

The Commission on Appraisal
of the Unitarian Universalist Association

Engaging Our Theological Diversity

**A Report by the Commission on Appraisal Unitarian Universalist
Association**

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Worship: How Do We Celebrate?

According to former Starr King School for the Ministry president Robert C. Kimball, “Unitarian Universalists are people who like to go to church.”¹ Worship—or for those who do not identify with that term, the Sunday morning program—is the most specifically religious way in which UU theologies manifest themselves in congregational life. While there are many kinds of events and activities in the lives of most UU congregations, it is the Sunday morning service that brings together the bulk of the people in UU communities. Consistent with the etymology of the word itself, through *worship* UUs ascribe worth; through congregational worship, we form a community around shared ascriptions of worth. The UUA can be seen as a joining together of worshipping congregations. In the course of our interviews and focus groups, many people suggested that worship is one means by which we find a common religious expression in the presence of diversity. Others, on the other hand, suggested that the content of the Sunday morning service is often the very thing that brings theological conflict to a head.

While this is not a study of worship, it was readily apparent to the Commissioners that worship, as an important source of both intra- and intercongregational unity and conflict, should be a major focus of this report. By surveying the member congregations, we hoped to see how the diversity of individual UU theologies shapes the worship life of our congregations. We also hoped to see just how comparable or diverse worship practices are across congregations.

Common Service Elements

The survey instrument contained items asking specifically about announcements, verbal joys and concerns, symbolic joys and concerns, and congregational readings. There was also an opportunity for free responses, allowing respondents to add other common service elements used in their congregations.

Announcements. Of all the worship-related practices about which the survey asked, none was more commonly reported than announcements: about 92 percent of congregations reported that announcements are made during their services. It was clear from the pattern of responses that for some congregations at least, announcements and how they should be made are a source of consternation. The respondent from one congregation wrote in large letters, “At last we got rid of announcements!” A few congregations made a point of stating that their announcements come before the lighting of their chalice, and therefore they do not consider them to be a part of the service. This is similar to a few other congregations that have attempted to banish other non-worshipful events (such as applause) while the chalice flame is lit. The orders of service enclosed by many respondents showed oral announcements appearing in nearly every conceivable place: at the very beginning of the service, after the introductory elements, and at the end.

Joys and Concerns. The majority of congregations take time in their services for the expression of joys and concerns, either verbally (86 percent) or symbolically (around 61 percent), such as through the lighting of candles. While we did not specifically track congregational size, it is clear that these practices (verbal expressions in particular) are much more common among small to mid-size congregations. In some congregations, the sharing of joys and concerns has been ritualized with the use of a song or a verbal liturgical element every week.

Readings. Exactly 75 percent of responding congregations reported the regular use of responsive or unison congregational readings in their services. Congregations were asked to rate the regularity of the use of readings or scriptures from several theological sources on a scale of 1 (never) to 10 (frequent). Specifically UU and literary sources typically received the highest ratings (with most congregations falling between 5 and 9), with several respondents reporting frequent use of secular poetry. These two were followed by humanist, Christian, and Jewish sources, in order of decreasing frequency around 4-5. Buddhist, pagan, and Native American writings received comparable ratings, with most congregations falling in the 2-5 range. The most consistent pattern in these results is the limited use of Hindu and Islamic writings, typically around 2 on the scale. Some congregations report ed –

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fairly uniform use of all but these two lowest categories. A distinct cluster of congregations, mostly small fellowships, gave high ratings to humanist writings in addition to the UU and literary sources, but rated all the rest as low. Another cluster rated only Christian and Jewish writings highly.

Chalice Lighting. There is no question that, in recent years, the lighting of a chalice at or near the beginning of a service has become an increasingly common event. In designing the form to be used in this survey, we intended for chalice lighting to be included on the checklist of service elements. However, through a proofreading error it was not included. Some congregational respondents wrote it in, and many others included sample orders of service that included the chalice lighting. These two categories added up to about 59 percent of responding congregations. However, chalice lightings are certainly more popular than this number would indicate. Since they were not specifically asked about it, some respondents may not have thought to include chalice lighting as a free response. Many congregations did not include sample orders of service that could be examined.

When it came to extinguishing the chalice, only 18 percent of congregations reported this practice or sent sample orders of service listing it. We can safely conclude that someone, at some point, extinguishes the chalice; many congregations that light one, however, have not ritualized its extinguishing. Presumably in such congregations this is done as a matter of course during the benediction, closing words, or other service-concluding elements.

Sermon Reflection or Discussion. Less than 5 percent of congregations reported a time for response to the sermon as a part of the service. As with the chalice lighting, this is almost certainly an underestimate. In congregations where it is practiced, it may be so taken for granted that a respondent might not have thought to write it down.

On the other hand, several churches specifically reported eliminating this practice, at least as part of the service itself (such as by setting aside time for it during the refreshments following the service), or attempting to make it more of a sharing and less of an intellectual and often confrontational “talk-back.”

Music

A total of 332 congregations (almost 90 percent of the total sample) reported using the most recent UUA hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, either as their only hymnal (323) or with supplementation from another (9). Eight congregations reported that they use no hymnal, most explicitly stating that they do not sing in their services.

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Children's Recessionals. One of the most common usages of a fixed hymn is as a children's recessional or children's benediction or simply for "singing the children out." A total of seventy-five congregations (about 20 percent of the total) reported using hymn 413 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, "Go Now in Peace," for this purpose; many of the congregations that simply reported singing this hymn may use it in this way as well. Only nineteen congregations reported using a song other than "Go Now In Peace" as a children's recessional.

The lyrics to "Go Now In Peace" printed in *Singing the Living Tradition* include the phrase, "May the love of God surround you." However, the song is often sung using the words "May the spirit of love surround you." Since many of the congregations that reported use of this song as a children's benediction did not send an order of service containing the lyrics used locally, there was no way to track this variation. However, the majority of congregations that *did* enclose orders of service use these alternative words rather than the ones in the hymnal.

Doxologies. Only about 23 percent (eighty-five) of responding congregations reported the use of a doxology. By far the most common song used was hymn 381 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, "From All That Dwell Below the Skies." Fifty-four congregations reported use of this song in some form, forty-seven as written in *Singing the Living Tradition*. Four congregations use adaptations of the original words, and three sing it in both English and Spanish.

Nine congregations reported the use of *Singing the Living Tradition* #123, "Spirit of Life," as a doxology. Six said they use a custom-written or unique song not appearing in *Singing the Living Tradition* or other recent UU hymnals.

General Hymns. If the use of a hymn as a children's recessional is eliminated, "Spirit of Life" is by far the most commonly sung UU song. Sixty-two congregations reported that this song, as written or with some adaptation, is used regularly in their services. In some cases it is used as an anthem, a closing song with the benediction, or a response to joys and concerns. No other song was reported as regularly used by more than six congregations. An outsider examining UU worship practices would almost certainly regard "Spirit of Life" as the standard UU anthem.

Anyone who served as a banner carrier at the 2002 General Assembly in Quebec City witnessed a graphic display of the place of this song in UU worship life. Prior to the opening ceremony, as the banner carriers were corralled in a waiting area, one of their number had a heart attack. As the paramedics arrived and began to care for this gentleman, the crowd began to sing "Spirit of Life" over and over again, very softly, and then to hum the

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tune until the victim was removed from the room. To the bystanders, this song was the clearest imaginable expression of their support and a way to reduce their own anxieties. Nothing could more explicitly encapsulate the place that “Spirit of Life” has won in the hearts and minds of many UUs.

Special Services

The survey instrument gave respondents a list of special services and asked them to indicate which ones were held regularly in their congregation. This list included Holy Communion, Flower Communion/Flower Sunday, Bread Sunday, Christmas Eve, Passover Seder, Children’s Sunday/Religious Education Sunday, and Water Communion. Respondents were also asked to list other special services held on a regular basis in their congregation, an opportunity they did not pass up.

A number of interesting and unique services were listed by responding congregations, but these are not the main interest of this study since we are looking for norms and commonalities. Table 1 in the statistical appendix gives more complete information regarding responses to this question.

If this sampling of congregations is in any way representative, it is clear that Norbert Capek’s flower ceremony, commonly referred to as the flower communion, has captured the collective UU imagination; almost 88 percent of congregations indicated that the flower ceremony is a regular part of their worship life. One congregation even mentioned a recent practice of incorporating the flower communion ritual format into memorial services for members who have died.

Over 70 percent of congregations reported annual Christmas Eve services, children’s or religious education services, and water ceremonies/ communions. Passover seders were reported by about 35 percent of congregations. All other special theme services had frequencies of less than 20 percent.

Communion deserves some special attention. There was *not* a clear pattern, as might be expected, of Communion being maintained to a greater extent by New England churches. Nor was there an obvious correlation with historically Unitarian or Universalist congregations or with congregational size. Where Communion is held (in 64 congregations, which is about 17 percent), it is performed an average of 2.7 times per year. Five congregations reported performing Communion ten times or more per year; five others said it was held only every other year or “infrequently.”

Of the services not explicitly listed on the form but reported using the free-response line, some variation on the All Souls ritual was most commonly listed (forty-four congregations). Of the thirty-three churches listing a specific Thanksgiving ritual, fifteen described it as a sort of harvest communion,

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usually incorporating cider and cornbread. Five others said that they perform a seder, like that detailed in Carl Seaburg’s *The Communion Book*.²

At the bottom of the list, only one congregation reported using Soulful Sundown; in their free-response space at the end of the questionnaire, two congregations said they had abandoned this service because of lack of participation or interest. Soulful Sundown is an alternative worship format designed to appeal to youth and young adults that is frequently held in the evenings and centered around diverse kinds of music. If this experiential approach is not supported in UU congregations, what other shifts in worship practice might meet the perceived needs of youth and young adults?

Respondents were also asked to report on changes to their service selections in the last ten years. The responses show a clear pattern of adding more ritualized services. The four special services listed as the most frequent above (flower communion, water communion, Christmas Eve, and Passover) were also the most commonly listed new additions. The Passover seder was also the most commonly eliminated, however. A number of other novel service forms were reported by only one congregation; some of these may spread and become common in the future. Table 2 in the statistical appendix gives more detailed results for this question.

Covenants and Affirmations

An examination of the statements of covenant and affirmation used in UU congregations shows a very distinct pattern of variations on a few basic themes. Of the 370 congregations submitting surveys, 203 (about 55 percent) reported that they do not use any specific covenant or affirmation in their worship on a regular basis. For a precise breakdown of the covenants used regularly by 45 percent of the responding congregations, see Table 3 in the Worship Survey appendix.

A text specific to the congregation, such as its mission statement, is used as a covenant or affirmation by forty-nine congregations. With the exception of one congregation that uses the Winchester Profession, all other congregations reported using a text that is in, or is based on a text in, the most commonly used hymnal.

The current UUA hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition*, includes five readings explicitly identified as covenants. Of these, the ones attributed to J. Griswold Williams (471), Charles Gordon Ames (472), and James Vila Blake (473) have shown themselves to be popular targets for revision. In reality, the versions of these covenants in *Singing the Living Tradition* are themselves revisions. In some cases the variations currently used in some congregations are more similar to the originals than the hymnal versions are.

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According to the section “Notes on Hymns, Tunes, and Readings” in *Hymns for the Celebration of Life*,³ the Williams covenant was originally entitled “A Covenant for Free Worship.” L. Griswold Williams was a Universalist minister and compiler of the original source of this covenant, *Antiphonal Readings for Free Worship*, which was published in 1933. James Vila Blake was a Unitarian minister. The covenant attributed to him was adopted in 1894 by the Unitarian church in Evanston, Illinois, during Blake’s tenure in its pulpit. Charles Gordon Ames, who began his ministry as a Free Baptist missionary, composed the covenant bearing his name for the use of the Spring Garden Unitarian Society in Philadelphia. His twenty years of ministry to the Church of the Disciples (Unitarian) in Boston in the early 1900s may explain the popularity of his covenant in New England.

The Williams and Blake covenants are very similar in their original versions. Some congregational covenants represent amalgams or blendings of the two to the point that it is difficult to determine which was the foundational text. Here are the texts as printed in *Singing the Living Tradition*:

The Williams covenant:

Love is the doctrine of this church,
The quest for truth is its sacrament,
And service is its prayer.
To dwell together in peace,
To seek knowledge in freedom,
To serve human need,
To the end that all souls shall grow
into harmony with the Divine—
Thus do we covenant with each
other and with God.

The Blake covenant:

Love is the spirit of this church,
and service is its law.
This is our great covenant:
To dwell together in peace,
To seek the truth in love,
And to help one another.

A total of forty-two congregations reported regular use of the Williams covenant, twenty-seven of them with some adaptation. The most common adaptations of the Williams covenant, in decreasing order of frequency, were:

- dropping or rephrasing “with God” in the covenant language at the end (27)
- replacing “human need,” most commonly with “humankind in fellowship” or “humanity in fellowship” (21)
- completely dropping the language referring to “growing into harmony” (11)
- dropping or rewording the reference to “the Divine” (10) • using possessive “our” instead of “its” in the opening lines (5)
- dropping “with each other” from the covenant language at the end (5)
- replacing the word “doctrine” with “spirit” (5)

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- replacing “church” in the opening line (4)
- dropping the use of “is” in the opening lines (3)
- dropping all covenant language at the end (3)

The phrase “mankind in fellowship” in the *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* (1964) version was replaced with “human need” in *Singing the Living Tradition* to make the text more gender-neutral. Many congregational variations instead use the phrase “humankind in fellowship,” a more neutral but less extreme change. Perhaps these versions predate the publication of the version in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

Of the forty-one congregations reporting regular use of the Blake covenant, nineteen adapted it in some way. Common variations on the Blake covenant included:

- replacing the word “church” with a word more in keeping with the nature or name of the congregation, such as “fellowship”
- adding the word “is” in the phrase “and service its law,” a change that increases the parallel construction with the opening line
- replacing of the word “law” with a word carrying less doctrinaire implications

Nine congregations reported covenants that are amalgamations of lines from both the Williams and Blake covenants. In several of these variations, the word “covenant” is replaced with “aspiration” with an accompanying change of verb form to reflect a hope for the future (or perhaps a continuity into the future) rather than just a current state of affairs.

Only four congregations reported use of the Ames covenant. In every case it had been adapted from the text in *Singing the Living Tradition*.

The Ames covenant:

**In the freedom of truth,
And the spirit of Jesus,
We unite for the worship of God
And the service of all.**

The reported adaptations appear to be altering the text in two opposing directions. Some make it less Christian by replacing “Jesus” with “Love,” while others make it more explicitly Christian by adding “Christ” to the second line. Of those that maintain the original reference to Jesus, the common alteration is the replacement of “freedom” with “love.”

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Rites of Passage

Unitarian Universalists have developed a variety of rites of passage for members and nonmembers of their congregations. The list is probably familiar: namings, dedications, welcomings (for adopted children), and christenings; weddings, holy unions, rededications of vows, and ceremonies of divorce; funerals, memorials, cremations, and burials; and of course, ordinations and installations of clergy. Frequently these ceremonies are crafted for the particular occasion both in text and structure. Unitarian Universalists have been doing this for years. All of these ceremonies serve to strengthen the bonds within families and between individuals and their spiritual communities.

Some congregations have rituals for the induction of new members, newly elected trustees, committee chairs, deacons, and members of pastoral care teams. These all allow the congregation to view those taking on particular tasks so that they will know whom to approach for particular requests, and they serve as all or part of a covenanting process with the other members of the congregation.

What is relatively new and exciting is the development of bridging ceremonies for our youth as they become young adults. The first time such a ceremony occurred at the continental level was at the 1995 General Assembly. They occur on the district and congregational levels as well. Bridging ceremonies are designed to avoid the so-called “cliff”—the point at which our youth often find themselves when they have aged out of Young Religious Unitarian Universalists and before they go out into the world of work or college. It can seem to them that there is nothing in their congregation’s environment specifically for them. This is of course a critical time because it may be when we begin to lose them.

While rites of passage were not explicitly listed on the worship survey questionnaire, some were listed in the free responses of many congregations (see Table 3 in the statistical appendix). These included new member ceremonies, child dedications, and coming of age services. Of the rites of passage mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, these three are most commonly performed during Sunday morning services. Most of the others are stand-alone events or are incorporated into other special occasions.

Concluding Reflections

The Worship Survey undertaken by the Commission indicated that of the responding congregations, 92 percent had announcements and 88 percent celebrated the flower ceremony. The most regularly used song was “Spirit of Life”; and the most common sources for readings were literary and Unitarian Universalist in origin.

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Unitarian Universalists have developed a variety of rites of passage to strengthen the bonds within families and between individuals and their spiritual communities.

These four observations from the survey data might seem a satisfying acknowledgment of the unity in our theological diversity. Announcements are a way of sharing interests and concerns about congregational and community life. The flower ceremony is a way in which each person present can both give and receive. The hymn “Spirit of Life” has a mellow, soothing quality, reaffirming our desire to be good, justice-making folk. The use of literary and Unitarian Universalist sources for our readings suggests that we value the spiritual resources offered by the secular world outside our faith and that we affirm the values of our coreligionists. What could be worrisome about this picture? Obviously, the survey has reported many other points of agreement among UUs.

In a presentation entitled “The Risky Venture of Worship,” Professor Robin W. Lovin of the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University noted that

Most people in American mainstream Protestant congregations do not come to church predisposed to worship. . . . The basic experience of worship, in which we offer something and are transformed by what happens in the offering—that basic experience . . . is foreign. Indeed they have been prepared to expect something quite the opposite. The basic model for what we do together in our affluent, consumer-oriented society is not *offering*, but *acquisition*. . . . It’s as if the event has to reassure us that in the end, it’s all really about us and who we are.⁴

Lovin further notes that we are now becoming accustomed to an entertainment model and asks, “What could be farther from the point of real worship than a preacher and a congregation whose experience is primarily being satisfied with each other’s company?”

Although Lovin is not speaking of UUs, his cautions are well taken. Worship services are the most obvious opportunity for members of a congregation to be with each other regularly. Because UU theological diversity militates against any generalized sense that UUs are offering themselves to God in worship, we have to ask, just what are UUs doing at their services?

If members think they are sharing, they might heed another of Lovin’s cautions: “What’s important to people who are ‘sharing’ . . . is that everybody else receive what is shared and nobody challenges or changes it.” For worship to be what it can be, “you have to do things that break the cultural assumption that when we give, what we are doing is ‘sharing’ in expectation of recognition and affirmation.”

Lovin’s comment may help explain why some UUs are uncomfortable with the announcements so frequently found in their worship. They are a form of sharing to which there can be no authentic response in the moment.

Those who sing “Spirit of Life” can also see that the words are basically about them: The Spirit is here to help us be who we want to be. Even the flower ceremony, the heartfelt and heartbreaking gift of Norbert Capek in the concentration camp, has in effect become a sharing, so that its beauty and power can be reduced to a pleasant festivity.

No major religious tradition lacks the element of offering in worship. And that offering is most importantly not the offering of material goods but of the congregant or worshipper. If UUs do not somehow begin to reclaim the experience of offering in worship, they may well find that their theological diversity and differing interests will slowly move them further and further apart. If, however, we begin to engage the issue now in adult classes, in the religious education of children and youth, and from the pulpit, we have a chance to employ the enormous richness of our theological diversity in the service of making worship a place to learn how to be more authentic and generous in our personal and public relations and commitments.

It is perhaps not a *language* of reverence that is needed, so much as a *practice* of reverence. It is not whether we call upon the Spirit of Life or God/Goddess and see that energy operative in our lives but what *we offer to life*. It is not enough to want readings or sermons to inspire us; we have to be *willing* to be inspired, even if it might mean we have to rethink things and possibly do things differently. This doesn’t require a particular theology or theistic thinking. It requires an attitude shift from self-cherishing to a sense of openness and interdependence in our worship. That does not mean a relinquishing of self-value or a denial of self-worth, just a shift in perspective. And that shift will slowly but surely grow beauty in our common life and reinvigorate our efforts toward the justice-making we yearn for.

Notes

1. Personal communication.
2. Carl Seaburg, ed., *The Communion Book* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association, 1993).
3. *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1964).
4. This and the following Lovin quotes from the 2004 James Luther Adams Lecture.

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