

New Directions for Youth Ministry
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Five years ago a process was started to revise the ministry for and to youth in our Unitarian Universalist Association. First came consultation on ministry to and with youth, and thousands of UU youth and adults across the continent weighed into a new youth ministry.¹ At the behest of UUA, there were conversations within congregations like Cedar Lane, as well as conversations at district and national gatherings and within the youth community. Then, in the summer of 2007, more than 50 selected UU youth and adults from around the country were brought together to make sense of the data in a summit.²

I learned about this important gathering at General Assembly weeks earlier. I was upset that only a few people knew about it; I even challenged the invitation list. Someone of influence must have heard about my complaints because the next thing I knew I was encouraged to come to the gathering and be a part of the process. Unfortunately, I could not make it to the summit because it was the same week that the pilot program at Beacon House that would become known as OWL-OUT would start. Since then OWL-OUT has reached over 100 youth of color in the D.C. area, and we shared our learnings and insights at General Assembly this year so others can start similar programming in their areas.

But the universe has a funny way of working things out, because a year later I was selected to join the UUA youth ministry working group, which was charged:

To recommend to the UUA Administration and Board of Trustees a framework and strategic imagination for Unitarian Universalist youth ministry based on the findings of the Consultation on Ministry to and with Youth and the recommendations of the Summit on Youth Ministry.

This past March the working group delivered its recommendations to the UUA Board of Trustees and administration. The recommendations are intended to achieve multigenerational ministry and a ministry to and with youth that our youth have said are important to them.

Who are these youth? They are from the most gifted, creative, articulate and intelligent generation the world has ever seen. Look at the picture on the front cover of the order of service today, created by one of our Cedar Lane senior high youth. They are comfortable with technology, people of color and LGBT people, and lead scheduled, structured lives, but like most teenagers of any age, they are reinventing, creating their identity. Past generations have rebelled from their parents' cultures, but the world in which our youth live is so radically different from that of their parents that there is not that traditional impulse to rebel. Youth today want comfort.

¹ http://www.uua.org/documents/youthconsultation/0708_summary.pdf

² http://www.uua.org/documents/youthconsultation/070720_summitreport.pdf

A cartoon in the book “Millennial Rising” captures this difference well, I think. The drawing has four women from 1950, 1970, 1990 and 2010 holding up signs. The sign for 1950 says “Question Nothing”; the sign for 1970 says “Question Everything”; the sign for 1990 “Question Questions”; and the 2010 sign says “Enough Questions.”

Enough questions. Youth today want to belong and be loved for who they already are, with the myriad of gifts that they bring.

So where does this happen? There are fewer and fewer spaces and places that encourage *multigenerational* community in this world, and religious communities are one of them. In many places youth are encouraged to come into the community, but it is youth who have to assimilate into an existing adult world, or it is the adult that has to integrate into the youth world. Where are the spaces and places that both youth and adult worlds/cultures/gifts are affirmed and create something radically different? Not the melting pot but the salad!

The recommendations of the youth working ministry team to the association try to address what might be needed for the above three scenarios – youth in “adult” space, adults in “youth” space and truly multicultural, multigenerational space.

Firstly, there is an acknowledgement that there is NOT a one-size-fits-all model: there are many ways to enrich the religious life of our UU youth.

Our congregations are the best places to provide for youth ministry. So the report recommends that financial resources be shifted from the national level and invested in congregations to achieve excellence in youth ministry and that programmatic resources be created to help. Congregations are encouraged to affirm youth participation in the full life of the religious community. A good example would be what we are already doing here at Cedar Lane. We have a wonderful youth choir and multigenerational bell choir, youth on the Religious Education Council and youth as RE teachers. We have a strong youth group; many of our social justice projects are multigenerational; and we have paid staff dedicated to youth ministry.

Another recommendation is that each congregation hires a paid youth ministry coordinator or director. Until that role can be fulfilled, the report calls for UUA to create five full-time youth ministry consultants on the staff of the regional level to help clusters of congregations do this work. There are other recommendations to help adults gain the competencies necessary to provide brilliant youth ministry, like including educational resources and training for youth advisors and ministers, and some recommendations to nurture and develop strong youth leaders.

For some youth in our association, the congregation is NOT how they stay connected to Unitarian Universalism. Instead, it is through regional, district or national events. Think of some of the youth you have known here at Cedar Lane who blossomed because they regularly attended a district youth events like a Con. I am reminded of Claire Hernandez, who spoke about her Con experience this year in our senior high bridging service.

I know of many UU youth of color who would have left us if it were not for participation in UU Youth and Young Adults of Color in national conferences. So the report recommends that

attention be paid to regional and national events that fit the needs of our UU youth in ways that their congregations are not providing, including all the recommendations and findings of the Mosaic Project, a parallel effort in which I was also involved that identifies the needs of UU youth and young adults of color. And the youth report also recommends that we pay attention to youth in other historically marginalized groups.

I could go on but you can read both these reports for yourselves. In fact, I urge you to read them on the UUA website.³

Why is this attention to UU youth ministry so important? A major reason is because of what's happening today in the lives of our youth. In the reading we heard how other religious groups are responding to and capturing youth in droves.⁴

Fundamentalist Christian leaders are seamlessly flowing into the youth world using rock concerts, sports, celebrities and the Internet to tell America's youth that God loves them. That is the first message. You are loved by a force greater than you have ever known and nothing can change that if you believe in our kind of Christianity. The second message is that you have to believe in our kind of Christianity to stay in the group.

The kind of Christianity these Christians are espousing is not one of tolerance and inclusion. It is much like the fundamental Christianity that our founding Unitarian and Universalist fathers and mothers broke away from. They teach the literal perfection of the Bible, and they are organizing young people against anything that challenges that interpretation. It is truly an "us versus them" mentality.

Ours is a small denomination, and our message of tolerance is far from mainstream culture. Our Unitarian Universalist youth have to face this new-disciple generation every day in their world. In their schools, in the workplace, when they go off to college or the military, they are greatly outnumbered. We need to help our youth equip themselves for this pervasive onslaught and battle of theology and faith that they face. We have to help our youth build and articulate strong reasons for their beliefs, for why they are Unitarian Universalists. We have to start building communities to strengthen them for when they go out into the world. And preferably, UU communities will be places that the youth feel comfortable in.

This morning's anthem reminds me of the Bible story of Elijah that comes right before it. The piece that was selected today comes after Elijah flees for his life from Jezebel. The angels of God are watching over him as he sleeps. But right before this, Elijah is worried that the people of Israel do not know which god to serve and so he proposes a test for the God of Israel and the God of Baal. How many of you know this story?

The people of Israel, 450 prophets of Baal and others are summoned to Mount Carmel. Two altars are built, one for Baal and one for the God of Israel. Wood is laid on the altars. Two oxen

³ http://www.uua.org/documents/youthoffice/090325_wg_recommendations.pdf and http://www.uua.org/documents/idbm/mosaic/0904_report.pdf

⁴ <http://news.sawf.org/Lifestyle/23401.aspx>

are slaughtered and cut into pieces; the pieces are laid on the wood. Elijah then invites the priests of Baal to pray for fire to light the sacrifice. They pray from morning to noon without success. Elijah ridicules their efforts. They respond by cutting themselves and adding their own blood to the sacrifice. They continue praying until evening without success.

Elijah now orders that the altar of the God of Israel be drenched with water (twelve barrels). He asks God to accept the sacrifice. Fire falls from the sky, igniting the sacrifice. It's an exciting story and one of the few places in the Bible where different gods fight. Elijah seizes the moment and orders the death of the prophets of Baal. In killing all the prophets of Baal, Jezebel threatens to kill Elijah because they were her priests.

The description of this story comes from Wikipedia ⁵, but you could go to the Bible and read it yourself.

The story struck a chord in me when I read it. Like the people of Israel, I see our youth as having to choose: Which god will they serve? Which theology will they follow? Which faith will they choose? What will become of their god?

My prayer is that we have equipped our youth to make the right choices in life.

Last year in senior high sessions we explored spirituality and different forms of worship. This year we will deepen our understanding and relevance of our UU principles to our lives, using Simpson episodes in the fall. Youth today watch 34 movies for every book they read⁶, so it's important to engage our youth with images in teaching. In the spring our 10th graders will attend UU services around the area to see how different UU communities worship, and our 11-12th graders will have the opportunity to take OWL, our comprehensive sexuality education program.

There is a part of me that wants our Unitarian Universalist faith to be like the Dodson family in the reading. Father and son look different and talk differently, but their message is the same. Our message of Unitarian Universalism can have many generations professing it.

Or like the three voices in the offertory -- the voice of morn, the voice of noon and the voice of twilight -- each is a glorious piece of the day, uniquely different but a part of the same wondrous event.

May our Unitarian Universalism faith grow to be big enough so that all voices are heard and honored -- uniquely different but a part of the same movement.

So may it be.

⁵ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah>

⁶ <http://www.christianpost.com/article/20070918/how-to-harness-millennials-for-christ/print.html>

Now please rise in body or spirit and sing the hymn “We Would Be One,” a hymn created when our Unitarian and Universalist youth movements joined together in the 1950s, years before the “official” merger of the two traditions in 1961.

Other sources/research for this sermon

1. Howe et al. “Millennials Rising: the Next Great Generation,” Vintage Books 2000.
2. Sandler, “Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement,” Viking, 2006.
3. Taffel, “The Second Family: How Adolescent Power is Challenging the American Family,” St. Martin’s Press, 2001.
4. Rendle, “The Multigenerational Congregation,” Alban institute, 2002.
5. http://www.reformedworship.org/magazine/article.cfm?article_id=1036
6. <http://www.csmonitor.com/2006/0926/p16s01-bogn.html>
7. http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/05/millennial_generation.html/print.html