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Report of the CUC Task Force on Polyamory

Submitted to the CUC Annual Meeting, May 2020

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“If I was in a loving supportive polyam relationship and my church didn’t approve, I’d leave that church. The fact that my church supports my relationship and my family grows my belief in Unitarian Universalism.”

—a polyamorous Canadian UU



1. Background

Many Canadian Unitarian Universalists are increasingly aware of polyamory as a way of conducting relationships, or are increasingly open about their own polyamorous relationships. In recent years, Canadian UU ministers and lay chaplains have sometimes been asked to officiate at polyamorous unions. Still, public understanding and acceptance of polyamory varies greatly, both among non-polyamorous Canadians in general and among non-polyamorous Canadian UUs.

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we aspire to be radically inclusive, and radical inclusion is more than mere acceptance. If we wish to create truly hospitable, diverse, multigenerational communities, we must not just tolerate but welcome, nurture, and support polyamorous people and their families as integral parts of our spiritual communities. However, polyamory remains a difficult concept for some to understand or accept. Canadian Unitarian Universalism will benefit from a faith-based statement on the topic, and from guidance that will lead to greater welcome and inclusion in our communities.

For these reasons, in 2018 the Board and Executive Director of the Canadian Unitarian Council struck a task force to examine polyamory in the context of Canadian Unitarian Universalism, and to develop position statements and resources that will help the CUC and Canadian congregations proceed on this matter.

The task force's mandate was to

- situate polyamory within a Unitarian Universalist faith context, intersecting the topic with our history, our seven Principles, our six Sources, and our five Aspirations;
- consult with those who have knowledge and experience on the matter in order to research current legislation, practices, and attitudes towards polyamory in Canada;
- support officiants in Canada with resources for education and for rituals;
- support congregations in Canada with resources for education in order to become more welcoming; and
- make recommendations to the Executive Director on how to proceed.

The task force's members are

- Rev. Meghann Robern—Winnipeg
- Rev. Rebecca C. "Beckett" Coppola—Kingston
- Shoshanna Green—Montreal
- Margaret Kohr—Toronto

Polyamorous people are part of our congregations, not just as members and friends but also as our clergy and staff. The report of this task force will cover the importance of welcoming and including polyamorous people in every aspect of congregational life. This includes

- celebrating and supporting love and loving relationships based in mutual covenant;



- celebrating and supporting all children and all people rearing children, whatever their family structure;
- supporting people through grief; and
- genuinely welcoming people into our congregations, with all their truths and their loves.

We, the members of the task force, believe that it is important for us to make clear that none of us identifies as polyamorous or is part of a polyamorous community. We have strived to work as allies, recognizing that not all polyamorous people feel safe in speaking openly about their lives and experiences. Aware of our responsibility to ensure that their voices are heard, in our work we spoke with individual polyamorous UUs known to us and have included many of their thoughts and stories throughout this report, sometimes as direct quotations and sometimes summarized in our own words. We also drew on work already done over decades by the UU polyamorous community. Once a preliminary draft of our report was completed, we shared it with polyamorous UUs and revised in light of their feedback.

We are grateful to all those individuals who helped us in the work, and also to Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness (UUPA; <http://uupa.org>), which shared its invaluable materials with us and allowed us to use them freely in preparing this report. UUPA, a related organization of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), has as its mission to serve the UUA and the community of polyamorous people within and outside the UUA by providing support, promoting education, and encouraging spiritual wholeness regarding polyamory.



2. What Is Polyamory?

What is polyamory? The word combines Latin and Greek roots meaning “many loves.” Polyamory is the philosophy and practice of loving more than one person at a time, romantically and/or sexually, and doing so with honesty and integrity.

The word *polyamory* will bring different images to mind for different people. For some, it may suggest casual sex, promiscuity, or “cheating” on a spouse. Some others may associate it with polygamy, in which one man marries and has authority over several women. But none of these is what people who identify as polyamorous mean by it, or what the Polyamory Task Force means by it in this report.

Polyamory is a general term. There are many ways of being polyamorous, and many forms of polyamorous relationships. Three or more people might be mutually committed to each other and romantically and/or sexually involved with each other, and not seek relationships outside the group; this form is sometimes called *polyfidelity*, and it’s much like the relationship of a monogamous couple except that it involves more people.¹ In an *open relationship*, two or more people may maintain a primary romantic and/or sexual commitment to each other, but each is also free to form relationships with others. Not all polyam people² consider one of their partners or relationships “primary” and others “secondary,” however; some see them all as of equal importance. Polyam people may form a chain or network of intimate relationships: Lee is involved with Pat; and Pat is also in relationships with Chris and with Alex; and Alex, Evelyn, and Kim are mutually committed to one another. And there are other possibilities, too. There are as many ways of being polyamorous as there are polyam people!

For instance, some polyam people we spoke with consider polyamory to be an identity, like gender and sexual orientation. Others think of it as a lifestyle or behavior choice. There is not a consensus about this within the community.

Although the word *polyamory* was probably coined only a few decades ago, polyamorous people have always been present in our society and our congregations. They’ve often had to hide their loves and their relationships, however, because the cultural emphasis on monogamy led to their condemnation.

¹ Strictly speaking, the parallel terms to *polyamory* and *polyamorous* would be *monoamory* and *monoamorous*. For a variety of reasons, including the fact that they are the terms used by the UUPA, we have chosen to use *monogamy* and *monogamous* in this report; but we recognize that usage may be changing. Like polyamory, monogamy may be felt as either an identity or a lifestyle choice.

²The words *polyamory* and *polyamorous* have often been shortened to *poly*. However, people of Polynesian descent have called themselves *poly* since before polyamorous people began doing so, and they have asked the polyamory communities to use another term. As members of a faith tradition that seeks to live into multicultural, antiracist, anti-oppression values, we therefore use the full words or the short form *polyam*. We have modified one quotation in this report to do the same, indicating the change with square brackets.



Polyam people sometimes speak of being “in the closet,” adopting the phrase from gay and lesbian people who have similarly had to hide whom and how they loved.

Over the past decades, beginning with the sexual and social revolutions of the 1960s and 1970s, Canadian (and American) culture has become more open to varieties of sexual preference and practice. It has also, sometimes belatedly, become more aware of the dangers of sexual harassment and exploitation. Too often this awareness has come in the wake of abuses of power, painful and sometimes catastrophic for the people whom they targeted and the communities—including Unitarian Universalist congregations—in which they occurred. Such exploitative relationships were not based in covenants or were violations of covenants, such as those between couples who had promised sexual and romantic exclusivity, and those between ministers and their congregations.

In the wake of such institutional traumas or their own harrowing experiences, some UUs may respond to the concept of polyamory with anger or fear, because they assume that polyamory must automatically involve such exploitation. The Polyamory Task Force acknowledges the wounds that exist, and understands why some may respond this way. But the assumption, while understandable, is incorrect. Polyamory is fundamentally grounded in covenant and in mutual respect among partners.

Polyam UUs confirmed this in their conversations with us. They articulated to us that polyam relationships, done well, require a significant amount of commitment, communication, and respect. Each partner must prioritize the interests of the others. What are held up as the best principles of monogamy are also those of polyamory.

We also determined that a portion of the misunderstandings or misinformation regarding polyamory in our UU communities is generational. The idea of relationship fluidity is more normalized in younger communities. Many UU youth and young adult groups are a mix of queer and straight people who are aware of and exploring alternative relationship structures and are comfortable with them. “Are you open to multiple partners?” is a common and unremarkable dating question these days, and dating apps include questions about their users’ dating and relationship preferences, which helps to normalize polyamory as one option among others.

So while some UUs may react negatively, others of us are comfortable with polyamory and unthreatened by it. Some of us are polyam ourselves. And still others may be curious, wary, or confused. This report cannot heal past wounds, but in offering it the task force hopes to educate non-polyamorous Canadian Unitarian Universalists, to acknowledge and illuminate some experiences of polyamorous ones, and to challenge and inspire us all to be truly radically welcoming and inclusive.

All the forms of polyamory share the essential features of honesty and integrity. As Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness puts it, “Polyamory is a conscious, consensual, and deliberate



decision for everyone involved.”³ Moreover, polyamorous relationships rely on clear communication, even more than monogamous relationships do. Monogamous couples sometimes get involved with each other, even marry, without seriously considering and discussing in detail what their mutual responsibilities and expectations will be; polyam people almost never enter into relationships without having those conversations, because there are fewer existing social models and rules that can be taken for granted, and there are more people whose needs and feelings need to be considered.

Polyamory’s emphasis on honesty, integrity, and openness is why it’s not the same as cheating or infidelity. Lying to and deceiving a partner is the antithesis of ethical polyamory, just as it’s the antithesis of ethical monogamy. And polyamory’s emphasis on free choice is why it’s different from authoritarian or patriarchal polygamy; in a polyam relationship, one partner doesn’t claim authority over the others.

Polyamorous people may date, may choose to have or not have casual sex, may choose to remain single or to enter into long-term committed relationships. They may have children, or they may not. Polyam people may be gay, straight, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, or something else; they may be cis, trans, nonbinary, genderqueer, or something else. And of course polyam people may be tall or short, kind or harsh, religious or secular, kinky or vanilla, of any class and any racial or ethnic group.

³ Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness, “Polyamory and Christians,” <http://www.uupa.org/Literature/Christians.pdf>, June 2013, 1.



3. Polyamory and Social Attitudes

“Four responses followed my coming out as polyamorous:

- *“this is wrong”;*
- *“don’t ask, don’t tell”;*
- *“great! you’ll be a leader in our social justice work”;*
- *and the final response was folks were pretty relaxed and genuinely curious but otherwise didn’t need to talk about it more.”*

A survey of polyamorous people conducted in 2016 by the Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family⁴ asked 480 respondents how they thought others saw them. Most felt that Canadians did not view their relationships as a legitimate form of family. More than three quarters said that non-polyam people still mistakenly treated polyamory as a sexual fetish or kink, and only a sixth agreed that “people see polyamorous relationships as a legitimate form of family.” Still, public awareness of polyamory is growing, and cultural hostility is lessening. In June 2018, the Newfoundland and Labrador Supreme Court legally recognized three adults in a polyamorous relationship as equal parents of their child.⁵ And at its 2014 General Assembly, the Unitarian Universalist Association amended its bylaw on nondiscrimination (Rule G-2.3) to include “family and relationship structures,” a phrase intended to welcome polyam people.

Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness says, “We are here. We live among you, and have, some of us, for many years. And you have not known us. We are among your close friends and valued parishioners, but there are essential things about who we are that you probably have never known. Unless, of course, you are one of us, yourself.”⁶ Polyamorous Canadian Unitarian Universalists shared with task force members some of their thoughts and feelings about being polyam in their congregations.

One polyam Canadian UU reflected, “At a UU men’s retreat it was interesting to meet others who are in polyam or open relationships, and there was a genuine curiosity that felt very healthy. Questions seeking understanding, rather than information, left me with a very different feeling. There was a presumption of being in relationship, belonging, and the energy was about deepening relationship.”

⁴ Canadian Research Institute for Law and the Family, *Perceptions of Polyamory in Canada*, report prepared by John-Paul E. Boyd, http://www.crilf.ca/Documents/Perceptions_of_Polyamory_-_Dec_2017.pdf, December 2017. Six survey respondents identified their religion as Unitarian Universalist.

⁵ “3 Adults in Polyamorous Relationship Declared Legal Parents by N. L. Court,” CBC News, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/polyamorous-relationship-three-parents-1.4706560>, June 14, 2018.

⁶ Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness, “Are We Ready for This? Unitarian Universalists and Responsible Multi-Partnering: New Options for Love, Family, Community,” pamphlet written by Harlan White, <http://uupa.org/Literature/AreWeReady.pdf>, July 2012.



Another said that it was not difficult for her and her partners to reveal the polyam nature of their relationship because she has “church cred,” meaning she is known and respected in leadership and has a long history of being active in all aspects of her congregation’s life. It was not a stretch to come out, in the way it might be for someone less woven into the congregation. She felt safe in her congregation, and wanted to be able to bring her whole life to her congregational community. Now all members of her polyam family system attend church from time to time, and they participate together in social and fundraising events. As one said, “It is nice to be able to hold hands and not have judgment. It’s nice to be together and to not have to worry.”

This person, like several others we spoke with, noted that such openness will matter a great deal when (hopefully a long time from now!) any member of the polyam family system dies. The others will be able to openly acknowledge the true nature of the relationship, and the true depth of their grief.

Many people, especially young people, have talked to this woman about their own situations, and they appreciate that she spoke out. She feels that her openness has enriched her sense of human community, in that it may help others feel they are not alone while normalizing the great variety of identities that can be present in any single UU community.



4. Polyamory and Unitarian Universalist Theology

“I feel that UU values would embrace the idea that more love and creating community and networks of support is a good match. It doesn’t feel incongruous with anything else in my identity.”

“I’m very frank that, like in a community not held together by creed, communication is at the centre of my relationship. Staying in covenant with my spouses takes work. There has been a lot of therapy and tears to get here, and I don’t believe any of us think that we won’t go back to therapy for a tune-up at some point. I can draw on that experience and the tools learned to better communicate within a congregation—holding space for everyone to feel heard and appreciated, but not holding so much space that we are never able to move forward.”

As a Unitarian Universalist working group, this task force took as its starting place the concept of *covenant*. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith; we are held together not by creed or doctrine but by covenants, entered into freely and thoughtfully. As a guide for our understanding of covenant as we worked together, we offer a definition from UU minister Reverend Erika Hewitt:

[Unitarian Universalism] is grounded in relationship arising from covenant—the promises a community makes about how they will be with one another. It’s not enough to want to live a life of greater integrity; we need help to be the people that we strive to be.⁷

Perhaps the most fundamental covenant among North American UUs is the one we make, as member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council and the Unitarian Universalist Association, to affirm and promote our seven Principles. Since this task force was struck by the Canadian Unitarian Council, we also sought to align our work with the CUC’s five Aspirations.

Covenant is also central to polyamory. And the freedoms and commitments of polyamory are not in conflict with those of Unitarian Universalism; quite the contrary. The Polyamory Task Force believes that Canadian Unitarian Universalists are called, by our Principles and Aspirations, to welcome and affirm polyam people, polyam relationships, and polyam family structures. We elucidate this by examining each Principle and Aspiration in turn.

⁷ Adapted with permission from Erika Hewitt, *The Shared Pulpit: A Sermon Seminar for Lay People* (Boston: Skinner House, 2014).



The Seven Principles

We, the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, covenant to affirm and promote

The inherent worth and dignity of every person

Part of affirming and promoting the inherent worth and dignity of every person is recognizing that there are a multitude of ways of loving other people, and that the bonds between humans are as diverse as our belief systems, philosophies, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic classes, and other identities. As members of a free faith, we are called to help each person fulfill their potential, and that includes helping them develop covenants of partnership in creative and flexible ways that are right for them and their partner(s).

Affirming the worth and dignity of a romantic or sexual partner includes treating them with honesty and integrity, and recognizing the centrality of free consent. If partners honestly and freely consent together on the form of their relationship, they are acting in accordance with the First Principle, regardless of whether they choose monogamy or polyamory.

Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations

Not every relationship, polyamorous or monogamous, lives up to the standards of our Principles. But every relationship has the potential to bring joy, spiritual growth, and mutual support in daily living.

Justice for polyamory means separating it from the misuses and misunderstandings associated with it in our tradition's history. Equity means recognizing that all relationships are valid as long as they are rooted in a freely chosen covenant that acknowledges any power dynamics involved. And compassion calls us to listen and learn from each other.

Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations

Acceptance of one another begins with education, awareness, and familiarity. Accepting polyamorous people and their families on the implicit or explicit condition that they keep silent about their polyamory is no true acceptance.

Those of us who are polyam need to be able to bring our entire beings, including our relationships, into our religious homes, in order to pursue spiritual growth. Those of us who are not polyam are called to listen to and learn from the people who have, over many years, worked out a deep understanding of covenant and relationship in the context of Unitarian Universalism.

A free and responsible search for truth and meaning

Freedom is the ability to seek inspiration and guidance in all of creation.

We live in a largely secular society, in which religion is sometimes categorically condemned as harmful. As members of a free religious faith, we are living proof that this broad condemnation is untrue. A categorical condemnation of polyamory is similarly untrue. It would be irresponsible to



conflate ethical polyamory with unethical and harmful misuses of it, and to resist change, learning, and growth on the basis of that conflation.

Healthy relationships require thoughtful, informed consideration. Nontraditional relationships have few role models and little societal support, and therefore require even more careful consideration. The Fourth Principle encourages us to wrestle with difficult relationship questions, and to examine carefully which relationship style best suits our own needs and those of our partner(s).

The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large

We affirm the right of conscience for UUs to choose the form(s) of our intimate relationships, and to have those relationships acknowledged and honoured in our faith communities.

Affirming the democratic process includes acknowledging its limitations. In democratically determining what the larger community will say and do, we must always bear in mind the voices of the marginalized and oppressed. Polyamorous people and the polyam community are marginalized and often maligned, both within our congregations and in society at large, and we should work to change this, not perpetuate it.

The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all

In the last few decades, the polyam community has done vital work around relationship building, trust, and the concept of covenant. The tools and perspectives that polyam people, both UU and not, have developed can be valuable in our congregational covenants and our engagements with the larger world. Polyam people have made themselves experts in these areas out of necessity, and we should be embracing them and striving to learn from them. From a UU perspective, it would be spiritual and religious malpractice to turn away from this source of knowledge about how to be in community with one another.

Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part

Whether others are aware of it or not, polyamorous people are part of our congregations, our communities, our society, and often our families. Polyamorous relationships are already a part of the web, and respecting the web means respecting those relationships when they are created and nourished in alignment with our seven Principles. This task force has found that people in healthy polyam relationships often have a deep understanding of how interdependent the web truly is, and how much care and attention is required to keep to the covenants that allow us to thrive within it.

“We put our relationship to property and to possessions onto everything, and it interferes with our ability to be a part of the interdependent web. The capacity to live in change has always been with me. The salvation in Universalism—we are all worthy and we are all saved—is a part of why this piece of my identity is something that I try to be public about.”



The Five Aspirations

As Canadian Unitarian Universalists, we aspire to be

Deeply Connected: We strive to foster healthy relationships amongst and within UU communities, with the broader world, and with all life.

We want to create communities to which people can bring their whole, joyful selves—communities in which they do not have to hide crucial parts of themselves and their loving. We want the people who come to our congregations to feel that they can live their authentic lives there, supported by the congregation's other members.

There are already polyamorous people in our congregations and communities, and we must create spaces that welcome them and enable all of us to deeply connect with one another. Fostering healthy relationships of all kinds means working to make all our members feel safe sharing about their relationships, covenants, and home lives.

Radically Inclusive: We strive to create hospitable, diverse, multigenerational communities.

Our world includes many ways of being in ethical and consensual relationships; polyamory is one. Excluding it from this aspiration would be hypocritical, making us less diverse and hospitable—and less multigenerational, since polyam people may be of any age or generation, and their families may be multigenerational.

Actively Engaged: We strive to work joyfully for a just and compassionate society, experimenting with new forms of community.

Polyamory offers expanded forms of relationship and family; affirming polyamory helps us provide support to our diversity of family systems. Polyam people, including polyam UUs, have wisdom to offer about new forms of community.

Theologically Alive: We seek to be ever-evolving in our understanding, open to new knowledge.

The celebration of honest and generous love has long been a cornerstone of Unitarian Universalist identity and religious practice, and over the years we have expanded access to this aspect of religious life. Many of the earliest same-sex weddings in Canada, including long before equal marriage was legally established, were performed by Unitarian Universalist ministers, and as a national faith community we began advocating for same-sex marriage in the 1970s. Similarly, as we have struggled with racism in our faith communities and our society, we have learned to better welcome, affirm, and support nonwhite and multiracial couples and families. It would have been profoundly naive to have assumed in 1950 that we knew everything we needed to about intimate relationships and how they should be affirmed, and it would be no less naive now.



Spiritually Grounded: We seek transformation through personal spiritual experiences and shared ritual.

No one can fully belong to a spiritual community if they are forbidden to participate in the spiritual practices and rituals that bind the community together. In Unitarian Universalism, the celebration of covenantal marriage is one of these. At the time of this report’s writing, federal law criminalizes multipartner weddings and ceremonies of union; for more on this subject, please see section 6 of this report, “Polyamory and the Law.” However, the actions and choices of Canadian UU ministers and lay chaplains in this matter are not constrained by the CUC; nor can any officiant be forced by their congregation to conduct an illegal ceremony. If asked to perform such a ceremony, a Canadian UU minister or lay chaplain must consult with congregational governance, spiritual guidance, and their own conscience, in light of our Principles, Sources, and Aspirations.

And there are many spiritual experiences and rituals other than weddings. We are transformed by the rituals we enact and the covenants we enter into when we dedicate children, and a child may be welcomed by more than two parents. We are transformed by shared grief and rituals of mourning, and a person who has died may be grieved by more than one partner. Our Fifth Aspiration calls us to create rituals and spiritual exercises that welcome and affirm all those in our communities, whether unpartnered, singly partnered, or multiply partnered.



5. True Welcome and Radical Inclusion

“The biggest thing is the invisibility of polyamorous family systems within UU communities. The experience of multi-parent households and more is lost, to our detriment.”

“I was a UU before I was polyam. When I entered into a polyam relationship, I was happy to know that ‘every family’ was welcomed, and I assumed that would include my new partners too. It took me quite a while to mention it, though, and I remember being quite nervous when it came up in a young adult chalice circle. But everyone made it a total non-issue.”

Why be welcoming? In section 4 above, we touched briefly on our Canadian UU aspiration to be radically inclusive: We strive to create hospitable, diverse, multigenerational communities. While all of our five Aspirations (and our seven Principles) are fundamental to how we have approached our research and our findings, the aspiration to be radically inclusive is particularly important when it comes to welcoming and equality for polyam people in our communities.

We have a moral and ethical obligation to provide, joyfully and without hesitation, the same acceptance to those of us who are polyam as to all marginalised people. Otherwise, we risk being hypocritical at every level.

In our work, we sought to listen to the direct experience of polyamorous UUs and to draw upon the work they have already done within and for our congregations across North America. Here are some important comments from Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness to UU faith communities:

“Increasingly, new visitors who are openly polyamorous will arrive at . . . churches asking if they and their children are welcome. Also increasingly, . . . churches will discover polyamorous people already within their memberships, closeted, wondering how safe they are in their own faith community.

“Polyamorous people sing next to you in Sunday services and in choir lofts. We serve on church committees and teach religious education. We attend denominational assemblies where many of us serve in a variety of roles in the service of our faith. Our faith is vital to us.

“Polyamorous people have families. We raise children, cherish pets, and keep in touch with extended family. We have jobs, pay bills, carry out the trash. Our family structure may be a little different than most people expect, but otherwise, we are very similar to everybody else.”

“Discrimination by the larger community can burden children of poly[am] families.”



“Ministers and churches can respond to individuals and families as people in need of a faith community, welcoming them without regard to the shape of their relationships and families.”⁸

When monogamous people ask polyamorous people to hide or remain silent about important and intimate relationships—even while the relationships of monogamous people are warmly celebrated, and their breakups sympathized with—they deny polyam people acceptance, community, and support, and they deny themselves a full connection with their fellow congregants.

We asked Canadian polyam UUs, “What do you hope for in a welcoming space?” Here are some of their answers:

“Language, and teaching people to come out of a heteronormative, monogamous assumption. For people to ask for pronouns, to ask if you have a partner or partners (not ‘girlfriend’ or ‘boyfriend’). We could all offer each other a space to just be normal and stop assuming about each other.”

“An acknowledgment that not all relationships follow the model we have been taught to expect. That there is an openness and curiosity that is expressed respectfully. There is incredible possibility in our relationships, that are as meaningful and rich and rewarding as a monogamous relationship.”

“After folks find out that I identify as ethically non-monogamous, I’ve had a lot of people come out to me privately and express that they don’t think their congregations could handle it. They haven’t told their congregations that a highlight of their year is traveling with a partner other than the partner the congregation knows, or that they were heartbroken that a relationship was ending and they had no claim to a relationship with the kids. Too often polyam and ethically non-monogamous folks in our congregations (and in the wider community) keep significant pieces of their lives hidden away in closets, and so never truly feel welcome among us.”

“It’s hard to keep in mind every facet of our intersectional community all the time. We’re going to slip and say things that can be exclusionary sometimes. I think the most important thing is that people be open to learning and reframing things as needed.”

“It would be cool if the websites for churches that rent their spaces would specifically mention that they are open to hosting ceremonies and rituals and milestones for polyamorous families. That would for sure give me the warm fuzzies of acceptance.”

“With part of our opening welcoming including the phrase ‘we welcome . . . every family,’ I hope people understand that means all families. I hope people in our community don’t see E as an

⁸ Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness, “Polyamory and Christians,” <http://www.uupa.org/Literature/Christians.pdf>, June 2013



addendum, because he isn't as active in church life as B and I are. I hope we can create space for less 'stereotypically ideal' polyam families and can help normalize it."

Starting Guidelines for Congregational Welcome and Inclusion of Polyam People and Their Families:

- Acknowledge diversity of relationship forms and family structures in all aspects of congregational life as a matter of course, just as we acknowledge multiple racial identities, genders, ages, and class and economic positions.
- Ensure that you do so in your primary worship service, as that is usually the biggest whole-church event that reaches the greatest number of people on the most regular basis. It is where we affirm our values for the community at large and not just subgroups with particular interests. Also, it is important for everyone to understand that the ministers and worship leaders affirm polyam members and friends.
- Choose and/or design RE programs and procedures, including Times for All Ages and multigenerational services, with awareness that children will come from a variety of family structures, including polyam ones.
- Include polyamory in sensitivity and awareness training and guidance offered for staff members, lay leaders (such as the board), and volunteers serving RE, small groups, and other programs and events.
- Acknowledge and honour, as requested and appropriate, relevant intimate connections in such moments as Joys and Sorrows, pastoral lists, and congregational child dedications and funerals. **On weddings, see section 6 below.**
- Enable respondents to answer as fully as they wish when you are collecting information on congregants' family structures or relationship statuses.
- Remember that the choice to be openly polyam belongs to the individual; do not out someone or pressure them to come out.



6. Polyamory and the Law

Since 1892, it has been an offence under the Criminal Code of Canada (s. 293) “to practise or enter into any form of polygamy or any kind of conjugal union with more than one person at the same time, whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage.” It is also an offence under this section to participate in or perform such a ceremony, even if the parties recognise that it is not a legally binding ceremony.

The enactment in 1984 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which establishes, among other things, freedom of religion and conscience as fundamental protected rights, cast doubt on the validity of this section of the Criminal Code and chilled any potential prosecutions for polygamy. But in 2011 the constitutionality of this section was confirmed in a constitutional reference case, in which the British Columbia Supreme Court (BCSC) ruled that, because of polygamy’s inherent harms, the law is a justifiable limit on both religious freedom and freedom of association.⁹ As part of its determination, the Court went on to make a clear distinction between polygamy and polyamory on the basis that the former involves participating in a ceremony that purports to sanction (that is, to “approve” or “encourage” or “expressly permit”¹⁰) a marriage or conjugal union. The judge wrote,

I conclude that properly interpreted, s. 293(1)(a) prohibits practicing or entering into a “marriage” with more than one person at the same time, whether sanctioned by civil, religious or other means, and whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage.

The offence is not directed at multi-party, unmarried relationships or common law cohabitation, but is directed at both polygyny and polyandry. It is also directed at multi-party same sex marriages.¹¹

The BCSC decision establishes that there is nothing illegal about being in a polyamorous relationship so long as no ceremony, no “sanctioning event,” is held. However, the moment that multiple people choose to hold a ceremony to honour, celebrate, ritualize, or bless the love they share, they run the risk of being charged with a criminal offence. The Court made this clear, despite what it called “the alleged absurdity of such a distinction—the possibility of avoiding prosecution by the simple expedient of not undergoing a sanctioning event.”¹²

⁹ *Reference re: Section 293 of the Criminal Code of Canada*, 2011 BCSC 1588, <https://www.bccourts.ca/jdb-txt/SC/11/15/2011BCSC1588.htm>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 1034.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, paragraphs 1036–37.

¹² *Ibid.*, paragraph 1039.



Many polyam people in Canada were glad to see this clear statement that polyamorous relationships are legal. But many were also disappointed that the Court did not go further and decriminalise sanctifying those relationships.

Before the BCSC reference case, the section in the Criminal Code might have been open to broader interpretation. A polyamorous ceremony might have been performed with minimal legal risk to participants and officiant. However, the decision in that case changed this.

Moreover, the Criminal Code uses vague terms and broad language in describing what is meant by “a form of marriage” and what kind of ceremony might constitute a “sanctioning event.” It will probably take another court case (or several) to clarify just what kind of ceremony would be considered a criminal offence. Until then, it is best to assume that any ceremony in which more than two people declare their commitment to each other could fall within the scope of the law.

At the time of this report's writing, the only modern case in which charges have been brought under this section of the criminal code is *R. v. Blackmore*, 2017 BCSC 1288, in which two men of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) community of Bountiful BC were convicted of having married multiple wives and were sentenced to three and six months of house arrest. No charges have been brought in any other case, in the FLDS community or elsewhere, even though other polygamous marriages are well known to exist.

It is unlikely that consenting polyamorous adults who choose to defy the polygamy law and have a commitment ceremony will be charged with a criminal offence. But it is possible. Some writers have suggested tactics or workarounds that may reduce the risk that a ceremony will be considered a “sanctioning event” by a court of law:

- Never call the ceremony a “wedding,” “marriage,” or “union” in any context, including invitations.
- Do not include any traditional elements of marriage ceremonies, such as vows. Instead, recognise already-existing bonds, such as those of loyalty, trust, and friendship.
- Do not involve any kind of officiant.
- Do not proclaim the participants “united” or “joined.”¹³

Since the details and social and cultural context of every polyamorous relationship are different, and since the legal situation remains unclear, there is no way to definitively determine the level of risk in any particular instance. It is certainly very high if any party to the ceremony is already legally married to, or in a civil union with, someone else. Performing a ceremony uniting such a person with another clearly meets the definition of polygamy in the Criminal Code.

¹³ See, for instance, Jenny Yuen, *Polyamorous: Living and Loving More* (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2018), p. 18.



On the other hand, if two members of a polyamorous group want to marry or otherwise unite with each other and neither is already in a legal marriage or civil union with anyone else, a ceremony would not break the law if it recognised only the union of that couple. In this situation, however, omitting and rendering invisible the other partner(s) might be painful for all of them. And of course, neither member of the couple could legally go on to have such a ceremony with anyone else without formally dissolving the first relationship.

Conclusion

At the present time, entering into “any kind of conjugal union with more than one person at the same time, whether or not it is by law recognized as a binding form of marriage,” is a criminal offence under s. 293 of the Criminal Code. Performing or participating in a ceremony that sanctions such a union is also an offence. It may make participants liable to criminal prosecution, and may endanger the officiant’s license to perform weddings.

The CUC cannot and does not endorse or sanction the participation by Canadian Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay chaplains in actions that are against the law, and the Polyamory Task Force does not recommend that it do so. Additionally, no officiant can be forced by their congregation to do something illegal; in their contracts and their codes of ethics, both ministers and lay chaplains retain the right of refusal.

However, our system of congregational polity means that each congregation is self-governing, and every minister enjoys freedom of the pulpit. The CUC does not set policy for its member congregations, their boards of management, or their lay chaplaincy committees. Each has the freedom and the responsibility to act in keeping with its values and principles, consider the level of risk it and its individual members are willing to tolerate, obtain appropriate expert advice, and choose its own way. The task force expects that Unitarian Universalist wedding officiants requested to perform polyamorous weddings or ceremonies of union will consult their congregational governance, legal experts, their spiritual guides and mentors, and their own hearts.



7. Recommendations to the CUC

We, the members of the Polyamory Task Force, are glad and grateful to have undertaken this work. In concluding our report, we offer, as requested, our recommendations to the Canadian Unitarian Council. Both our work and our recommendations are founded on the understanding that as Unitarian Universalists we are called to be welcoming and inclusive in our language, our actions, and the workings of our faith communities, and to honour the sacredness of human love and connection.

i. We believe that affirming the validity of polyamory and welcoming polyamorous people is both a justice issue and a religious duty, implicit in our Second Aspiration.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC formally and publicly state this.

ii. At the time of writing, it is an offense under the Criminal Code of Canada to perform or take part in a multipartner wedding or other ceremony of union.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC not endorse or sanction the participation by Canadian Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay chaplains in such ceremonies.

iii. The CUC is the voice of Canadian Unitarian Universalism and has a proud history of action on justice issues.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC prepare itself to speak out on this issue, including in future legal cases if they arise, and to support Canadian Unitarian Universalists who may find themselves attacked for being polyamorous or for affirming the validity of polyamory.

iv. The CUC is an important support to Canadian Unitarian Universalist congregations in both their institutional workings and their spiritual discernment.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC offer education and training to its staff, to enhance their ability to in turn support congregations working to improve their understanding of polyamory and their affirmation of polyamorous people.

v. We recognize that many people are unfamiliar with the concept of ethical polyamory, and that some may need education and support as they expand their understanding of relationship and family structures.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC establish a committee or working group to discover and develop informational and educational material on polyamory, both introductory and in-depth, suitable for Canadian Unitarian Universalists, including ministers, other religious professionals, professional staff, lay leaders, and congregations.



vi. It is particularly important for ministers, religious education staff, and other religious professionals to affirm and nurture polyamorous people and their families in their faith communities, and for congregants to feel that they are supported by their faith leaders in times of both sorrow and joy.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC work with UUMOC, CUURE, and other relevant professional organizations to encourage education and dialogue.

vii. It is not enough to merely state that we are welcoming and inclusive, nor is it enough to offer occasional services, publications, workshops, or events focusing on polyamory. Such special, separate attention may be necessary, but on its own it can be othering rather than inclusive.

Therefore, we recommend that these educational efforts offer religious professionals, staff, lay leaders, and congregations specific ways to incorporate and normalize polyamory in everyday congregational life.

viii. Unitarian Universalist congregations have long been aware of the importance of highlighting the welcome and richness they offer to particular populations, often through pamphlets that target such groups as LGBTQIA people, elders, multifaith families, and others.

Therefore, as Canadian Unitarian Universalist congregations grow in their understanding and affirmation of polyamory, we recommend that the CUC develop or obtain similar material, suitable for visitors to our congregations, that highlights the welcome Canadian Unitarian Universalist congregations can offer to polyamorous people and their families.

ix. A great deal of invaluable educational material has already been created by polyamorous people and communities, and Unitarian Universalists for Polyamory Awareness has placed polyamory in a specifically Unitarian Universalist context.

Therefore, we recommend that the CUC take advantage of the work that has already been done by such groups, and liaise where appropriate with them for mutual support and action on polyamory affirmation.
