

# *PLURALISM IN A UNITARIAN\*UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION*

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## **Preamble**

Congregations in most other denominations gather around a shared belief system or creed. Conformity to that belief system or creed, and acceptance of the authority of the church to impose that belief system, are the required standards for membership.

In Unitarian\*Universalist congregations, the gathering force is not conformity of belief but a commitment to community based on the primary authority of individual conscience and experience. This means that within a Unitarian\*Universalist congregation there is usually a broad spectrum of beliefs, and this pluralism is not just passively tolerated but actively welcomed as a positive enrichment of the shared profession of faith. If we are a chorus of voices, Unitarian\*Universalists prefer to sing in harmony and not in unison. The function of a Unitarian\*Universalist community is not to enforce theological conformity but to encourage depth and authenticity in the individual's faith. The details of belief are secondary to the experience of personal authenticity within community.

## **Sources of Unitarian\*Universalist pluralism**

There are many sources which enrich Unitarian\*Universalist pluralism. The relative significance of these sources vary from person to person, and for each person at different times. These sources include the liberal heritage from the Judeo-Christian tradition, religious and secular humanism, science, earth-centred spiritualities, mysticism and "new-age" philosophies. Local cultural, social and political influences are also incorporated as legitimate factors. Congregations will have a stronger identification with one of these sources because of their particular history, or because of the influence of particular leaders throughout that history. For example, one U\*U congregation might identify strongly with the liberal Christian tradition because it was founded several hundred years ago when U&Uism saw itself as very much a part of that tradition. And another U\*U congregation might identify most strongly with the humanist tradition because it was founded in the mid-twentieth century during a time when rationalism was in the

ascendant. The important thing is that no single U\*U congregation can define the full breadth of U\*U expression. Each congregation is a gateway into the larger reality. As at congregational level, so too at individual level. No-one is entitled to insist that their personal interpretation of Unitarian\*Universalism is normative for everyone else.

### **What does this pluralism mean in congregational life?**

#### ***Worship***

Within a pluralistic congregation, worship is less likely to follow a fixed and unchangeable pattern whose purpose is the discharge of ritual obligation. Each worshipper needs to approach the service with an open mind, seeking to take direct comfort and inspiration from those elements in the service which are immediately familiar; being willing to be challenged by those elements which are unfamiliar; and indulgent about those elements which are alien because there are others in the congregation for whom they will be inspiring. The worship leader does not speak *the* truth, but gives voice to their understanding of truth.

#### ***Governance & Programmes***

In a pluralistic Unitarian\*Universalist congregation, it is a good sign when there are things happening which do not interest or appeal to you but which others appreciate. Authority is shared.

### **Questions for consideration**

In a pluralist congregation:

- is everyone's opinion or belief of equal worth?
- what is the theological authority of leadership, ministerial or lay?
- who decides the style and content of worship?
- how do you present a coherent identity to the public?

***David Usher***