

MEADVILLE LOMBARD THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL

CREATING THEOLOGY TOGETHER: A CURRICULUM FOR SPIRITUAL
LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

A THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE:
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

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DEDICATION

Dedicated To Francis, My Partner in Love, Life and Faith

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ABSTRACT

Theology in the Unitarian Universalist tradition has become so individuated as to be sterile. Theology should speak to that which we hold most cherished together. Our congregations need to create a common, shared theology that goes beyond the little boxes of post enlightenment belief with which our love for individualism has left us. We need a way to create a new normative theology in each congregation that helps us collectively formulate spiritual reasons for what we do, at once both accessible to us as individuals, but definitive enough so that each congregation could refer to that theology as a foundation from which to make justice. The thesis of this project is that a shared leadership curriculum would begin to reinvigorate our foundational purpose and drive our congregations towards theologically grounded action. I propose that the curriculum explore answers to several questions of ultimate importance:

1. What is the nature of hope?
2. What is our response to racism and oppression?
3. What is the best response to suffering?
4. What is our individual and collective purpose?

The overall learning goal of this curriculum is heuristic: To help a group of people think theologically in community and thus empower their religious life. Specifically, this curriculum is to be used by leadership groups in a congregation as a guide to think generatively and theologically about their work. By focusing on the leadership core, throughout the year, I intend to ground their leadership in a theological formation that would translate into a meaningful and forceful mission.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Shared Theology

Since the merger, Unitarian Universalists have struggled with articulating a common set of beliefs much less a theology that would help to ground us in a deeper meaning towards the good work we so often feel called to do. In large part, this is due to our denominational culture of sanctifying individual beliefs above all others. Indeed, such courses as “Building Your Own Theology”¹ are based on the post enlightenment premise that each of us can build our own theology independent of the congregation and the larger movement of which we are a part. I believe such an emphasis on individual belief is outdated and misguided. While there is an attraction to discovering what each of us holds to be most important, it is often as a reaction to what we had been told was true by the religious authorities of our past. This tendency, now enshrined in our adult curriculum and membership materials, allows for easy entry into our congregations but does no more to challenge us to grow spiritually than signing the membership book.

I contend that theological identity starts with the individual and grows richer as that individual shares and encounters other theological perspectives in the life of a group or community. All theology is in process. We are all the poorer in our faith if we rely only on our limited position in discerning meaning from and about the world in which we live. When we are walled up in our own individual beliefs we miss the creative interchange necessary to challenge those beliefs and grow from the process.

¹ Richard Gilbert, *Building Your Own Theology*, 2nd edition (Boston: UUA, 2000)

Our congregations are in desperate need of a common theology that goes beyond the spacious principles of the UUA. As both Karen Armstrong² and Kaaren Anderson of First Unitarian Church of Rochester, NY made clear at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly in 2011³, what matters less is what each of us believes and what matters more is what we hold most cherished together. Theology should speak to that which we hold most cherished together. Our congregations need to create a common, shared theology that goes beyond the little boxes of post enlightenment belief that our love for individualism has generated. We need a way to create a new normative theology in each congregation that helps us collectively formulate spiritual reasons for what we do, at once both accessible to us as individuals, but definitive enough so that each congregation could refer to that theology as a foundation from which to make justice.

What is Theology?

Historically, the word theology refers to the study of God. However, in modern usage the word has come to mean so much more than the study of some preconceived understanding of the deity. Secularization has led to a re-formation of theology. Theology is no longer accessible to the public through the university but is still relevant to the changing face of religion. As Linell Cady persuasively argues, the “interconnected web” of the church and other non-profits may be the best place for theology to be made public; growing out of the particularly religious to an engagement in public life.⁴

² Karen Armstrong, “The Challenge of Compassion”, Ware Lecture, (Charlotte: UUA, General Assembly, 6/25/2011), <http://www.uua.org/ga/past/2011/184434.shtml>

³ Rev. Kaaren Anderson and Rev. Scott Tayler “Living Outside the Box” (Charlotte: UUA, General Assembly, 6/26/2011)

⁴ Linell Cady, *Religion, Theology and American Public Life* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 89-90.

Theology in congregations, I contend, best happens through the praxis of education and action. My own ministry focuses on the lay theological education of my people with the stated end to create a theological center from which to do justice making. Given this new meaning, if we substitute ultimate value in place of a deity, we have a much more inclusive meaning to theology. But what is of ultimate value? Clearly our personal and social context has a deep impact on this question. Those of us raised in a Western, scientific and postmodern world will have a very different understanding of value than those aboriginal people for whom value consists largely in survival and the maintenance of their physical world. Value is personal but it can be shared. Moreover, ultimate value is possible for us as religious liberals to share especially if it is rooted in a shared experience such as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s understanding of the Beloved Community.⁵ Theology is the system by which we discover, raise up and act upon those shared ultimate values. Theology is the systematic consideration of values for at least the individual and more usefully for a group of people.

The 20th century Unitarian Theologian Henry Nelson Wieman suggests that these values constitute a “concrete but transcendental reality”.⁶ In other words, theology can be defined as a set of ultimate values about the nature of the universe and our existence that are both concrete in their reference to everyday situations and also transcendent in their reference to a higher good towards which we strive. At its best, a theology should help us

⁵ While the term “The Beloved Community” was first coined in the early 20th century by the philosopher Josiah Royce, Dr. King popularized the term in the civil rights movement as an expanding community that models peace and justice into the world. See <http://www.thekingcenter.org/king-philosophy#sthash.6ePO9BxM.dpuf>

⁶ Henry Nelson Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946), 3-12.

give meaning to our lives and the world in which we live through a systematic understanding of what we value and how we are going to act on those values.

This curriculum's goal is to help a group of leaders within a congregation determine what they collectively value most and to create a plan by which those values are enacted in their congregation and, by extension, the larger world. The curriculum's emphasis is to create a shared theology not simply a "laundry list" of leaders' theologies. What each leader believes matter less than the journey on which the leaders embark on this theological discernment together.

That being said, each of us already has a normative theology that we use to give meaning to our lives and our place in the world. James Fowler in his classic work *Stages of Faith* describes a theological triangle that best illustrates the interplay between the individual, community and the Holy; the individual and the community form the base points and the Holy the point to which both aspire.⁷ The base of the triangle, as commentator Susan Smith notes, speaks to the covenantal relationship between the individual and the beloved community. A useful theology is one that understands and expands on that base relationship.⁸ Too often Unitarian Universalists are overly concerned with the horizontal relationships of meaning; giving breadth to our spiritual understandings and welcoming those who are different into our midst. Rarely do we give adequate attention to the vertical dimension; exploring how our individual and communal meanings deepen our purpose to a greater power. Giving name to those individual theologies will be part of the journey together. In the interests of transparency, let me tell you about my own theology.

⁷ James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981)

⁸ Susan Smith, "The Truth About Santa," *The UU World* (Boston: UUA, 11/1/2006)

I am, broadly speaking, a religious naturalist. Through my spiritual practice and luminescent experiences, I have felt the presence of a power in my life much greater than me. I reluctantly call this power “God”. However, because I also believe in the use of reason to explain the universe, I am unable to define this God beyond these fleeting encounters. I do believe God is made manifest through what Henry Nelson Wieman terms the “creative interchange” we have with one another. We can and often do create meaning and hope out of our relationships with one another when it seems impossible to do so by ourselves. As Mary Catherine Bateson puts it: “It is learning to define ourselves through relationships, as part of something larger, and recognizing that the goals of individuals must sometimes give way to, or at least harmonize with, larger entities. Human beings are components of larger systems...”⁹

I believe God holds an attraction that pulls each of us towards each other in what the feminist theologian Monica Coleman terms “God’s calling”: “The power to save the world is in God’s calling. God provides a vision of the common good to each of us, to the world.”¹⁰ The attraction of God’s calling is therefore calling us forward into the world as agents of change and hope. And yet, my explanation for our place in the cosmos is tentative at best since God exists beyond the rational. It’s a long way from the Big Bang to a faith that we are here for a purpose. My theology rests in my belief that we are here to make our world a better place within the larger cosmological context of an expanding universe. While I can’t say with certainty that the “universe is good”, I can say that we

⁹ Mary Catherine Bateson, “Why Should I Inconvenience Myself” in *Moral Grounds*, Kathleen Moore and Michael Nelson, eds. (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2010), 213.

¹⁰ Monica Coleman, *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 59.

have a responsibility as co-creators with God to make the universe, or at least our little corner of the universe, better.

My theology is immanently pragmatic. Pragmatism is, to quote William James, a philosophy with a purpose, which “unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work”. A pragmatic theology then is an orientation to the world, a way to look at the world, and a disposition of living in the world, that limbers a community such as a congregation to act in the world. I concur with James that “truth is one species of the good”. If Unitarian Universalist theology is by nature provisional, then James’ understanding of truth, bolstered perhaps by the optimism that only collections of individuals can discern the truth, leads me to the conclusion that theology can only be pragmatic.¹¹

Pragmatism treats concepts as tools to be tested experientially to see and clarify the world. Pragmatism is applied to problems. It is not itself a problem to be solved. It is, rather, a method or process by which we discern meaning. In this way, it is perfectly suited to Unitarian Universalism, a religious tradition committed to the search for truth and meaning. As I often describe our religious tradition as “more process than product” so too does pragmatism offer signposts to guide me on my own theological construction.

This pragmatic approach will, no doubt, impact the framework and context for this curriculum. My hope is that the curriculum will allow us to open up our minds to construct a world saving theology together.

¹¹ William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1907), 42.

Towards a Normative Theology

If theology is the systematic determination of shared values, then how are we to know if our theology is pointing us in the direction of the good? I believe that theology must direct us towards action as much as it explains our place in the cosmos. This explanation is the place of the normative. By normative, I mean a theology that not only describes what is in the world but what we should do about it. I realize that many religious liberals are reluctant to ascribe right and wrong to what we believe. This is not what a normative theology does. It does not tell us what to believe –that must be determined through a careful reflection on our experience, reason and intuition – but rather what we should do with what we hold ultimately meaningful. If I believe that my calling is to co-create God in the world, then I am equally called to create that good which I believe represents that God in the world. This curriculum calls on us to reach beyond post modernism; wherein post modernism is seen as the deconstruction of ideas to their smallest parts.

Deconstruction can be useful in helping us re-examine our value assumptions. It can also be toxic in ignoring the interplay between and among ideas. I am calling on us to create theologies that reach beyond such relativism to the bold possibility that we are here for a greater and more unifying good than ourselves as subjective beings in the world.

Designing and developing this course led me to delve more deeply into the concepts of post-modern theology¹². Postmodern theology, incorporating a radical pluralism, proposes a paradigmatic shift in theological understanding away from a centric model of God (one God, many forms) to a poly-variant model (many forms of many gods).

¹² Philip Clayton, *Transforming Christian Theology: For Church and Society* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 34-42.

Postmodern theology borrows its description from the social and business model of Google in which the user is afforded as much information as possible, leaving the marketing and end use of the information up to the user. Instead of controlling the gateway to information, the provider opens the doors and markets products and services based on the user's interests. Thus, the user, or believer, is in control of the world she or he is creating. Such a theology pre-supposes vastly different combinations of response to questions of ultimate meaning, sometimes diametrically opposed. Phillip Clayton, a theologian at Claremont School for Theology, one of the proponents of this shift, draws a parallel with the success of President Obama's elections using open ended communication to the promise of a renewed Christianity: "This new theology, genuinely transformative theology, calls for deep personal involvement, openness to criticism and new information, engagement with the world as it really is and with other persons as they really are."¹³ The implications of this wide-open approach to meaning making for those who come to our liberal churches is that they will be far more likely to be engaged in co-creating theology than to be passive consumers of it. In other words, by providing many platforms of understanding and the lay theological education to garner meaning from those platforms, we will be able to address and possibly answer the complex questions of the new world. This is, I believe, the theological direction I am moving towards; a God of many possibilities calling us into co-creation of a just world.

Moral Foundations

We have common moral foundations that make such a normative understanding possible. Here, I do not refer to any kind of moral philosophy but rather a morality in the pragmatic

¹³ Ibid., 155.

form that is a morality that most religious liberals take to be normative. A dissection of our moral foundations is outside the scope of this curriculum and may prove to be ultimately counterproductive.¹⁴ In terms of a normative moral foundation to this project, I refer to Jonathon Haidt who has outlines five moral foundations upon which we as human beings seem to build our theological understandings. They are: Care vs Harm, Fairness vs Cheating, Loyalty vs Betrayal, Sanctity vs Degradation and, Authority vs Subversion. Most of us want to care for those in need of protection, stand for justice in the primary form of fairness for all, be loyal to those who most represent our interests, and show sanctity toward those people and symbols deserving of respect. The fifth foundation of authority, for liberals at least, depends greatly on whether the authority is protecting or harming those in need of protection. If the authority is harming those in need of care then subversion is the higher moral value. Haidt argues that liberals employ the first two moral foundations (Care vs Harm and Fairness vs Cheating) far more than the other three. Liberals are less concerned about loyalty, sanctity or authority in terms of national or religious norms and symbols. This deficit, Haidt argues, explains why democratic and progressive political parties seem less able than their more conservative counterparts to appeal to the larger moral palate of the American public.¹⁵

In order to determine what is theologically normative, we must determine where on the moral spectrum each group lies. While it might be generally true that we seek to care for those in need of our protection, we need to ask first “who needs our protection and how are we in relation to them”? Or better yet “how should we be in relation to them in order

¹⁴ Ronald Dworkin, *Justice for Hedgehogs* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), 37-38.

¹⁵ Jonathon Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012), 149-179.

to be truly helpful; knowing that our very place of privilege changes the dynamic of our interaction?”¹⁶ While it might be true that justice is a higher value than cheating, we need to ask “what is just?” In order to ascertain what authority might look like for us theologically, we must ask “what is the place of personhood in relation to the needs of the larger group?”. In order to determine what is sacred, we need to ask “sacred in relation to who or what?”. These and other moral questions are part of our work towards a shared theology in this curriculum.

In order to create a meaningful shared theology, we need to determine what is moral about that theology. Theology is only worthwhile when it can be applied to how we can act corporately and individually in the world. Anyone can say they believe that the earth is sacred; what does that sacredness mean when we are forced to choose between getting to a meeting that impacts the poor over the carbon footprint of flying to that meeting. This curriculum provides moral foundations underneath the theology we are trying to create together.

The Necessity of Action

A theology is not meaningful unless it is accompanied by a plan of action that builds upon the moral values described above. The great religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs writes:

¹⁶ Dr. Michael Hogue, Draft Comments, November 2014.

“Some beliefs are like walled gardens. They encourage exclusiveness, and the feeling of being privileged. Other beliefs are expansive and lead the way into wider and deeper sympathies.”¹⁷

As congregations we have a tendency to act more like walled garden in matters of theology than open fields. As I will elucidate in the next section this is due, in part, to our fear of offending anyone other than those who share our individualistic beliefs. The other reason for this walled garden approach is a corollary to the first; we are also afraid of excluding others by proposing actions which not every member of a congregation can support. This has led to a boutique approach to social justice work; our congregations tend to support a broad range of social justice initiatives, many of them of interest to just a few rather than do the hard work of choosing one or two larger projects. We sense the need for action to accompany our theologies but as congregations we are unable to focus on a single plan of action. Our individualistic approach to theology has resulted in a fragmented approach to social justice making.

The theology I propose we co-create in this curriculum insists on a single plan of action for two reasons. The first is that by considering a plan of action throughout the entire theological process, we find ourselves better able to see the pragmatic use of that theology and sacrifice our more ancillary beliefs for the common good. The second reason is even more compelling. If we are to remain relevant in the near future, ours must be a faith in which its leaders propose action that is compelling in its urgency and compelled by a deliberate shared system of ultimate value and meaning. In other words,

¹⁷ Sophia Lyons Fahs, as quoted in Warren Ross *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association* (Boston: Skinner House, 2001), 155.

any theology absent of action is a theology irrelevant to a liberal religion committed by its essential values to social change.

By co-creating theology with a plan of action, leaders, and by extension the congregations they lead, individual beliefs are focused into a coherent and transformative reality beyond the often ephemeral cacophony that passes for diversity in our congregations. A theology with a plan of action brings the prophetic front and forward in our common quest for social change. It attracts and invites individuals to transcend their history as fragmentary actors and unites them into a faithful whole. As James Luther Adams put it:

“What is called for is interiorization wedded to creative social protest and institutionalization. The phrase is “black is beautiful” and the women’s consciousness movement are expressions of the recognized need for psychological and institutional transformation. If the individual is not enabled with others to take responsibility for his or her own historical role, he or she will live on in a “dream history” that reinforces his or her transformations.”¹⁸

As Adams suggests the social transformation of society is wedded to our transcending the “dream history” of our own individual meanings in favor of a shared meaning that transforms our world. A co-created theology with a plan of action is one important way for us to take that responsibility. I contend that the most important social transformation towards which we must act is to eradicate racism and other forms of oppression.

¹⁸ James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers* editor George Beach (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 231.

Moving Beyond Racism

Fifty years after the march from Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, America is still a nation mired in racism. Of our many oppressions, racism is the one that runs right through the heart of our body politic. As the theologian James Cone puts it, racism is America's "original sin and it is institutionalized at all levels of society"¹⁹. Moreover, racism is inextricably linked to most every other oppression in our society; classism, sexism, and gender inequality are all connected to the power imbalance represented by race.²⁰ By attempting to formulate a plan of action woven into a co-created theology dealing with the issue of racism, we are, in effect, beginning to address the systems of oppression we are bound by covenant to dismantle. The necessity of addressing racism as a part of co-creating a shared theology runs right through the center of this curriculum just as racism itself runs right through the center of our collective hearts. Just as a generation of Unitarian Universalist ministers and laypeople answered Dr. King's call to Selma, so are we in these succeeding generations to answer that call.

For this reason, the theology that your group of leaders is co-creating, requires a plan of action that moves towards the ideal of a society beyond racism. You may be tempted to pick another cause to act upon, but I would challenge you to find one as central of our collective malaise as racism is. Furthermore, as will be shown, there is a direct linkage between suffering, which all of us feel, and the realities of racism. By exploring these two together as you will do in chapter two, you will not only find a means by which to align

¹⁹ James Cone, "Theology's Greatest Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy" in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones eds. (Boston: Skinner House, 2003), 3.

²⁰ Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds., introduction to *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, (Boston: Skinner House, 2003).

your theology with suffering but more adequately access your emotional connection to racism and its related oppressions.

Some might ask, “what difference can a plan of action imbedded within one small group’s co-created theology make in the world?” The answer might be “more than you realize”. As predominantly euro Americans of privilege, we have influence that far exceeds those marginalized by a racist society. Even bearing witness to the injustice of racism and its related oppressions, makes a difference. When I led twenty of my white congregants into a city council chamber to speak in support of blocking refinery pollution affecting Latino communities downwind, the council took note and delayed the refinery’s expansion.

The work of dismantling racism is sometimes uncomfortable because it requires us to examine our own complicity as participants in a racist society with our aspirations as a progressive people. As you move forward through this theology, keep that tension alive. It will draw your theological meaning making into deeper relief.

Beyond the Individual

Since the Enlightenment, we have come to believe that individual belief is the highest value in liberal religion. This belief results from our reaction to dogmatic religion that has been the enemy of free inquiry and personal exploration. Our religious movement grew directly out of this mind set. Unfettered by the strictures of doctrine, our ancestors, especially in post-colonial America, made the values of self-determination and free inquiry paramount with lasting and important results. Since Emerson, entire generations were freed to question the nature of society and their place in the nature of things leading

to scientific progress and social advancement. By rejecting the authority of the church, many a Unitarian and Universalist led the way in such social movements as women's rights, racial equality and civil rights for all genders. Most religious liberals prior to the turn of this century found our Unitarian Universalism and felt empowered and at home spiritually. I do not mean to belittle this incredible social legacy. However, in the last several decades the spiritual landscape has changed. Generations "X", "Y" and especially the "Millennials" take the right to freely believe what they choose as a given. They are the children of those generations who worked so hard to carve out their individualistic faith from the stones of orthodox religion. Proclaiming the "right to freely believe" is not a theological end in and of itself. It is a means, and a largely expected means now, towards greater and hopefully shared values. Those values may or may not have anything to do with religion. In fact, the growing number of young people who define themselves as "spiritual but not religious" would indicate that ALL religions, including Unitarian Universalism, have lost the interest of young people who are searching for values larger than themselves.

What is still true is that people yearn for community and purpose; preferably a purpose that serves larger moral values than just the community itself. This is why I believe leaders must fashion a common shared theology that can be communicated to their congregations and those seeking a religious home. We must move boldly from a "Building Your Own Theology" to "Creating a Shared Theology" that starts with the individual in relation to others in a community. All theology is relational. Unitarian Universalist theologies need to eschew rabid individualism and begin embracing our collective identity as individuals who are part of a vital congregation. I do not believe you

can be a Unitarian Universalist outside of being a part of a congregation. Being part of a congregation can take many forms be it attending on Sunday, participating in a small group ministry, serving with others in the cause of social justice or participating digitally in some form. Our covenantal tradition, indeed our very identity as a non-creedal religion, implies we join with others to create meaning together.

There is no such thing as a religion of individuals. The nature of religion is to give power to the shared values of a group of people through identity, ritual, practice and faith. There is very little attractive about a group of people who are all on their own spiritual journeys without any common purpose towards which they are journeying. A congregation is the place of a shared theology; to create a shared value that will change lives for the better.

What is Religion Anyway?

Religion is a shared set of values employed within a culture or community of adherents toward a common spiritual end. Religion is a necessary means to help bring our shared values to a realistic end. The end to which I am suggesting we journey in this curriculum is a theology of ultimate values embedded within the “Beloved Communities” we are trying to create. While a “Beloved Community” in a Christian sense means that community dedicated to the coming kingdom of God, I mean beloved in a more localized sense. As mentioned above referring to the vision of Dr. King the ultimate ideal of the beloved community moves us towards the ideal of a community dedicated to the saving practice of love both within our walls and, by extension, into the struggling world we serve. The purpose of our religion is to co-create a “beloved community” a community of ideals and actions to support the moral foundations of our liberal tradition.

More generally then, what is religion? While there are many good definitions of religion, I find the sociologist of religion Joachim Wach's the most useful. Wach says that religion has three major expressions: theoretical, practical and sociological. Each of these expressions influences the other two; that is, in order to practice a religion there must be a theoretical (theological) basis which is naturally informed by its social context. This curriculum engages all three of these expressions. In order to practice religiously we must act on our theology and our theology must be adequately informed by who we are and what we practice. For our purposes, all three of these dimensions are vital. Using Wach's definition, religion must be social. There can be no religious expression in isolation. We learn and express ourselves religiously within a social context. Religions, said Wach, are systems that involve social relations and function.²¹

In fact, these systems are the difference – and the divide – between the religious and the spiritual. We are all spiritual beings in some sense but not all of us are religious. A religion involves and transcends the individual spiritual experience and places that experience within the context of the theological, social and practiced dimensions of the religious. The religious attitude is the socially framed, theologically defined, and practiced expression of shared spiritual experiences. This formal social context is what has led to the divide between the spiritual but not religious. Since orthodox religion continues to be used for political and social ends (as is the case in our current cultural wars over marriage, sexuality, abortion and political control) orthodox religion has

²¹ Joachim Wach, *Comparative Study of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), introduction, 55-56.

alienated younger generations who seek a more authentic religious context in which to place their spiritual explorations.²²

Our religion as Unitarian Universalists has flirted institutionally at a vague edge with the spiritual. By embracing individualism so thoroughly, we have failed to live up to our nature as a liberal religious institution that actually has something to say morally to those spiritual seekers who are wary of orthodox religious views built on moral foundations that these spiritual seekers see as self-serving and restrictive. We can become what UUA President Peter Morales proclaimed “A religion for our time”, if we are willing to embrace the totality of our religious identification across broader moral foundations such as Haidt has described.

By creating a shared theology rooted in practice and embracing a more inclusive social context we are able to re-position ourselves and capture the imagination of those spiritual seekers who deride most other religions as restrictive and controlling. Our freedom, our transparency and our practice can become the means by which we create a new theology for our time.

Reclaiming Our Covenantal Theological Roots

Surprisingly perhaps, we have a rich history from which to begin this theological reformation. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal religion rooted in congregational polity. Our polity only roots our social nature as a religious people more deeply. With no appeal to a deity or direct body of tradition, we are all the more obligated to search for

²² See Brian McLaren, *Finding Our Way Again: The Return of the Ancient Practices* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Press, 2008). See also Patrick Cheng, *Radical Love: An Introduction to Queer Theology* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011).

our ultimate values and act upon those values within the congregations we belong to. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 reminds us that we are drawn together in love and in the service of God.²³ As Alice Blair Wesley reminds us we are “to be individually, one by one, called – or drawn – by the spirit of love *to enter the covenant with other members to love faithfully*”.²⁴ To be a covenantal religion is to be doubly obliged to create a theological understanding together that will adequately speak to our social values as a people and call on us to fulfill those values within a shared normative moral practice. Covenant is more than just a contract or agreement. A covenantal theology is a theology that demands we place our faith in the shared values of the group. Without these shared values, we are only a collection of individuals who are gathered together to share what we each individually believe without any attempt to create a new shared ultimate value and, in that creation, find something new and greater than the sum of our beliefs.

Sharing our individual beliefs may be a great way to start a theological conversation but it does little to advance a deeper shared understanding upon which to act. Our covenantal heritage reaches back to a time before the relativistic values of post modernism to a deeper understanding of the religious as a shared experience not the shallow conversation of “you believe this” and “I believe that”. The deeper conversation then results in a shared belief together, which might require us to give up something for the good of the whole. As Wesley suggests: “To worship and serve and grow and thrive, as we have it in

²³ *The Cambridge Platform* (Boston: 1648), 70-72.

²⁴ Alice Blair Wesley, *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures* (Chicago: 2002, Meadville Lombard Theological School), 91.

us to do, we need now to invent covenantal structures for more free cooperation among us than we have had since our earliest days on this continent.”²⁵

Implied Sacrifice

What must we give up individually to create this richer and deeper theology from which we can practice our religion and gather to us all those who are hungry for an open spiritual community? Sacrifice is not something Unitarian Universalists like to discuss. Almost every religious tradition teaches us that giving up something for the betterment of the whole is a necessary spiritual practice. Lent, Yom Kippur, Ramadan, even our congregational pledge drives, are liturgical reminders of this necessity.

Liberal individualism might lead us to consider that sharing a theology asks us to sacrifice our beliefs. By giving up on one belief or doubt, we are diminishing our true selves. However, striving for a shared theology is not giving up but adding to our collective understanding of why we are here and where we are going. As Michael Hogue observes in this discussion “the work of developing a shared theology is grounded in a more accurate account of social nature, as well as the social power of religion.

Developing a shared theology adds to rather than subtracts from our nature as persons.”²⁶

Viewing sacrifice, whether it be our beliefs or our doubts, does not weaken us as individuals. Rather, it strengthens us in adding to a more nuanced and richer understanding of whom we are as individuals acting in a world with those who might be radically different from who we are as people. Defending our little silos of belief against dialogue and evolution does little to advance our collective meaning making in an

²⁵ Ibid, 63.

²⁶ Michael Hogue, comments made in thesis review, April 2014

increasingly complex world. Personhood, as the sociologist Christian Smith, points out depends on “communicating in relationships...it is the very activity that helps us to constitute persons as persons in the first place and is a central purpose of personal life.”²⁷

Viewing the sacrifice of our personal beliefs as a betrayal of our “true selves” is short sighted and poor anthropology. We become deeper selves in the act of sacrificing our cherished beliefs for what a common quest for meaning might give us.

I have come to believe that we must give up our certainty for the possibility that others might be right as well and within that interchange be deepened and transformed together into something new spiritually. For much of my early adult life, I believed that Christianity was mistaken in its insistence that we are all fallen and that only by believing in the saving power of Jesus Christ can we be saved. This redemptive theology struck me as self-serving at best. Of course Christians would say that I thought. Such a redemptive theology ensures more followers through no fault other than being human. Only after I worked closely with a Franciscan monk who was tending to the spiritual needs of AIDS patients in the early 1990’s did I realize that I might be wrong. Brother Mike (I will call him) spent his days hearing the confessions and laying on hands of healing to those in the final days of their lives. This act was in the early days of the epidemic when little was known about the causes and treatment of AIDS/HIV. The cultural condemnation of AIDS patients was based on the mistaken assumption that God was punishing these gay men for “the sins of sexual deviance”. The fear was palatable. To minister to these men was considered risky. I was working with Brother Mike as part of my outreach as a new minister.

²⁷ Christian Smith, *What is a Person?: Rethinking Humanity, Social Life and the Moral Good From the Person Up* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 72.

As we went from bed to bed, I would listen as Brother Mike heard their confessions. Most of those confessions were heart wrenching. Some of these men told of sleeping with scores of other men. Some told of using dirty needles for their drug addiction. Some were monogamous and clean but their partners were not. Brother Mike offered no judgment. He heard their confession and he held their hands and he forgave them their sins, intentional or otherwise. As he performed each confession, I watched waves of relief roll over these tortured men. I realized they were sacrificing their pride in confessing. I realized Brother Mike was sacrificing his judgment and maybe his welfare in this ministry. I realized that together each was sacrificing the illusion of control before the inexorable march of fate, life and death. Sacrifice is part of our human religious project. There is power in letting go. There was power for me.

Suddenly, I saw in those men and in Brother Mike the suffering of humanity that we need to let go into the hands of God. I was freed from the illusion that Christianity was all a sham; I saw how a personal savior can actually save a life. I haven't become a Christian but I understand the power of Christianity. I was willing to give up my antagonism for a newfound respect. This change in me was not agreement but respect, embracing what the philosopher William Connolly labels "agonistic respect": "In a relation of agonistic respect, something in the faith, identity, or philosophy of the engaged parties is placed at risk".²⁸ By giving up my condemnation of Christianity, a condemnation that supported my liberal theology, I was adding to my faith in pluralistic theology that includes the redemptive impulse of Christianity.

²⁸ William Connolly, *Pluralism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press: 2005), 125-126.

This awareness in me exemplifies the kind of theological sacrifice that I hope this curriculum invites us to practice as we create together a covenantal theology true to a real liberal religion. We must engage a theology that moves beyond our individuality, that is specific to the congregation we serve and that is morally grounded in the foundations of what makes us human beings in our place in the cosmos.

Barbara Holmes in her book *Race In the Cosmos* suggests that such a theological project reaches back to our primal moral nature as a social species hoping to answer the call to create a better world:

“Every culture, no matter where it currently stands, emerged from basic and primal organizations. It is in the remembrance that we reconnect to our relationship to the universe. Maybe if we can remember, we’ll be able to fly.”²⁹

We are moral and social beings in need of ultimate values by which to order our universe and act compassionately towards those in need. We are religion marked by a deep and covenantal tradition that relies on freedom and transparency as a means to common spiritual identity. There are people, many young, who are deeply in need of and searching for a co-creative religious home in which to give form and life to their spiritual longings. We can become congregations in which all three of these forces combine to create a consilience of hope. I hope this curriculum provides one way for that to happen.

²⁹ Barbara A. Holmes, *Race and the Cosmos: An Invitation to View the World Differently* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2002), 88.

CHAPTER 2: GETTING STARTED

This curriculum is divided into four distinct lesson plans, each is meant to take six hours. Each session works best if the leadership team devotes a full day in retreat to work on their theology. Going on retreat is ideal but not necessary. Identifying two co-leaders before each session is a must. This chapter outlines what those responsibilities include. Leaders need not be experts to lead this curriculum. In the true nature of process thinking, this is a genuinely co-creative endeavor. The co-leaders participate in creating their theology along with the rest of the group. This curriculum is designed for groups under 12 participants.

This curriculum works best if it is done in longer sessions rather than shorter ones. The longer time invites participants to move out of their daily concerns and the business of congregational life, to engage more reflectively on what matters most to each participant and the group collectively. I do not recommend combing this work in a half-day format with other leadership business. While tempting, the group will not achieve the depth of understanding and emotional resonance necessary to the creative process. While this is a significant commitment of time, leaders will find this work informative and perhaps transformative as they go about the more prosaic work of leading. Only by sacrificing an entire day to this proves will leaders feel the depth of their collective theological identity.

Set Up Requirements

It is important to meet in a space that is comfortable, private and conducive to being creative and supporting growth. A comfortable home with as few distractions as possible works well. Certain church spaces can also work well provided they are free from distractions.

Materials Needed

Newsprint on an easel

Blue Painters Tape

A set of good markers

3x5 index cards

A pad of notebook paper

A table large enough for the group to work around (a circle of chairs is acceptable but the table provides a ready writing surface)

A chalice and a table covering to help set the chalice in a sacred space

Colored sticky dots

A power point projector and a laptop

Time Estimation

Each session estimates a quantity of suggested time needed for the work. Included in each session plan is time estimates for breaks in support of continuity and momentum. I

recommend you do not skip those breaks. This collective spiritual evolution can be surprisingly hard work and taking some time to rest and be in fellowship keeps us focused and in relationship. Breaks are essential for growth, absorption and thought evolution. People process thoughts and experiences differently. The breaks suggested in this curriculum allow for different kinds of thinking.

Remaining in Covenant

In our covenantal tradition, vital to spiritual growth is the realization that all the participants take on this work with agreed upon understandings. Indeed, the process of creating theology is a covenantal process. Together our shared purpose in this work is to be in covenant in order that we evolve together. To create and maintain a covenant of understanding in this work is more than a means to the end of a shared theology, it is also an end in and of itself. When we covenant with one another we create the beginnings of a theology.

In some ways, the leadership group that embarks on this journey will become a covenant group in its own right. At the end of the first three sessions there are three follow up questions for the group to consider in a possible on-going covenant group. I recommend that the group set aside an hour at least once a month to discuss each of these questions before the next day-long retreat. By pursuing those questions in a continuing group setting the leaders remind themselves of the importance of collective theological reflection as well as nurturing those relationships so central to building the beloved community. As Robert Hill writes in his introduction to small group ministry:

“Does this turning of our attention to a form of church organization mean that we are abandoning deeper issues, averting our eyes from the most profound questions of being mortal human beings? No. This way of being with one another requires respectful attention to others and implies recognition of what some Buddhists refer to as “basic goodness” in our fellow human beings. Community, being together in right relationship, is the wellspring of religion. Beneath our differences, we can recognize what we have in common: deep needs, strength, courage and wisdom.”³⁰

In the first session, take fifteen minutes to draft a rough covenant of understanding that all the participants will honor as the theology evolves. Ask participants to verbalize supportive behavior. Write each expected behavior down on newsprint. Issues surrounding confidentiality (what is said in the group stays in the group), honoring time, using “I” statements, etc., should all be stated. Rather than ask for consensus on each item, ask instead: “Are we all able to live up to each of these understandings?” If the answer from each (and ask each to assent) is affirmative than put the words “Covenant of Understanding” across the top of the newsprint and post it on the wall. With each subsequent session bring out this covenant and ask for any changes and continuing assent.

Shared Leadership

Before beginning this work, the group must select a leader and co-leader. When using this curriculum as a board, I recommend to NOT ask the chair or president to be one of

³⁰ Robert Hill, *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time* (Boston: Skinner House, 2003), 95.

those leaders. One of the characteristics of healthy adaptive leadership is to share that role. I recommend that this curriculum be led by those who do not often lead. This approach has two advantages. The first is that this work lends itself to slower introspection, a personality trait often found in those who often do not volunteer to lead. The second advantage is that those who lead this curriculum will find their leadership skills enhanced in a profound and non-threatening way. Theological formation is introspective work. Who better to lead than those who are most introspective?

After the first session I recommend that a new leadership team be selected to lead the next session. That new team should meet with the first team to discuss lessons learned and improvements to the work. At the end of the second session, a new leadership team should be selected and so on through all four sessions.

Read Before You Leap

I am not one to read instructions before I attempt to assemble anything. In this work that approach is not recommended. There is important preparation needed in leading this curriculum, much of it introspective. Please read through the entire curriculum before starting. Make notes, ask yourself and your co-leader questions. Feel free to contact me, the author (contact information included in the appendix). Each session includes some suggested readings and links. The resources are rich and rewarding to study. This curriculum is designed to be taught over the course of a year in four long sessions, you may find you have the time and the desire to expend effort into the project.

The Leaders Role

For each session, each team should select a leader and co-leader. Just as this curriculum co-creates theology together, so too should it help the group co-create teams together. In the true sense of shared ministry, it is best to share the leadership. Prior to each session the group should elect a leader and co-leader for that coming session. You might also consider selecting a different scribe for each session. After four sessions, then, just about each member of the group (assuming groups of 8-12) would have had a chance to lead this curriculum. Such a shared model of leadership is not only a learning opportunity but a chance to enhance the diversity and richness of your theological formation. As each individual brings certain styles and gifts to the process, the outcome of your theological discernment will reflect that diversity.

Leadership guru George Barna writes, “Leadership works best when it is provided by a team of gifted leaders serving together in pursuit of a clear and compelling vision”.³¹

Think of the team leaders as the pilot and first officer of a commercial airliner. The pilot has command but each has the ability and the desire to see a successful outcome to the day. Like any good pilot team, the co-leader’s responsibility is to question the judgment of the leader. Like creative theological discernment, the leadership team is engaged in meaning making by the very fact that they are learning and leading together.

The leader is an individual who sets the agenda for the day, prepares materials and coordinates space and participation. During the session, divide the leadership responsibilities between the two leaders. For instance, the co-leader could light the

³¹ George Barna, *The Power of Team Leadership: Achieving Success Through Shared Responsibility* (Colorado Springs: Waterpress Books, 2001), 8.

chalice, the leader could read the opening and outline the agenda for the day, and the co-leader could lead the first activity. After a break, the leader could lead the second activity continuing the trade-off throughout the day. In other words, take turns. As leaders take and rescind the lead, group dynamics evolve and adjust where the stimulus may trigger a breakthrough.

The co-leader is also that person who can, should circumstances require, step in to the leadership role as needed. When this happens ensure you recruit another co-leader to take the previous co-leaders place.

When leading be aware of the essential tension between time and content. Every good teacher knows the importance to balance time restrictions with momentum. Being on time is equally important as allowing for dialog and deeper sharing. Finally, remember that good leaders caress participants towards the goal. Be flexible and willing to move the creative process forward.

Pastoral Concerns

Some of what will be discussed in this course will be deeply personal. If the leaders perceive that someone is having difficulty or is in distress, take a break and allow that person to process. He or she may need to excuse himself or herself. If the distress is immediate ask the person if she would like to have someone call the minister or a trusted friend. In any case, it is advisable to inform the minister of the concern so the minister can determine how best to follow up.

CHAPTER 3: SESSION 1

Demystifying Theology: Introduction to Theology and the Big Questions

Introduction

In this session, participants are exposed to theology as a meaning making system of thought. Theology is often viewed with suspicion by religious liberals who assume that the word implies a deity or belief in a deity. As mentioned in the introduction, theology is the study of ultimate meaning with a focus on the big questions of life. These include:

1. What is the nature of hope?
2. What is our response to racism and oppression?
3. What is the best response to suffering?
4. What is our individual and collective purpose?

The assumption of this course is that when a group of leaders can adequately answer these questions, they will be better able to lead from a deeper and more engaged common identity. To do this, the first session develops some theological tools by which to begin this important work.

Theological tools include exploring our emotional and social history, working with concepts that are practical in our everyday lives and realizing that all theological formation is a continual process. The emphasis in this session and throughout the curriculum is to focus on how theology makes a difference in the lives of the leadership and the church rather than an abstract collection of individual beliefs.

Goals

1. To explore participants theological past and how it has evolved.
2. To consider a normative theological framework through the use of metaphorical process.
3. To lay out the initial framework of a shared theology.

Welcoming and Centering (10 min)

Session leaders are encouraged to set out refreshments, a chalice, newsprint, markers, masking tape, pens and paper. Use recorded music, preferably jazz or instrumental blues, to set the environment as people enter the space.

Chalice Lighting (5 min)

The co-leader lights the chalice and the leader reads:

“In a very real sense, all theology is autobiography, is it not? Our experience, real and vicarious, is what informs our sense of reality, our internal picture of the way the world works, what our values are. We believe what we know is true -- that is, our felt knowledge--not what we are told is true. In the final analysis, how can a person who wishes to live with integrity do other than this?”³²

These words by the Rev. Dr. Marilyn Sewell speak to the essence of why we must do theology together. While theology is autobiography, it is based largely on our place in the world over a period of time. In this session, we discover how our theology has changed

³² Marilyn Sewell, “The Theology of Unitarian Universalists” in Huffington Post, 9/29/2014.

over time and what we hold true in common. We explore our common felt knowledge that informs our work together as leaders.

Activity #1 What Loved You Into This Place? (30 min)

All of us come to a congregation because someone invited us and/or something was missing in our lives. All of us come to be loved. By way of introduction, have each participant answer these two questions:

1. What brought you to this church?
2. Who or what loved you into staying?

The answer to those two questions can be very personal and powerful reminders of what it means to belong to a covenantal community.

Activity #2 From Whence We Came (30 min)

Have participants physically line up across the room. Designate one end of the room for those who grew up with no religious background and designate the other end of the room for those who grew up with a strictly orthodox or fundamentalist background. After everyone has found their place, ask each participant to briefly explain their religious background and answer the question “What was theology to you?” Encourage participants to present some of their personal story into this description (e.g. I was raised in a strict Baptist household, with a stern father and six brothers and sisters in Eastern Tennessee).

Have one of the leaders copy the theological places onto newsprint and post on the wall.

Break (15 min)

Activity #3 What do you believe about God? (40 min)

Forest Church once wrote:

“God language can tie people into knots, of course. In part, that is because ‘God’ is not God's name. Referring to the highest power we can imagine, ‘God’ is our name for that which is greater than all and yet present in each. For some the highest imaginable power will be a petty and angry tribal baron ensconced high above the clouds on a golden throne, visiting punishment on all who don't believe in him. But for others, the highest power is love, goodness, justice, or the spirit of life itself. Each of us projects our limited experience on a cosmic screen in letters as big as our minds can fashion. For those whose vision is constricted (illiberal, narrow-minded people), this can have horrific consequences. But others respond to the munificence of creation with broad imagination and sympathy. Answering to the highest and best within and beyond themselves, they draw lessons and fathom meaning so redemptive that surely it touches the divine.”³³

Let us think of God as something more than a being or a person. Imagine God as a process and a force. What is the ultimate force in your life that moves you to live and act in the world?

With this broader understanding ask participants to once again line up across the room. Designate one end as the belief that no such force exists, that is classical atheism, and designate the other end as a belief in a personal understanding of God as a being at work in your life and the world.

³³ Forrest Church, *The Cathedral of the World: A Universalist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009)

After participants have placed themselves along that line ask them each to describe their belief. One leader should list the descriptions of God or lack thereof. Are there any similarities to the character of these beliefs? For instance, do the themes of love and hope emerge? Circle the similar beliefs and post this newsprint in the room.

Break (15 min) or Lunch (45 min)

Activity #4 Find a common metaphor for God/Force (30 min)

Introduction to the Activity

In this next activity, participants are invited to think more deeply about their concepts of God/Force through the use of metaphorical thinking. Sallie McFague in her book *Models of God* writes:

“theology is mostly fiction’, but a multiplicity of images, or metaphors, can and should enhance and enrich our models of God. Most importantly, new metaphors can help give substance to new ways of conceiving God appropriately ‘for our time’”³⁴

Metaphors convey the essence of God in unique and emotional ways. As McFague puts it:

“The essence of metaphorical theology, however, is precisely the refusal to identify human constructions with divine reality. Since a metaphor is a word or phrase appropriate to one context but used in another, no metaphorical construction can be univocally applied, that is, applied in the form of identity. To

³⁴ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1987), 12.

say that 'God is mother' is not to identify God with mother, but to understand God in light of some of the characteristics associated with mothering. It is, then, also to say, 'God is not mother,' or, to combine the positive and negative aspects of metaphorical theology”³⁵

A metaphor is one way to describe the ineffable nature of the God/Force in our lives. As McFague points out metaphors have both the quality of what a thing is as well as embodying the quality of what a thing is not.³⁶ For instance, to describe God as a window, tells us that God can be seen through to another space, can be gone through or even closed. But, with this metaphor, God is also not a door that can be walked through, it takes effort to crawl through a window. Nor is God an object on the other side of the window but is, rather, the portal itself.

Metaphorical thinking helps to ground the participants into a theology of the here and now and to avoid, as McFague puts it “needless abstractions and self-indulgent irrelevancies.”³⁷ Metaphors also have the ability to “disorient and reorient” ourselves to new ideas about ultimate meaning. The parables of Jesus were really metaphors in story form that disoriented his followers from what they thought was important and helped to reorient them to a reality completely opposite the one they had known (i.e. “The first

³⁵ Sallie McFague, *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 37.

³⁶ David Lot in his introduction to McFague’s work writes: “McFague explores the epistemological function of metaphors, writing, “Metaphor is a way of knowing, not just a way of communicating. In metaphor, knowledge and its expression are one and the same” in *Sallie McFague: Collected Readings*, David Lot, ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1975), 12. McFague concludes: “A theology that takes its cues from the parables never reaches its object, but in language, belief, and life as metaphor, story, and living engagement we are sent off in its direction. It is a theology for skeptics and for our time” page 127.

³⁷ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1982), 23.

shall be last and the last shall be first”). This concept has the effect of unseating previous assumptions about the ultimate and reconsidering others. As an example, if God is the Father, than patriarchal systems of oppression are considered sanctified but if God becomes a field, a more egalitarian worldview is possible.³⁸

Activity

Hand out index cards and ask the participants to write down or draw their metaphor for God. Ask the participants to be as concise and imagistic as possible, moving beyond broad descriptions such as love and hope to descriptions that are as close as possible to something tangible in the world; doors, fields, trees, stars, people, animals, colors, and quilts. The point is to concretize these broad concepts and in so doing to move each participant into a common theological space; metaphors help to level the conceptual field from ideal mental constructs to more emotional embodiments.

One of the leaders should collect the cards and tape them next to the newsprint describing the participant’s current theological understanding.

Break (15 min)

Activity #5 Synthesis (30 min)

The point to this final exercise is to begin to synthesize the descriptions with the metaphors being used. Ask participants in groups of two to place two of the metaphorical descriptions (not their own) next to the various theological descriptions on the newsprint. After all the cards have been placed, ask everyone to step back.

³⁸ McFague, *Models of God*, 46.

One of the leaders now asks the group to identify common themes emerging from both the theological descriptions on the newsprint and the metaphorical descriptions on the cards. Look for three or four common themes and note them on separate newsprint. If the group feels comfortable, engage them in word smithing, a tentative description of the God/Force using theological and metaphorical language.

Do not be concerned that everyone's viewpoint is not captured in this synthesis. The group is not trying to create a laundry list of beliefs or a concept that is the lowest common denominator but rather to capture a concept that is both emotional and metaphorically rooted in the world in which we live. Naturally, the group will avoid words that personalize the God/Force too much. However, as leaders it is important to avoid a description that is too conceptual. Explain to the group that this is tentative and only the first step in creating a theology together.

Check Out (15 min)

Go around the group and ask each participant to share how this work surprised them. Surprise is a sign of creativity and imagination. Pay close attention to discomfort and emotional concerns and be sure to report those out if need be to the minister.

Closing Words (5 min)

Joining hands in a circle, the co-leader reads the following closing thoughts from Rev. Bill Sinkford:

“What calls us to embrace (our) vision? What voice shouts its imperatives or whispers the possibility that love might be real? The God I know, and I use that

word, does not “will” or insist that we live towards the vision of the beloved community. The God I know exists as a possibility or a potential that is present in my life and in which my life plays a part. It is not the idea of wholeness but glimpses of wholeness that support me and give me hope... We long for certainty, a blueprint we can confidently follow. What we get are glimpses... In the wilderness of responsibilities, of failures of energy and of nerve, in the face of the tyranny of the to-do list, we choose to follow paths where we have glimpsed wholeness before... It’s not easy to have only glimpses of what we can rely on. I suppose that is why they call what we do “faith” – a belief that grace will come as we answer the call to take one more step forward.”³⁹

End of Session 1

Follow up questions for a series of groups meetings before the next session (consider no more than one question per meeting):

1. What is the nature of the cosmos?
2. What is the difference between good and evil?
3. How are we saved?⁴⁰

³⁹ William G. Sinkford, “Far From Ease and Grace” in *Not for Ourselves Alone: Theological Essays on Relationships*, Burton D. Carley and Laurel Hallman eds. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014).

⁴⁰ For how to structure a follow up covenant group, see Robert Hill’s *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003).

CHAPTER 4: SESSION 2

Authority, Race and Authenticity

Introduction to the Session

In the long history of Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists there has been a struggle between our aspirations to be diverse and our ability to overcome our white middle class practices in order to become allies for racial justice.

This session asks you as a group to own your own fears and the fears of your congregation as they apply to racism. After this activity, you will be asked to formulate how your authority as leaders might change other moral perspectives. As Mark Morrison-Reed states in his book *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* “Liberal churches welcome blacks and others who have assimilated middle-class values.”⁴¹ Our style of worship and polity keep us segregated. At the end of the day, our power and privilege keeps us segregated.

In order to create a truly meaningful shared theology among leaders of the congregation, there needs to be an honest look at how your own congregation has encountered race and what you as leaders might want to change in your congregation. Finally, you will be asked to incorporate this moral authority and racial awareness into your emerging shared theology. Some religious liberals may reject social action as necessary to theology⁴².

However, as Paul Rasor and others demonstrate it is the very fact that we are

⁴¹ Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination* (Boston: Skinner House, 1980), 168.

⁴² Richard Rorty, “Religion as a Conversation Stopper” in *Common Knowledge* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 1-6 makes the case that interjecting religion into issues of justice dilutes the power of the argument because there are no common religious values in a pluralistic society such as ours. The corollary to this view is that theology must be kept separate from social action and indeed is detrimental to theology. This is known broadly as the “exclusionist ideal”.

theologically pluralists that requires us to share the value of taking action. Moreover, because we are so careful as liberals to not exclude others religious viewpoints as possibly valid, we are all the more likely to ground our social action in values that are largely accessible to most people. As Razor puts it: “A central methodological criterion of liberal theology is the conviction that theological claims must be intelligible to and consistent with other areas of human knowledge.”⁴³

Embedded within this social action is the larger problem of oppression, suffering and evil. Any theology must answer the larger question of why people suffer. While it is not a primary goal of this session to answer the problem of theodicy⁴⁴, questions of why suffering and oppression exist need to be considered by participants.

Leaders should be aware that discussing personal prejudice and congregational history can be painful for some. Please be aware of this and be prepared to consult with the minister as needed.

Goals

1. To own your “place in race” and the fears you may have of those different from you.
2. To own your congregation’s diversity, attempts to achieve racial justice and its fears.

⁴³ Paul Razor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: Skinner House, 2012), 45-51.

⁴⁴ “Theodicy” comes from the Greek words (viz., theos = God, and dike = justice) meaning the “justification of God.” It is often considered a problem as in Rabbi Harold Kushner’s famous title “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People”. Brian Hebblethwaite puts it this way “You say God is both omnipotent and perfectly good. If so, there ought not to be any evil in the world, since your God would be both able and willing to prevent it. But there is evil in the world; so either there is no God, or he is not omnipotent, or he is not perfectly good” (Brian Hebblethwaite, *Evil, Suffering and Religion*), 60

3. To reflect on your shared theological understanding of this work.
4. To formulate a plan of action to improve your congregation's outreach as "racial allies" through a broader moral palate (see the discussion of Jonathon Haidt in the Introduction).
5. To help participants consider how racism is suggestive of oppression and suffering and how a shared theology can speak to those human conditions.

Welcoming and Centering (15 min.)

Session leaders are encouraged to set out refreshments, a chalice, newsprint, markers, masking tape, pens and paper. Use recorded music, preferably jazz or instrumental blues, to set the environment as people enter the space.

Chalice Lighting (5 min.)

Light the chalice and read the following from *Been In the Storm So Long* edited by Mark Morrison-Reed and Jacqui James:

Dark and Light, Light and Dark

Blackmail, blacklist, black mark. Black Monday, black mood, black-hearted.

Black plague, black mass, black market.

Good guys wear white, bad guys wear black. We fear black cats and the Dark Continent. But it's okay to tell a white lie...Angels and brides wear white. Devil's food cake is chocolate; angel's food cake is white!

We share language and we are shaped by it...Ascribing negative and positive values to black and white enhances the institutionalization of this culture's racism.

Welcome darkness...Darkness brings relief from the blinding sun...Night signals permission to reset, to be with our loved ones, to conceive of new life, to search our hearts, to remember our dreams...Seeds grow in the dark, fertile earth.

The words black and dark don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balanced and reclaimed in their wholeness. The words white and light don't need to be destroyed or ignored, only balance and reclaimed in their wholeness. Imagine a world that had only light-or dark. We need both. Dark and light. Light and dark.⁴⁵

--- Jacqui James

Activity #1 (30 min. total with break)

Owning your Own Place in Race

Hand out index cards to the each participant and read the following: "All of us come from an ethnic and cultural background. Assuming that diversity is only seeing people of color in your congregation, misses the diversity already present. On paper describe your "family of origin". From what country did your ancestors come? How many generations ago did they come to this country? What customs does your family still practice?

"Skip a few lines and write about when you are afraid of people different than you. Is it when you were in an unfamiliar neighborhood? When others speak a different language? The tone and volume of their voices? How they dress?"

After everyone is finished. List the ethnicity of those present on newsprint and on separate newsprint list the fears.

⁴⁵ Mark Morrison-Read, *Been in the Storm So Long: A Meditation Manual*, ed. Jacqui James (Boston: UUA Press, 1991), 8-9.

Discussion

What did you learn about those in the room? Could the customs of those present be seen as threatening by others? Why or why not?

Break**Activity #2 (60 min)****Owning your Congregation's Racial Identity**

Read Handout # 1 "An Interview with Rev. Abe, Minister Emeritus"

After reading this, ask the group as a whole to reflect on the following:

Is this church essentially racist in practice if not name?

What can we do to become better racial allies in our community?

What would we change to be more welcoming in practice?

Should we move the church location to better position ourselves to be racially inclusive?

The leaders should capture these ideas on newsprint.

Break (10 min)**Activity #3 (90 min)**

Racism is an example of suffering. In this activity, ask participants to reflect on their own personal suffering as it relates to such prejudice as racism.

Hand out sheets of paper and markers. Ask each participant to draw a picture of when they suffered. After everyone is finished, ask those who are willing to share. (Note: Be aware of deep emotional issues emerging. Crying during this exercise is not unusual, sobbing might be a sign of a greater need and the minister should be alerted.) Some may not be willing to share.

Ask participants:

1. How does your experience relate to racism or other forms of oppression?
2. What does your theology say about your suffering? How do you reconcile what you believe with the suffering you have experienced?
3. How might we expand our understanding of the morality of countering oppression beyond an appeal to fairness and care to the other moral senses, loyalty, sanctity and authority, for example how does oppression violate our sanctity as human beings?

Break or lunch (40 min)

Activity #4 Theological Formation Exercise (50 min)

Break into triads, have each triad select a scribe and discuss the following:

What is our calling as a congregation?

The leader draws the group together and charts common phrases. In one sentence, write down the calling on newsprint.

Does it include racial justice?

Break into two groups and discuss the following:

Is there a spiritual reason for this calling?

(Bear in mind the theological history of your congregation discerned in Session 1)

Come together as one group and discuss the following:

What is our spiritual calling as a congregation towards racial justice?

Leaders try to capture this in ONE sentence on newsprint.

Break (10 min)

Activity #5 (40 min)

Devise an action plan

Reflecting on your own prejudices, fears and taking into account your congregation's failures and successes at racial justice, devise a plan of no more than six steps with measurable results for the next two years.

Include in this plan:

Address education as to what diversity means (such as leading the class *Tapestry of Faith*, see bibliography).

Own your congregation's racial history honestly; ask for a volunteer to write a short history.

Propose changes in worship style and music (such as exploring the authority and sanctity of including diverse viewpoints and styles in worship)

Define a social justice agenda that includes racial ally work (such as partnering with a local interfaith shelter, working with disadvantaged youth, CLUE and other racial ally groups)

Assign a volunteer to bring this plan back to the board and congregation for discussion and ratification and attach the results to your common theological statement. (see course introduction)

Check out and Closing (15 min)

Gather in a circle. Have each participant use one word to describe their current emotional state. As always, participants may “pass”.

From Handout #2 have each participant read a line from Mel Hoover’s “Spirit of the Pioneer”. If there are more lines than participants continue to go around circle until the reading is read in its entirety.

Extinguish the Chalice

Leader’s Reflections (15 min)

Immediately assemble the leaders of the course to summarize and debrief the feelings within the group. Reflecting on personal prejudice and congregational history can be painful. If further follow-up is required with some who may have been hurt, please advise the minister. Also note those who seemed reluctant or did not participate fully. Consider following up with them individually to hear their concerns.

As always it is helpful to transcribe the newsprint into a document for future reference as the course progresses.

End of session 2

Follow up questions for a series of groups meetings before the next session (consider no more than one question per meeting):

1. What is suffering?
2. What does racism have to do with me?
3. How can I see myself as an ally?

CHAPTER 5: SESSION 3

Practice Makes Meaning: The Importance of Sources and Experience

Introduction to the Session

In this session the group grounds their theological framework in the sources of our faith tradition and their own personal experience. Six sources are commonly held in our Unitarian Universalist Tradition:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men that challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions that inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings that call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings that counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions that celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.⁴⁶

While it is beyond the scope of this curriculum to explore all six of these sources, participants are asked to consider the first two in constructing their normative theology.

⁴⁶ The website for Unitarian Universalist Association; UUA.org

In the first activity, the group is asked to reflect on the “Direct experience of the transcending mystery” of our world; what is commonly referred to as spiritual experience.

There has been a great deal of debate in the last decade about the definition of spirituality and its relationship to religion. Generations younger than baby boomers are increasingly referring to themselves as “spiritual but not religious”; indicating a lack of affinity with religion as a means to this direct experience of the Holy. Unitarian Universalism is uniquely poised to move beyond this apparent conflict by re-defining our identity as spiritual and religious, or better yet, “spiritually religious but not dogmatic”.⁴⁷ While tradition still plays a large role in American religiosity, most religious liberals ground their theology in reason and a direct experience of the divine.

In many ways, this direct experience of the spiritual, especially when coupled with a spiritual practice, is the most promising theological tool we have as pragmatic religious liberals. Diane Butler Bass observes:

“When spiritual practices retain their commitment to intentionality, the wisdom of imitation, and a focus on God’s reign then they possess the ability to transform “religion” into *religio*, an experience of wonder, trust, and faith. Religious and spiritual? Not so much. But spiritual and religious? That is the path toward a new sort of Christianity. It is the way of awakening.”⁴⁸

⁴⁷ PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project; <http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report2religious-landscape-study-key-findings.pdf> (Washington D.C., 2014. U.S. Religious Landscape Survey).

⁴⁸ Diane Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collings Publishers, 2012), 167.

As Unitarian Universalists we are unencumbered by the need to limit our spiritual dimension to “God’s reign”. Rather, we have the opportunity to explore the breadth of spiritual practices as we encounter the transcendent.⁴⁹ Meditation, prayer, dancing, music, study and service are but a few of these important practices.

After the group explores the efficacy of certain spiritual practices, participants are asked to consider several “sacred” scriptures from our biblical and Unitarian Universalist tradition. Every religious tradition has a canon of scripture upon which it draws its theology and practice. As a religious movement born of the Enlightenment our scriptures are at once religious and secular. While we do not limit our scriptures to a specific canon (indeed, it might be said that the whole world is our scripture), there are those critical works that are worth consideration in determining a shared theology. A liberal religious collection of scripture would take many volumes. A list of scriptures worth considering can be found in the bibliography⁵⁰. In this session, participants are asked to read three of our sacred scriptures and to reflect on them theologically. Then they are asked to consider a spiritual or transformative event in their lives and reflect on how these (or any other text) changed them theologically.

Finally, the group is asked to reflect on how these scriptures and experiences have changed their shared theology. As with other sessions in this curriculum, the findings of

⁴⁹ If anything, we are prone to being too broad in our spiritual exploration; following an eclectic path towards the transcendent may leave us wandering hungry when discipline and practice may have helped. At the very least I recommend what Arvid Straube calls “A spiritual maintenance schedule” a rotation of practices in order to focus your exploration. See Scott Alexander, ed., *Everyday Spiritual Practices* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999).

⁵⁰ See Ernest Cassara, ed., *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith* (Boston: Skinner House, 1971).

David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975).

Conrad Edick Wright, *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emmerson-Parker*, Conrad Edick Wright, ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

this session are provisional and always open to new experiences and expressions of the sources of our faith either individually or collectively.

Goals:

1. To understand the breadth and depth of spiritual practice in Unitarian Universalism.
2. To understand how those practices inform and change a theological framework.
3. To relate scriptures to individual experiences within a theological framework.
4. To reconcile scripture and experiences with the group's emerging shared theology.

Welcoming and Centering (15 min)

Session leaders are encouraged to set out refreshments, a chalice, newspaper, markers, masking tape, pens and paper. Use recorded music, preferably jazz or instrumental blues, to welcome people into the space.

Leader welcomes the group: "Today we explore both the variety of spiritual practice and the use of scripture in our liberal religious tradition. Unitarian Universalism was born out of Judeo Christianity and the Enlightenment but has grown in its breadth to include the wisdom of Asian religions, the learning of science and the beauty of poetry and art. A theology is not just an intellectual exercise. It requires other sensory experiences to give it breadth and depth. Of the six sources of our faith (read the sources above) we will be exploring the first two. Specifically, we explore meditation and chanting as a spiritual practice. Then, after a break we consider how our sacred scriptures impact our shared theology. In this session we review a few of these scriptures and relate them to our

growing shared theology. We also consider how our own experiences together and collectively impact that theology.”

Chalice Lighting (5 min)

“The fire is alive. Watch it move. It flickers. It dances on the wind. It changes with every breath (blow softly on it). Fire is alive. It is born. It grows. And it dies. But fire is special. It can live again and again.” - Janeen Grohsmeyer⁵¹

Activity #1 Spiritual Practice (30 min)

The leaders read:

“As our chalice symbolizes, our religion implies movement. Spiritual practice means that which we regularly do in order to deepen our understanding of the Ultimate and draw more emotionally and intellectually towards a shared theology. There are many kinds of spiritual practices from which to choose. The typology of the Hindu practice of yoga is most helpful in understanding the breadth of the spiritual practices in which we engage. Derived from the word “to yoke” yoga is that practice which ties our practices to our theology. The five types of yoga are: Jnana yoga or the path of knowledge; Bhakti yoga or the path of devotion; Karma yoga or the path of action and service; Raja yoga or the path of meditation and Hatha yoga or the path of physical discipline. Unitarian Universalists might practice reading, writing, praying, Hatha yoga, tai chi, prayer, meditation, singing, music, and serving others. All of us have a spiritual practice even if it is coming to worship or serving in leadership.”

⁵¹ Janeen Grohsmeyer, “Flame of Learning, Chalice of Love” in *Tapestry of Faith* (Boston: UUA.org, 2011).

On several sheets of newsprint the leader lists a heading for each of the five types of yoga. Ask participants to take an index card and describe their spiritual practice. Ask them to think broadly, they might be surprised at what constitutes a spiritual practice. After everyone has written down their practice (s) ask them to share. The co-leader should capture the practices under the columns of yoga described above.

Discuss as a group:

1. Where do most of our practices fall?
2. What does that say about us a group?

Break (10 min)

Activity #2 Towards a shared spiritual practice (40 min)

In this activity, the leaders guide the participants through three spiritual practices; meditation, chanting and dance. At the end of this activity the group will vote on which practice most spoke to them and why.

Meditation:

Using Handout #3 guide the group in a breathing meditation.

Chant:

Blow out and then relight the chalice. From the Hymnal “Singing the Living Tradition” sing #362 Rise Up, O Flame; first together, then as a round by splitting the group into two. Sing at least ten times.

Dance:

Have the participants stand. Play meditative music and lead them in the dance of Universal Peace: standing raise your hands to the ceiling, gathering the energy of the cosmos, bring them together in the sign of prayer across your chest, open your hands towards the floor, gather the energy from your knees to your chest and release it again to the cosmos by spreading your hands to the ceiling. Repeat and repeat and repeat and repeat.

Return to your seats and sit quietly for two minutes.

Discuss as a group:

1. What did that feel like for each of you?
2. Which one brought you the most meaning?
3. What does each practice say about your theology?
4. Which practice did the group like most? Why?
5. How did that practice draw us together?

Break (30 min or lunch)

Return to your tentative theological statement. Discuss as a group:

What would we change given this spiritual practice? What other practices might we employ to live out this theology?

Activity #3 Sacred Scriptures (30 min)

From Handout #4, read the following passages aloud either as a round or as leaders.

From the Hebrew Bible, Amos 5:23-24

From William Ellery Channing

From Margaret Fuller

From Mary Oliver⁵²

As a group discuss:

1. Which scripture spoke to you and why?
2. What do we as Unitarian Universalists consider sacred scriptures?
3. Is there one of these readings that speaks to our emerging shared theology?
4. Which one and why?

Break (5 min)

Activity #4 Writing a shared liturgy (45 min)

Part of creative interchange is working together to embody the theology we share. In this activity participants will work together to create a shared worship liturgy that they will use for the remainder of the course. Elements should include all of the practices you have explored in this session; meditation, reading, movement, words, song and silence. On a

⁵² Further Source Resources can be found in the bibliography. See Ernest Cassara, ed. *Universalism in America: A Documentary History of a Liberal Faith* (Boston: Skinner House, 1971).

John Buehrens, *Universalists and Unitarians in America: A People's History* (Boston: Skinner House, 2001).

Arnold Crompton, *Unitarianism on the Pacific Coast* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957).

David Robinson, *The Unitarians and the Universalists* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975).

Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

Conrad Wright, ed. *Three Prophets of Religious Liberalism: Channing-Emmerson-Parker* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).

Conrad Wright, ed., *A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism, 2nd edition* (Boston: Skinner House, 1989).

large piece of newsprint begin brainstorming ideas for your liturgy. Handout #5 includes ideas on designing worship.

After brainstorming (and brainstorming means listing all the ideas), handout small color dots, four to each participant and ask the participants to place dots on at least four elements they would like to see.

When this is done the leaders will order the elements into a liturgical outline.

Now assign each element to groups of two or three and provide them with hymnals and other worship materials to complete their service element; e.g. a responsive reading can be borrowed from our hymnal or written new, a song might be used from the hymnal or taken from another source, etc.

Bring all the elements together, including words and music onto a fresh sheet of newsprint. Ask if this speaks to your shared theology.

Closing (15 min)

Close this session with your newly created shared liturgy. Congratulations!

End of session 3

Follow up questions for a series of groups meetings before the next session (consider no more than one question per meeting):

1. What rituals speak to me and why?
2. How can my theology be expressed?
3. What do I appreciate our worship and why?

CHAPTER 6: SESSION 4

Putting it all together: A Theology of Shared Mission

Introduction to the Session

The group has now travelled through three sessions of creating theology together. In this final session participants will join together in actually creating a shared theological statement and a plan of social action. The end of your work together is to build a theology that moves us toward what our tradition often calls the beloved community.

Towards The Beloved Community

The 19th century philosopher Josiah Royce defines the beloved community as:

"A community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts as a part of his own individual life and self the same past events that each of his fellow-members accepts may be called a community of memory... A community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life and self, the same expected future events that each of his fellows accepts, may be called a community of expectation or...a community of hope...the community is a being that attempts to accomplish something in time through the deeds of its members."⁵³

Since each member of your congregation is encouraged to find their own meaning, the community as a collection of its parts is left with the task of meaning making in practice.

⁵³ Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1913), 248.

If Royce defines loyalty as a service of causes, then the service to those causes must be part of our common theology.⁵⁴

Moreover, the common theology we seek within the beloved community creates a stronger, more sacred community. In a culture of fierce individualism such as ours, there is a divide between those who practice spirituality, what the sociologist Courtney Bender calls “metaphysicals”, and those who consider themselves “religious”. Bender concludes that most of those who consider themselves “religious” are religious not because of their allegiance to any doctrine or spiritual practice but because they are hungry for community. In fact, many religious people, Unitarian Universalists included, follow spiritual practices outside what their congregation has to offer. What draws people to religion is not spiritual practice or doctrine *per se* but the healing power of community that also happens to have spiritual benefits. The rise in religiosity in the last several decades is a reaction to the alienation of the modern world. Being loyal to a beloved community is a response first to alienation and secondly to spiritual identity. As Bender puts it, we yearn to be “members of each other” recognizing the “thick interdependency of our lives”.⁵⁵

Such a communal theology is in fact truest to our heritage as Unitarian Universalists. With roots stretching back to the Cambridge Platform, our congregations are inherently bound together by a mutual promise to find a truth unfolding together. As Alice Blair Wesley reminds us, our covenantal heritage is our epistemological authority.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty* (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1908), 178-179.

⁵⁵ Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6-14.

⁵⁶ Alice Blair Wesley, *Our Covenant: 2000-2001 Minns Lectures* (Boston: First Unitarian Church, 2001).

Given this hunger for beloved community and the nature of Unitarian Universalist theology to locate within that community, the question remains, how do we move our congregation as a community towards a shared theological understanding?

Arriving at an Engaged Public Theology

I believe that Unitarian Universalists are drawn into a greater power that calls us into the world and co-creates the universe with us. However, this post-modern process theology is tempered by a suspicion that there is more to our lives than the exercise of free will; perhaps we are being directed towards an end. Perhaps we cannot define what that end is, but I often describe this as working toward the “good”. Beyond the beloved community, which can be seen as the means to this end, is a larger good expressed in our social justice making as a congregation. We rely on our congregations to define a larger good as we move forward in this work.

The creation of this communal theology needs to be experimental and attentive to the pluralistic nature of the congregation and the culture in which we work. This communal theology needs to be, as the theologian Douglas Sturm, puts it “local” and “thick”.⁵⁷ As you create your theology and begin to create a plan of action, consider focusing your energy on a single social justice project partnering with local activists and interfaith groups.

⁵⁷ Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a Politics of Rationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 7.

The Place of the Third Sector

Primarily, this work needs to be done in, what the philosopher William Dean, calls the “third sector”; a public space between the individual and the commercial world all of us inhabit such as the voluntary associations of the church and other non-profits who work in partnership with the church.⁵⁸ As a congregation, you are uniquely poised to create the praxis of theory and practice. The challenge is to implement this broad movement of theological engagement towards social justice making. This is a tall order and may not be possible in the course of this curriculum. However, even in this first attempt by your leadership to marry a shared theological statement with a plan of social action, you are helping us mature as a religious movement.

Responding Theologically to Racism

While as a leadership group you may choose to create a theological plan of action addressing any cause, this curriculum urges you to strongly consider the issue of racism and oppression as worthy of your leadership focus. As has been noted, racism and oppression best exemplify the connection between our individual suffering and the suffering of those marginalized by the very power centers we as religious liberals inhabit. In other words, by addressing racism as a theological action, we grapple with the vertical dimension of our values and identity. All of us have felt oppression. As participants in the predominant paradigm of power, how do we relate our oppression to those not like us? What should our theology say about how we might transcend that otherness towards a larger and more just beloved community? It is the goal of this course to create a more

⁵⁸ William Dean, *The Religious Critic in American Culture* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994), 160-161.

engaged and shared public theology that will give us the tools to respond to the suffering of the oppressed in the world. The pragmatic connection could not be more obvious or more urgent. As Sturm puts it: “Racism is, bluntly put, an obstruction to that kind of creative interaction through which both Self and Other might find their great good.”⁵⁹ The created theology of each member of the congregation taken collectively will find a ready expression in responding to racism and, by extension, other oppressions and sufferings in our lives and world. Regardless of the particularities of what each member believes, the fact that we engage in theological reflection together creates shared values (such as compassion, inherent worth and freedom) more readily available to reference to as we move forward in responding to injustice. As Sturm observes, “Social justice, on its structural level, is less a matter of principles of distribution, as a matter of the patterns of interaction, institutional and cultural, through which life is lived.”⁶⁰

A shared process of theological reflection is a powerful and local interaction that will help your congregation respond to the needs of others. Even more powerfully are those interactions between communities of agonistic theologies that leave aside questions of principles and get to the immediate work of actually helping others. In this final session, the group will reconcile their values towards a statement of shared theology, drawn not down to the lowest common dominator but up to a normative nature of divinity, both personal and cosmic. The action plan imbedded in this session should, with any luck and grace, pull that theology up from a fear of offending those who disagree to the higher plane of faith; inspiring us to stretch beyond our comfort zone to a faith beyond mere

⁵⁹ Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a Politics of Relationality* (Albany: State University of New York, 1998), 64.

⁶⁰ Douglas Sturm, *Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a Politics of Relationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 69.

belief. Participants are urged to focus not on what they disagree with, or how they can reduce that disagreement, but rather focus on that to which they can even tentatively.⁶¹

Goals:

1. To craft and agree on a shared theological statement for the group that focuses on shared value of mission.
2. To formulate a plan of social action that addresses the racism and oppression as a means to explaining suffering in ourselves and our world and what this leadership group can do about it.
3. To suggest to other groups in the congregation and the congregation as the whole how this shared theology might change the understanding of the congregation's covenant and its place in the world.

Welcoming and Centering (10 min)

Session leaders are encouraged to set out refreshments, a chalice, newspaper, markers, masking tape, pens and paper. Use of recorded music, preferably jazz or instrumental blues, will invite people into the space.

Relate to the group the following:

“For the last three sessions we have been “creating theology together”. In this final session we will attempt to draw our learning together and formulate a share

⁶¹ Manuel Vasquez in his work *More Than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) makes the case for a materialist theory of religion in which postmodern reductionism is replaced with a theological framework rooted in the lived materiality of the world we inhabit. His theory eschews universal pronouncements about ultimacy and embraces the reality of how *what* we believe changes *how* the world actually is. While philosophically technical I commend this book to those interested in a critique of postmodern liberalism.

theological statement that is more than our lowest common shared beliefs but rather an aspiration, even if we don't totally agree with every word, about who we are and what we value. We will then formulate a plan of social action that puts this theology into practice. Finally, we will agree on next steps to bring our work to the congregation and suggest ways we might better covenant together."

Chalice Lighting (5 min)

The leader lights the chalice and reads:

"And so we have come to this sacred space and sacred time. A time to create a shared faith from our many paths. A faith beyond assurances, yet calling us onward to change the world. Anne Lamott writes:

"We religious types, even those who detest organized religion, pray for deeper faith and a greater sense of oneness with God. Once when I was about to fly to the other side of the world and asked my church for prayers, my pastor said, 'By the time you get on a plane, it's too late for beggy prayers. It's time for trust and surrender.' These two things are almost all I want, but unfortunately, neither one is my strong suit. I am very strong on blame, and wish this were one of God's values, but trust, surrender? Letting go, forgiveness? Maybe just after a period of prayer, but then the mood passes and real life rears its ugly head again? Not so much. I hate this, the fact that life is usually Chutes and Ladders, with no guaranteed gains."⁶²

⁶² Anne Lamott, *Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2012), 97.

We can't know with certainty where our path will take us but we are better for having travelled this way together, in this our walking prayer is love.”

Activity #1 Bring it All Home: A Review (30 min)

Post all of the newsprint from the last three sessions. Each leader takes turns recounting the journey from the exercise that explored our theological past to our present to the themes that emerged. Recount the second session when the group grappled with issues of racism and oppression both in your congregational history and individually. Recount the shared liturgy you designed. Divide the group into triads and discuss the following:

1. How has this course changed what I believe about the Holy/God/Power in my life?
2. What have I learned about the group and the church in this course?

Have each participant answer in turn taking no more than four minutes each. Use a timer.

Bring the group back together. Ask each triad to report out: What did they hear? List these comments on a fresh piece of newsprint.

Break (10 min)

Activity #2 In the Beginning: Telling our Story as Theology (50 min)

In this activity the group goes about the task of forming a theological statement through the heuristic device of storytelling. “We tell ourselves stories in order to live” wrote the novelist Joan Didion⁶³ and in that telling our shared meaning is made. In the first session of this course participants are asked to recall their own story from their religious

⁶³ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 1979), 11.

beginnings to the present day. In this activity, the group will embark on telling the congregation's story as a theological framework. In the Hebrew Book of Genesis, God creates the world (several times) and in each creation, takes humanity in and out and in again. If we read that story not only as a biography of God (who goes from being a very personal entity in the Garden of Eden to a voice in the whirlwind in the Book of Job)⁶⁴ but also as anthropology, we can begin to see how humanity has become less of a created being and more of a creator. Theology is one important way in which we create meaning. Storytelling is the means by which we can do that creation.

In this activity pay close attention to the values, themes and metaphors that the group has developed in this course. Ask the group to keep those in mind as they write their story.

Tell the Story: Outline

Ask the participants to divide in three equal groups. Each group will develop part of the story.

Group 1: *In the beginning*; in 200 words or less, describe the beginning of the church using any material at hand. Be sure to describe the ideals and failures of that beginning. Adopt a metaphor for this work such as "In the beginning we dreamed our church would be a shining beacon for all to see". Pay attention to what that metaphor says and doesn't say about the church's purpose.

Group 2: *As we grew*; in 200 words or less, describe how the church saw itself theologically and socially. What was the dominant theology at that time? How involved

⁶⁴ The changing literary nature of God is outlined beautifully in Jack Miles *God: A Biography* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

was the congregation in combatting racism or other social justice calls of the day? Was there “acting out” going on among members at that time? Be sure to describe the ideals and failures in that time. Adopt a metaphor for this growing up time as well.

Group 3: *And so we became*; in 200 words or less, describe how the congregation came to be what it is today theologically and socially. What is the dominant theology today? How involved is the congregation in combatting racism? How does it respond to suffering and the needs of the community? Be sure to adopt a metaphor for this time as well.

Break (10 min)

Now have each group read its story. The leaders should stand by the charts of values and metaphors and put a check mark next to those they recognize in the telling. Write down the three metaphors developed. How are they similar? Is there one metaphor the entire group can embrace?

Activity #3 Writing our Theology (45 min)

In many ways the group has already been writing their theological statement but now comes the time to put it all together. Recall that theology is a system of meaning making from our most ultimate values. In this exercise, you use the stories and metaphors and tentative action plans to create a shared theology. If the group can name a greater power, either in concept or metaphor that will be helpful. While few Unitarian Universalists can agree on the word “God” other words like “Force”, “Power”, “Spirit of Life”, “Love”, “Ground of All Being”, etc. may be helpful.

As a group, find the language of meaning that most adequately answers the learning goals of this course.

Goals:

1. What is the nature of hope?
2. What is our response to racism and oppression?
3. What is the best response to suffering?
4. What is our individual and collective purpose?

Your shared theology answers each question in turn. Explain to the group that this statement **MUST** reflect the work you have already done. This is not the time for new thinking.

The leader should write these phrases on four separate sheets of newsprint and lead the group in answering them.

- Our Hope:
- Responding to Oppression:
- Responding to Suffering:
- Our Purpose as Leaders:

Remember that assent to the group statement does not negate the individual faiths within the group. This is a shared theology; we share in all or parts of what we have decided as important.

Note: This will be a challenging task. It may help to remind the participants that you have covenanted together (indeed we exist in a covenantal theological tradition) to remain

respectful of difference while searching for the unity that binds us. Word smithing is not necessary in this activity. The point is to come up with a shared theology that is precise and compelling.

Break (15 min) Perhaps, now is time to break out a bottle of bubbly Apple Cider!

As the group breaks, the co-leader should transcribe the shared theological statement onto a fresh page of newsprint.

Activity # 4 Designing a Theological Action Plan (45 min)

“Faith without works is dead.” St. James

Introduction to the Activity

As theological pragmatists and a people covenanted to change the world, it is important that we spend some time putting this new shared theology into practice. What is needed is a theology of liberation that engages those well-meaning progressives in shared power with those who are being exploited. To proclaim the system broken or to blame the progressive middle class for being racist is not enough. To proclaim a theology of liberation based on the Christian gospels when the appeal must be broader than to those Latinos who might resonate with a Christian position is not enough. What is needed is a theological perspective that engages God in the actions of those involved, oppressed and oppressors. What is needed is an unfolding of divinity through human contact and direct action.

When we talk about creating a social action plan based on the concept of liberation, we need to acknowledge the theological foundation of Christian liberation. As Gustavo

Gutierrez has pointed out, the church broadly speaking “must make the prophetic denunciation of every dehumanizing situation...which means that the church must also criticize itself as an integral part of this order.”⁶⁵ Such a call to accountability is not reserved for the Christian Church. Any religious order, including Unitarian Universalists, has a moral imperative to speak out against the status quo even as they themselves participate in that status quo. We should never underestimate the power of education as a first step for both the oppressed and oppressors to begin to realize *koinonia*⁶⁶, the union of God with her people.⁶⁷

However, prophetic denunciation and education is not enough to change the dominant system of oppression. We must broaden the theological framework to include action not as a mere means to alleviate our guilt as oppressors but to create the kin-dom of God for all, liberating the oppressed immigrants and those oppressors who see this co-creation as an extension of their basic humanity. After all, as Catherine Keller so eloquently observes, “Those who know suffering come closer to a truth about the creation: the future is open, alarmingly and promisingly.”⁶⁸ The co-creation of justice through direct interaction is the realization of the divine impulse, be it the “creative event” of Henry Nelson Wieman⁶⁹ or the Agapic justice of the theologian Catherine Keller. As Keller writes “when it corresponds to the lure that calls us each into the creative coordination of

⁶⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), 267.

⁶⁶ Koinonia is a transliterated form of the Greek word, κοινωνία, which means communion, joint participation; the share which one has in anything, participation, a gift jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution, etc. (Source: Wikkipedia.org).

⁶⁷ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum Books, 1970) , 264

⁶⁸ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2008), 9.

⁶⁹ Henry Nelson Wieman *The Source of Human Good* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1946), 54-83.

our desires, it protects us from each other.”⁷⁰ Co-creating justice with the oppressed is the creation of the Holy on earth, the extension of the beloved community. While a call for liberation and an education of our place in the system of oppression is a start, we only begin to change the status quo by realizing our place as co-creators alongside those who are oppressed. Only when we work alongside those who are oppressed will we realize a new collective identity *in God*. Anything less, such as working for a policy change from within our class, no matter how noble, leads only to sympathy for the oppressed and not to empathy for our shared identity as human beings. As Kwame Anthony Appiah rightly observes, “Collective identities shape individual honor”, not the other way around.⁷¹ We can hardly expect to truly liberate ourselves as long as we consider the oppressed as something other than people caught in a net of context and oppression.

Alfred North Whitehead wrote, “Progress is transcendence of the obvious”. In formulating a plan of action in line with your shared theology, the obvious might not seem so obvious. If we accept Whitehead’s contention that our metaphysical reality is vulnerable to context⁷², then how can we know what the right plan of action is in light of the theological framework outlined above?

The first order of any plan to ease the suffering and oppression of others is to remain open to experimentation in good pragmatic fashion. If one action doesn’t work, we must be ready and open to try another. This is the very ethic of risk that led to the early

⁷⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process*, 117.

⁷¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), 12-13.

⁷² Michael Hogue, Class Lecture, March 2013.

successes of the civil rights movement under the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the 1960s.⁷³

We must also be strategic. After all, as William Shultz makes repeatedly clear, depending on some sort of moral consistency on the part of our adversaries has led more than one progressive movement astray. We need a plan to overcome oppression with a clear line of action, recognition of an adversary and a broadly appealing message.⁷⁴

In this activity, the group returns to the tentative social action plan they wrote in Session 2 and rewrites this with a new shared theology in mind. Post the previous plan on newsprint. Ask the group:

What would you change?

What would you add?

Make notes to the previous plan directly.

Break (10 min)

During the break one of the leaders re-copies the plan with the changes made from this activity. Then post that side by side with the new shared theological statement. Ask the group if their theological values are reflected in the revised plan.

One suggestion is that the group meets with the social justice committee and reviews this plan to see how it might be used in their work.

⁷³ See Sharon Welch McLaren, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000).

⁷⁴ William Schulz, Comment to the UUA General Assembly, June 2011.

Activity #5 Bring it to the people (40 min)

“Those who truly lead are able to create a following of people who act not because they are swayed, but because they were inspired. For those who inspire the motivation to act is deeply personal.” - Simon Sinek⁷⁵

The group may be tempted to write a report or a newsletter article about this shared experience and product. After all, if this was exciting to the group, doesn't it follow that it will be exciting to the congregation? Not necessarily. The power of “creative interchange” as a theological method lies not only in what was created but in how it came to be; the emotions, the deeper sharing, the celebration, the pains of a creative project such as this is not easily communicated didactic. Any participant who has returned from a large Unitarian Universalist gathering such as General Assembly knows how disappointing it can be to try to share their excitement about what they had learned with the “folks back home”. Reports may satisfy those who participated in the process but rarely inform and inspire those who were not there.

We all lead busy lives and as such it is always a challenge to adequately convey the experience of creating a shared theology with the group. With so much competing for our attention is it any wonder? Not only are there competing events within a congregation, there is serious competition for the attention of your fellow congregants from outside the world.

⁷⁵ Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 5.

There are a variety of ways to bring this experience to your congregation, solicit feedback and chart a way forward. The suggestions below are only one way. After discussing this with the group you may want to modify, change and build upon this plan.

The 4 X 4 Rule

Seasoned church leaders know that we can only effectively reach their congregations with a message that is told four ways at four times. Since this is such a creative and nuanced process let me suggest the following four activities to “bring it to the people”. You won’t be able to do each of these four times but the more you tell people the better they will understand and engage with the project. Give this project a name so that people hear the same reference over and over again. Doing Theology Together as a name works well. As a group decide which of these actions they will take and who will be responsible for them.

1. Plan a Worship Service

Depending on your minister or worship team process, plan a worship service that invites people into the creative work you are doing. It won’t be feasible to re-create the activities in this curriculum but you could re-enact certain parts of this curriculum through drama and storytelling. First begin with the same liturgy you designed in Session 3. Attend to the sources and words you used. Briefly explain that this liturgy was designed as part of the course. Use the message of the liturgy to act out what you discovered using either a script or improvise. Encourage the group to act it out, such as a re-enactment of the activity in session one wherein participants placed themselves along a theological spectrum personally. Have the atheist shout to the theist: “What are you doing over there?” And

the theist replies, “I was going to ask you the same thing” followed by some dialogue about how you found common ground. Have fun with this. Be sure at the beginning and end to explain that you were “Creating Theology Together” and how it has helped you to build a plan for consideration by the congregation.

2. Write a Short and Long Report

Many people like to read about what was done and what is proposed. Suggest that one or two people in the group write a short report for the newsletter on what you as a group learned and the plans that you made. You don't have to share your plans in this short report. In the longer report explain the process you went through, highlight what you learned, quote a few people, and talk about how this work has informed your larger goals as leaders. Be sure to include your social justice plan in this longer report. Share this report first with your minister and social justice team. Consensus relies on momentum. They must hear of your plans at some level and have a chance to comment before you share it with the wider congregation.

3. Meet with your Leaders

If your congregation has a leadership program or ministry council, have the leader and co-leader of this curriculum ask for a meeting with that group to share your experience and solicit feedback on what you might do next as a congregation or groups within the congregation.

4. Consider a Retreat

If the theological understanding that came out of this curriculum was satisfying, consider offering this course in a larger setting as part of an all-congregational retreat. Handout #6 gives you some guidance on how to structure and run such a retreat for larger groups.

Remember, the power of this work is not so much in the theology we arrive at together (although that can be immensely important as we grapple with a new religious reality) but in the process of learning and growing itself. The journey is the meaning as much as what you decide. As those who have attended such focused retreats as leadership schools, spiritual retreats or other intentional moments of reflection can tell you, being together in community in new and wonderful ways changes us. This is the true magic of being a part of a covenantal community and theological process.

Closing (25 min)

Thank the group for their participation. Before leading the group in closing reflections and readings, please read the conclusion (Chapter 7) to this curriculum carefully. In it is an argument and outline for a new doctrine of beloved community for our liberal faith. It might help to mention some of the ideas presented in that conclusion to the group.

Sharing the Light

Gather the group seated in a circle. One of the leaders should hold the chalice and read the following:

“Our time of creating together is coming to a close. We have shared our light of truth and made it brighter in our work together. We have made plans in place to

lead our congregation forward. Please take the light and as you hold it share what you have learned from this work together. Take as much time as you need.”

After the chalice has been passed around and returned to the leader place the chalice in the center, stand, hold hands and sing these words from our Hymnal *Singing the Living Tradition* #402:

From you I receive

To you I give

Together we share

And from this we live

Sing four or five times looking to the left and the right.

Finally, with hands still joined, the co-leader reads these closing words from John Buehrens and Rebecca Parker in their book *A House of Hope*:

“Come to the global meetinghouse! Sing the songs of others. Hear them sing yours back to you until you yourself are changed. Be a partner of hope. And, wherever you live, help to make yours a house of hope for others. One where all who speak may feel they are heard, and where the voice that issues forth is one not of despair for this world’s ills, but of hope for a shared future.”⁷⁶

End of session 4

⁷⁶ John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker, *A House for Hope: The Promised of Progressive Religion for the Twenty – First Century* (Boston: 2010, Beacon Press), 182.

CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION

Creating a theology together is the first step towards a spiritual renewal within Unitarian Universalism. We are being challenged like never before with a rapidly changing religious landscape; those spiritual but not religious (the so called “nones”, as in none of the above) are impatient with our protestant form of worship and organization even if they are lucky enough to find us. Even more challenging is the rise of the “dones”; those who have tried religion and found in wanting in relevance, meaning and flexibility. If we are to engage with this new digital age and the generations that are coming to us, we will need to provide a theological construct that is deeply satisfying and rooted in both our democratic polity and ancient wisdom.

The implications of this wide-open approach to meaning making for those who come to our liberal churches is that they will be far more likely to be engaged in co-creating theology than to be passive consumers of it. In other words, by providing many platforms of understanding and the lay theological education to garner meaning from those platforms, we are able to answer the complex questions of the new world. This is, I believe, the theological direction we are moving towards; a God of many possibilities calling us into co-creation of a just world.

Our task is to further define our shared theology as we engage other religions pluralistically. I believe in a greater power that calls us out into the world and co-creates the universe with us. This entire curriculum has been a process theology built on the suspicion that we are being directed towards an end. Building a beloved community that is committed to justice making is the means to this end. I believe that engaging in social

justice making at the multi-faith level holds the greatest promise of helping us discover our reason for being.

The creation of shared theology such as your group has been doing here is practical and needed. While the theology itself may continually be open to change, our acting of co-creating that theology changes the world and us with it. In that way it meets Strum's criteria to be both "local" and "thick".⁷⁷

How then can we describe this God/Force of co-creation? It is not so much a Being as a process. We are not in search of a God as much as we are in search of an effective way to become God/Force. This is the nature of Unitarian Universalism: Creating a God/Force that is flexible enough to continue to grow with us. As I tried to stress through the necessity of metaphorical theology, we need a theology that is not so much a noun as a verb. Images of God/Force that employ deeply organic and relational imagery are especially useful. Hopefully, your group has been able to infuse their theology with such an active character.

Does such a process have anything to offer the future of Unitarian Universalism? I believe it does. I believe that we are passing through an inflection point in our religious identity: moving from freedom of belief as an end in and of itself, to freedom to believe in community as a means to an end. But what then is the end? I don't believe that it is just more questions. We need to be moving towards a common purpose. I believe that purpose is an emerging shared doctrine of beloved community; a doctrine because it is an

⁷⁷ Douglas Sturm, *Douglas Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a Politics of Rationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 201-203.

accepted teaching of our religion and an vision of beloved community because what we seek will save the world.

Towards a Doctrine

The theologian Gordon Kaufman has identified the essential paradox of post modernity as the continual interpretation of meaning through our use of language amidst the myriad of experiences we encounter in the modern world.⁷⁸ We are constantly adjusting our interpretations of our world based on opinions created by the blogosphere and technology. How then are we expected, especially as religious liberals, to decide on what has ultimate value in our lives? Creating a shared theology is one means by which we are able to decide on those ultimate values. However, with each group creating their own shared theology how can we decide on how to act beyond our own congregations? A theology of a group is better than an isolated bunch of individuals each with their own theology, but it is a far cry from the uniting dogma of orthodox religions. We eschew dogma for good reason; it diminishes our capacity for the free and responsible search for meaning at the heart of our tradition. How are we to become “religious but not dogmatic” and have anything to say to the religious right or a world in need of justice? I believe that our plurality requires some form of ultimate values beyond our own individuality from which we can all speak. Why is it that so many Unitarian Universalists refer to the seven principles as if they were a statement of common faith? The principles were written as a covenant between congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association, not as a credo of Unitarian Universalist doctrine. I believe we yearn for a common theology that reaches

⁷⁸ Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: 1993, Harvard University Press), 347.

not only across the vast plurality of beliefs that makes up our people but that speaks adequately to the struggles of our time. We need a doctrine of that informs, inspires and calls us to justice.

Despite our initial aversion to the word, there is a profound efficacy in the idea of a doctrine for the liberal church. Doctrine is not the same as dogma. Dogma is “a belief or a set of beliefs that is accepted by members of a group without being questioned or doubted”⁷⁹. James Luther Adams, echoing our liberal ideal that revelation is not sealed, rightly rejects unquestioned belief, “Nothing is complete and therefore nothing is exempt from criticism”.⁸⁰ It is in the nature of being liberal that our religion must question belief as such and adapt to the culture of which we are a part.⁸¹ That does not mean, however, that we cannot attempt to create and hold a common purpose that invites theological value into our religion. While we cannot be dogmatic, we can strive towards a doctrine at least within the congregations we are a part of.

Doctrine is “a set of ideas and beliefs that are taught or believed to be true”⁸² Surely we can accept this as religious liberals. The problem lies in to what degree we can accept a doctrine. We need a doctrine that is more specific theologically than our principles but normative and pragmatic enough to be accepted by most Unitarian Universalists. In other words we need an theological end to which our freedom is taking us. This is where a shared theology comes into play.

⁷⁹ The web site of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Merriam-Webster.com

⁸⁰ James Luther Adams, *James Luther On Being Human Religiously* ed. Max Stackhouse (Boston: 1976, Beacon Press), 12.

⁸¹ Paul Raszynski in his book *Faith Without Certainty: Liberal Theology in the 21st Century* (Boston: Skinner House, 2005) offers a sweeping view of this heritage from our German Enlightenment roots through the Post Christian age.

⁸² The web site of the Merriam-Webster dictionary, Merriam-Webster.com

I have no illusions that as a religion Unitarian Universalism would agree to a doctrine but I do believe that we can largely accept the efficacy and the necessity of *moving toward a doctrine of beloved community*.

We can either unite around shared ultimate values that move us towards common purpose or face irrelevancy as the next generations create their own meaning making institutions through which they will change the world. The media has largely written off liberal religion as irrelevant or perhaps even oxymoronic.⁸³ What doctrine will adequately speak to the challenges of environmental degradation, racial justice, income disparity, hunger, access to clean water, and democratic decline? It won't be the freedom to belief whatever you want. It won't be a diatribe against those who oppose us. It will need to be a doctrine spiritually grounded in our ultimate values with a reference to a higher power than the individual. In other words, the doctrine of beloved community we strive towards needs to be *in service of the Holy*.

Towards A Doctrine of Beloved Community for Unitarian Universalists

In order to be ultimate, the doctrine I am suggesting needs an ultimate force to which we are being drawn to serve. What is that force? By necessity, that answer will be rooted in an individual or, better yet, a group definition. However, just as Alcoholics Anonymous allow recovering alcoholics to define their higher power, so too can we, as religious liberals, root our doctrine in a Being/Force/Power/Ideal greater than ourselves. We simply cannot afford to leave the ultimate end of our doctrine as a faith undefined. An undefined end, even one that is tentative, leaves us with no end at all. The end of our

⁸³ Paul Rasor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: 2012, Skinner House Books).

doctrine can begin as a personal decision but a greater end needs to be accepted as a given for this journey towards a doctrine we might all embrace.

Just what is that the end of that doctrine? It is simply not possible given the freedom of individual belief, which lies, at the center of our tradition, to propose a unifying higher Force that would be acceptable to most Unitarian Universalists. Our diversity of experience makes such an end impossible in the context of liberal religion. There is, however, a compelling possibility that we might move towards a doctrine of beloved community as the force to which we all might ascribe.

In order for the journey towards such a doctrine to succeed we must overcome our collective aversion to religious language and re-embrace the language of the Holy. Rev. William Sinkford suggested this many years ago as President of the UUA: “I do feel that we need some language that would allow us to capture the possibility of reverence, to name the holy, to talk about human agency in theological terms—the ability of humans to shape and frame our world guided by what we find to be of ultimate importance.”⁸⁴ Naming a higher power does not negate our humanist traditions. On the contrary, it permits us to engage in a level of value identity far beyond the secular. Whether we celebrate the Spirit of Life or God or Force or Power or Ideal, we invoke a responsibility to something far greater than ourselves as mere individuals. We allow for a vocabulary of reverence to enter into our religious movement that makes us more accessible to future generations and more understandable to the outside world. To fail to allow for such language may further marginalize us in the public square and among future generations

⁸⁴ William G. Sinkford, “The Language of Faith”, A sermon by Rev. William G. Sinkford preached at First Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Church, January 12, 2003 (UUA.org).

that yearn for the poetry of ultimate meaning. Paul Razor in his most recent book makes this point poignantly:

“while contemporary religious liberals are not shy about speaking out on important social and political issues, they are often reluctant to do so using specifically religious language. This suspicion of religious language is one of the several tensions within liberal religion that pull against liberalism’s prophetic impulse.”⁸⁵

We cannot afford to ignore either this pluralism or the need for religious language if we are to remain relevant for the next fifty years. In fact, as Razor suggests, embracing religious language may be necessary to own our prophetic justice making purpose as white allies⁸⁶. What will moderate this language of reverence will be the very liberal heritage we own. As already stated, being a liberal religion entails being open to change. Whatever doctrine we might be able to agree on as a religious movement will be, by our nature, provisional. Some might argue that is not doctrine at all; claiming that to leave open the possibility for revision results only in a snapshot into who we are and what we believe. However, every religion has doctrines that change. Ours are likely to change more quickly. Just as what we hold to be ultimate changes so too does the higher power to which we pledge ourselves to serve. After all, the world, technology and science are changing at light speed. What is to say a Unitarian Universalist doctrine of beloved community can’t change as well? To stagnate is to die.

⁸⁵ Paul Razor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: 2012, Skinner House Books), 18.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

If such a beloved community could be identified then what would we do as a religious movement to serve that doctrine? As I have attempted to draw out throughout this curriculum, there are really only two ways to serve the ultimate value in our lives. The first is to offer acceptance and compassion to those in need who walk through our congregational doors and the second is to do justice. I have tried to show that the first is embedded in the second; that showing compassion is one form of justice making. It is especially because we are such a pluralistic tradition that we must do justice work specifically the work of eradicating racism in our congregation and the world at large. Dismantling the systems of oppression of which we are a part is the most tangible expression of the beloved community we hope to create. “Faith without works is dead” wrote the Apostle James; our faith must be equal to the works we do. Anything less is a kind of moral masturbation. Our doctrine of beloved community requires that we live out our call to serve in making the world right where it is wrong, especially in the wrongs perpetuated by oppression.

A doctrine of beloved community necessitates a plan of social action for each and every group within Unitarian Universalism. Such a plan is a central part of this curriculum. The plan can change but a doctrine of beloved community must include one. This means that simply talking about what we need to do is not enough. This also means that certain religious stances, such as the Taoist philosophy of Wu Wei Wu will be insufficient for our doctrine⁸⁷.

⁸⁷ Wu Wei Wu is often described as the path of least resistance by Taoist authors. While that characterization is a bit simplistic, those wishing to learn more about this Taoist Doctrine will find an excellent synopsis in: Chad Hansen and Brandon Toropov, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Taoism* (New York: Beach Books, 2012), 47-49.

While the term beloved community means many things, I use it as Martin Luther King, Jr. understood it:

“Behind King’s conception of the Beloved Community lay his assumption that human existence is social in nature. “The solidarity of the human family” is a phrase he frequently used to express this idea. “We are tied together in the single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality,” he said in one of his addresses. This was a way of affirming that reality is made up of structures that form an interrelated whole; in other words, that human beings are dependent upon each other. Whatever a person is or possesses he owes to others who have preceded him. As King wrote: “Whether we realize it or not, each of us lives eternally ‘in the red.’ ” Recognition of one’s indebtedness to past generations should inhibit the sense of self-sufficiency and promote awareness that personal growth cannot take place apart from meaningful relationships with other persons, that the “I” cannot attain fulfillment without the “Thou.”⁸⁸

The end of our doctrine of beloved community would be idealized in this fashion but made real only within the local congregation and its leadership who have embarked on this theological journey. The doctrine of beloved community I propose is specific to each Unitarian Universalist congregation, which acts as a microcosm of the universal ideal King once imagined.

Such as a localized doctrine of beloved community, while not universal, is possible. It is my hope that after the leadership group of has finished this curriculum, they, or those

⁸⁸ Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp Jr. “Search for the Beloved Community” in The Christian Century (Chicago, IL April 3, 1974), 361-363.

who follow them, will embark on the larger project of creating such a doctrine of beloved community of the congregation they are a part of. I believe this is the most that we can hope for given our limitations of freedom that permit the vast theological diversity within each individual and the congregations they are a part of.⁸⁹

Towards A Doctrine of Beloved Community for Unitarian Universalists Living in Communities

So then how do we move our communities towards a doctrine of beloved community?

We are rooted by covenant in the communities of which we are a part. Not just the congregations to which we may belong but with increasing tendency the communities we form outside of congregational walls. As Josiah Royce reminds us:

"A community constituted by the fact that each of its members accepts, as part of his own individual life and self, the same expected future events that each of his fellows accepts, may be called a community of expectation or...a community of hope...the community is a being that attempts to accomplish something in time through the deeds of its members."

Communities of faith begin as places of trust and memory but they only grow if they imagine a future together. That future implies sharing in a deeper meaning than just the past. If each member of a congregation or group is encouraged to find only their own meaning, the community as a collection of its parts is left with the task of meaning making in practice.

⁸⁹ Thanks to Drs. Mark Hicks and Michael Hogue for their insight into this limitation during our Doctor of Ministry Final Consultation on January 7, 2014.

It was out of those communities, which by their nature transcend the individual, that the larger ideal of a beloved community is possible. For Royce the ideal of a “Beloved Community” was dedicated to the cause of loyalty, truth and reality itself; a reality that included an understanding of God, however diverse.⁹⁰

However, when we root the work of meaning making in a community and group that knows one another, which trusts one another (such as this curriculum has attempted to do) then we are more likely to allow ourselves to move towards such a beloved community. Anyone who has been a member of a congregation or group knows this instinctively: You will suspend judgment and objection much more readily for someone you know over someone you don’t know. That loyalty is normative to the very way we do theology together. And it is that loyalty that will move us forward together. Royce defines loyalty as a service of causes and that service allows us to create theology together and attempt a doctrine of beloved community as religious liberals.⁹¹

Moreover, this search within the beloved community creates a stronger, more sacred community. Our culture of fierce individualism and unbridled consumerism has turned spiritual practice into a commodity. Yet people are hungry for community. As Courtney Bender points out, spirituality coupled with community creates a more lasting and ultimately satisfying religious life.⁹² What draws people to religion is not spiritual practice but the healing power of community that also happens to have spiritual benefits. The rise in religiosity in the last several decades is a reaction to the alienation of the modern world. Being loyal to a beloved community is a response first to alienation and

⁹⁰ Josiah Royce, *The Philosophy of Loyalty*, (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1908)

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 178-179.

⁹² Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: 2010, University of Chicago Press), 6-11.

secondly to spiritual identity. We yearn to be “members of each other” recognizing the “thick interdependency of our lives”.⁹³

Communal meaning making within our congregations is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Our congregations are inherently bound together by a mutual promise to find a truth unfolding together. As Alice Blair Wesley reminds us, our covenantal communities are what helps us to find the ultimate meaning so many yearn for.⁹⁴ Loyalty is the very basis upon which we were formed as a religious movement:

“Most crucially, the doctrine of a free church flows from mutually shared loyalties of the members, and these loyalties are to be seen at work in everything the members do together as church people.”⁹⁵

Towards a Doctrine of Beloved Community for Unitarian Universalists Living in Communities Rooted in Covenant

Just as we find trust and loyalty necessary to work towards a doctrine within our beloved communities, so too do we find the roots of that work in our covenantal heritage. As Alice Blair Wesley and others show, our very covenantal tradition roots us in theological interchange and justice making work. She refers to this as the “third reality”; a reality that is beyond what was and what is, lived in shared covenant to create what could be.⁹⁶ This hope, some would say salvation, for the world can be found as far back as the Cambridge Platform of 1648 based on the great commandment of Micah 6:8 “He has told you, O

⁹³ Douglas Strum, *Solidarity and Suffering: Towards a Politics of Rationality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 7.

⁹⁴ Alice Blair Wesley, *Our Covenant: 2000-2001 Minns Lectures* (Boston: First Unitarian Church, 2001).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-69.

man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do just and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”⁹⁷

Paul Razor observes this hope is deeply rooted in our Universalist heritage as well:

“There is something theologically vital in the original Universalist insight that is worth preserving. If we restate this Universalist principle in the language of our own time, we might say that it is basically a commitment to human liberation, which has always been a central theme in religious liberalism.”⁹⁸

That liberation might very well be about saving lives; lives lost to hunger, poverty, racism, homelessness, desperation and even mediocrity. As a covenantal religion we strive to be about the business of saving those lives around us in the here and the now.

Our covenantal heritage then roots us in “search and service”. We search for the ultimate by nature of our freedom to believe and we are called to serve others in the midst of that search. This is the heart of who we are as a religion. Our theological interchange requires us to stretch both our minds and our hands towards the ultimate in the cause of justice. This is at the root of our journey towards doctrine.

Toward a Doctrine of Beloved Community for Unitarian Universalists Rooted in Covenant Stretching Towards Justice

We come then to the practical means by which we journey towards the beloved community: The stretch towards justice. Just as I claimed that our religious movement faces a radically different reality in the face of religious indifference, so too does our

⁹⁷ English Standard Version.

⁹⁸ Paul Razor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: Skinner House, 2013), 102.

democracy face a crisis of identity. Are we to be a nation of many voices and cultures working towards the common values of fairness and equality or are we to become an empire who exploits the world for our own gain while in our own country, where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer? Since 9/11 we have been hurtling towards a culture of empire despite our ever increasing plurality. Cornel West believes that this impulse towards empire is rooted in the subtle but persistent American ethos of manifest destiny.⁹⁹ This impulse marries us to an acceptance of “redemptive violence”¹⁰⁰ (especially at the hand of the police as we are witnessing in cities across this country) and what Paul Razor calls “Free Market Fundamentalism”; that is the faith that only the free market unfettered by regulation can bring opportunity to all.¹⁰¹ In fact, this marriage only brings further poverty, violence and a widening division between those who have and those who have not.

As easy as it might be for us as largely middle class euro Americans to ignore this urge towards imperialism and its attendant oppressions, Unitarian Universalists might best heed Martin Luther King, Jr.’s observation that we are “united in a network of mutuality” what effects one will, eventually, affect us all. Michelle Alexander in her groundbreaking book *The New Jim Crow*, observes the “white man has suffered too”; we suffer by the violence that pervades our culture, by social costs of increasing poverty and by

⁹⁹ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York, Penguin Books, 2004).

¹⁰⁰ Wink Walter, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 12-34.

¹⁰¹ Paul Razor, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square* (Boston: Skinner House, 2013), 66-68.

moral malaise such “white” acceptance of this divide leaves us with. Alexander rightly asks, “how us can come to include all of us”?¹⁰²

Only by collectively resisting that urge towards empire can we hope to have a voice as a liberal religion in the public square. In order to have a voice that is actually religious, we will have to try to arrive at or, at the very least, strive towards, a common doctrine of beloved community. Our failure to even attempt a common theological voice will leave us scattered with thousands of desperate voices in the hurricane winds of social discourse and media cacophony.

One Possible Doctrine of Beloved Community Rooted in Covenant Stretching Towards Justice

By way of conclusion, I offer one possible doctrine of beloved community. This is extrapolated and adapted from a field test of this curriculum with my own beloved congregation in California. While our board of trustees had many different ideas about what was ultimately important, we settled on the metaphor of a field as the means by which we described the end of our work together. I have further refined this metaphor of a field to be a common field, a shared resource which we all use to live, work and play upon. In a historical sense, the “common” was that piece of open pasture shared by a local populace upon which the inhabitants grazed the livestock. There was an unwritten covenant surrounding this shared space: It was not acceptable to over graze one’s livestock because to do so would lead to a depletion of this shared resource. Human nature being what it can sometimes be, this violation led to being outcast from a

¹⁰² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 260.

community and/or further depletion leading to the common's destruction.¹⁰³ In this metaphor the natural gifts and challenge of a field is further refined to include the natural gifts and challenges of a common space or community. In this doctrine the common is complete with the power to give life through food, a space to play, and learn and grow. It is also the space wherein others can come and share equally in its beauty and bounty. The metaphor of the common implies a respect for the gifts that it bestows while inviting others to share proportionally in those gifts just as our beloved communities must learn to extend that life-giving gift to all who come to us and beyond. It is not a perfect metaphor by any means. It lacks an ample call to reach out beyond our own common to other commons in need of help. Nevertheless, it will illustrate how such an exercise might deepen our theological identity and further our call to save the world.

So here it is in all its human imperfection. This is just one example of just how far we could go if we co-created theology together:

“As UUs we believe in the highest power of Love on earth; a common field of life that keeps on giving and growing. We are required by our faith to tend the field, root out what is destructive and plant seeds of change and health, even as the sting of our own self-serving sweat stings our eyes. We welcome others to this common field in order to share in our bounty. We will live out our faith by working towards anti oppression in welcoming those in need of compassion into our community and standing witness against the destruction of human dignity in all its

¹⁰³ This depletion has been metaphorically extended to include those who over use any of our planets natural resources including water, minerals, oil and now our atmosphere; a paradigm known as the “Tragedy of the Commons”. See Garrett Hardin’s *Nature and Man’s Fate* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961).

forms. God of Love, we are here, ready to serve. This is our doctrine of faith and in this do we covenant.”

Are we prepared to accept the challenge to move towards this doctrine and see the value in trying? I hope you will do all you can to reach for that faith that makes all things new and makes our living together a sacred and saving act of grace. In the words of Hafez:

Every child has known God,

Not the God of names

Not the God of don'ts

Not the God who ever does anything strange

But the God who knows only four words:

“Come Dance with Me”

Come, Let Us Dance Together.

APPENDIX: HANDOUTS

Handout #1 “An Interview with Rev. Abe, Minister Emeritus of Freedom Church”

Freedom Church (the name of the church has been changed) has had a long history of standing up for justice; they have worked for immigrant farmworkers rights, advocated for the end of the Vietnam war, stood for marriage equality, provided sanctuary for El Salvadorian exiles, and stood for racial justice. However, the reality is that they are still largely Euro-American and middle class.

Question: When were you minister of Freedom Church?

Al: I was minister of Freedom Church from 1963 to 1987.

Question: During your time how did you experience race relations in the church?

Abe: We were always a mostly white church. In fact, there were not that many of our own people who lived around the church. Most came from the surrounding communities. We really didn't have much presence in the black community. We had one black woman who taught for many years in our church school. She had a college education and was very much into integration. Her husband was a union organizer. They were very involved in the NAACP. And we would go with them to their meetings.

Question: So the church was not at all integrated.

Abe: No. But neither was the neighborhood. We tried to be. Especially after I arrived. There was a big meeting for the district right after King was shot. Unitarians were all fired up to do something. It was decided we would have a presence. We would work with

a black movement downtown. Mostly it was Freedom Church people who went, every other week to do voter registration and protest at City Hall. We used each other.

Question: What do mean “used each other”?

Abe: We wanted to appear inter-racial and involved and they wanted our money. When we stopped giving them money, they stopped inviting us. It was just like what was happening at the UUA. The BAC wanted the UUA’s money, that’s all. When Bob West cut it back the next year, they all walked out, led by that sinner Jack Mendelsohn. We were sold out. They never cared about integration.

Question: Sounds like you had some hard feelings about this.

Abe: Well, that’s just the way it was. We were all using each other.

Question: Would you say there was racism in the church?

Abe: No. We weren’t racists. But we were insulted. We sponsored a show on black history in the church and this more radical group from downtown put it on. After the show, their leader called us white folks “pricks and pussies” for being up here on a hill thinking we could make a difference. That angered a lot of people. The neighbors were upset that we even sponsored the show. That is when we stopped being a part of the movement.

Question: So was there a difference of opinion about this issue?

Abe: There were two kinds of black people. The folks like this woman from our church who wanted integration and civility and this more strident group that wanted revolution. I guess we liked the integration group more.

Question: It is interesting that this seems to mirror what was going on in the UUA at the same time.

Abe: Yes. This woman and her husband and their friends at the NAACP were like the BAWA and this downtown group was like BAC. Very similar. Except our people had sex with some of the black people.

Question: Sex?

Abe: Yes. Some of our people were sleeping with the black people from downtown.

Question: So what happened after that at Freedom Church?

Abe: Oh, we went on. We keep talking about how to bring black people in to the church but very few came.

Question: Was there any effort to reach out in an action like you did in the sixties?

Abe: No, nothing like that ever happened again.

Question: Why do you think that is?

Abe: I think we aren't like black churches. We don't believe in God. We don't sing and dance. So unless they were liberal and educated why would they come? And we were out here in the suburbs. Who comes out here?

Question: Were there restrictions on housing out here?

Abe: One of the cities up here had a restrictive covenant (one community had a restrictive covenant from 1952-1962) but they were thrown out before all this. No, I think it's because the realtors just wouldn't show black people homes out here.

Question: Looking forward what would we have to do to become more racially diverse?

Abe: Keep doing what you are doing now. But you would have to move off out of the suburbs and they will never agree to that.

Handout # 2 “Spirit of the Pioneer” by Melvin Hoover from Been In The Storm So Long¹⁰⁴

We can't change the past, but we can learn from it and build on it.

We can't control the future but we can shape it and enhance the possibilities for our children and grandchildren.

We can't discern in the present the fullness of our actions and their impact but we can be pioneers in our time, exploring fully the crevices and cracks where knowledge and new insights might be found.

We can explore our spectrum of relationships and confront our complacency and certainties about the way things are.

We can dare to face ourselves I our entirety

to understand our pain,

to feel the tears,

to listen to our frustration and confusion, and

to discover new capacities and capabilities that will empower and transform us.

In the spirit of the pioneer, let us now go forth.

¹⁰⁴ Jacqui James and Mark Morrison-Read, *Been in the Storm So Long: A Meditation Manual* (Boston: UUA Press, 1991).

Handout # 3 Guided Breathing Meditation

Breathing is the very source of life, some might say, the Spirit of Life itself. In the historically older creation story of Genesis, God is said to have “formed man of the clay of the earth, and breathed into his nostrils the very breathe of life, and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7). The Hebrew word for that breath *ruach* means the very energy of life itself. Breathing and the focus on the breath is a part of every religious tradition on earth. In Carolyn McDade’s prayer put to music, “Spirit of Life” we sing, “Spirit of Life, Come onto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion”¹⁰⁵, inviting the breath of life to come in and then to be sung out into the world through acts of compassion. While there are many excellent breathing meditations to use, I suggest this simple meditation in order to both calm our minds and call us to that energy which infuses all of us.

“Sit comfortably in your seat. Place your feet firmly on the floor. Feel their rootedness to the earth. Sit back firmly yet comfortably in your seat with back and shoulder straight. Place your hands on gently in your lap. Close your eyes and listen. Now together let us breathe in the spirit of life, deeply, (count 1,2, 3) and slowly exhale compassion. Again, breathe in the spirit of life, exhale compassion. When thoughts come into your mind dismiss them gently and return to the breath. Breathe in the spirit of life, exhale compassion. Again, breathe in spirit, breathe out compassion. Now in silence together, breathe in spirit, breathe out compassion. Simply breathe in, then breathe out. Concentrate only on the breathing in then breathing out. Breath in sprit, breath out compassion. In silence.”

¹⁰⁵ Carolyn McDade, “Spirit of Life” in *Singing the Living Tradition* (1981, 1993: Boston, Beacon Press), 123.

Note: If you have a small meditation bowl to signal the start of five minutes of silent breathing this is helpful. Many smart phones have these as apps. Ring the bell and keep time. When the five minutes are up, ring the bell again.

“Now, return slowly to this place. Take one more large breath in, and hold it, 1,2,3, breathe out. Feel your feet, feel the energy travel up from the feet into your lap, through your chest, into your arms and hands. Move your fingers. Now slowly open your eyes and return to this present space. May the blessing of life’s spirit remain, and compassion be extended throughout the world. Blessed be.”



Handout #4 Sacred Scriptures

1. From the Hebrew Bible, Amos 5:23-24:

“Take away from Me the noise of your songs: I will not even listen to the sound of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream.”

2. From the Christian Gospels, the Beatitudes, the Gospel of Matthew 5: 1-10:

“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3. From William Ellery Channing:

“I call that mind free, which masters the senses, which protects itself against animal appetites, which contemns pleasure and pain in comparison to its own energy, which penetrates beneath the body and recognizes its own reality and greatness, which passes life, not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting, and seeking after righteousness.

“I call that mind free, which escapes the bondage of matter, which, instead of stopping at the material universe and making it a prison wall, passes beyond it to its Author, and finds in the radiant signatures which everywhere bears of the Infinite Spirit, helps to its own spiritual enlightenment.”¹⁰⁶

4. From Margaret Fuller:

“Male and female represent the two sides of the great radical dualism. But, in fact, they are perpetually passing into one another. Fluid hardens to solid, solid rushes to fluid. There is no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.

“History jeers at the attempts of physiologists to bind great original laws by the forms which flow from them. They make a rule; they say from observation what can and cannot be. In vain! Nature provides exceptions to every rule. She sends women to battle, and sets Hercules spinning; she enables women to bear immense burdens, cold, and frost; she enables the man, who feels maternal love, to nourish his infant like a mother.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ William Channing, Sermon: “Spiritual Freedom” (1830).

¹⁰⁷ Margaret Fuller, *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Dover Publishers, 1845), 103.

5. From Mary Oliver:

“You do not have to be good.

You do not have to walk on your knees

for a hundred miles through the desert, repenting.

You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.

Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,

over the prairies and the deep trees,

the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air, are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,

the world offers itself to your imagination,

calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting –

over and over announcing your place in the family of things.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Mary Oliver, *Wild Geese in New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005).

Handout # 5 Designing a Worship Service

“Our most widely understood definition of worship, cited by theistic and non-theistic UUs alike, seems to be: We gather to hold up things of ultimate worth meaning and value...(alas) we provide a one-dimensional experience: a single service that has to fit all ages, sizes and cultural preferences. Most of our worship element engage one locus of religious understanding – the mind – and only minimally touch the body, the heart and the spirit.”¹⁰⁹

Wayne Aranson and Kathleen Rolenz point to the need for a worship service that appeals to the whole being that is human; words for the mind, movement for the body, sounds for the ear and heart. As you design you liturgy keep this in mind. There are many orders of service but here is one suggestion:

Creating an Altar Space

Chalice Lighting and a Call to Worship

Music and Dance (such as the dance of Universal Peace)

A Message: Which could be a story, a small drama, or other words.

An Offering: Not necessarily a collection, but an offer to an altar

More Music

A Sacred Reading

A closing ritual such as holding hands and reciting a covenant

¹⁰⁹ Wayne Aranson and Kathleen Rolenz, *Worship That Work: Theory and Practice for Unitarian Universalist* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2008), 15-17.

Handout # 6 A Large Congregational Retreat

Using the course for a larger congregational retreat:

The advantage of this curriculum is that it draws together the same group of people over an extended period of time. By so doing, there is a greater sense of trust and creativity.

While this course can be adapted for a congregation, it is important to realize that there will be less time for the depth of a co-created theology to take place. In a larger setting, there is a possibility that a greater understanding of various theological perspectives may occur. However, the larger group may not be able to arrive at a single theology statement, much less move towards a shared doctrine of beloved community. Nevertheless the results may be worth exploring the theory and activities contained herein as a way to move your congregation to a greater and more normative theological understanding as a community.

What is vitally important is that this course begins with the group of leaders for whom it is designed. As in all spiritual journeys, the work is more fruitful with a guide. There is no better guide than those leaders who have already done this work together.

Designing a Retreat

Ideally this work takes two full days on retreat. That said, it is advisable to have a slightly longer time period in order to accommodate the other interests of a community on retreat.

Two leaders should be chosen from the leadership group who completed the course previously. Any team of the original leader and co-leader will do, but be sure they are two individuals who are well organized and largely trusted by the larger community.

Depending on the size of the group, you may need up to four leaders to lead two groups.

Groups larger than 15 will be hard to manage. The vital nature of the project requires that you impress upon those attending the retreat that they must covenant to stay through the entire weekend and fully participate in the course. This curriculum will not work on a drop in basis, when each participant needs to feel safe and trusted. The leaders may need to shorten and eliminate some of the break in order to complete the course. A weekend long retreat could look something like this:

Friday Evening: Session #1 (You may need to save the last activity until the following day)

Saturday Morning: A short worship service and session #2

Lunch

Saturday Afternoon: Session #3 (perhaps combine the breaks into one longer mid-afternoon break)

Other Evening Activities

Sunday Morning: A longer worship and session #4 all except the closing worship which should happen after lunch.

Lunch

Closing Worship and Departure

Note: I would be very interested in knowing how this larger group process worked.

Please email me this and any other questions at revmorehouse@gmail.com

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