

 **Minding the Gap** 

How can we Support the Young Adults in our Denomination?

A Sunday-Service Kit for your Congregation or Fellowship



*Created for free use by Canadian Unitarian Universalist congregations and fellowships,
by young adults Christine Mishra and Jessica Bayne, with help from many others.*

Fall 2010

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Fall, 2010

Dear Congregational Leaders,

This service kit is designed to allow any congregation or fellowship to lead a meaningful service about Young Adult issues, regardless of size or number of youth and young adults, whether they have a minister or are lay-led.

There is a common pattern among our congregations and fellowships: there is a strong Religious Education (R.E.) program for children and youth, and there is a strong contingent of members and friends in the “adult” group, from those in their late thirties to those in their 70s and 80s, but there is a conspicuous “gap” in the 18-35 age range. For a long time this pattern has been considered to be the “way things are,” and most congregations and fellowships felt at a loss about how to keep youth around after high school, and how to draw in young adults before they have children old enough to be active in the R.E. programs. However, this pattern does not have to remain the norm.

Yes, it’s true that 18-35 year olds tend to move away from home and get caught up in school and starting jobs and families. This means that they often move away from a home congregation, and/or find that the regularly scheduled programming doesn’t meet their needs and schedules. This is a reality, but this does not need to be where the conversation ends.

By recognizing these realities, we, as a denomination, and each congregation or fellowship, can begin to reach out to older youth and young adults. We can be more welcoming to this vibrant group, and find ways to meet their needs and nurture them along their personal and spiritual paths. We can build truly multigenerational communities, where all members and friends will feel more empowered, nurtured and welcome, and we can all learn from one another.

This service is designed to help your congregation or fellowship begin the conversation around how to “Mind the Gap” in your community. We hope it will create a “buzz” about young adults during coffee hour, and maybe lead to a few small (or large) changes in your congregation or fellowship.

Remember that denominational growth comes not only from attracting new members, but also from keeping those we already have from leaving because we no longer meet their needs. Therefore, this service is not only about young adults; it is about the present and future of our movement.

In this packet you will find a suggested order of service, notes to the service leader(s), and a set of reflections, songs, readings, and meditations/activities to choose from to create your service. We hope this will be helpful. If you have any questions, feel free to contact us.

Sincerely,

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Acknowledgements

Thank you so much to all of the young adults who helped to make this kit possible. The reflections are truly from the heart, and demonstrate some of the wide range of perspectives and experiences of young adults in Canada. Also, a big thank you to Sanford Kome-Pond and Robbie Brydon for their input, suggestions and proofreading.

The name *Minding the Gap* is inspired by the UUA's Mind the Gap! Youth and Young Adult Ministry Sunday program which took place in 2002. The “gap” refers to the fact that there is usually a gap in the 18-35 age range in our congregations.

Suggested Order of Service

Prelude – New Soul by Yael Naim

Welcome – *Your congregation's traditional welcome.*

Chalice Lighting – #436 (by David C. Pohl in *Singing The Living Tradition*)

Reflection Reading #1 – *Select a reflection from the those provided in the following section*

Song #1 – Here We Have Gathered (#360 in *Singing The Living Tradition*)

A Tale of Two Congregations – By Christine Mishra

Song #2 – Building Bridges (#1023 in *Singing the Journey*)

Reflection Reading #2 – *Select a reflection from the ones provided*

Meditation and Visioning – *This can be found in the readings section*

Offering – *We suggest that undesignated contributions go toward the congregation's efforts to support Young Adults, such as bursaries to send some young adults to the ACM in May. Play any instrumental music you like during the offering.*

Reflection Reading #3 – *Select a reflection from the those provided in the following section*

Taking Action – *Instructions for this part can be found in the notes section*

Closing Words – Commitment by Dorothy Day (#560 in *Singing The Living Tradition*)

Final Song – Now Let Us Sing (#368 in *Singing The Living Tradition*)

(Suggested extra verses: Light, Life, Dream, return to Hope again)

Readings and Resources

Reflections

By Anna Isaacs:

Anna Isaacs is a thirty-something UU young adult in Victoria, B.C., who has worked in the church office, chaired the board, attended B.C. and national CUC gatherings and still has a hard time getting out of bed early enough on Sunday morning.

I first went to a UU Sunday service after graduating from University. I loved my friends fiercely, but if I had one more angsty, navel-gazing discussion about what to do with our lives that went nowhere, I was really going to snap. And yet I came to a small-lay led UU fellowship as a non-churched queer feminist interested in multiple spiritual traditions, with that same question burning in my brain. I had been lucky enough to land employment somewhat related to my schooling, where I hoped I could catch my breath. But after I got my feet back under me, what was I really going to do with my life?

When I dragged myself out of bed most Sunday mornings and went to church, it was a relief to find myself in a sea of grey-haired grandmas with a handful grandpas, aunties, uncles and nieces and nephews in the mix. They were all thinking about the same question as me, but from totally different perspectives and with delightfully different answers. The diversity fed my soul and was a profound source of comfort, strength and inspiration.

This is how a quirky, caring, independent-minded clan has become part of my extended family. They are there for me as lives of those I love, jobs, and relationships end and begin. We laugh together and eat together and figure out how to be who we want to be and do what we want to do in the world.

I was envious of those who grew up UU, but I was resigned to the fact that I was an outsider who had showed up too late for the party to fit in with other young UUs. It is only as I neared the end of my twenties and embarked on my thirties that I've given much thought to myself as a UU young adult.

These last few years have brought some very modest growth in my congregation's young adult population. I've gone from being the only one under forty most Sundays to regularly seeing more than one other young adult face in the crowd. Interacting with other young UUs gives me hope that it is possible to build community with other young UUs.

Meeting UU students has also brought me to the startling realization that I am an "old" young adult. My time is almost up and I feel like I don't want to miss out.

Watching friends become parents has also shifted my thinking. I have this gut feeling that having kids is probably the last time most people of my age will ever give any real thought to joining a religious community. I see how my friends are getting sucked into worlds filled with other parents with small children just like them.

While it is natural for them to make these connections, I hope for them that they can find a more diverse community of people to be a part of raising their children and supporting them as parents.

Becoming UU has been such a gift in my life. I want to let other young adults know about our faith and to help make our congregations welcoming to those young adults who want to check us out.

If starting tomorrow our religion was dependent on only the people under 40 who are currently Unitarian, we would have a hard time getting together enough people for a soccer team, never mind existing as a religious movement. My life in this religious community didn't start at the cradle, but I would like it to take me to my grave, and to leave knowing that UU community will continue to be there for the children growing up in our religion throughout the span of their whole lives too. In a way, I want to be fully engaged as a young UU now so that I and those who come after me get a chance to be old UUs in a healthy, diverse and vibrant religious community.

By Christopher Wulff:

Christopher Wulff is a 30-something living in Toronto. He has been involved in the Unitarian Fellowship of Kingston, First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto and the Continental Unitarian Universalist Young Adult Network.

Two months after the towers fell I returned to the Unitarian faith. This isn't a tale of sadness, of revenge, or of reconciliation. In some ways, I think this is, as writer Rebecca Solnit might say, my own paradise built of hell.

Working in a new job in Kingston, I had found myself surrounded by people who wanted action, any action, any action at all to relieve their anxiety, their loss, their fear, their sudden and shocking discomfort with instability and uncertainty. Their pain filled me, their anger distanced me and their deep need for what they simply called action, scared me.

All of this pleading, this wailing, this gnashing of teeth was eating away at me – pushing me further and further from people. I needed not action, but space. Space to reflect. Space to grieve. Space to imagine another way forward. And I needed this space in a community of others who needed it too. I needed to share this space to make it real. And I knew that there was one place I had been in my life where this space was both taken for granted and fervently protected.

I kind of grew up in the Unitarian church in Toronto. I went to the kids' program when I was young, washed dishes and made coffee in my early teens, and attended services sporadically in my later teens. But I drifted away in favour of hanging around with friends, working in sex ed, and the many, many opportunities of a privileged high school life.

These same priorities carried through university at Queen's, where the campus newspaper, the radio station and, sometimes classes, all filled my days. School ended, I got a job, met a girl, bought a house and found myself yearning still for something. I didn't know what the something was, but I knew that I had gotten the things I was supposed to want, and yet found myself more wanting than before.

Like the new job and the communities I found myself in after university, the world was suddenly, subconsciously, feeling very closed. My future had become a series of choices from a restricted menu, not freely emerging from the bounty of fields and forests. My politics had narrowed to an approved platform, my learning to a narrow curriculum, and my community to regular couples dinners and the occasional birthday party. My consciousness didn't make anything of it at the time, but my dreams were of wide open spaces, with people dancing, sun shining and horizons ever-shifting. I think I was crying out for space to grow, space to expand, space to let loose the abundance and joy I felt dimming inside.

I found that space in the Unitarian Fellowship in Kingston and in the Continental Unitarian Universalist Young Adult Network (C*UUYAN, *pronounced see-ooo-yan*), my truest spiritual home.

Young adult conferences have been spaces of great personal revolution and change for me. It was at a young adult conference that I first understood my privilege in anything other than an academic sense. In a workshop on trans rights, all of the gender power and fluidity that I had struggled to comprehend in school were suddenly made manifest. And in the fires and worships each night I found my voice. And again and again I fell in love. How could I not, surrounded by beautiful people who shared so many of my values, who themselves were creating lives beyond the box. Young adult community, including the FUUSE (Forging the Unitarian Universalist Sensory Experience) network online and all the continental and district conferences were all about space for me. They were a space to explore self, to nourish others, to break our bonds to convention together in loving community. Our motto as a young adult community is "radically inclusive, justice-centred and spiritually alive" – precisely the kind of space I needed.

At the same time that I was discovering C*UUYAN I was finding a home for my spirit in the community where I lived. I came to Kingston Unitarian Fellowship in the fall and inside two years was on the board, newsletter editor, communications chair, sitting on three national committees, two continental committees and on staff for conference after conference after conference. I taught OWL, gave sermons, served as a youth

advisor, a facilitator, a CUC service consultant and much more. They made all of this space for me to grow, to learn, to lead. And when I needed to step back, they gladly made that space too. This Unitarian community across the continent and in my own backyard invested in me substantially, and I hope that I am continuing to pay it back for what it showed me was possible when we embrace abundance rather than scarcity and speak to people's hearts when asking "How are you called?"

I sit now in many ways without a congregation of my own, but instead within a community of beloved seekers spread across the city, the country, the continent and increasingly the world. Space has expanded and choices abound and abundance is ever present. And yet I know that should I feel the world shrinking, witness options disappearing, see identities narrowing, that there is and always will be a community of seekers whose very calling is to make space – that which for many, myself included, is the space that saves.

By Jessica Bayne:

Jessica Bayne is a 33 year old UU young adult in Waterloo, ON. She chairs her congregation's membership committee, and started a young adult group in Waterloo in 2010.

As someone from a church background, my journey to Unitarian Universalism may sound familiar to others. In my early teens, I began grappling with my Roman Catholic beliefs and how I could live my life according to ideas that did not seem relevant to a Canadian in the 20th century. While I was welcome to help read the Word during mass, there was no welcome for my questions, no safe space in which to explore these issues, and no way to make my faith real for me, so I stopped going. My brothers and sisters followed suit, and looking at us now, only one sibling is still associated with the Catholic church. Why? Well, he had kids, and they needed to be baptized.

Now, before we get feeling a bit smug about my Catholic exodus, the experience I just described as a Catholic teen could just as easily be that of a UU young adult. We have these great youth programs set up to support our teens in their religious exploration, and then they bridge to... what? What lies on the other side? Committee work? Coffee hour? Is this the real "Bridge to Nowhere"? Too many of our own young adults leave our congregations after having positive youth group experiences, only to maybe return when they have children of their own. I think that relying on our children's education programs as a way to recruit young adults really misses the mark.

Sharon Hwang Colligan writes: "UU young adults ask me: is UUism strong enough to challenge me? Deep enough to deepen me? Real enough for me to be proud of? Fellowship and comfort are good things but I can get that at a cafe. I want to know about the religion. And I want to feel its power, not just believe in some principles on paper."

Being able to live my life with consistency between my religious beliefs and my actions everyday is a blessing, and I am grateful to have found my spiritual home in UUism. My congregation has become involved with a Building Bridges program with our local interfaith group as a way to find common ground between different faith traditions. I suggest we also need to build bridges between our generations to find common ground in what makes UUism a vital and important religious movement for Canadian young adults in the 21st century. We can expect more of ourselves, to be a movement strong and real enough to provide the experiences and power that young adults crave. To model living with integrity and depth in a world that can be fickle and shallow. To question together our purposes here and now, and to move forward knowing that we will do work in this world we can be proud to call our own.

By Robbie Brydon:

Robbie Brydon is 26 and has held many leadership positions congregationally and nationally. He has recently moved from Toronto to Hamilton to attend McMaster University.

The story I have to tell is about what makes Unitarian Universalism vital to me, what makes me stay – and what brought me back when I left. Some of my experiences are common to many younger UUs and others less so, but many of the conclusions I draw may be relevant to UUs of all ages.

I started coming to Religious Education classes at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto at the ripe old age of 9. My standout memories of R.E. include taking our play “God is Going To Get You” on the road, far too many crafts and one phenomenal year when the group was run by a lively woman who worked at Sony Music. When I was 13, the junior youth group was slow getting started and waking up on Sunday morning was getting more difficult, so I stopped coming. It's hard to think now that my journey in religious community could well have ended right there.

It was three years later that my mom came home from church with an invitation: “Jacob (YAK-ob) says you should come back.” Following a leadership conference that spring, I was at a point in my life where I was looking for connection. So I did come back. I went to two youth conferences that fall in upstate New York and I found that the youth community was a perfect fit for me. As UUs, we have an incredible youth community that offers radical acceptance, support for personal and spiritual growth and a progressive lens on the world at large, all at exactly the right time in teenagers' lives. What we haven't managed to do is meet the needs of most of those youth when they become young adults.

Three years and a dozen youth conferences later, I packed my bags and headed off to university. Okay, so I only went to the suburbs from downtown Toronto, but it turns out Sunday morning is less appealing when there's an hour and a half transit trip between you and the congregation and, anyway, I was no longer part of the youth group. I might have made it to one service during my first semester. It's strange to think that I could have easily wandered away and been one of the 12,000 or so Canadians who marks 'Unitarian' on their census forms but doesn't belong to a congregation (and heck, we've only got 5,000 members).

Once again, I was offered a bridge back. Within two months, I was asked to sit on the CUC's Youth Advisory Group and that spring, the congregation's Worship Convenor called me up and asked me to be a worship leader at the congregation, a role that I was happy to take on, given my experience planning worship as a youth. Suddenly, I had to come at least once a month, I worked closely with the ministers and the worship leaders – and pretty much everyone knew who I was, since I was front and centre for two years. Eventually I was coming every Sunday because I had a community I felt a part of, I enjoyed what we shared on Sunday morning and ... my sleeping patterns had started to change. I've now served three years on the Board of Trustees, two as Vice-President, I've led the Coming of Age class twice, developed a Faith in Action course and helped get the Member Engagement program off the ground.

Why do I tell you this story? For three reasons:

One, the vital piece for me was being a part of a sacred community that held values consistent with mine. The effusive warmth, openness to each person and depth of care at youth and young adult conferences is powerful. Our covenant groups and working groups sometimes achieve the same. And, very occasionally, Sunday mornings do, too.

Two, this gives us a structural problem. Of my R.E. and youth cohorts, only one other person still attends my congregation regularly and, as a religion, we lose more youth every year than we gain total members of any age. Most youth bridging into young adulthood find Sunday morning services ... well, dull, after the emotionally charged community and worship services they experienced. The depth of relationship and connection tends to be stronger in our working and covenant groups and at small, intense events like CU*UL school, retreats and lay chaplaincy trainings. To grow and thrive in this religion, one needs to ask or be asked to make their way into deeper connection.

And three, the only thing remarkable about our young people is that they need more outreach. I was lucky. I got two vital offers to do something interesting that arrived at just the right time and brought me back and into the heart of my congregation. (There were other offers that I turned down, including one to sit on the Board before I even finished high school.) I think we let our fear of intruding get in the way of our ability to reach out to people of all ages, some of whom are in need of another invitation. The young adults who have come through our youth movement have often changed communities and sometimes continue to change communities frequently. Many need time to develop new relationships and need time to develop stability in their lives. The invitation that reaches them may be one five years down the road and maintaining the connection to be able to extend that invitation is a major challenge for us, as congregations and as individuals. The payoff, though, is incredible.

By Christine Mishra:

Christine Mishra is 23, and she grew up attending the Unitarian Church of Calgary. She was very involved in youth programming locally and denominationally, and she just graduated from the University of Lethbridge.

Growing up, I always felt very at home in my congregation – I'd been attending literally as long as I could remember, since I was three years old. However, I started to feel a deeper spiritual and community connection to Unitarian Universalism as a junior youth while participating in the Our Whole Lives program, and even more so after attending my first youth conference, CanUUdle, when I was 15. From then on I became heavily involved at the regional, national, and even continental levels. There was a lot of work, emails, teleconferences, planning and meetings, but it was all worth it because I felt incredibly nourished, re-energized, and spiritually fulfilled every time I gathered with other UU youth. Regular doses of late night worship, singing, cuddle puddles, and social justice projects with other youth made my stressful high school and early university years easier to take, and gave my life another layer of meaning. I cannot truly express how important this community and these experiences have been to me – they truly have shaped my life and who I am today.

Bridging out of the youth community when I turned 21 was a painful, sad and scary experience. I was leaving behind everything about the youth community that had sustained me and brought me so much joy, and I wasn't sure what would be waiting for me on the other side of that bridge. However, I am an optimist, so I tried to look on the bright side – I wouldn't miss all the committees and meetings and all the hard work and tricky problems to navigate. Actually, I was pretty burned out by all of that, so I was a bit relieved to leave that part behind for the time being. Also, I'd seen the flurry of emails and plans made before the previous ACM, when a group of young adults were excited to jump-start a young adult presence and programming, so I had reason to hope that my first ACM as a young adult would have a decent young adult presence, with programming and plans in place to help us form a community.

Sadly, this was not the case. Young adults were essentially forgotten in terms of programming, and there were only a handful of us who attended at all. Turns out that "gap" between the programming and community for youth and for adults I'd heard about was real after all. I was discouraged and started to reconsider whether I would attend the ACM the next year... maybe in a few years I'd come back. I was busy with my last year of university, and what was I really getting out of attending anyways? It didn't rejuvenate me like CanUUdle used to, and it was expensive to travel to.

But as it turns out, I did come back. A happy coincidence of timing got me to Victoria for the ACM after all, and the experience gave me hope again. With a new Youth and Young Adult Coordinator at the CUC, and a small critical mass of young adults and bridgers, we began to build some energy and optimism amongst ourselves. We could have some quality, relevant programming and social events at next year's ACM, we could be better organized so things wouldn't slip between the cracks. We even came up with a lofty goal of getting 50 young adults at the 50th Anniversary ACM in Toronto in 2011. When I think about the work that must be done

to make this happen, I don't feel bogged down anymore. I feel optimistic and uplifted because I know I'm not alone, and I know that my efforts won't go to waste. Creating an energized and nurturing community of young adults at our national conference is worth it.

What will it take to get our Young Adult community to the place where it nourishes its members as the youth community does for the youth? There is no easy answer, but I do know that we'll need support and input at the congregational, regional, and national levels. Congregations need to work to welcome young adults to join and play meaningful roles in the congregation, and better structures must be in place to ensure that there is relevant, quality programming for young adults who attend regional and national conferences.

The strength of a community lies in its ability to grow. Therefore the community should prepare itself to be a welcoming and safe space for new members of every generation, as well as placing an emphasis on obtaining and retaining young adult members. I hope you'll join me on this journey.

By Sean Barron:

Sean Barron is 20 years old and stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism in high school. He has been very involved as a youth at both the local and national levels, including two years as the Youth Observer to the CUC's Board. After growing up in Calgary, Sean now attends Saint Paul University in Ottawa.

As a child, being read to was a privilege that I enjoyed. I more than enjoyed it; growing up it was a place of comfort that I could run to in times of crisis. It is where my love of radio and spoken word came from, and why I prefer audio books nowadays to the written word. To be enticed to take a step into the world, whether it be fantasy or reality, where I can expand my emotional, intellectual, cultural even linguistic experiences without moving is profound.

Story-telling is how I learn. It places me into another reality, transforming what I know to be true and challenging what I thought to be false. It presents new paradigms for me to place onto the world I know and breaks the old ones down.

This is how religion has its power. It strikes at a core within one's identity and ties them to narratives of old. Religion places one in the line of many, adding purpose and meaning to life through a common story. For Christians and Muslims, being put into the narrative of their prophets with a divine message and direction provides a place for discernment and cultivation of a religious practice and faith.

So what's our story? As Unitarian Universalists do we have a narrative? Or are we content to be a hodgepodge of borrowed and individual narratives that define what we are and who and where we want to be? Or is that our post-modern narrative?

From my experience of UUism, as both a youth and a young adult I see our narrative as more of a shared vision. A vision that we inherited from our fore-parents, enhanced by modern thought and put into action every day. We know that this world is not just. We reject the idea that in our society today, people are getting what they deserve, that the unequal and racialized nature of our society is a natural expression of the human condition; rather it is an artificially created construct that is used to divide, disempower, and detach our humanity from the other.

I believe our narrative is quite well summed up by the statement "We stand on the side of love." We may debate what that means, but that is our intention. Standing on the side of love means a world where love guides our actions. I am not talking about wishy-washy love, but actual love – the divine/human recognition of the self in the other that allows us to transform ourselves and our world. Love allows us to take the first step to begin to know the stranger. We don't have to like them; we just have to love them.

We should preach this in the pulpits, and embody it in the streets. We need to refresh the world with our voice of love. Love coming from a faith that embodies the pluralism the world needs.

A Tale of Two Congregations

Let me tell you a story about two UU congregations that started off very much alike, but whose decisions and actions led them down very different paths, to very different fates. These two congregations could be anywhere in Canada, in neighbouring small cities. Each congregation started off with about 100 members and friends, with a small R.E. program including a youth group, and with members from ages 2 to 92.

The first congregation had no particular plan about being a lifespan learning community or a multigenerational community or anything like that; they just worried about Sunday services, coffee hour, the yearly budget, and so on. They didn't feel they had time or funds to attend regional or national gatherings, so only a handful of adult members attended, and they were not asked to report back or share their experiences on their return.

As the children in R.E. grew older, there were no new children coming in to replace them in the younger classes, and gradually the youngest classes were closed because there simply weren't any children to attend. The youth group became primarily a social gathering place where the teens hung out, listened to music and watched movies, and occasionally had a good discussion, but they were never encouraged to deepen their spirituality, or to become part of a larger UU youth community by attending youth conferences — in fact they didn't even know that these conferences and this community existed. When the youth graduated from high school, the congregation sent them off into the wide world with good wishes, and assumed that they would be back when they had kids, maybe to jump-start the failing R.E. program. No one thought to reach out to the campuses of the local college and university to start a campus ministry program, or even to post the occasional notice about services and church events somewhere that students might see it.

With no R.E. programming for infants and young children, young parents felt that they couldn't attend unless they found a babysitter for Sunday morning, so no young families joined any more. The few twenty-somethings who had grown up UU and moved to the area for school or jobs, and those who discovered Unitarian Universalism online and found their way to the congregation, saw no one else even near their age and no one particularly welcomed them or asked them to come back the next week or to the church picnic, and so they stopped coming.

After a few years of this process, there was no R.E. program for children or youth at all, and the general feeling in the congregation was that that money could be better spent elsewhere, and if suddenly a whole bunch of people with children showed up, then they'd talk about re-starting R.E. But of course that never happened. Soon there was no one in the congregation under 50, fewer than 30 people showed up any given week, and the congregation was literally dying. Pledges were falling as almost the whole congregation was retired and living on a fixed income, and every once in a while the oldest members would reminisce about the good old days when the congregation was vibrant, and there were members of all ages, and they still had the money for their own building and a settled minister.

pause

But what about the other congregation? The one that made different choices and had a different fate?

The second congregation made a conscious decision become an intentionally multigenerational community. They decided that in order to do this, there were two main things that needed to be provided: times for people of all ages to be together, involved in the same activity such as multigenerational service, and also times and spaces for each age group to have age-specific programming and events; plus a few cross-generational activities such as children-seniors game nights.

They invested time and money into making their R.E. space and programming vibrant and inviting, and training and recognizing the R.E. teachers, so that they stuck around. They planned parent nights where parents of young children could get together to socialize and to discuss how to do UU parenting. They had a story for all

at the beginning of every service so that the children spent some time with the adults, and they made sure that the themes in the adult service were also touched on in the R.E. classes, so that everyone could discuss the same theme during coffee hour or on the drive or walk home.

They sent their potential youth advisors to youth advisor trainings so that they were well prepared and knew how to help nurture the youth. The congregation encouraged the youth group to attend youth conferences and trainings, so that they could be part of moving youth worship services, deep discussions, and fun activities with youth from other parts of the region and across the country. The youth were invited to write articles and reflections about their experiences for the church newsletter, and they also ran two “youth style” services throughout the year that adults could attend, usually in the evening. The adults who attended left feeling deeply touched by the experience, and invited youth to join the Sunday services committee to work on one service a month that would be a bit different and more youth-like than usual. Youth and young adults were invited, as individuals, to join the choir or sit on a committee that interested them, since they were part of the congregation.

When youth graduated from high school there was a bridging ceremony to mark this important transition in their lives. The Minding the Gap committee worked with the parents of these bridgers to make sure they didn’t get forgotten: for those who were staying in town, they were periodically invited to be involved in some personally meaningful way. For those who moved away, the committee contacted the membership committee of their now nearest congregation, and tipped them off to some of that youth’s talents and interests so that their potential new congregation could welcome them with open arms; and they also made up care packages to send to those in their first two years away from home, so that they would know that their home congregation still cared.

The congregation also scraped together the money to hire a chaplain to serve the university and college specifically, to provide the necessary continuity to allow a campus ministry program to thrive. The campus ministry group collaborated with the congregation on social justice events in the community, which raised the profile of both groups, and brought in new youth and young adults. A young adult small-group-ministry group was also started at the congregation, and soon they had to start another one because the attendance was so high. Young adult style services were started, such as Soulful Sundowns, and they were popular with other members of the congregation, as well.

Because they were retaining many of their bridging youth, as well as bringing in new young adults (either from other UU congregations, or new UUs) from the college and university, through the social justice projects, and by offering great R.E. programming for young parents, there was no “Gap” in the 18-35 age range at this congregation, and the congregation as a whole was more vibrant and sustainable. When newcomers of any age showed up on a Sunday, they saw people their age, and saw that there were a variety of activities, programs, and roles for someone like them. Members of all ages were supported by the congregation to attend the CUC’s annual conference and meeting, and they brought back new ideas, energy, and knowledge that benefited the whole congregation. The membership of this congregation grew to over 250 members, and is still growing today.

pause

One final note: You may have noticed that this is a fairy tale, although the examples are drawn from a number of real-life congregations, so it is based in reality. Hopefully, no congregation will disintegrate as completely as the first one did, and we know that no congregation is perfect; sometimes plans fail despite our best efforts. Therefore, please take this as part cautionary tale, part ideal vision to strive toward — but remember that it is not the only ideal possible.

Meditation and Visioning

We will now have the meditation and visioning. Please close your eyes if you feel comfortable.

I invite you to imagine that you are a young adult. Please choose an age for yourself, either in the 18-25 age range, where young adults are typically attending post-secondary school or training, and beginning their jobs; or in the 25-35 age range, where many are more settled in their career, and many are getting married and starting a family. Have you chosen an age?

Ok, now think about what your emotional, spiritual, and financial situation is. Have you moved recently? Do you have time on your hands or are you busy? Do you have children? What are you looking for if you come to a church?

**pause* 5-10 seconds of silence*

Now imagine that you walked in the door of this congregation/fellowship. What does it feel like? Do you know where to go? Is there someone to greet you and welcome you? Do you see anyone your age, or anyone you think you might have something in common with? Are there posters or brochures displayed about activities and programs you might be interested in? Is the sermon interesting to you? Do you feel welcome? Are you likely to come back?

**pause* 20-30 seconds of silence*

Now, what do you think this congregation/fellowship could change that would make you feel more welcomed, and more likely to come back?

**pause* 20-30 seconds of silence*

Now, when you're ready, please open your eyes and return to this space. Then please turn to someone sitting near you and briefly share your thoughts and reflections on this meditation with them.

Notes for the Service Leader(s)

Physical Layout

To give your congregation a taste of something different, and what a more young-adult style service might look and feel like, we suggest that you change your normal seating arrangement for this service, if physically possible. A circle or U-shape (with as many rows as necessary for the number of people) is appropriate for this type of service. When changing your seating layout, however, be sure to take into account the sound equipment you have in your space – we don't want you to compromise your members' ability to hear what's going on.

Order of Service

Please don't feel too tied to the suggested order of service — this is your service after all.

- If it feels too long, you could include two reflections instead of three, or shorten the meditation.
- If you usually have a “story for all” at the beginning of your service, you can switch the order of Reflection Reading 1 and the Tale of Two Congregations, so that the “fairy tale” functions as the story for all.
- If your congregation usually does joys and concerns in the service, then feel free to add that to the order of service wherever you feel it fits best.

Music

We have included four songs in the suggested order of service. Most are in the hymnal or in the hymnal supplement, *Singing the Journey*.

The suggested song for the prelude can be found on YouTube, and played with or without the video for your service. Here is the link to the video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f8wpdr-YbbU>

If you wish to purchase a copy of the song, it can be downloaded for \$0.99 at <http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/yael-naim/id266125243>.

If you would like to choose different songs, here are a few more possibilities:

From Singing the Living Tradition:

317 - We Are Not Our Own

323 - Break Not the Circle

347 - Gather the Spirit (song 1)

From Singing the Journey:

1008 - When Our Heart is in a Holy Place (song 1)

1011 - Return Again (song 2)

1012 - When I Am Frightened

1017 - Building a New Way

Chalice Lighting and Closing Words

In the “Suggested Order of Service” (on page 1) we have suggested readings for the chalice lighting and the closing words. Other suitable options from *Singing the Living Tradition* would be:

- 444 - This House
- 459 - for the benediction
- 468 - We Need One Another
- 498 - meditative prayer
- 692 - benediction
- 698 - another benediction

About the Reflection Readings

The young adult reflections were written by young adults from across Canada. We wanted to ensure that even in a congregation or fellowship with no young adults, an authentic young adult voice would be present in this service. There are several more reflections than will fit in a particular service, so please read through them all, and choose those that speak to you. You may want to choose those that mention a particular situation that your congregation faces, or you may simply want to choose a few that give very different perspectives. We suggest that you try to vary the reflections you choose by gender and age of the author, if at all possible.

If you find it hard to choose between all of these insightful reflections, we suggest that you print off a couple of copies of each, and leave them in your fellowship hall after the service and for a couple of weeks following this service for members to read if they choose.

A short bio paragraph is included with each reflection. You can choose to have these read out at the beginning of the reading, or simply state the author’s name and age and include the bios in the order of service.

If you have any young adults in your congregation or fellowship (even those who may come only rarely), you might consider inviting them to read one or more of these reflections during the service; or you might invite them to write their own reflection if they are comfortable with this. These invitations are important, so that you ask your young adults to participate in a meaningful way; however, be careful not to pressure your local young adults into being involved in this service or sharing their own reflections if they do not feel comfortable doing so (One Protestant congregation found a helpful approach to be “welcoming, but not desperate.”)*.

*See “Setting the Welcome Thermostat,” <http://www.alban.org/conversation.aspx?id=9067>

Meditation/Visioning

This meditation is designed to get your congregation to examine how welcoming they are to young adults currently, and begin to think about how it could be improved. Feel free to modify it if you feel the changes would make it fit your situation more closely.

During the meditation, there are suggested places to pause to allow for contemplation. Once you have finished, ask everyone to turn to their neighbour and quietly share what they envisioned. Give them 2 or 3 minutes to share, and then use a bell or some other signal to bring everyone’s attention back to the pulpit.

Taking Action

Prep: A large board or poster or flipchart should be placed at the front of the sanctuary. You'll need a large quantity of sticky notes or index cards.

Hand out two sticky notes or index cards to each person. Suggested instructions are:

On the first card, please write down a goal for the congregation/fellowship with regards to young adults, such as an idea to try to be more welcoming to young adults, or a number of young adults to try to send to the ACM, etc.

On the second card, please write down a personal commitment, some way that you can help this congregation/fellowship be more welcoming to young adults, such as a young adult to reach out to, or some way to contribute to the congregation's efforts.

(Wait 3-4 minutes to allow them time to think and write)

Please come up to the front and place your sticky/card on these boards, so that we can use these ideas to help us reach out to young adults. Hold on to your personal commitment as a reminder for yourself.