

Religious Education Ministry

Handbook for Teachers and Advisors



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Religious Education Connections

Overview of

ESSEX CONVERSATIONS:

Visions for Lifespan Religious Education

Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee, Skinner House Books, 2001 (Available in the UUA Bookstore)

About every 20 years or so, Unitarian Universalists seem to recreate their focus of Religious Education. The formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961 brought together over a century of experience in educating children in both traditions. Then, in 1975, seventeen religious professionals representing a variety of Unitarian Universalist-related organizations met at Stone House, a conference center in Rhode Island to discuss, dialogue, reflect, and envision the needs of Unitarian Universalist religious education for the 1980s. From their work, the Religious Education Futures Committee was born. The *Futures Report* laid out **basic language** for the development of the Affirmations and the Living Traditions Sources that comprise the Unitarian Universalist Principles.

As we entered a new millennium, another group of leaders were called together to discuss, dialogue, reflect, and envision the next directions for Unitarian Universalist religious education. Participants were chosen by a committee of representatives from the Liberal Religious Educators Association (LREDA) Board, Meadville/Lombard Theological School, and the UUA Religious Education Department/Lifespan Faith Development to present papers at gatherings the Essex Conference Center in Essex, Massachusetts. Three questions posed to the participants were:

- As we enter the 21st Century, what is at the core of our evolving UU faith?
- What is your vision/goals for our lifespan liberal religious education?
- What are the vital components of Unitarian Universalist religious education?

While some of the essays specifically focus on children, youth, young adults or adults, the themes apply to all ages, or lifespan religious education.

The abstracts of the essays are on the Unitarian Universalist Association web site (<http://www.uua.org/re/other/essex/>). *Essex Conversations*, was published by Skinner House in 2001, and is available from the UUA Bookstore. The quotes used here are from the abstracts. I would encourage you to read the essays themselves.

Themes that we can highlight from *Essex Conversations* for religious education in CLF are:

- Faith development/spiritual journey
- Intergenerational focus
- Social transformation
- Taking religious education 'out of the box'
- Relational religious education (tool for this issue)

Faith development/spiritual journey

The focus of the educational ministry is changing from “teaching religion”, with a focus on information, to supporting the concept of faith development. Unitarian Universalist faith development would progressively nurture spirituality and character formation. The focus is on helping individuals of all ages to more fully integrate their spiritual life with their sense of identity as Unitarian Universalists.

The goal is to help children, youth and adults develop life-enhancing relationships with others, our faith, the world, our earth, and the universe. This change was implied in my defining religious education in the December 2003 edition of *New Connections*:

Religious Education is more than 'Sunday School', more than a 'curriculum' or 'session plan'. Religious education is the variety of ways that we learn religiously, the ways we gain knowledge and experience for our individual life-long spiritual journeys. Our spiritual journeys will differ, but there are various "tools" that we can share. These are "tools" that we can use all of our lives. [One of the ‘tools’ that I mentioned was the Principles and Purposes/Affirmations and Sources.]

As Unitarian Universalist, without a specific body of knowledge that we expect everyone to have, we have the challenge and opportunity to focus on spiritual development and spiritual practices for a lifetime.

Intergenerational focus

Lifespan religious growth and learning literally means that we are learning throughout our entire lives – religious education is a continuum. We can approach this by ‘compartmentalizing’ people into age groups. This does address the characteristics of specific age groups. However, not everyone fits exactly into the expectations for the age groups, and we can all learn and share our learning with others of differing ages. (The “Time for Children” in a service may engage adults as much as children!)

Families and small groups have such an opportunity for intergenerational activities and focus! In fact, there needs to be a conscious effort for the respective age groups to have time with each other. A facilitator for a younger age group still needs an opportunity for religious exploration with people his or her own age. The challenge is to balance age-specific religious educational opportunities with cross-ages opportunities. We need to be intentional in planning to engage all ages. This is another way of considering ‘lifespan’ religious education or faith development.

For every activity undertaken by an adult in a religious community, we can ask “Where are the children and how do can they participate?” For every activity with children, we can ask, “What can the children teach the community, and how can we learn as we interact with the children?”

Social transformation

A number of essays focus on or mention social justice issues. Some thoughts emerge:

What keeps us from greater alignment between what we say we value and our effectiveness in the process of social transformation.

Social transformation must be coupled with a holistic religious education program, education for critical consciousness and the practice of freedom, rooted in the doctrine of love. (The Balanced

Religious Education Program that was presented in the December 2003 edition of *New Connections* has a major component dealing with social justice.

Education for social action must not only inspire but also equip us to change the world, from where we are presently to beyond just ourselves, insuring that social justice is inseparable from meaning-making in our faith.

The focus is ‘acting out our faith.’ In a religious education session, we all bring our understanding of a topic or theme, have an opportunity to explore in discussion and activity within a community of people with similar religious values, be it in a family or a small group, and formulate new ways of approaching the theme. And our new understanding will have an impact on how we live as we leave the religious education session. Maybe we should be explicit or open in stating that social justice is an underlying consideration of our spiritual or faith development, all of our lives.

Out of the box

The term ‘out-of-the-box’ brings me the image of a jack-in-the-box. Think of religious education as the character in the box that is just waiting to spring out when the handle is turned just right or a button is pushed! And then it is really hard to push the figure back into the box, so that handle can be turned or the button pushed again – and again – and again.

Taking – or allowing religious education out of the Sunday school “box” is to explore ways in which the whole religious community is both teacher and learner. Instead of a designated time and place, like Sunday morning and in a church, being where religious education occurs, view all of life and all of the time a family or group is together as a time for educating religiously.

There is a danger, though. Once religious education gets ‘out of the box’, it really cannot be neatly put back into the box.

Relational Religious Education

A number of the essays in *Essex Conversations* focus on the need for developing relationships. This has been known in religious education for generations: children learn religiously as they experience relationships, from nursery care throughout life. We associate so much of what and how we learn with the people involved, as designated ‘teachers’ and with informal interactions. Some of the comments from the essays are:

We need to provide opportunities for the development of deep and authentic relationships;

We need life-long skills, tools and attitudes to identify and dismantle oppressions and build bridges between people.

The goals of religious education are to create and maintain a human environment and atmosphere where people of all ages can find and create a just community, grow and develop skills and the confidence to live their lives wholly, find and give comfort and solace, and celebrate life.

(Ginger Luke, *The Children's Fire is the Community Fire*)

We are at once individuals, unique and separate, and part of communities, from the immediate family to the entire world. Focusing on the relationships has led me to develop what I call ‘Relational Religious Education.’ This is patterned after the Small Group Ministry or Covenant

Group moment with Unitarian Universalism today. The discussion of this concept is the ‘tool’ for this edition.

Summary:

“We must change limited cultural attitudes about religious education and teaching in church....The teacher [parent, person] who listens and hears, who affirms and challenges, who questions and encourages questioning is the heart of our programs. We can overcome resistance to teaching with a vision that engages and supports teachers in their own spiritual search. We must make manifest the miracle that we know happens when teacher-guides engage with young people, with co-leaders and themselves. They become co- creators of a pilgrimage that goes ever deeper and feeds souls.” *The Teacher as Spiritual Guide*, Roberta Nelson

Components of a Balanced Children and Youth Ministry

Worship

This is when we share spirituality and caring with the community and is an important part of our interaction. Worship with children and youth tends to be more interactive with an emphasis on sharing and movement. Whereas we are often the recipients of worship in the adult sanctuary, with children we engage and interact in worship.

Learning

Almost every aspect of the Religious Exploration Ministry can provide learning experiences for our children and youth. Curricula provide explicit means for learning about UU history, sources of our beliefs and paths toward living UU values in daily life. Our children and youth also learn through social interaction at the Fellowship, during District events, and their own experiences. RE is a safe place to expand horizons and learn more about the world around us.

Community Building

Community building and socializing is a time for our children and youth to get to know one another, time devoted to “hanging out.” Some of the most valuable experiences happen during free time and social activities. This is time to bond together, establish trust, and practice acceptance. Community building is the time to share our liberal religious values by getting to know others and allowing others the opportunity to get to know us.

Social Action

Central in Unitarian Universalism is the belief in “deeds not creeds.” What we do in love is more important than what believes we hold. As we encourage our children and youth to live their UU values in their daily lives, they often become passionate about social justice issues. Social action projects are an important way for our children and youth to put hands and feet on our Principles while having fun.

Leadership

One of the biggest contributions Religious Exploration Ministry makes to our denomination is the development of child and youth leadership. Leadership begins with learning how to be in covenant with one another and apply the seven Principles to our interactions. In this way, leadership is about learning how to work together, facilitate, reach consensus, foster cooperation, and make sure every person is heard.

Multigenerational Interaction

Religious Exploration Ministry is built on the collaboration and exchange among generations. Multigenerational environments encourage all of the other components of the RE Ministry. Children, youth and adults can learn from each other, experience different forms of worship, build community, empower each other to lead, and make a difference in the world through active application of our values and faith.