

# A Brief Guide on Taizé-style Worship in Unitarian Universalist Congregations

By Rev. Aaron White

## Introduction:

The term “Taizé -style” refers to a particular form of worship practiced by the Taizé Community, an ecumenical Christian group in Taizé, France. This community consists of “over a hundred brothers, Catholics and from various Protestant backgrounds, coming from around thirty nations.”<sup>1</sup> The community was formed in the 1940’s by a man named Brother Roger, and it originally existed to meet the needs of refugees from the Second World War. Over time, the Taizé Community has become internationally known as a place of pilgrimage and peace by people of faith from around the world.

On any given day, hundreds, if not thousands, of young adults gather in Taizé to worship, work, pray, and further develop their spiritual lives. They gather around the central event of life in the Taizé Community: contemplative worship services characterized by brief meditative hymns and periods of silence. These short, repetitive songs are sung in a number of world languages and often come from the Psalms or other scripture. The members of the community say this about their experience of young people worshipping with them: “We brothers are often impressed by the ability of the young people to remain in our church, sometimes for hours on end, in silence or supported by meditative singing. They themselves are sometimes astonished to discover how much they have prayed in Taizé.”<sup>2</sup>

What, then, makes the Taizé worship so appealing to young people around the world? On their website, the brothers of Taizé identify three elements they feel contribute to this effect:

- An Accessible Prayer:

“This concern to make the inner experience of prayer accessible to a large number is the reason why the community developed a way of praying with simple and meditative songs... What touches the young people in Taizé is perhaps the sense that we strive to make the expression of faith as simple as possible, without at the same time watering it down.”<sup>3</sup>

- A Meditative Prayer:

“I have the feeling that, by repeating one or two verses, the song opens for them a direct access to the Word of God and enables them to interiorize, to incorporate the beauty and even the ‘roughness’ of the biblical words. And then, when words already known by heart are rediscovered by reading them, some texts are illuminated with an unexpected light. I sometimes wonder if our way of singing is not a kind of introduction to lectio divina, that way of reading the

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article6525.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article6525.html)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article3148.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article3148.html)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article3148.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article3148.html)

Word attentively that opens a space to let the text reverberate in all its dimensions. The Jews speak of ‘masticating’ the Torah. .. In Taizé, the repetition of the songs echoes this mastication, this respiration of the Word.”<sup>4</sup>

- A Prayer of the Heart:

“Another aspect that often touches me when I listen to young people speaking about the prayer in Taizé is the capacity that the time of silence in the middle of the liturgy has to give them the opportunity to focus on what is within them. They know how to describe what that silence makes possible: ‘to take stock,’ ‘to listen to your heart,’ ‘to think about your problems,’ ‘to empty your mind,’ ‘to take a break,’ ‘to do some soul-searching,’ ‘to drop your masks’... When they are together, they are not afraid of the silence. On the contrary, many say that at first the ten minutes seem long, but afterwards, they fill up by themselves... Through singing and silence, young people discover that they are able to have new hearts, simple hearts in the original meaning of the term, a heart without a fold, an unfolded heart.”<sup>5</sup>

### Taizé Worship in UU Congregations:

Counter to many assumptions about other alternative worship styles, Taizé-style worship does not include contemporary music, vast multi-media technologies, or bands onstage leading hymns. It differs from normative Unitarian Universalist worship also in that it includes no sermon, no announcements, and little to no verbal explanation of worship elements. This style of worship asks participants to stop, pray with song and silence, and listen to the “still, small voice” within.

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations would benefit from incorporating Taizé-style worship into the life of their communities, either as separate worship events or by weaving this style into regular Sunday services. This form of worship is meaningful and spirit-filling for people of all ages, requires minimal financial investment, is simple to execute, and addresses basic spiritual practices that date back thousands of years.

The basic order of service suggested by the Taizé Community is as follows:

Hymn/s of Praise  
Psalm (Possibly with sung response in-between lines)  
Reading  
Hymn  
Silence  
Intercessions or Litany of Praise  
Our Father  
Concluding Prayer  
Hymn/s

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article3148.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article3148.html)

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article3148.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article3148.html)

With the theological diversity inherent within Unitarian Universalist congregations, strictly Christian elements (Psalms, biblical readings, etc.) need not be the sole elements in constructing a UU Taizé-style service. Excellent places to begin looking for the building blocks of a UU Taizé worship service are the hymnal, *Singing the Living Tradition* and its supplement, *Singing the Journey*.

On the following pages, I have included sample orders of service for a Unitarian Universalist Taizé-style worship service, some blank and some with hymn and reading suggestions. I have also included lists of hymns from *Singing the Living Tradition* and *Singing the Journey* that lend themselves to the short, meditative style associated with Taizé worship. Each hymn is sung numerous times, sometimes accompanied by instruments such as guitar, piano, or flute, and sometimes sung a cappella. The particulars of such a service will vary from congregation to congregation. However, it is important that the service be led by a competent and confident leader and that the physical space is arranged to facilitate a meditative environment.

The brothers of Taizé say this about the creation of the worship space:

A place of prayer can be made welcoming with very little: a cross, an open Bible, some candles, icons, and flowers. The lighting should be subdued, not glaring. Put a carpet in the center for those who wish to pray while kneeling or sitting on the ground; chairs or benches should also be available around the edges for those who prefer to sit on them.

It is helpful to welcome people as they enter, giving them the song-sheet and inviting them to come forward.

Leading the prayer is a service to others. It entails preparing the prayer and making sure it goes forward in a way that allows everyone to remain focused on the essential, with no distractions. Once the prayer has begun, there should be no technical announcements or explanations that interrupt the flow.<sup>6</sup>

For more information on the Taizé Community, visit: <http://www.taize.fr/>

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.taize.fr/en\\_article339.html](http://www.taize.fr/en_article339.html)

## **Sample Orders of Service for Unitarian Universalist Taizé-style Worship**

### Sample OOS 1

Gathering Hymn

Welcome and Introduction (Lighting the Chalice)

Hymn/s

Psalm/Prayer/Reading

"Hymn of Light" - (One candle is lit from the chalice and placed in the sand. Invitation to light  
candles of prayer in silence during this hymn)

Silent Prayer/Meditation

Hymn/s

Reading

Hymn/s

Closing Words and Extinguishing the Chalice

### Sample OOS 2

Entrance Hymn/s

Reading From Hymnal - Chalice Lighting

Reading

Hymn/s

Silence

Hymn with Candles

Departing Prayer

Hymn/s

### Sample 1 with Hymn and Reading Suggestions

Come, Come, Whoever You Are #188

Opening Words and Welcome

Rise Up O Flame #362 (Lighting the Chalice)

Reading #421 (Adapted from Psalm 98)

Voice Still and Small # 391 (One candle is lit from the chalice and placed in the sand. An  
invitation is given to light candles of prayer in silence during this hymn)

Silence

Spirit of Life #123

Reading #654 "Impassioned Clay"

Meditation on Breathing # 1009

Closing Words and Extinguishing the Chalice

## Suggested Hymns from UU hymnals for Taizé-style UU Worship Liturgies

\* Denotes hymns used in traditional Taizé worship

From *Singing the Journey*

- # 1002 - Comfort Me
- # 1007 - There's a River Flowin' in My Soul
- # 1009 - Meditation on Breathing
- # 1010 - We Give Thanks
- # 1037 - We Begin Again
- # 1047 - Nada de Turbe\*
- # 1048 - Ubi Caritas\*
- # 1049 - Veini Spirito Creatore\*
- # 1058 - Be Ours a Religion
- # 1069 - Ancient Mother
- # 1072 - Evening Breeze

From *Singing the Living Tradition*

- # 123 Spirit of Life
- # 188 Come, Come, Whoever You Are
- # 362 Rise Up, O Flame
- # 338 Dona Nobis Pacem\*
- # 389 Gathered Here
- # 391 Voice Still and Small
- # 396 I Know This Rose Will Open