening (3 mins)

Activities

What is a creed? (10 mins)

Unitarians struggle over and then reject Creedalism (10 mins)

Write a Creed for Yourself and Your Church (14 mins)

Universalists adopt and then reaffirm a Creed (5 mins)

What are the effects of adopting a Creed? How does it affect our church today? (10 mins)

Closing (3 mins)

Materials Checklist

Chalice

Candle

Matches

Markers

Easel paper

- Pre-written definition of "creed" on easel paper
- Pre-written "Winchester Profession" on easel paper
- 3 pieces of easel paper with the pre-written titles: "Effects of Adopting a Creed;" "Effects of Being Non-creedal;" and "How We See This at Work in Our Church Today."

Blue painter's tape

Paper: one sheet of 8 1/2x11 per participant

Pens

Preparation

Review the cards from the first session, and see if anyone listed issues about beliefs and/or creeds in 19th Century Unitarianism or Universalism they would like to investigate. Read over the story of the process of Unitarian non-creedalism and prepare to explain it to the group. Prepare the 5 pieces of pre-written easel paper for the session.

Session Plan

Opening (3 minutes)

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church's chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry's: "As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life's gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love."

Activities

1. What is a creed? (10 minutes)

Ask your group to define the term "creed." Either popcorn-style or by calling on people, solicit a shared definition of "creed" and write it up on easel paper. Have another piece of easel paper at the ready with the following definition of creed already written out: "A stated system, doctrine or formula of belief shared by a religious community, usually presented as a summary statement of the community's core beliefs." How does the definition you created together compare to this definition? Notice where your group had different ideas than this definition, and encourage curiosity about where those ideas came from and what they mean. Explore how participants feel about creeds.

2. Unitarians struggle over and then reject creedalism (10 minutes)

Tell your group that Unitarianism has a long history of struggling with identity and creed. When Henry Bellows tried to organize the first conference of US in 1865, he faced resistance on two grounds: 1. That a national organization was anathema to Unitarianism's foundation of congregationalism; and 2. That a national organization would require a creed, which was opposed by the faith's radicals and transcendentalists, who were already distancing themselves from Christianity. The transcendentalists, beginning with Emerson, had already broadened the definition of God's revelation from the Bible alone. They claimed nature was God's *direct* revelation and in the 1840s began using anthologies of other religions' scripture, as well as literature, in church. Bellows' intent for the 1865 National Conference was therefore to "reorganize[e] the whole denomination on the basis of work, not creed," (Robinson 1985, 92). The National Conference was successful, and Unitarians began organizing nationally despite suspicion from the radicals. Radicals dominated the Western Unitarian Conference and when a few conservative ministers there pushed the idea of adopting a creed, the Conference declared itself non-

creedal in 1875 and again in 1886. Out of this struggle came one of the most admired statements of Unitarian belief, “The Things Most Commonly Believed To-day Among Us,” written by radical leader William Channing Gannett. When the Western Controversy came to the national stage, the National Conference of Unitarians also declared itself non-creedal in 1894. (Robinson 1985, 117-122)

3. Write a creed for yourself and your church (14 minutes)

Pass out Handouts 5 and 6 and ask participants to consider the statements in them. Although the Unitarians decided to be non-creedal, they did, and still do, make statements of belief. These statements are not binding, but they do contain “Things Most Commonly Believed To-day Among Us,” and invite people who are “in general sympathy” with those things to affiliate. What else do participants notice about the statements? Do they feel in general sympathy with them? Why or why not? Pass out pieces of paper and ask the participants to write their own “creed.” Tell them to use one side of the paper to write their *own* creed, and the other side to write a creed for their church. Give them 5-7 minutes to do this, and tell them it does not need to be exhaustive, perfect, or final. Bring the group back together and ask them to notice the differences and similarities between their creed and the one they wrote for their church. How do they feel about this? How do they feel about this exercise? Ask for a few volunteers to share one or both of their creeds. Do the participants have similar creeds written for the church? Did anyone write the 7 Principles?

4. Universalists adopt and then reaffirm a creed (5 minutes)

Remind the group that Universalism adopted a creed in 1803, and ask them if anyone remembers from the previous session the name of that creed, or any of its content. Have a piece of easel paper with the Winchester Profession written on it, and hang it up. Remind them that you distributed a copy of this Profession to them in previous session. Then tell them the Universalists reaffirmed this creed in 1870—over half a century after they adopted it—with no revisions. Explain that the Universalists defined themselves by their central doctrine of universal salvation, and had much less theological innovation and controversy than the Unitarians. Their attention focused more of their attention on their work in the world. Throughout the 19th (and in to the 20th) century, Universalists were active in working for social justice—what they saw as the will of God on earth.

5. What are the effects of adopting a creed? How does it affect our church today? (10 minutes)

Ask participants to compare and contrast the Unitarian and Universalist approaches to creed. What are some of the effects of adopting a creed? Of being officially non-creedal? How do we see these consequences at work in our church today? Have three pieces of easel paper taped up to take notes on the discussion: one entitled “Effects of Adopting a Creed;” one entitled “Effects of Being Non-creedal;” and one entitled “How We See This at Work in Our Church Today.”

Closing (3 minutes)

1. Extinguish the chalice, either using your church’s chalice extinguishing words, or say, “As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world.”

Handout 5
Session 4

Unitarians' First Statements of Non-creedalism

“The Western Unitarian Conference conditions its fellowship on no dogmatic tests but welcomes all thereto who desire to work with it in advancing the kingdom of God.”

-The Western Unitarian Conference, 1874 (Robinson 1985, 117)

“The Conference of Unitarian and other Christian Churches was formed in the year 1865, with the purpose of strengthening the churches and societies which should unite in it for more and better work for the kingdom of God. These churches accept the religion of Jesus, holding, in accordance with his teaching, that practical religion is summed up in love to God and God to man. The Conference recognizes the fact that its constituency is Congregational in tradition and polity. Therefore, it declares that nothing in this constitution is to be construed as an authoritative test; and we cordially invite to our working fellowship any who, while differing from us in belief, are in general sympathy with our spirit and our practical aims.”

-The National Conference of Unitarians, 1894 (Cooke 1902, 229)

Things Most Commonly Believed To-day Among Us

We believe that to love the good and live the good is the supreme thing in religion:

We hold reason and conscience to be final authorities in matters of religious belief:

We honor the Bible and all inspiring scripture, old or new:

We revere Jesus and all holy souls that have taught men truth and righteousness and love, as prophets of religion:

We believe in the growing nobility of Man:

We trust the unfolding Universe as beautiful, beneficent, unchanging Order; to know this Order is truth; to obey it is right, and liberty, and stronger life:

We believe that good and evil inevitably carry their own recompense, no good thing being failure and no evil success; that heaven and hell are states of being; that no evil can befall the good man in either life or death; that all things work together for the victory of Good:

We believe that we ought to join hands and work to make the good things better and the worst good, counting nothing good for self that is not good for all:

We believe that this self-forgetting, loyal life awakes in man the sense of union, here and now, with things eternal,--the sense of deathlessness; and this sense is to us an earnest of a life to come:

We worship One-in-All,--that Life whence suns and stars derive their orbits and the soul of man its Ought,--that Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world, giving us power to become the sons of God,--that Love with whom our souls commune. This One we name,--the Eternal God, our Father.

-The Western Unitarian Conference's statement of principles, authored by William Channing Gannet, adopted by the Conference as non-binding in 1887 (Robinson 1985, 121)

Session 5: Humanism and Theism

Session Goals

- To increase awareness of the roots of Religious Humanism in Unitarianism
- To connect those roots to contemporary UU issues
- To investigate the historical relationship between Religious Humanism and Theism in UUism

Learning Objectives

After this session, participants will be able to:

- Articulate when and how the Religious Humanist movement began in Unitarianism
- Articulate the basic theological tenets of Religious Humanism
- Identify one point of disagreement between Religious Humanism and Theism
- Discuss how their church approaches the conversation between Humanism and Theism today

Session at a Glance

Opening (5 mins)

Activities

Introduction to Humanism (15 mins)

Our Reaction to The Humanist Manifesto (15 mins)

Humanism and Theism in Our Church Today (20 mins)

Closing (5 mins)

Materials Checklist

Chalice

Candle

Matches

Nametags

Markers: red, yellow, and green

Blue painters' tape

Easel paper

- Pre-written Humanist Manifesto on easel paper
- Two sheets of easel paper with the pre-written titles "Humanism" and "Theism"

Copies of Handout 7

Preparation

Review the cards from the first session, and see if anyone listed issues about humanism and/or theism they would like to investigate. Read over the story of the origins of Religious Humanism in Unitarianism and prepare to explain it to the group. In some churches, this session could be particularly contentious. If you do not have a sense of this yourself, have a conversation with your minister prior to this session to see what sort of issues your church has had with humanism and theism. Ask your minister for advice on how to tailor this session for your group. Prepare the Humanist Manifesto on easel paper as well as the two pieces of easel paper entitled “Humanism” and “Theism” for the session.

Session Plan

Opening (5 minutes)

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church’s chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry’s: “As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life’s gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love.”

Activities

1. Introduction to Humanism (15 minutes)

Starting in the 1920s and 1930s, some Unitarian ministers were moving away from Christianity and developing a new theological position that came to be called Religious Humanism. Unitarian ministers and theologians Curtis W. Reese and John H. Deitrich led this theological shift from basing religion on God to basing it on humanity. Religious Humanism evolved in the context of modernism, and was marked by faith in reason, science, progress, freedom, democracy, and naturalism. Religious Humanists believed traditional religion would die from the modern advances of science and reason, and that a humanist approach to religion would rescue religion’s vital ethics from obscurity and irrelevance. The Humanist ideas that were being born in the 1920s were first expounded in the 1927 *Humanist Sermons*, edited by Reese, and famously circulated in the 1933 *Humanist Manifesto*.

Distribute the *Humanist Manifesto*, and go around the room, having participants read the various paragraphs. After you have finished reading it, get a few general reactions. Does this sound familiar? Current? Out-dated? Notice if there are any trends in the reactions in the room. Are they generational? Ethnic? Geographic? Gendered?

2. Our Reaction to *The Humanist Manifesto* (15 minutes)

Hang up pieces of easel paper with the *Manifesto* written on it around the room. Tell participants you are going to use different colored markers to circle the parts of the *Manifesto* that seem true in the church today (green), that seem out-dated (yellow), or with which participants disagree (red). Tell them there are no right or wrong answers, and that any one piece of the Manifesto might be circled in two or three colors, as different participants might agree or disagree with it. Notice what portions of the Manifesto get the most circles, and where participants agree or disagree with each other.

3. Humanism and Theism in Our Church Today (20 minutes)

After the exercise, tell the participants that when Religious Humanism first entered the theological stage in Unitarianism, it was controversial, but was eventually accepted and has risen to prominence as our most dominant theological orientation. The debate between Theism and Religious Humanism characterized Unitarian theology of the 20th century. The most common humanist critiques of theism and theist critiques of humanism from the 1920s and 30s continued through the 20th century and in to present-day Unitarian Universalist churches. Hang up two pieces of easel paper, one entitled “Religious Humanism” and the other entitled “Theism.” Have your participants share their reactions to, and the pros and cons of, both theological positions, and write them up on each sheet of paper. [Background information for the session leaders: The Humanist critiques of Theism are laid out clearly in the *Manifesto*. Common Theist critiques of Humanism include: Is Humanism adequate as a sustaining vehicle for religious belief and ethical action?; Can Humanism’s optimistic faith in the goodness of human nature stand up against the massive cruelty and violence in the world?; Is Humanism inextricably tied up in a problematic modernist belief in un-ending progress?; and Does Humanism put an extreme emphasis on the individual, to the detriment of the community?.] Notice if there are generational, ethnic, geographic, or gendered patterns in the comments of your participants.

Ask participants if they think this debate is alive in their church today, and if their church’s theology and/or culture is more Humanist, Theist, or both. Ask them if the discussion in their church feels like a competition, an experience of *either* Humanism *or* Theism, or if their church is a both/and place where Humanism and Theism live together. Ask them if it is important to them for their church to be either/or, and/or both/and.

Closing (5 minutes)

1. Do a go-around check out with participants, asking them each to finish the sentence: “As we leave the session today, I feel_____.” Be sure to note any powerful feelings in this go around, and share them with your minister and/or your pastoral care team at the church, if necessary.
2. Extinguish the chalice, either using your church’s chalice extinguishing words, or say, “As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world.”

The Humanist Manifesto

FIRST: Religious humanists regard the universe as self-existing and not created.

SECOND: Humanism believes that man is a part of nature and that he has emerged as a result of a continuous process.

THIRD: Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualism of mind and body must be rejected.

FOURTH: Humanism recognizes that man's religious culture and civilization, as clearly depicted by anthropology and history, are the product of a gradual development due to his interaction with his natural environment and with his social heritage. The individual born into a particular culture is largely molded by that culture.

FIFTH: Humanism asserts that the nature of the universe depicted by modern science makes unacceptable any supernatural or cosmic guarantees of human values. Obviously humanism does not deny the possibility of realities as yet undiscovered, but it does insist that the way to determine the existence and value of any and all realities is by means of intelligent inquiry and by the assessment of their relations to human needs. Religion must formulate its hopes and plans in the light of the scientific spirit and method.

SIXTH: We are convinced that the time has passed for theism, deism, modernism, and the several varieties of "new thought".

SEVENTH: Religion consists of those actions, purposes, and experiences which are humanly significant. Nothing human is alien to the religious. It includes labor, art, science, philosophy, love, friendship, recreation--all that is in its degree expressive of intelligently satisfying human living. The distinction between the sacred and the secular can no longer be maintained.

EIGHTH: Religious Humanism considers the complete realization of human personality to be the end of man's life and seeks its development and fulfillment in the here and now. This is the explanation of the humanist's social passion.

NINTH: In the place of the old attitudes involved in worship and prayer the humanist finds his religious emotions expressed in a heightened sense of personal life and in a cooperative effort to promote social well-being.

TENTH: It follows that there will be no uniquely religious emotions and attitudes of the kind hitherto associated with belief in the supernatural.

ELEVENTH: Man will learn to face the crises of life in terms of his knowledge of their naturalness and probability. Reasonable and manly attitudes will be fostered by education and supported by custom. We assume that humanism will take the path of social and mental hygiene and discourage sentimental and unreal hopes and wishful thinking.

TWELFTH: Believing that religion must work increasingly for joy in living, religious humanists aim to foster the creative in man and to encourage achievements that add to the satisfactions of life.

THIRTEENTH: Religious humanism maintains that all associations and institutions exist for the fulfillment of human life. The intelligent evaluation, transformation, control, and direction of such associations and institutions with a view to the enhancement of human life is the purpose and program of humanism. Certainly religious institutions, their ritualistic forms, ecclesiastical methods, and communal activities must be reconstituted as rapidly as experience allows, in order to function effectively in the modern world.

FOURTEENTH: The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.

FIFTEENTH AND LAST: We assert that humanism will: (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from them; and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few. By this positive morale and intention humanism will be guided, and from this perspective and alignment the techniques and efforts of humanism will flow.

Session 6: Closing—Unitarian Universalism’s Relationship with Christianity Today

Session Goals

- To increase understanding of Unitarian Universalist identities today
- To build more healthy relationships between Unitarian Universalists and Christians

Learning Objectives

- After this session, participants will be able to:
- Estimate how many UUs identify as various theological perspectives
 - Have a healthy conversation about or with Christian Unitarian Universalists

Session at a Glance

- Opening (5 mins)
- Activities
- Who identifies as what in Unitarian Universalism? (15 minutes)
- What type of Christians are Unitarian Universalists? What type of Unitarian Universalists are Christians? (10 minutes)
- Unitarian Universalism’s Relationship with Christianity (5 minutes)
- Model Conversation (10 minutes)
- Closing (10 mins)

Materials Checklist

- Chalice
- Candle
- Matches
- Nametags
- Easel paper
- Markers
- Blue painter’s tape
- Pre-made graph: actual graph
- Pre-made skeleton graph
- Pre-made cut-outs for the graph: 10 pieces each of six different colors of construction paper in sizes corresponding to 5% on your graph
- Timer

Bell

Preparation

Review the cards from the first session, and see if anyone listed issues about contemporary Unitarian Universalism they would like to investigate. Prepare graphs and pieces of construction paper. Review your conversation with your minister from last week and your group's experience last week, and determine if you should expect any conflict or pastoral needs in this week's session. Consult your minister or your pastoral care team if this is so.

Session Plan

Opening

1. Light the Chalice
2. Either read your local church's chalice lighting words, or use Starr King School for the Ministry's: "As we light this chalice, we reaffirm our commitment to accept life's gifts with grace and gratitude and to use them to bless the world in a spirit of love."

Activities

1. Who identifies as what in Unitarian Universalism? (15 minutes)

Ask the participants to recall the mapping exercise they did in the opening session. Ask them to think about how their church might map themselves if the entire church did the exercise, and then ask them to imagine all of Unitarian Universalism participating in the mapping exercise. How do they think UUs would map out?

Hang up a piece of easel paper on which you have drawn the skeleton of a graph. "Theological identity" is the horizontal axis of the graph, and "Percentage of UUs" is the vertical axis. Count the vertical axis in units of 5%. Have 10 pieces each of six different colors of construction paper cut up, each the size of one of your 5% units. Label slots on the horizontal axis of the graph with the words: "Mystics;" "Humanists;" "Earth/Nature Centered;" "Theists;" "Christians;" and "Other." Give each category a corresponding color, and have your participants guess how many UUs identify as each category (according to the 1997 *Fulfilling the Promise* survey filled out by almost 10,000 UUs). After your group is finished, compare the graph you created as a group to a graph you bring in that has the real numbers: 46% of the respondents identified as Humanists; 19% identified as "Earth/Nature centered;" 13% identified as "Theists;" 13% identified as "Other;" 10%; as "Christians;" and 6% as "Mystics." Make sure the colors you attributed to each category on your pre-made graph match the colors you use in the group exercise. Where was the group close to the numbers from the survey? Where were they off? Also, be sure to note that the vast majority (90% or more) of the survey respondents identified as heterosexual, white, and over 35 years old. The majority (more than 65%) of the respondents identified as married or partnered women who did not have children living with them.

2. What type of Christians are Unitarian Universalist? What type of Unitarian Universalists are Christians? (10 minutes)

Begin with an exercise exploring the group's assumptions. Ask the group to remember the mapping exercise from the first session together. Then ask the group to characterize a contemporary "Christian Unitarian Universalist." Ask for adjectives, popcorn-style, reminding the group that there might be someone in the group, or in their congregation, who identifies as a Christian UU. Write the adjectives up on easel paper.

Then explain that according to Rev. Ron Robinson, the coordinator of the Unitarian Universalist Christian Fellowship (UUCF), the number of Unitarian Universalists coming to "freely follow Jesus," as the UUCF puts it, *through* Unitarian Universalism is increasing. In the last ten years, two-thirds of the people attending their annual meeting say they were Unitarian Universalist first, and came to Christianity through Unitarian Universalism. In contrast, when the UUCF began in 1945, it began as a conservative movement of New England Unitarian Christians who were resisting Humanism. For the first 20 years, members were almost all from Massachusetts. When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in the 1960s, however, Trinitarian Universalists started joining the UUCF. In the 1970s, Catholic Christian UUs started joining. In the 1980s, there was an increase in Liberation Christian UUs and Feminist Christian UUs. In the 1990s, the scales finally tipped towards the UUCF having more national members than members from New England. Does knowing about this demographic shift affect the group's assumption about Christian UUs? Why or why not?

3. Unitarian Universalism's Relationship with Christianity (5 minutes)

Christianity is probably the least acceptable faith identity within Unitarian Universalism. Some of our Christian fellows in the faith feel judged and ostracized. Ask your participants if, given what they have learned in this course and their experience in Unitarian Universalism, where they think this tendency comes from, and how they feel about it?

4. Model Conversation (10 minutes)

Knowing that 10% of Unitarian Universalists identify as Christians, and many of them came to Christianity through Unitarian Universalism, how might we react if we witnessed prejudice against Christian Unitarian Universalists? Ask for four volunteers, and couple them off. Arbitrarily (longer hair, taller, darker eyes, brighter clothes, etc) pick who will be Person A and who will be Person B in each couple. Instruct the first couple that they are going to model a conversation between a Christian UU who feels ostracized and a non-Christian UU. Person A will be the Christian UU and Person B will be the non-Christian UU. Tell them they each have one minute to talk while the other person listens and they will switch of so each person will get to speak twice. You will ring the bell at the end of one minute. Begin with Partner A, and switch off three times, so each partner has an opportunity to speak twice. After the first couple has gone, get feedback from the rest of the group. What did they witness? What went well? What could have gone better?

Instruct the second couple that they are going to model a conversation between a UU who makes a hurtful comment to or about a Christian UU and a person who is advocating for healthier relationships with Christian UUs. Person A will make the hurtful comment and Person B will respond to it. Tell them they each have one minute to talk while the other person listens, and they will switch of so each person will get to speak twice. You will ring the bell at the end of one minute. Begin with Partner A, and switch off three

times, so each partner has an opportunity to speak twice. After the first couple has gone, get feedback from the rest of the group. What did they witness? What went well? What could have gone better?

Closing

1. Do a final check-out with your participants, asking them to complete the following sentence stem, “As I finish this curriculum, I realize I have learned _____; and I feel _____.”

Extinguish the chalice, either using your church’s chalice extinguishing words, or say, “As we extinguish this chalice, we remember that the work goes on in our hearts and in the world.”

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