

Who Needs Us? (Us UUs)  
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I was sitting in front of the computer one day recently, when I stumbled upon a report of some interesting research. The authors interviewed several hundred people, Unitarian Universalists. They had been members of UU congregations but had moved to an area where the nearest UU church was more than an hour and a half away. They had all lived in their new area for at least one year. The question they asked them was “what are you doing for a religious community now?”

That’s a question that you might ponder. If you were to move to a UU-deprived area, where would you find your spiritual home? How would you spend your Sunday mornings?

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The most frequent response they heard was “we’re not part of any religious community” or “we’re unchurched now.” When asked to expand on their answers, these respondents had a variety of comments. Some said that they had tried a number of different churches – or synagogues, mosques, or temples – but they didn’t feel that any of them was the right place for them.

“I grew up going to church every Sunday,” **Avery** said, “so it never really occurred to me not to continue church-going after we moved. There was a friendly looking church on the corner, just a short walk from home, so I didn’t see a need to look further. I’m not sure what denomination it was; that didn’t seem very important either to them or to me. But the sermons were boring; they sang hymns badly; they *talked* social justice but didn’t actually *do* anything. I gradually went less and less, and then stopped going altogether. No one seemed to notice.”

Another interviewee, **Bobby**, said, “My family was Methodist. I don’t know why, but I had a hard time at church growing up. I remember when I was about six, I asked my teacher what a virgin was. We kept hearing about the Virgin Mary and I wanted to understand. She gave me a disapproving look and told me to ask my parents.

“Then a few years later I upset everyone when I said I wasn’t ready to be confirmed. I pretty much went along with the doctrine, but I just didn’t have the confidence I felt I should have, before taking the big step.

“A couple of years later a rumor went around that I was a homosexual; I didn’t even know what a homosexual was! It was a relief when I left town for college, and in that college town I discovered Unitarian Universalism. In any event, finding myself, many years later, as the result of a job transfer, in a town without a UU church, I thought I should give the Methodists

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another chance. They did nothing wrong. They were welcoming and friendly. But it just brought back too many memories. After four or five weeks I decided I just couldn't handle it."

"I tried out the Disciples of Christ," **Chris** acknowledged. "It was their Christmas Eve service, and the minister read the nativity story from Luke. I asked her after the service, whether it really happened the way Luke says it did. She said something like, 'Yes and no. CNN wasn't there to provide an eye-witness account, but at a deeper level it is the Truth with a capital T.' I realized then how much I was attached to the straight-talking preaching at my old UU church. I decided that listening to muddy sermons every Sunday was too high a price to pay for less than compelling community and mediocre music."

"I was raised Catholic," **Devon** explained, "so I thought I should return to my roots. For a few months I thought it could work.

- I know they say that the bread and wine are really and truly the body and blood of Christ, but they're just using language in a peculiar way.
- I know they disapprove of birth control, but none of the families in the church had more than two kids, three max.
- I know they should allow women and gays and married folks to be priests, but it's just a matter of time.

"But then on the Sunday before election day they read a letter from the bishop telling us how we should vote. That was it. I didn't go back."

**Erin** volunteered this explanation. "I was brought up UU, but growing up, I never really saw the point of it. If we don't have to worry about hell – and I don't worry about hell, or heaven either – and if no one cares what you believe, and if the coffee is better at Starbucks, who needs it? I remained a UU because of the children and because of the choir. But now the children are grown up and on their own, and I sing in a wonderful community chorus."

"I feel liberated." That was how **Fred** began. "I don't know how it happened, but I became a pillar of my old UU fellowship. I seemed to rotate between three jobs, Sunday service coordinator, treasurer, and president. Every year I said I was willing to step aside, but every year they couldn't fill one of those three positions, so they would ask me again, and I didn't know how to say No. They said the fellowship couldn't get along without me, and, actually, I agreed with them.

"Having my Sunday mornings free has been wonderful – the talk shows on TV, This American Life on NPR, the golf course in good weather, the Sunday New York Times. I have more balance in my life now. It's never occurred to me to do any church shopping here.

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“I went back to my old fellowship a couple of months ago. It had been three years since I moved away. I admit I was amazed – they seemed healthier than when I left. They sing with more enthusiasm; there are more kids; coffee hour is too crowded.”

“I looked forward to joining the Quaker meeting,” said **Gerrie**. “I so much admired their reputation for pacifism, the simplicity of their services, their consensus method of decision making. Everything I had heard about the Friends convinced me that I would never find a better group of people. I lasted with them about seven months. They were nice folks, don’t get me wrong, but they were far from perfect.

“They had parking lot post-meeting meetings, just as we used to. One fellow seemed to be inspired by the Holy Spirit every week, always about the same time. You’d think that the Holy Spirit would have better judgment. It was though I was back with UU Joys and Concerns. They were all pacifists, but they seemed to feel – at least most of them did – that the U.S. had to maintain a military capacity. I agree with that, of course, but I expected a little more idealism from Quakers.”

Don’t try to find this study on the Internet. I could find it on my computer, but I’m pretty sure you won’t be able to find it on yours.

### II

The second largest group of respondents have found their place in mainline Protestant churches.

**Harry** is one of these. “I go to the Episcopal church now,” Harry explained. “It was clear within my first month here that that was the church to go to. You would never have to apologize if you went there. The mayor is a member, and there are doctors and lawyers and college professors. I certainly enjoyed my UU years, but I admit it’s a relief to be with those with whom I feel, well, comfortable, at ease. I have nothing against Lesbians or pagans, don’t get me wrong, or those who work at jobs I wouldn’t want my children to have, but my new church really has impressive people.

“And between a healthy endowment and a number of reliable benefactors, I’ve been able to cut my pledge in half without feeling any guilt at all. Are you wondering how I get along with them theologically? I really don’t worry about that stuff. I never tried to understand what affirming the worth and dignity of all people meant, or what in the hell an interdependent web is. No one else here seems to worry about ‘begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,’ so why should I?”

**Ingrid** is now a member of her town’s UCC church. That’s the United Church of Christ, like Trinity, across the street, our landlord. “It’s the place for social action,” she explained. “The minister preaches the social gospel. His Jesus is on the side of the oppressed. He doesn’t worry

much about the miracles. He just says, that was then, this is now. The minister and probably half the congregation would be just as happy in a UU church. I'm not sure they'd notice the difference."

"But I'd hate to give up their grand pipe organ. I had no idea how much I missed that organ during my UU years. When I first heard the organ here, it took me back to my childhood, it filled a void in my life. I don't know what to compare it with. If someone started a UU church here, an organless UU church, would I switch? I don't know; it would be hard."

Here's **Jim's** report. "I guess I'm a Methodist now. It's easier than I thought it would be. Back before we moved, I went to the UU fellowship, and **Jane** – that's my wife – and the kids went to the Methodist church. She grew up Methodist and saw no reason to leave it. I grew up Methodist, too, and converted to Unitarian Universalism to have an excuse to leave the Methodists behind.

"But they've mellowed, or I've mellowed, and going to the Methodist church doesn't seem to bother me the way it used to. I think I took it too seriously when I was young. I thought you had to believe all of that stuff. Now it seems more like Don't Ask, Don't Tell. I sing in the choir here, just as I did with the UUs, and no one seems to notice or care if I do the Sunday crossword puzzle during the sermon. I usually get the last word in place just as the preacher announces the closing hymn. I imagine that once the children are gone, we'll gradually cut back on church attendance."

"Maybe I've always been a Presbyterian," that's how **Kathy** began her comment. "**Ken** – that's my husband – rejected Catholicism as soon as he could, and Unitarian Universalism was as much religion as he would tolerate. The UU church was a good one for our family. I taught RE every year. Working with the kids was so rewarding, seeing them grow and mature, helping them to shape their values, helping them to understand the need to help those less fortunate than they, witnessing their growing sense of social justice – I never understood why there always seemed to be a problem recruiting enough teachers.

"Ken found his niche when he discovered a poison ivy infestation on the church property. Then he solved the erosion problem, which no one else seemed to be aware of. I think his greatest accomplishment was arranging to have the beloved old oak tree removed before it fell on the church roof and without having anyone quit – I was sure we'd lose Mrs. what's-her-name over that. That tree was majestic, as it towered over the church. But trees don't live forever, and this one was mostly dead.

"Joining the Presbyterian Church here was remarkably easy. It felt like I had never been away, and it felt not much different from the UUs. Maybe it's the people. The people have always been more important for me than the doctrine. Ken resisted coming with me at first. Then he would join me every three or four weeks – I think he felt guilty – but he said this time he'd stay completely away from the grounds. But one Sunday he noticed some poison ivy, and

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within three months he was grounds chair again. If heaven doesn't have grounds to maintain, Ken will be convinced that he's been sent to the other place. Oh, by the way, I haven't heard the word *predestination* spoken since we started here."

### III

And now I'll share with you the comments of a few folks who followed roads less traveled.

**Lee** is now the member of Community Church, a non-denominational church. "When I first arrived here," Lee explained, "I tried to look up the local UU church – why hadn't I done that before I moved, rather than after? I discovered, much to my horror, that there wasn't one. After my initial shock and disappointment wore off, I thought that I could get along without a church. I could live my UU values even if not part of a UU congregation, and I had always considered myself more spiritual than religious. Sunday morning could be my time for long walks in the state park that's nearby.

"But after a few months I realized I was missing something. I wasn't quite sure what it was. I thought maybe it was community, but I had made a number of friends. I thought maybe it was intellectual stimulation, but between my Kindle and lectures at the library, I felt no deficiency there. I thought maybe it was the music, but I happened to mention to someone that I played the viola, and soon I found myself in a string quartet. So I finally realized that it was church that I missed. I decided to try Cedar Street Church – its denomination doesn't really matter, it's quite respectable.

"At first I thought it would be welcoming. But one Sunday a member of the search committee that had brought in their new pastor a couple of years ago mentioned – I'm not sure why – with a certain amount of horror in her voice, that they had almost selected a Lesbian. Later, the Director of Christian Education tried to recruit me to be a youth group advisor, but then, a few days later, when I told her that I would do it, she seemed to get somewhat flustered and told me that they already had someone *else* for the position. But the next Sunday she was still in her recruiting mode. Finally, someone commented to me that she was so glad that I had chosen Cedar Street rather than Community Church. She explained that 'so many young adults *like you* seem to prefer Community.' So I tried it out, and I haven't looked back. But I still wish we had a UU congregation here."

Others chose a non-Christian religious community.

**Megan** had no problem dealing with the absence of a UU congregation. "For my husband and me, the UUs were a compromise between his Mormonism and my Judaism. Where I lived before, there wasn't actually a Jewish congregation, so the UUs were the obvious choice for me, though it took some persuading for **Michael** to go along with the program. I moved when we got our divorce, taking the children with me. Joining the Reformed congregation was

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practically automatic. The kids will adjust. What would I do, you wonder, if I lived in a city with both a Reformed synagogue and a UU society? I honestly don't know."

Now I should mention some of my favorite responses.

**Nick** joined CLF, that's the Church of the Larger Fellowship, the UU mail-order church, or I should probably now say the UU Internet church, meant for those who live in an area without a UU presence, and the choice as well, so I hear, of those with a convenient UU congregation, but a congregation not to their liking. "It's strange," Nick writes, "but I'm getting used to it. With podcasts and Facebook and email and Twitter, one can get quite involved, and really feel part of a community. Still, if a face-to-face UU congregation were available, I'd join it."

Distance for some is not a barrier. Here's **Olive**. "Two hours each way, to worship with other UUs, what's the big deal? Nothing's close out here. Now, I admit my attendance is not quite as regular as when I lived five minutes away – or ten, if I bicycled – and the distance gives me a good excuse for avoiding committees. But I've evangelized some of my new neighbors, and most Sundays there are three or four of us carpooling together.

"I did try the local church. There's only *one* in town. It's nondenominational, the result, I'm told, of a consolidation, a few decades ago, of Congregationalists, Church of Christ, and AME, with a Baptist minister brought up as a Catholic and trained in a Lutheran seminary.

"When I arrived, I was told by my new neighbors that it was quite liberal, the local church, but when I happened to mention 'Darwin' one Sunday, during coffee hour, there was a long, embarrassed silence, broken finally when someone speculated about the chance of rain that afternoon. But, with two hours in the car, I can be with other humanists, discussing whether it's morally consistent to oppose the death penalty but approve of abortion, discussing whether a creator God is bad poetry or a handy metaphor, discussing whether we want to raise our children to be UUs or to raise them to choose their own path, guided by reason, and whether these *two* options are really a *single* option."

Finally, let me mention **Peter**. "I didn't like the idea," he explained, "of moving to a town without a UU church, but I liked the idea of unemployment even less, so here we are, in the middle of North Dakota – or is it South Dakota? I was amazed, actually, to discover a small free thinkers group here, but I'm a *religious* humanist, and I found them, well, just too narrow. The nearest UU congregation is actually only a half hour away, if you have a private plane, and not counting the time getting to and from the airport. This is a town of about 16,000 – that should be enough to support a group of UUs, I told myself.

"It's taken four years, but I think we have a solid foundation now. Our emphasis from the start was on religious education for the children, and for the adults, too. Through word of mouth and notices on the library bulletin board, we gradually gathered quite a few families, including, by the way, all but one of the free thinkers.

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“We hired a local school teacher – a disaffected Methodist – to be our director of religious education. We paid her. Eventually we decided there were enough of us to start doing worship. We were fortunate to have a pretty good pianist among us, and a couple of good singers, and before you knew it, we had a respectable church choir. Now we have a half-time minister who comes out from the city for eight days a month, including two Sundays, and a friend of the congregation, a retired Baptist minister, who’s really a UU but doesn’t want to lose his pension, who preaches once a month, for free.”

### IV

Now it’s your turn: If you were to move somewhere without a UU presence, where would you find your spiritual home? How would you spend your Sunday mornings? And give some thought to which of those fourteen characters you might be able to identify with.