

Full Inclusion Living and Learning Unitarian Universalist Society

You may have followed the story on the internet. A teenager was barred from his local church (not a UU congregation), his way inside blocked on the steps of the church by the local police. A court order had been issued; the youth was considered a danger due to behavioral issues that were an outgrowth of his Autism Spectrum Disorder diagnosis. The church had legitimate concerns about its ability to create a safe environment for the young man and the other congregants, but that this issue should have had to wind up in the courts was truly sad. If one cannot feel welcome at religious services, where can one ever hope to feel welcome? Our first UU principle affirms the inherent worth and dignity of all individuals, not only those who do not have developmental or social or communicative challenges.

Many parents of children diagnosed with developmental disabilities and pervasive developmental disorders feel a lack of spiritual exploration in their lives. Due to the nature of the pressures facing their families, the lives of many parents of children with disabilities are tied to the present. While concerned with the here and now, they must simultaneously always plan for their own and their child's entire future, as many children will not grow up to be able to live independently. Many such families seek a place where they can grow spiritually in a mutually supportive environment. They also seek a place where their children can participate in a religious community, but their children's unusual behavior can make this exceptionally difficult. They sometimes seek to join "mainstream" congregations, but feel as though they and their children do not fit in, and cease attendance.

Similarly, many individuals with developmental disabilities and pervasive developmental disorders feel as though they would like to be members of caring, spiritually-oriented communities. Their differences from typically-developing populations, however, make them uncomfortable or cause friction with existing congregations (see, for example, Meyers, 2005). While this is often not the case, and many individuals do join and function easily in existing congregations, there are many others who are sufficiently uncomfortable that they never join nor participate nor derive the benefits such activities can bring.

To meet this need, we are forming the **Full Inclusion Living and Learning Unitarian Universalist Society (FILLUUS)**, a group effort of UUs, parents of individuals with disabilities, the individuals with disabilities themselves, and local clinicians and educators. Emerging congregation status for this fellowship is being sought with the UUA. This fellowship will provide religiously based service and support to the wide community, with a particular emphasis on individuals who might have had difficulties fitting into traditional faith-based communities due to behavioral issues.

FILLUUS will be a lay-led congregation that will allow those who are seeking spiritual exploration to do so in a setting with people who understand their life circumstances, where the special needs of themselves or their children do not constantly have to be explained or made a topic of unwanted attention. It should be noted that participation in this fellowship would not be limited to individuals with special needs and their families but would be explicitly concerned with, and will seek to have the resources allocated to serve, those with special needs and/or their

families Services at FILLUUS will be tailored to the needs of its individual members. For religious exploration/education, for example, since many of the youth will still be developing their verbal interaction skills, every effort will be made to create activities that are not so verbally based and will allow them to use their strengths and thus to fully participate will be sought.

FILLUUS may be the home congregation of many individuals, the place where they find their permanent spiritual home. It need not be, however. Returning to the precedent that we started with, we don't believe that the only choices before us are (1) someone can attend services with no support, and (2) someone cannot attend.

Rather, we recognize that many of us need to be taught the skills that will allow us to participate more fully. Or we may require behavior treatment plans that help to teach new behavior that will replace maladaptive ones. We seek to make the Full Inclusion Living and Learning Unitarian Universalist Society a place where just such teaching will take place and may result in some of our congregants leaving us for more mainstream congregations. We will be saddened, but we will also count that as a victory for personal autonomy. The choice will now be available; the way will not be blocked.

We can use your help. Do you have a skill that may help FILLUUS to fulfill its mission? Do you have expertise in sign language and are willing to serve as a translator/trainer? Can you help in religious exploration through your unique talent as a music or art therapist? Can you donate your musical talents or other skills? If so, we can certainly use your help.

On our www.Filluus.org web page, the following appears in the "inspiration" link:

I find myself thinking of an evening in a small town in central New York. I was keynoting the first day of a conference discussing teaching for students diagnosed with autism, and demand had far outstripped the capacity of the venue where the conference was to be held. The local evangelical church graciously allowed us to use their much larger space.

The conference was to be held the next day. That Friday night, we tested the projectors and set down the various brochures and handouts. The facility, though, was in full swing around us. I tested out my sound system while a teenage gospel rock band rehearsed.

Another room held a cooking activity, with the food being earmarked for the local poor. Another room held a group of young people planning out ministry to the local retirement home. Another room held a men's discussion circle. I saw notices on the bulletin boards about missionaries from the congregation, including pre-teen children from the congregation, who were sending information back from Africa.

I remember thinking, "This is hardcore!" It seemed like the whole town revolved around this facility, and congregants were nothing if not dedicated and mutually supportive. Can you imagine people in such an all-encompassing religious and social effort expressing frustration with another congregant because he lacked particular verbal skills or had an

activity level above what is typically expected? Can you imagine that a role could not be found for the person?

I believe that this example is what we must reach towards. Specific religious doctrine aside, this place served a community and spiritual function for its members. Services in the form of Sunday worship are one thing. Taking the ideas and translating them into action, actions that can take advantage of the skills and dedication of all members of the congregation, is the ultimate goal. Unitarian Universalists have sometimes been called “Free thinking mystics with hands” (Owen-Towle, 1998). When this is taken to heart, and the promise is translated into action, the difficulties that some members of our congregations might have with some of the more verbal, or some of the more sedentary, aspects of worship dissolve into nothingness. The only question is whether our congregations are creating these outlets, providing opportunities for all members of the congregation to put their desires into action. If we are not, we run the risk of being nothing but talkers. “By their fruits shall ye know them” (Matthew 7:16-20) is a commonly heard phrase. “Put up or shut up” is another. Fine talk that is not followed up with fine deeds rings a bit hollow. (Adapted from *The Inherent Worth and Dignity of All Individuals*).

If this rings true to you, please join us.

References

Meyers, B. F. (2005). The caring congregations handbook and training manual: Resources for welcoming and supporting those with mental disorders and their families into our congregations. Will To Print Press.

Newman, B. (2008). The inherent worth and dignity of ALL Individuals: Encouraging full participation in our Unitarian Universalist Congregations. Dove and Orca.

Owen-Towle, T. (1998). Freethinking mystics with hands: Exploring the heart of Unitarian Universalism. Skinner House Books.