

Pre-Evangelism: Opening the Door
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We Unitarian Universalists have the reputation for not wanting to evangelize, for staying away from anything that looks like proselytizing. I'm not sure this reputation is always deserved; maybe we've grown beyond it. But for the next twenty minutes I'll assume that at least some of us – this could include me – feel that people should choose their own religious paths without outside assistance or interference. Or maybe we feel that *we* found Unitarian Universalism on our own; so *they* should, too – if they're not clever enough to find us, do we really want them?

Evangelize, by the way, comes straight from the Greek and means to share the good news. Usually this refers to the good news of Jesus Christ, but it can just well mean the good news of Unitarian Universalism. *Proselytizing* refers to attempting to convert someone from one religious faith to another. I'm not much interested in converting those who are content with their current spiritual home. But I would like to make our good news available for those who are seekers, those who are looking for something that is missing in their lives.

This morning, I won't try to tell you how to evangelize, and I'm not going to urge you to the street corner, to share our good news with passers-by, and I won't send you door to door with our saving message. My topic rather is *pre-evangelism*. For us UUs, that might be as far as we're willing to go, *pre-evangelism*.

So here are six pre-evangelical things that you can do. *None* of them involves your having to explain Unitarian Universalism to others. *None* of them requires you to invite anyone to join you. They're all quite safe.

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(1) *First, live in such a way that people will want to follow your example.* Another way to put this could be – don't do anything that would embarrass this congregation, if people knew you came here on Sunday mornings. But I like the first way better: live in such a way that people will want to follow your example.

Here's what I have in mind. A new family moves to town. They could be neighbors, co-workers, fellow students, fellow PTA members, someone you met at the library. They are not firmly tied to a faith tradition. Or the faith tradition that they were part of back in Ohio doesn't have a presence here, or is too far away, or they're not sufficiently welcoming. Whatever the reason, they're looking for a church. And they notice you. It could be how you treat everyone with respect. It could be how helpful you are, how you avoid exploiting others or putting them down. It could be how you

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refrain from laughing at racist or sexist or heterosexist jokes. It could be your care in recycling, or your good judgment on social and political issues.

Here's where it gets tricky. One Friday afternoon they say to you, "What do you and your family do on Sunday morning? We were part of a church back in Ohio, but we're not sure where we would fit in here."

Don't be alarmed. Here's all you have to do, just say "We go" – or "I go" – "to the Unitarian Universalist church, on South Stratton Street, a couple of blocks south of York St." That's all you have to say. You don't have to wait for their response. You could start coughing and run off for a drink of water. You could look at your watch and say, "Oh my goodness, I'm late, see you Monday." You could accidentally drop the box of cereal you're carrying in the aisle at the grocery store. You could change the subject to the coming baseball season.

But what if you're not as quick with an escape gambit as you need to be, and you hear them ask, "Unilateral Universalism – what's that?" You're trapped. No, you're not trapped. There are a number of evasive responses you can make that don't put you on the spot, that don't force you to explain what you feel you don't really know how to explain.

You could say, "Oh, just check out the website, uua.org, it will answer all your questions, much better than I could."

Or you could say, "I've heard that the best way to start is to go to beliefnet.com and take their belief-o-matic quiz. It will help you figure out where you belong."

Or you could say, "Really, the ministers can explain it much better than I can. I'm sure they'd be pleased if you called them."

Or you could rummage around in your purse or your pocket and come up with a principles and purposes card and hand it to them. "Here, this should help." I have a few extras here if you need one.

(2) We've already moved on to your second pre-evangelical task: *be willing to acknowledge that you're part of this faith community*. Now, we've been discussing this in the context of someone who respects you and wants to follow your example. But this challenge could come up in more difficult circumstances.

It could be your mother asking, "Hello, Jeanne/Gene, it's your mother calling. You've lived in Gettysburg for over a year now. Your father and I were wondering whether you've found a church yet?"

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Or it could be your boss, late on a Friday afternoon. “Sorry, Jeanne/Gene, it looks like we’ll have to work over the weekend to get this project done. Of course, you won’t have to come in until afternoon on Sunday, so you won’t miss church. You do go to church, don’t you?”

Or it could be the friendly young Mormons, going door to door inviting folks to come to their church.

What do you say to your mother, to your boss, to the friendly young Mormons? Are you willing to acknowledge that *this* is your religious home?

Now, let me take a timeout and acknowledge that I don’t assume that everyone in this room considers this their religious home. Some of you may be newcomers or visitors, trying us out. I hope you’ll be willing to give this church another chance. Some of you are here because your spouse or partner is part of this congregation. You’re always welcome.

Are you willing to say to the friendly young Mormons, to your boss, to your mother, to your neighbor, “I’m a member of the Unitarian Universalists of Gettysburg,” or “I attend the Unitarian Universalist church”?

I can imagine four kinds of responses that you may hear. Some just won’t want to go there and will move the conversation on to another topic. With them, you’re safe; you’re off the hook.

Some will plead ignorance and ask about Unitarian Universalism. You know how to respond to them: refer them to a website or to your minister or give them a copy of the purposes and principles.

A third group will say either, “Oh, we used to go there,” or “we don’t go to any church, but if we did, it would be the UUs’.” This could be the beginning of an interesting conversation, but if you want to play it safe, move on, change the subject.

It’s the fourth group that may be a problem for you. “You’re the folks who don’t believe in Jesus,” they may say, or “you’re the folks that Garrison Keillor makes fun of every week,” or “I hear you’re a bunch of ___” – you can fill in the blank. If you’re up against hostility, you probably don’t want to get involved in a conversation. Indeed, you’re not likely to change their view no matter how hard you try. It’s probably better just to let them see, over the months or years, that you are actually a decent human being. If you feel a need to respond, you could say something like “don’t believe everything you hear,” or “there’s more to us than that,” or “that hasn’t been my experience.”

(3) Let’s move on now to third task of pre-evangelism. *Listen, be a listener, earn the reputation of being someone who will listen to others.* This may sound easy, but it’s not. At least for some of us – me, for example – it’s not. It could be a neighbor telling you about tensions with a spouse or partner. It could be a cousin sharing the challenges of living with a teenager. It could be a

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co-worker overwhelmed with the frustrations of attempting to help a stubborn elderly parent (or a feckless adult child). It could be a person at a party, concerned about the prospect of eternal damnation.

Here are a few suggestions on how to be a good listener. I realize that there are probably those in this room with greater expertise than I on listening.

First, give the person who is talking to you your full attention. Don't be on the lookout for a better conversational partner. Don't let yourself be distracted by your iPhone or whatever it is. Let the other person know that you are paying attention. Let your body language tell them that you're engaged with them. Ask an occasional clarifying question. Repeat back to them what you believe you've heard.

Second, don't be in a rush. Let them have the time they need. On the other hand, you need to be in charge of your own time, and you need to be able to set boundaries. Let them know that you have to leave in five minutes. Be willing to cut off the conversation when you need to.

Third, be nonjudgmental. This doesn't mean that you should encourage them to believe that you approve of their affair, or of their imposing gluten-free, local, non-genetically modified veganism on their family, or of their using scarce family resources on sky diving lessons. But they're probably judgmental enough on themselves, without your help.

Fourth, don't try to solve their problem for them. It's obvious to you that they don't need a fourth car or a Las Vegas vacation, but if their problem had such an easy solution, they would have solved it by now.

Finally, know when you need to refer them to someone else. You might suggest that they consider talking directly to the person they're complaining to you about. Or they might need a mechanic, or a cardiologist, or a psychotherapist. Or possibly they need a church.

(4) On to item four on my six-part pre-evangelism list. *Tell your story: tell your story of how you found Unitarian Universalism*, or how you found this congregation, or how you came back to this faith or this congregation after a time away. Now, this may sound too much like evangelism and not simply *pre-evangelism*, so here are some qualifications.

First, don't tell your story unless someone asks you to.

Second, don't suggest to them, don't imply, that *your* story should become *their* story.

Third, telling your story does not commit you to explaining what Unitarian Universalism is about. We've already discussed how to avoid that. But please do share what attracted you, what brought you in.

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- It could be the music.
- It could be a friend, spouse, or partner.
- It could be the need for moral and spiritual training for a child.
- It could be a way to get your mother off your back.
- You could have been looking for Unity or Unification or the UCC folks across the street and ended up here by mistake.
- You could have been looking for a group that would be friendly and accepting of ___ – again, I’ll let you fill in the blank.
- Perhaps you and that person next to you were looking for a compromise between the Pentecostals and the Sunday morning talk shows.

Here’s the very much abbreviated version of my story: I’m here because of Don Van Doren, Catherine McHugh, Kerry Mueller, and Vera Tilson.

(5) Moving on. The fifth item in my pre-evangelism menu is: *put a UU bumper sticker on your car*. You may consider this going over the edge. This may feel more like evangelism than pre-evangelism. But here’s how you stay in your area of nonevangelical safety.

Someone in the Wal-Mart parking lot says to you, “I see you have a bumper sticker there that says ‘Nurture your spirit, help heal our world – Unitarian Universalists – UUA.org.’ What’s that about?”

How do you respond?

Here are three ways out:

- You can say, “I have no idea; I borrowed the car from a friend.”
- Or, if you don’t think you can pull that one off, try this: “I bought the car used; I have no idea what that’s about.”
- Or here’s another response: “Where did *that* come from? Someone must have slapped it on my bumper while I was shopping.”

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By way, I happen to have a few bumper stickers with me. See me during coffee hour if you'd like to have one. The only condition is: you have to promise that you'll actually put it on your car – today. I don't want it sitting at home at the bottom of a pile of things to do.

(6) We've reached, finally, the sixth and final pre-evangelical assignment. Some of you will consider it the most difficult, while others of you will consider it the easiest. Some of you will wonder why this one is on my list at all. Here it is: *Support this congregation generously*. I'm talking financial support, financial generosity. What that means, of course, will vary from person to person.

For some of us a twelve-month pledge in three figures will be a generous pledge. For others of us it will take a four- or even a five-figure pledge to count as an instance of generosity. It's for you to decide.

But why, you ask, is giving money to this congregation a pre-evangelical activity?

When you support a cause financially, you feel more committed to it; you feel more ownership of it. You identify with the cause, you want it to succeed, to thrive. I didn't make this up, by the way. As a result, you're more likely to acknowledge that you're part of this place. You're more likely to stick up for it, when others are critical of it. You're more likely to correct misunderstandings. Possibly you'll even invite others to join us – of course, in a low key, non-evangelical way.

There's a second side of this, perhaps the more obvious side. More money will help us do a better job – building maintenance, training, staffing, publicity. With more money we can more generously support our district, the Joseph Priestley District, and the national organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association. They do wonderful things for us, but they can't operate without the financial support of congregations like ours.

The stronger this congregation is, the more we become a full-service church, known for excellence, the more we are known in Gettysburg and the surrounding region, known for our work for social justice, known for our friendliness, the easier the tasks of pre-evangelism will be. In fact, you may find yourself on that slippery slope from pre-evangelism to evangelism itself.

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There you have it – my short course in pre-evangelism, or on non-evangelical evangelism. To sum up, here are the six things you can do to avoid the label of evangelism:

1. Live so that others will want to follow your example.
2. Don't keep it a secret, your being a part of this congregation, of this religious movement.

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3. Be a good listener.
4. Tell your story.
5. Put a UU bumper sticker on your car – or your bicycle, or your canoe.
6. Make a generous pledge of financial support – and what better time than now.