

# The Welcoming Congregation Program

## Executive Summary

January 2018

### What and How

For more than twenty years, the Welcoming Congregation Program has helped Unitarian Universalist congregations become more welcoming and inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It has helped us understand the ways that our practices, language, and faith culture can make LGBTQ people feel excluded, and how to take active steps toward welcome and inclusion instead.

“Welcoming” means that your congregation engages, as a spiritual practice, in the deepest way possible to intentionally welcome individuals, families, and communities of all sexual orientations and gender identities. It takes constant doing and stretching for our welcome to grow.

### Who should engage in the Welcoming Congregation Program?

Congregations recognized as a Welcoming Congregation more than five years ago often benefit from refresher programming on transgender issues, bisexual and queer issues, race/ethnicity and sexuality, and other intersections of identity and experience.

### Every Welcoming Congregation Program is different!

There is no one way to run a program. It is meant to be created and planned by a congregational team to suit the needs and circumstances of your congregation. However, there are certain requirements.

## Program Requirements

The requirements for recognition as a Welcoming Congregation are:

1. **Measurable achievements** in the areas of education, congregational life, and community outreach, using the [Welcoming Congregation Guidelines and Action Steps](#) as a guide.

Congregations are encouraged to pay particular attention to the following topics:

- transgender issues
  - bisexual and queer issues
  - the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity with other identity factors like age, race/ethnicity, class, and ability. Because these issues are often glossed over by the mainstream, there is a real need for these discussions in our congregations.
2. **A congregational vote** in affirmation of being recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) as a Welcoming Congregation ([see below](#)).

## Getting Started

### Find Others - You Can't Do It Alone

Feel out congregational leaders, gather supportive members around you, and engage in conversations about how to best move forward.

### Congregational Vote Is Recommended at the End of the Process

In many congregations, a formal vote *before* educational opportunities creates conflict.

## STEP 1

### Assessment

#### A. Form Assessment Team

#### B. Assess Successes and Gaps

- Assessment by the Assessment Team
- Assess Through Congregational Input

#### C. Develop an Implementation Plan

#### D. Develop a Report and Recommendations

## STEP 2

### Plan Your Welcoming Congregation Program (Implementation Plan)

#### Time Frame

Plan out a program that moves at a pace that works for your congregation. An average program is about 18 months.

**Plan programming that will best suit your congregation** that will take your congregation to the next level of welcome and inclusion. Consider using the Welcoming Congregation Guidelines and Action Steps as a resource as you:

1. Create your goals based on recommendations from the Assessment
2. Develop a programming plan
3. Decide on a time frame

## STEP 3

### Action Steps

Not all steps are appropriate for all congregations. It is up to each congregation to adjust its goals according to its unique situation and needs. **However, every Welcoming Congregation Program must create diverse opportunities for engagement through education, congregational life, and community outreach.**

## **STEP 4**

### **Monitor and Celebrate Your Progress**

Your hard work deserves attention and recognition - if only by yourselves! As you move through your program, monitor your progress against the goals your Welcoming Congregation committee set and/or by using the [Guidelines and Action Steps](#). Keep your congregation informed as to what has been accomplished.

## **STEP 5**

### **Evaluation**

There are a number of ways to evaluate the program using qualitative, quantitative, formal and informal measures. Ideally, it is done throughout the process - as part of *Step 4* - and at the end of the program. Start with the goals that you outlined in your implementation plan. You will be measuring your outcomes against what you sought to achieve as outlined in that plan.

## **STEP 6**

### **Take a Congregational Vote**

A congregational vote in favor of being recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council as a Welcoming Congregation is a requirement for Welcoming Congregation status. The vote needs to be in compliance with your congregation's by-laws and constitution. Put simply, it is a vote on whether or not to be publicly recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council as a Welcoming Congregation.

## **STEP 7**

### **Apply for Recognition**

Once you feel that your congregation has made measurable achievements in the areas of education, congregational life, and community outreach regarding LGBTQ issues, and have had your congregational vote, apply for recognition.

When requirements have been met, the Board President of the congregation may send the application to the office of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

# The Welcoming Congregation Program Guidebook

## History

For more than twenty years, the Welcoming Congregation Program has helped Unitarian Universalist congregations become more welcoming and inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Citing the principles of our UU faith—especially the one that affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person—the 1989 General Assembly voted to initiate the Welcoming Congregation Program. Shortly thereafter, the Welcoming Congregation Handbook was developed. New editions of the handbook were released in 1995, 1999, and 2002. Much has changed in the lives of LGBTQ people since then and it was discontinued in 2014.

## What and How

“Welcoming” means that your congregation engages, as a spiritual practice, in the deepest way possible to intentionally welcome individuals, families, and communities of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

Welcome is a spiritual practice. It takes constant doing and stretching for our welcome to grow. We practice welcome in our congregations by:

- Promoting inclusivity and using inclusive language
- Creating welcoming spaces, including gender neutral bathrooms
- Saying our welcome out loud and in print and online
- Building our welcoming skills as congregational leaders and greeters
- Deepening our understanding of identities that differ from our own
- Offering sexuality education for the entire lifespan
- Preventing discrimination in the process of hiring a minister
- Engaging in justice ministry in our communities and the wider world
- Regularly engaging in Welcoming Congregation programming and ministry

The Welcoming Congregation Program has helped Unitarian Universalists understand the ways that our practices, language, and faith culture can make LGBTQ people feel excluded, and how to take active steps toward welcome and inclusion instead.

Official recognition as a Welcoming Congregation allows you to more publicly open your church as safe space for LGBTQ persons; to take positions on oppression in your larger communities; and to accomplish outreach.

**Taking the Next Step Toward Welcoming All:  
*Important Opportunities for Inclusion***

LGBTQ people are not the only ones who struggle to feel welcome and included in our congregations, and thus being a truly and fully welcoming congregation means acting to counter more than just heterosexism. The Welcoming Congregation Program is only one possible entry point. By taking the first step - any first step - we can explore how one oppression is linked to others. In fact, to be truly welcoming to LGBTQ people, we must think big!

Like all people, LGBTQ people have multifaceted identities. They can be people of colour, working class or poor, of varying abilities, immigrants, as well as children and youth and single parents and elders. These other identities can result in further exclusion and marginalization. Justice advocates talk about intersectionality. This refers to the places two or more areas of discrimination - such as those based on gender identity and colour - contribute to oppression. As you consider each of the steps outlined below to becoming recertified as a Welcoming Congregation, you need to consider how these other identities may compound the challenges of being LGBTQ.

Think about which individuals would feel most welcome in your congregation, and who might feel less welcome. Would a working class lesbian single mom feel welcome? Would an elderly Asian transgender man? How about a blind genderqueer person? How might you extend your welcome, little by little, step by step?

We hope you will incorporate other entry points into your Welcoming Congregation refresher programming, or tackle them as your next step toward welcoming all and affirming that diversity enriches our communities. Becoming a Welcoming Congregation can act as a catalyst to learning more about ourselves and to ending exclusion. Only when we are truly open to the wealth of diversity in our world will the inherent worth and dignity of every person be affirmed with a large voice.

*Is your congregation an intentionally welcoming congregation to all these LGBTQ people?*

Refer to this link about [Nurturing Inclusivity](#) for more resources that will help nurture inclusivity around age, family, race, ethnicity, class, economic background, class and ability and disability.

### **Who should engage in the Welcoming Congregation Program?**

Congregations recognized as a Welcoming Congregation more than five years ago often benefit from refresher programming on transgender issues, bisexual and queer issues, race/ethnicity and sexuality, and other intersections of identity and experience. Celebrate the progress you've made and identify areas where your congregation has room to grow.

*Be sure you are taking steps that will stretch your congregation to new levels of welcome.*

### **Every Welcoming Congregation Program is different!**

There is no one way to run a program. It is meant to be created and planned by a congregational team to suit the needs and circumstances of your congregation. You get to design a unique program that will best help your congregation engage in the deepest way possible with the question of how to more intentionally welcome individuals, families, and communities of all sexual orientations and gender identities.

## **Program Requirements**

The requirements for recognition as a Welcoming Congregation are:

3. **Measurable achievements** in the areas of education, congregational life, and community outreach, using the Welcoming Congregation Guidelines and Action Steps as a guide.

Congregations are encouraged to pay particular attention to the following topics:

- transgender issues
- bisexual and queer issues
- the intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity with other identity factors like age, race/ethnicity, class, and ability.  
Because these issues are often glossed over by the mainstream, there is a real need for these discussions in our congregations.

4. **A congregational vote** in affirmation of being recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) as a Welcoming Congregation ([see below](#)).

## Getting Started

Getting started is often the most challenging step. Mobilizing support and energy can sometimes be difficult, and some congregations face other challenges. If you're a small congregation, start with the UUA's [small congregations](#) page.

### Find Others - You Can't Do It Alone

Feel out congregational leaders, gather supportive members around you, and engage in conversations about how to best move forward. The more listening, consultation, dialogue, and consensus that occur at the beginning between professional staff, trustees, boards, committees, and members of the congregation, the more likely your program is to succeed.

### Congregational Vote Is Recommended at the End of the Process

In many congregations, a formal vote before educational opportunities creates conflict. It generally works best if the only consensus at the beginning is the agreement of lay and professional leadership to form a Welcoming Congregation committee to plan programming. This is like any other committee that might form around a desire to contribute to the congregation.

## STEP 1

### Assessment

Below is an abbreviated version of the assessment process.

Please refer to this document for a full description:

[https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/wc\\_renewal\\_assessment\\_process.pdf](https://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/wc_renewal_assessment_process.pdf)

#### E. Form Assessment Team

#### F. Assess Successes and Gaps

- Assessment by the Assessment Team
- Assess Through Congregational Input

#### G. Develop an Implementation Plan

#### H. Develop a Report and Recommendations

## STEP 4

### Monitor and Celebrate Your Progress

As you move through your program, monitor your progress against the goals your Welcoming Congregation committee set and/or by using the [Guidelines and Action Steps](#). Keep your congregation informed as to what has been accomplished.

## STEP 1

### Assessment

Below is an abbreviated version of the assessment process.

Please refer to this [Renewing the Welcoming Congregation document](#) for a full description.

#### I. Form Assessment Team

For a Welcoming Congregation renewal initiative to be successful, the congregation's leadership, including the board and professional staff, needs to commit to the process. It is recommended that the board appoint a diverse, time-limited Assessment Team of six to ten people. It is expected that the assessment work can be accomplished in six to eight meetings or less, but this may vary depending on the process the team decides to use.

1. **Membership:** Ideally, your team should represent the diverse makeup of your congregation—members of all genders, sexual orientations, ages, cultural and racial groups, abilities, and backgrounds—and each member should be thoroughly committed to the goals of the program.

It is important to include at least one youth on your committee, if possible. It is also important to not expect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) members to provide all the energy and leadership required by the program. People who are “allies” of LGBTQ people need to assume leadership roles. [Read about how to be a good ally.](#)

**Insert Terms of Reference template**

2. **Education:** Consider undertaking education and team-building exercises as a committee to ground yourselves, build community together, and get on the same page before bringing programming to your larger congregation. As part of that process, create a group covenant. **insert CUC template**

3. **Reach out to:**

- **Congregations that have recently done a Welcoming Congregation Program.** Find out what their programming looked like, share best practices, and build relationships around this important work.
- **Local LGBTQ groups and organizations.** Build relationships, ask how you can help their work, and brainstorm ways to bring their message to your congregation.

#### B. Assess Successes and Gaps

- **Assessment by the Assessment Team**
- **Assess Through Congregational Input**

#### C. Develop a Report and Recommendations

#### D. Develop an Implementation Plan



There can be a temptation to spend a lot of time and effort collecting data, reviewing results, and analysing the problem. And of course, this assessment is an important first step. But it is only the first step.

It can be easy to get stuck at this juncture and not move on to implementation. Sometimes this happens because when we are truly engaged, deep spiritual work happens. And this work can take time. Sometimes resistance occurs when we, as individuals and as a congregation, are examining that which makes us uncomfortable. (For example, no UU wants to imagine that they might be transphobic.) This natural resistance can stall progress. It is important to differentiate between the two and to skillfully manage each of these experiences.

Be sure to devote ample time and energy not just to assessing your congregation but to implementing the program. *Keep moving forward!*

## **STEP 2 Plan Your Welcoming Congregation Program (Implementation Plan)**

Once the board has received the report from the Assessment Team, it can decide how the recommendations can best be incorporated into the congregation's strategic plan. It might decide to form a Welcoming Congregation Committee, Interweave group, or other LGBTQ/Multicultural committee, if one does not already exist, or charge an existing committee with overseeing implementation of the plan. The board is encouraged to request regular reporting from the committee so that it knows that work is moving forward.

These skills, perspective and knowledge would be of use on the committee: adult education; religious education; congregational life; organizational development; change management; strategic thinking; communications; facilitation skills.

### **Time Frame**

Plan out a program that moves at a pace that works for your congregation. An average program is about 18 months. Some dive enthusiastically into educational work and move quickly on to community outreach. Others move more cautiously, building consensus and spending years having discussions and processing materials. Of course, the welcoming process does not end when you apply for recognition, but most congregations are able to make substantive process within a year or two.

**Create diverse opportunities for engagement through education, congregational life, and community outreach.**

**Plan programming that will best suit your congregation** that will take your congregation to the next level of welcome and inclusion.

Consider using the Welcoming Congregation [Guidelines and Action Steps](#) as a resource as you:

4. Create your goals based on recommendations from the Assessment
5. Develop a programming plan
6. Decide on a time frame

**Offer programming that:**

- **Speaks to a variety of learning styles and scheduling needs.**  
A workshop series is a central part of many programs but should never be the only component of your program. Intentional education should happen in a variety of ways.
- **Is balanced in terms of different areas of LGBTQ concerns.**  
Make sure your program isn't dominated by a single issue, such as same-sex marriage/relationships.
- **Identifies areas that might be more challenging for your congregation.**  
This could include transgender issues, , bisexual experiences, queer identity, and/or issues of race/ethnicity and sexuality.  
*Make sure your programming addresses your growing edges.*
- **Reflect on which LGBTQ people might feel most welcome in your congregation, and which might not feel welcome.** Think about how you can extend your welcome, little by little, step by step. Check out more entry points from Multicultural Growth & Witness and/or consider engaging with Building the World We Dream About, a "Welcoming Congregation style" program on race and ethnicity.

## STEP 3

### Action Steps

The ideas steps are offered in the hope that all congregations going through the Welcoming Congregation Program will consider incorporating them into their work. Not all steps are appropriate for all congregations; it is up to each congregation to adjust its goals according to its unique situation and needs. However, every Welcoming Congregation Program must cover the three areas of **education, congregational life, and community outreach.**

#### Ideas and Opportunities for Education

- Have worship services on LGBTQ issues
- Host a panel or round-table discussion on an LGBTQ issue
- Hold a LGBTQ film series with discussions
- Hold a congregation-wide common read and book discussion

- Make LGBTQ welcome and inclusion topics part of discussion forums before/after services or small group ministry groups
- Discussion forums before/after services or in small group ministry groups on welcome and inclusion topics.
- Offer workshops (once or twice a month, as an afternoon or day-long event, or even online through webinar technology). Possible sources include:
  - Egale Canada <https://egale.ca>
  - Rainbow Health Ontario [www.rainbowhealthontario.ca](http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca)
  - PFLAG Canada <https://pflagcanada.ca>
  - Our Whole Lives lifespan curricula
  - Interweave's [bisexuality and transgender curriculums](#)
  - The [Institute for Welcoming Resources](#) resource pages
  - UUA LGBTQ Ministries [Identity 101](#) pages
  - [Nurturing Inclusivity](#) pages
  - The [Living the Welcoming Congregation](#) curriculum
  - The [Institute for Welcoming Resources](#) ?? resource pages

### **Ideas and Opportunities for Congregational Life**

- Adjust bylaws to be inclusionary using [affirmative nondiscrimination language](#)
- Add language welcoming people of all sexual orientations and gender identities/expressions to worship, orders of service, website, brochure, etc.
- Use welcoming language, images, and information on your congregation's sign, on your bulletin boards, and in other areas
- Include news and information of LGBTQ concern in your newsletter, website, Facebook page, etc.
- Provide [inclusive language](#) guidelines and training to worship coordinators, speakers, as well as congregational leaders
- Revisit your religious education programming for all ages and make sure it is inclusive of all sorts of families, identities and experiences, abilities and learning styles, and more.
- Offer Our Whole Lives lifespan curricula or partner with nearby congregations to offer it.
- Make LGBTQ and other's marginalized issues and history a regular part of your liturgical calendar and congregational year
- Think about how welcoming your physical space is and whether improvements could be made, such as [gender neutral](#) bathrooms.
- Institutionalize trainings/discussions for [greeters/ushers](#) and other volunteers and staff (including those working with children and youth) on welcome and inclusion.

### **Ideas and Opportunities for Community Outreach**

- Hold an LGBTQ film series open to the public.

- Participate in public events around LGBTQ issues.
- Build and sustain relationships with local LGBTQ group(s) or organization(s); attend their events; ask how you can help.
- Build partnerships with nearby congregations in other denominations who are also committed to LGBTQ welcome.
- Provide building space to LGBTQ community groups
- Institute regular events that serve LGBTQ populations; for example, a Pride Prom for LGBTQ and allied youth, a pancake breakfasts for LGBTQ elders, a pen-pal program for incarcerated queer and trans people? Think big!
- [Take action](#) on a local, provincial, or national issue of LGBTQ concern. Work in partnership with justice groups.

## STEP 4

### Monitor and Celebrate Your Progress

As you move through your program, monitor your progress against the goals your Welcoming Congregation committee set and/or by using the [Guidelines and Action Steps](#).

Keep your congregation informed as to what has been accomplished. Many congregations publicize their programming and offer updates on what their congregation has done so far on their website, on a bulletin board, and/or in their newsletter.

## STEP 5

### Evaluation

There are a number of ways to evaluate the program. Start with the goals that you outlined in your implementation plan. You will be measuring your outcomes against what you sought to achieve as outlined in that plan.

Ideally, evaluation is done throughout the process - as part of *Step 4: Monitoring and Celebrating Progress* - and at the end of the program.

Using qualitative, quantitative, formal and informal measures, you can determine:

- how well your process worked
- what steps have and have not been completed and why/why not
- congregational participation
- satisfaction with trainings and events
- level of congregational welcome
- value of certification



## STEP 6

### Take a Congregational Vote

A congregational vote in favor of being recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council as a Welcoming Congregation is a requirement for Welcoming Congregation status. The vote needs to be in compliance with your congregation's by-laws and constitution. Put simply, it is a vote on whether or not to be publicly recognized by the Canadian Unitarian Council as a Welcoming Congregation.

Once you feel that you have made measurable achievements in the areas of education, congregational life, and community outreach regarding LGBTQ issues, and have had your congregational vote, apply for recognition.

See Step 7 below for application details. A copy of the Reporting Form can be found here ([create internal link](#)) and in Appendix 2 of this document.

## STEP 7

### Apply for Recognition

When your congregation has met the above requirements, the Board President of the congregation may send the office of the Canadian Unitarian Council ([executivedirector@cuc.ca](mailto:executivedirector@cuc.ca)) the following information:

- Name of congregation and mailing address
- Name, phone number, and email address of the person submitting the application
- Date and results of congregational vote to apply for recognition from the CUC as a Welcoming Congregation
- A summary of the work done in service of becoming more welcoming to sexual and gender minorities, particularly in the three areas described in the [Action Steps](#): Education, Congregational Life, and Community Outreach. Ideally, this summary will include:
  - A description and summary of your **educational work**
  - Additional programming your congregation has offered
  - A description and summary of your work related to **congregational life**
  - A description and summary of your **community outreach**
  - Specific plans for continuing this work into the future

When submitting an application for recognition as a Welcoming Congregation, it is helpful to address how your congregation met the Action Steps, how you altered the steps to suit your needs, and what additional steps you took in each area—not because these steps are requirements but rather to help the Canadian Unitarian Council best understand your unique context, in order to help support all of our congregations in their welcome and inclusion.

**Send your application to:** Canadian Unitarian Council at [executivedirector@cuc.ca](mailto:executivedirector@cuc.ca)  
Please allow one month for review. NOTE: Digital applications only accepted. Print applications will be returned.

## APPENDIX 1:

### Action Plan

GOAL	TASKS	TIME FRAME	RESOURCES	MOST RESPONSIBLE	PARTNERS
<b>EDUCATION</b>					
Common Read Program	TBD	Oct	Copies of book for Church Library, refreshments for meeting	WC Committee	Church Book Club
Worship service	TBD	Jan	Readings, music	Minister + WC Committee	Worship Committee
Our Whole Lives	TBD	Sept - May	OWL curricula, trained facilitators	Director of Lifespan Learning	Religious Exploration Committee
<b>CONGREGATIONAL LIFE</b>					
Gender neutral washrooms	TBD	Dec	Budget for signage	WC Committee	Property Committee
Adjust By-laws	TBD	June	CUC WC resources	Board Liaison + WC Committee	Board
Include LGBTQ concerns in all communications	TBD	Sept - June	newsletter, website, social media channels	WC Committee	Communications Committee
<b>COMMUNITY OUTREACH</b>					



Provide building space to PFLAG	TBD	Sept - May	Meeting room, tables, chairs, co-promotion	WC Committee Liaison to PFLAG	PFLAG
Participate in Pride	TBD	June	Congregational participation	Youth Group + WC Committee	City Pride
Host public LGBTQ film series	TBD	Jan - March	Screening technology, films, meeting space	WC Committee + Film expert	Public Library, Public Art Gallery

## **APPENDIX 2:**

### **Report Template**

#### **WELCOMING CONGREGATION REPORT**

<b>CONGREGATION:</b>	
<b>YEAR OF PROJECT:</b>	
<b>YOUR NAME &amp; EMAIL:</b>	
<b>ROLE IN CONGREGATION:</b>	

**PLEASE DESCRIBE YOUR PROJECT BRIEFLY:**

**WHO WERE THE LEAD PEOPLE INVOLVED IN CARRYING OUT THE PROJECT?**

**EDUCATION ACTIVITIES/EVENTS AND RELATED CHALLENGES:**

**CONGREGATIONAL LIFE ACTIVITIES/EVENTS AND RELATED CHALLENGES:**

**COMMUNITY OUTREACH ACTIVITIES/EVENTS AND RELATED CHALLENGES:**

**HIGHLIGHTS, ACHIEVEMENTS AND LEARNINGS:**

**IMPACT ON YOUR UU COMMUNITY:**

**OTHER COMMENTS:**