

Diversity Within Community

Summary: Unitarian Universalist communities include individuals with varied theological commitments, religious behaviors, and ritual observances. While Unitarian Universalists engage in many forms of religious practice and celebrate many religious and secular holidays, the springtime Flower Communion is a specifically Unitarian Universalist event that honors diversity within community.

Unitarian Universalists identify with a variety of religious and philosophical traditions. Many consider themselves Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Wiccan, Humanist, atheist, agnostic, pantheist, freethinking, or spiritual but not religious. Interfaith couples often find Unitarian Universalism appealing since it respects and draws from the wisdom of all religious traditions. Giving up other religious affiliations or practices is not a prerequisite to become a Unitarian Universalist. Membership involves a “covenantal” relationship with a congregation rather than a “creedal” affirmation of certain doctrines. The signing of a membership book is the formal step to joining a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Before religious freedom was guaranteed by law, public affirmation of unitarian or universalist beliefs might have been punishable by death; today, signing the membership book is a public affirmation of one’s commitment to being part of a theologically liberal community that embraces diversity.

Since Unitarian Universalists draw inspiration from many sources and come from a variety of backgrounds, the liturgical year often includes celebrations of the Winter Solstice, Christmas, Passover, and Easter as well as secular holidays such as New Year’s, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Earth Day, Indigenous Peoples Day, and Thanksgiving. The emphasis during these celebrations is on the inherent worth and dignity of all people and the interconnectedness of all life.

One ceremony, the Flower Communion, specifically celebrates diversity within community. This ceremony, usually held in the springtime, was developed in 1923 by Norbert Capek, a Unitarian minister from Prague. Capek wanted to create a new form of communion that would bind together Catholics, Protestants, and Jews and provide a ritual in which all participate. During the Flower Communion, each member brings a flower and places it on the altar. After the service when all the flowers have been blessed, everyone takes home a different flower, as a symbol of interconnectedness. Norbert Capek’s commitment to diversity was seen as a threat to the platform of the Nazi Party, a fact that led to his

execution. Capek's demise is a sobering reminder to Unitarian Universalists of the importance of upholding the value of diversity in community.

Unitarian Universalism encourages all individuals in their own spiritual journey. Many congregations have groups to create opportunities for individuals to cultivate deeper engagement with their own beliefs. There might be a Humanist book club, a Buddhist meditation *sangha*, a Christian fellowship that gathers for communion, or a Pagan circle that comes together to celebrate the turning of the seasons. Congregations may also have Small Group Ministries that bring people together across age, gender, ethnic, economic, and other differences to think about life's big questions, reflect on their experiences, and support one another.

United by the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, members gather to further their individual and collective spiritual growth. As they do, they deepen their commitment to putting their beliefs into action in their community and wider society and encourage others to do so as well.