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UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 1 - Wildflowers September 2024

This groundbreaking 10-episode docu-series takes an inspiring and honest look at how Unitarian Universalism (UU) is evolving across Canada in 2024. This isn't just a celebration—it's an invitation to all of us to reflect on what it means to live our UU values in the diverse communities we call home, from bustling cities to small towns, and for diverse people to shape diverse expressions of UUism beyond congregations and, if so, what this means for our national identity.

In each episode, Erin Horvath and Amber Bellemare, the Canadian Unitarian Council's Justice and Equity team, interview Unitarian Universalists who have formed groups outside of congregations and are experiencing an alternative kind of UU community. The individuals share their perspectives and reflections on their experiences, and speak only for themselves. We thank them for their generosity.

Transcript for Episode 1: Wildflowers

Our guests for Episode 1 include:

- Peter Scales, First Unitarian Church of Victoria
- Liz James from Mirth and Dignity
- Reverend Wendy Luella Perkins, founder of Soulful Singing

Liz James

So way back when we're having these conversations in seminary, we were trying to come up with these perfect ideas of the initiatives that we should do into the future. And I found myself thinking, because I have experience working as a volunteer with the CUC, going into congregations, doing workshops from years ago: No matter what we come up with, we don't get to go into congregations and say, "Now you should do this."



	<p>We thought about it in seminary. We came up with this great plan.” You can't go into a congregation, tell them what colour to paint the wall behind the pulpit, let alone how they should do their thing. I just kept thinking, "this is destined to fail". Even if we came up with the perfect solution, which I didn't think we would.</p>
	<p>But even if we did, and I remember thinking, “You're thinking about this like we're a factory, we have to come up with the right solution and roll it out”, which is how we're predisposed to thinking, that's sort of steeped in our culture. And it's not a factory, it's an ecosystem. Congregations are a web of things that are alive, and they're doing all kinds of different things.</p>
	<p>And that's how I came to the idea: What makes an ecosystem resilient in the face of change? It's that there's many different things going on.</p>
Music	
Amber Bellemare	<p>Welcome, welcome, welcome to UU Expressions: Love in Real Life! A ten-episode docuseries that discovers, celebrates, and challenges how Unitarian Universalism is practiced across Canada in 2024. This is a first for the Canadian Unitarian Council. It is a research project of epic proportions, and we are privileged, honoured and thrilled to have been able to do this research and to prepare the findings in a way that we hope will engage Unitarian Universalists across Canada. You just heard the voice of Liz James, founder of UU Hysterical Society and Mirth and Dignity. I am Amber Bellemare.</p>
Erin Horvath	<p>And I am Erin Horvath.</p>
Amber	<p>And we are the CUC's Justice and Equity Team. Together we've brought to you the Eighth Principle Forums, Inclusivity Forums, Inclusivity Action Groups, Elders circles, Uncolonizing focus groups and more.</p>
Amber	<p>And one of the themes we did see coming up often is sustainability. So in a lot of congregational expressions of UUism, membership is declining as folks get older, right? So they're asking themselves, well, how can we be self-sustaining?</p>
Erin	<p>Right. And one of the things that you and I have been talking about over the past four years or so has been inclusivity. And through the various things that we've done, the various forums and conversations, the one thing that has emerged was the realization that inclusivity isn't about getting diverse people to fit into a set expression of UUism. That isn't what people on the outskirts of UUism are saying that they want.</p>



Amber	Right. They want to be able to shape their own unique expressions of UUism. So we wondered then, is there a sustainable way for a diversity of people to shape diverse expressions of UUism? And if so, what does this mean for our national identity?
Erin	With these episodes, we're presenting the results of these interviews to show that there is already a diversity of expressions, and to explore what else could be created if UU values are released into the world and encouraged to become many different expressions. We're also exploring the realities of where we are as a faith community and the roadblocks we face moving forward.
Amber	So expect us to share the ideas and then you, the audience, can by engaging with the stories of your peers, with the supporting materials, with the questions for future dialogue, and our recommendations, you the audience can decide where you fit in and where you want to take it.
Erin	We also want to make sure that you know, as an audience member, that you might hear some truths that sting a little, but you'll also hear stories and conversations that will enliven, inspire, and hopefully excite. Our hope is that you stay with us from beginning to end as the story unfolds and we uncover more complexity, nuance and begin to imagine ways to move forward together.
Amber	We did feel it was worthwhile to share a bit of our backgrounds before we get started. So Erin, do you want to go first?
Erin	Certainly. So in addition to my work with the CUC, I bring a few other relevant skill sets to this project. For about 30 years or so, I've worked with groups, businesses, communities, and organizations to help them navigate the process of change, which includes reimagining themselves, and building forward. At times that has been done through challenging and changing systems, at other times through creating something new like a social enterprise or organization, and other times it's through collaborative art & storytelling. The other skill set that I bring is research. So I'm a doctoral level researcher - and I do what's called mixed methods research and that combines statistics and stories in such a way that we get to learn more in depth what's happening in any given situation.



Amber	<p>And wow are we ever lucky to have you on our staff, Erin. So I am a storyteller in many ways and my body of work often involves using vulnerability as a way to help reframe their assumptions and shift their perspectives. I am a multi-disciplinary visual artist: I do videography, photography, immersive and digital art, I'm a muralist, a painter, a documentary filmmaker, just to name a few of those things. But I'm also a community builder: I founded a non profit women's art collective here in Montreal, I own and operate a co-working style art studio, and I have extensive experience developing online engagement. I've been creating a lot of diverse media for the CUC for quite some time and since its inception in 2014, I've served on the Truth Healing and Reconciliation Initiative. I specialized in communications at Concordia University and minored in First Peoples Studies. On top of that, I have been a UU since 2002.</p>
Erin	<p>Wow. Okay, so our combined love of art and story (which is a valid way of sharing research findings by the way) prompted us to produce this series...because let's face it - reading research reports is not most people's idea of a good time! I might be one of the exceptions. The podcast approach allows listeners to hear the voices of our participants, which we hope builds a sense of understanding, community, and cohesion that words on paper just would not be able to achieve.</p>
Amber	<p>Another thing we felt was important to note is that while I am UU, Erin, you are not.</p>
Erin	<p>Right. And this difference has helped us form a more complete understanding of what we were encountering in this research. We did work together, though, we wrote the questions, and then I performed the interviews. And then we both looked at the findings and pieced together some narratives and themes.</p>
Amber	<p>Right, and then I took the transcripts from the interviews to assemble 10 episodes around themes that I thought were important, and then Erin tied everything together with a script that helps further contextualize our findings. And then we edited the script together to make sure it was just right!</p>



Erin	And this is important to note, because as an outsider, there were times when I didn't see the significance of what people had shared, and you were able to show me why it was completely significant to the overarching theme that we were exploring at that time. And then at other times it would be reversed and I would point out something I felt was significant as an outsider looking in, and you would have missed that because of your familiarity with the UU culture. So having one of us coming in and looking at it from an outside lens and the other an insider's lens tended to create a bit of a balance. Which I think strengthened this research.
Amber	I agree. Just another note: You can find the details of each of the people and projects we interviewed, as well as our research methodology, on the site we created for this docu-series. You can find the link in the episode notes. And also, you might hear some insider language from our guests, and these abbreviations are also in the show notes. So with that let's begin.
MUSIC	
Erin	Since what we really want to emphasize is that UU congregations and the Canadian Unitarian Council are seriously considering sustainability into the future, we thought it would be best to paint a picture of what the broad spectrum of UUism in Canada is like right now, starting with our first guest's perspective and experience of a congregational expression.
MUSIC	
Peter Scales	My name is Peter Scales. I live in Victoria, B.C., and I have been a Unitarian for 30 years.
Erin	Peter is a member at Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Victoria
Peter	What many people are looking for is a community which is non-judgmental, which doesn't compel them or encourage them to think of any gods or outside forces, nonscientific forces. And for many of us, that's a compelling attraction.
Erin	Peter is referring to the humanist expression of UUism, which gained popularity in the early 20th century. Now if I were to talk to other



	<p>congregants, they may share from a different paradigm or paradigms, such as but not limited to: Christian, Catholic, Jewish, Earth-centred, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic, feminist, anarchist, institutionalist, contemplative, and spiritualist. And then there are those who would resist anyone who tries to put a label on them of any kind.</p>
Amber	<p>Right, and as Linda Thomson with the Congregational Life Team put it, it's a Choose Your Own Adventure. The key is to do it in a way that it is open-hearted, open-minded, and committed to the idea and practice of a diverse community.</p>
Erin	<p>Peter went on to describe, in his opinion, how his congregational expression got to this point in history.</p>
Peter	<p>In the 1950s, my understanding is that Unitarianism was a Christian denomination and even into the early 60s, many Unitarians would have likely considered themselves Christian with a non-Trinitarian. So they're not thinking, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, they're thinking of new expressions of their Christianity and they are drifting away from the establishment.</p> <p>In the late 1960s, was a great time for people in North America to drift away from or reject the establishment and establishment views. And there was Unitarianism near the forefront of that. So it became more humanistic in the 70s and 80s. In the early 1980s, when the AIDS epidemic ravaged North America, it was downtown Christian churches and Unitarian congregations that took up the mantle of connecting with gay and lesbian folks who needed religious community.</p>
	<p>So that was a significant shift in the early 1980s. We already had gays and lesbians, many of whom were still in the closet, I'm not sure when the CUC took a formal position on the rights of gays and lesbians, at first for medical care and then for equal marriage. That 1980s HIV AIDS shift, the GLBT shift was huge.</p>
Peter	<p>When I became a Unitarian 30 years ago, the bigger shift coming on was the environment and the recognition that we needed to provide green sanctuary. We needed to use less electricity, use less power, recycle more, change all the lightbulbs in the church as part of a progressive view of how to respond to,</p>
Peter	<p>we weren't calling it climate change yet, but to changes in, I'm not sure if it was the energy shock or what what compelled those changes. In 1995,</p>



	it was still unusual to have a gay or lesbian minister in Unitarianism in Canada, and now it's quite common.
Peter	When Unitarians get really angry about the use of the word church, they tend to be ex-Catholics. That's just my feeling. And what I remind them is we, like all Protestant churches, meet at 10 a.m. on a Sunday.
Peter	Somebody at the front tells us when to stand and when to sit. We sing hymns. We have a keyboard player. As has been happening since Martin Luther started the Reformation. And we have a message, a homily or a lesson exactly as Protestant churches do. We almost have a liturgical diary of what services we're going to do during the year.
Peter	So don't tell me we're not a church.
Erin	I think the unique part of what Peter is saying is that in the story of the congregational expressions, as we call it, are folks who found themselves on the outskirts of other faith communities and created a church community where they could belong.
Erin	And as I listened to him speak, I understood the significance in why the congregational expression is the way it is and why it's so dear to people's hearts.
Erin	It also helped me understand some of the reasons activism became a key part of the congregational expression as those people took a stance for others being ostracized and disrespected, including non-human beings. So thus that leaning toward environmental action. They were being responsive to the world around them.
Amber	The idea of having different expressions of UUism is not something new, that's just showing up, even with this research project that we're doing right now, it's part of our practice to change and reflect and grow depending on the time period. We do pride ourselves on being a responsive faith, and that characteristic has been challenged and protected over the years as the world changes. And the world is changing faster than ever. So the question is, with that in mind, what is responsive right now?
Erin	And that's a good question to ponder as we learn more about Peter's reality:
Peter	We had a lot of fun at Capital Unitarian Universalist Congregation in 2023 because five of us were the youth group and we all turned 60 in 2023 and there's nobody after us.



Peter	We are the youth group. The only thing that makes that easier to take once, once the giggling dies down, is that the Anglican Church in Vancouver Island is acknowledging that there will be no Anglicans in about 15 years on Vancouver Island, no white European Anglicans.
	They are dying so fast and the United Church of Canada in Victoria has been consolidating churches, selling property. One of their great historic United Churches in downtown Victoria shut down last fall. Their tiny elderly congregation has amalgamated with another congregation closer to the university. I'm sure there will be losses along the way. So when we look around and think, ha ha ha, at least we have 60 year olds, that's not really a cheery thing.
Erin	So then this makes me think about that original email that you sent that connected us.
Amber	I remember this email we'd received from Peter when we put the call out for these interviews. He'd asked us to consider the foundational congregational expression as part of our research since it held so much value and there was this fear that the memory of it would be erased if we just focused on the new expressions.
Erin	Right, and there was an appreciation for the work we were doing, but a warning that we'd be missing a significant context if we overlooked the innovators of their time. Here's how I responded:
	I actually cried when I read it because I was so moved by the sentiment, which maybe I was projecting onto it. I don't know. But this beautiful sense of like, here's who we are, here's what matter to us, here's what we created for ourselves when we found ourselves on the outskirts, when others found themselves on the outskirts and we welcomed them in.
	And now we're aging and we're seeing that folks are not necessarily doing it the same way as us. And don't forget us. That's how I read your your email. And I was so touched by that because I was thinking about it as like the foundational because there was expression of UUism that predated the one that you're describing now, right.
	This is certainly a foundational expression in Canada and the U.S. and elsewhere that's now trying to understand, well, what are we now and what are we going to be in 15 years so that we're not completely shutting down? What does this new version of us look like?
Peter	That's lovely. Thank you for telling me that.



Erin	The congregations are losing elders regularly, even weekly at times; not long ago two UU elders died in the same week. In fact, Peter and I had to wrap up our interview so he could attend another celebration of life, where he says he's been learning so much about these UU elders.
Erin	It's important to recognize that what Peter is witnessing is not unique to the congregation he's connected to. In 2013, the CUC's national membership numbers were 4564 people. In May 2023, there were 3603. That's a decrease of 961 people, and a loss of 21.06 percent.
Amber	Ouff these numbers feel drastic. Is it similar to other faith organizations like Peter was talking about?
Erin	Yes it is similar to the overall decline seen in people identifying as Christian or Catholic in the Canadian Census where the numbers dropped from 67.3 percent in 2011 to 63.2 percent in 2019. Some would like to categorize UUism as a non-religion but, in this case anyhow, it is similar enough that we are seeing the same patterns of decline as people grow older and die, and no one replaces them. To broaden the scope even further, in 2019, the National Trust of Canada predicted that we'd lose 9000 places of worship in the next decade, which we are in the midst of now.
Amber	This is a familiar story for so many congregations and fellowships.
Erin	It is, but thankfully it's not the only story.
Amber	That's right! From our interviews we realized there are folks out there sharing UU values with the world in weird and wonderful ways.
Liz	<i>Hi, my name is Liz James. I am the creative director of Mirth and Dignity, which is an organization that has several different arms. The thing that people know us best for is the UU Historical Society, which is a Facebook group.</i>
Amber	The UU Hysterical society is a very popular UU Expression.
Liz	I had this idea that you could doUUism online, which no one had heard of in January of 2020.
	I was in seminary at the time. I was very interested in the idea of doing Unitarian Universalism differently. And so we were having these conversations about "attendance is going down and church is becoming harder and harder". And then we'd have these very academic discussions about it. And I found myself thinking the only way to really understand



	<p>this problem is to get out there and try different things and to learn from social enterprise and to learn from online communities and content creators.</p>
	<p>So rather than just staying in our UU bubble. So I was out there reading and learning all this stuff and trying out different types of community. Just dozens of different, Let's try this and see what happens. Let's try this and see what happens. The Hysterical Society, interestingly, wasn't one of those intentional experiments.</p>
	<p>I mean, that was my mindset at the time. The Hysterical Society came out of a practical joke. I really love laughter and I come from a family that expresses love through practical jokes. And I remember my first, maybe second or third UU service someone did a joke during Joys and Concerns, and I remember thinking, "I will have shared jokes with these people."</p>
	<p>That's when I know I'm at home is when we have shared jokes. So a couple of us bored seminarians were playing a practical joke on the UU Lucy Stone Housing Co-operative in Boston. And I found myself feeling really at home as a part of the joke. When you understand shared humour, it's because you have shared culture.</p>
	<p>And we were poking fun at the parts of UUism that we thought needed, poking fun at. We were lifting things up that we liked. The values were really tied into it. So when it ended, I didn't want it to end. And so I created the Facebook group sort of on a whim just to feed me because I need humor.</p>
	<p>It was absolutely a personal "Liz, this is the space that I need". It was a a break from my formation process. It wasn't a part of it because that process was hard for me as a person with a lot of learning disabilities. An academic environment was more challenging for me and Facebook felt more at home.</p>
	<p>I didn't really put a lot of energy or investment into it, but people like to laugh. And so it grew and it grew and it was at about 20,000 people when someone put a post that, "oh my gosh, I saw a real UU church. I had no idea they were a real religion. I thought they were made up for this humour group". And I had this moment of like we're representing Unitarian Universalism to people. It was neat, but it was also a responsibility that I had not thought through.</p>
Erin	<p>Their approach to UUism might be described as colouring outside the lines at times, and they support others who are doing the same.</p>



Liz	And why did Mirth and Dignity exist then? Because we have a principle in our group of you don't want to have more infrastructure than you need to accomplish the task. No infrastructure just because you already have it and you're keeping it going. And so we had this realization, at that time someone came to us with an idea for a board game ministry, and they wanted to do a role playing game based curriculum.
	And I think a board game ministry is a fantastic, interesting out of the box idea, very in keeping with the kinds of things that we do. And by this point we had preaching resources and we had a podcast, so we had branched out a little bit and people started approaching us with different ideas for outside the box things.
	Maybe they need a fiscal sponsor so they can get a grant, maybe they need coaching, maybe they need advice and there are not a lot of people in UUism that you can go to if you want to do something that is very, very different from our traditional structures. And we realize we have a lot of skill and we have a lot of expertise and history with this.
Erin	Liz went on to explain how the "colouring outside the lines" approach works within their organization:
Liz	Our board is 50 percent people of color who were born in other places and English is not their first language. And that's actually been a really important skill set in that they are much more able to think outside the box in terms of what kinds of structures.
	We think of being inclusive to people from a diversity of cultures as a thing that we do in order to be good people and nice to people from those cultures. But in fact, in our experience, it's been an invaluable asset because when you come from a different culture, you have a whole other suite of ways of solving problems that then the board can tap into that.
	And so that's been really valuable to us.
	When something comes up, I'll send a note to the board and say, I think this is a no brainer. If any member of the board feels we need a meeting, then we have a meeting immediately. If everyone agrees it's a no brainer, then we don't meet and we just go with what I think we should do.
	We've sort of structured it so that each person is doing the thing that is their thing that they naturally feel a lot of ownership of, which allows our organization to function with a very lean structure.



	<p>in terms of the skill set, everyone in our group is a DRE, which is interesting, except for me. Lynn Ungar is also a minister, so I think she identifies primarily as a minister but has DRE training, which you notice because whenever we're like at a retreat or something and I start to say something that's obnoxious or doesn't have quite the same level of training and sophistication, the team always goes, "Well, I'm just curious."</p>
	<p>DREs have a faith formation lens that is a bit outside the box.</p>
	<p>And so over the last year and a half ish, we've become much more of a consulting and facilitating of all different kinds of weird UUism, as we call them, beyond just the Hysterical Society</p>
	<p>We navigate like a Roomba. We bump into a thing, we go a different way, and then we sort of plan as we go. There is no part where we strategize more than about six months ahead, because the nature of our work, you can't see more than six months ahead, but we are very governed by our values.</p>
	<p>And those happen according to interest. Sort of an exciting let's try this. And some of the work and some of them don't. During COVID, we did worship services, we don't anymore because that's too much work.</p>
	<p>I just travel to congregations. Not all of it continues. We try things and then we see how it works and go from there.</p>
	<p>And right now we're looking at hopefully if the grant comes through, partnering with Wendy Luella Perkins, who's doing amazing stuff online with singing through her soulful singing program.</p>
Erin	<p>We'll hear more about Reverend Wendy Luella later. But for now, here's Liz again, talking about how they choose their partners</p>
Liz	<p>Flexibility is really important. And the other part is to look for people who are already experiencing success in something neat they're doing. So every one of the people that we partnered with, they were already doing it sort of as a fledgling thing or a volunteer thing.</p>
	<p>And there was interest and there was momentum and they'd been doing it for a while. So you knew they were the sort of person who could really take the reins for themselves. And so we look for people who are like that and partner with them, and we don't oversee what they're doing. They're already doing great job. We just say, what are the things that are in your way and how can we make us do things as possible in your way so that</p>



	what you're doing can really flourish, which is a very low effort way of helping people.
	The partnership model really allows us to do a lot. Help applying for a grant is usually the biggest thing. Often the infrastructure applying for a grant. Different people have different amounts of experience with that and we've done quite a few of them.
	A huge part of being helpful with that is if they choose to do a grant, Andrea and I do a thing where we sit down for the day and we walk them through the process and we're able to do most of the grant application in one day, just get that done and off. That's a huge helpful thing and that's assuming they've got a sponsor and things like that.
Erin	Liz and her team at Mirth and Dignity also identified an important underlying need that they help to meet:
Liz	The other thing is a sense that what they're doing is important and valuable and possible. So we have all these denominational structures designed to lift up congregations and say, this is a real thing, you can do it, best practices, all that kind of stuff. And we don't have that same emotional support for people who are doing something different.
	And so someone who's excited about your project and see it sees it as valid, to be a colleague and talk to is really valuable to people in early stages.
	We have habits around what we see as more or less legitimate. And we have those for good reasons. My experience was when I went to seminary, there was a lot of time thinking about discernment. What is your call? What is your thing in the world? And we spent a lot of energy lifting this up as this is a legitimate and important and valuable thing.
	And we don't have that same thing for outside the box and lay ministries. And so we're trying to provide some of that same thing that you get in ministerial formation or as a DRE or as a music professional. The emotional lifting up.
	Even more so if you're not a minister, right? So community ministries still have access to that ministry stuff. It tends to be very parish focused, so it doesn't fit. But they at least have colleagues.
	And so many of the things that people do that are unique and different don't involve hiring a full-time credentialed minister because that's quite an expensive salary. So if we're going to do a diversity of different



	creative things, we're going to need to legitimize types of leaders that aren't professional ministers and we don't have collegiality set up.
	I don't just mean community based ministers. I mean community based ministries. So people who are doing all kinds of different things
	We don't tell the stories of those ministries the way that we tell the stories of more traditional ones.
	We don't lift them up in the same way. And every time I hear someone saying, but we need diverse things and we need something that will meet the future. And as things are changing and we need to create those things, I think: But they're all over the place. You're just not recognizing them. It feels like someone is looking at a field of wildflowers and saying, How come nothing will grow here?
	And you're like, Well, nothing that you're thinking about as a flower is growing here, but you're thinking, these are weeds, These are not weeds, these are flowers.
Amber	That's an incredibly powerful image.
Erin	That's what I said. It's amazing how we can be looking at something and missing something so beautiful, right before our very eyes, this field of wildflowers, and not even noticing they're flowers and not weeds. Remember the opening quote at the beginning? Well that was Liz - here's how it ends:
Liz	I was really conscious about we already have enough congregations, we need other things happening. So when I was creating various different things that I made that were different, one of the things that I thought about was how is each of these things connected to traditional structures of Unitarian Universalism?
	Because if I'm just Liz off in a corner doing my own thing, that's not a diverse ecosystem. That's a diversified stock portfolio. It's slightly better than if we're doing all the same things. But the real power comes when these things are interconnected.
MUSIC bridge	
Amber	This is key! All the beautiful expressions of UUism are not in competition with each other, but if interconnected, could become a robust faith organization.



Erin	Yes, and as you and I know, having been in conversation with so many interesting expressions, we have an opportunity to open up the discussion in ways that help us see how alive UUism actually is and how we might redefine and reorganize to strengthen our bonds.
Amber	Ok cool, this feels exciting. This series is our way of celebrating an emerging UUism and asking ourselves how might we live into the future.
Erin	Right. Now, remember Rev Wendy Luella, and the soulful singing project that Liz referred to?
Amber	Yes
Erin	<p>Well, I spoke with her too. But first a bit of info about her UU expression.</p> <p>Soulful Singing meets online everyday at 9am plus Thursday evenings plus special event on the weekend. the songs they sing are short, repetitive, easy to learn, and reflect UU principles and values. There are a total of 50 people involved with an average of 15-20 showing up on any given day. Their demographics include age ranges from early 30s- late 70s; mostly women, she says, many retired, mostly White, and a range of social classes from those living in poverty to those who identify as wealthy. Most are English speakers, and they're mostly from North America but they do have some occasional joiners from the United Kingdom and South America. Several of the attendees are also retired ministers attending from various faiths. Rev Wendy Luella is paid through the donations people give her. About 40 percent cannot pay her due to the fact that they are living in poverty. And this is part of the reason she has `created an online site to house her music and hopes to raise funds for her ministry by people buying subscriptions to use her music.</p>
Wendy Luella Perkins	And right now, I'm the affiliated community minister here in Kingston with the Kingston Unitarian Fellowship. But my ministry is a community based ministry and it's mostly online, not exclusively, but mostly online around singing meditation that I call Soulful Singing.
Erin	Wendy Luella has been singing since she was young and has incorporated into all area of her ministry including work with congregations with the CUC, Unitarian Universalist Association.
	She has been offering Soulful Singing since 2002
Wendy Luella	I would say that for me, the practice of Soulful Singing is something that I probably have done for my entire life, which is use singing as a way of companionship, as a way of expression, as a way of articulating my



	values, as a way of feeling my feelings, as a way of moving through difficult things.
	That singing has been just a foundational thing in my life.
Erin	I asked Rev Wendy Luella to explain more about what happens in a Soulful Singing get together.
Wendy Luella	So those groups were usually in my home in other people's homes and community centers. And the idea of Soulful Singing was a singing meditation where we would sing short songs that could be taught by ear. There was no music in front of us. There was no words in front of us. The leader would teach a song line by line like this.
	SHE SINGS HERE
	Now that's a zipper song, so you can add in different. It's good to have a friend or two. It's good to have a dream or two. It's good to have a snack or two, you know, it could be any kind of thing there. And then we would sing that again and again and again in a repetitive way.
	And as we sang that song or any song and as it came around again and again, maybe we'd have some harmony spontaneously, nothing written down. Maybe we would feel the song a little deeper in our body. If it was a zipper song like that one, maybe folks would call out words that they wanted to include. So it was a way of including people's diverse experiences.
	And then there would be a silent and quiet time and then another song would arise. I did this from 2002 until 2020.
Erin	And then...the pandemic hit.
Wendy Luella	There is no way I would have ever done this Soulful Singing on Zoom without the pandemic. I know for sure I would never have done it. Three weeks before, somebody who was planning to come to an in-person gathering. She emailed saying, the roads are kind of slippery.
	And she lives like a half an hour away from Kingston. Do you think I could just, like, FaceTime into Soulful singing? Or maybe Zoom in to Soulful Singing? In my head I said, There's no damn way I am ever doing that. But I didn't reply that way of course, I replied in a very well, thank you for your, you know for your request for that.
	Like, I wouldn't be able to do that because of technology things, but thanks for letting us know and, you know, it's good to stay home tonight. Yeah, that makes sense. I basically totally in my heart of hearts said



	"there is no way in hell I am ever going to use what Zoom, to FaceTime, to do singing like that.
	The whole thing about Soulful Singing is that we get to hear the harmonies that we're all making together, that we're in the room together. I was a true believer about that way of singing, and I still am. Singing in a room together, which I still do is a beautiful thing. And I have discovered because I was pushed into it, because I needed to do something to respond to what was happening.
	In a pastoral way, I started to offer singing on Zoom as a pastor, I was like, People are scared. People need something and I could do this. Not because I thought that soulful singing online was going to work, not that I had a dream about at some point. yeah, I'll get my songs shared on TikTok.
	And so I thought to myself, so many people are at home
	I'll start a group that will meet one every morning at 9:00, we'll have a morning group at 9:00, we'll sing for 45 minutes, and then we'll have like a half an hour of listening and sharing and just a time for people to share afterwards. And I'll do that for the next couple of weeks until things blow over.
	That group is still meeting every single day.
Erin	At the time of our interview she estimated that the group had met every single day, totalling around 1400 times.
Wendy-Luella	And the reason they keep coming is because there's power in song. There's power in the process of singing, and there's power in these small songs. I've written so many songs, I've written hundreds and hundreds of songs. But the songs that I write really illuminate and lift up Unitarian Universalist values. And even if you are not connected to a Unitarian Universalist congregation it is a way of sharing those in such pithy ways. And people remember, people remember a song like
SINGING	We're All Connected Bird Cloud and Tree, we we're all connected, Earth wind and sea, an entire woven exquisite tapestry.
SINGING	We're all connected. Breath, you and me,



	<p>And because it marries this embodied practice with really theological tenets, because that's what the words of these songs are, theological propositions, even though there are people there that are completely secular, that would never imagine it as being a theological statement, I think of it that way in some ways that this is a this is a belief, a value, a way of thinking that I think promotes the kind of healing, inclusivity, diversity, care, collective care that that I want to see prospering in the world, in a world that's really difficult.</p>
Erin	<p>Soulful singing has evolved to include book club, a creating group, special monthly events, in person and an online picnic... it's a genuine caring community,</p>
Amber	<p>Soulful Singing is an expression that falls somewhere in between a traditional worship space that Peter was talking about and the Facebook humour group Liz created.</p>
Erin	<p>Right, and interestingly enough, Wendy Luella estimates that 70% percent of the people who attend her group are not affiliated with UUism at all, much like the Hysterical society.</p>
Amber	<p>They just feel connected to the expression. The potential is palpable.</p>
Amber	<p>Wow. Powerful stuff. So despite the narrative of our communities being in decline, there's actually so much life happening, and I mean, life that is imbued with our values and our theology.</p>
Liz	<p>Having those stories lifted up.</p>
Erin	<p>That's Liz again.</p>
Liz	<p>So I'm thinking in particular of partners right now. So I'm thinking of people like the board game ministry or Soulful Singing.</p>
	<p>I think if more people knew those stories in Canada, more people would directly supporting them. So I think if people knew that Mirth and Dignity exists and for \$5 a month you can support the coaching program and all these innovative different things. More people would do that. And also it would be good for Unitarian Universalism and to really own those stories and the difference that they're making.</p>
Erin	<p>The Canadian Unitarian Council has recognized and celebrated what Mirth and Dignity and the Hysterical Society have been doing.</p>
Liz	<p>The podcast numbers are slowly growing. It's a podcast, right? So they grow slowly. That's the nature of the beast, but it's growing. And the CUC has funded the most recent season of the podcast, The Shining Lights</p>



	<p>grant is funding the second season, so pretty much everything that's happening with the podcast this year is coming from CUC support.</p>
	<p>I wish that the CUC would take more credit. So I think that sometimes we have these conversations about, different things that are happening or people will approach me and say, it's so neat what you're doing. It's so different and outside the box of our traditional structures as though there is some kind of dichotomy there. And I don't think people realize how supportive those traditional structures have been of what we're doing.</p>
	<p>It's not the case in all of North America. It's not the case, in my experience in the United States, that the organizations like the UUA are as quick to realize what's going on. But in this whole process, right from the beginning, I've been really supported by traditional denominational structures in Canada. So you lot have always been supportive. I was initially a member when I became not a member, it was very clear to me that those people were still my colleagues DRES, other lay leaders.</p>
	<p>All of those people have been really supportive of what I'm doing, even when they don't understand it. And the CUC in particular through the grant that we just got for the podcast, through the Shining Lights award, through being there every time I have a legal question about charitable status or I need to get the word out that we're doing something and I call on their regional staff person to help me with that.</p>
	<p>The CUC has been there throughout the entire process and very quick to modify to the things we need, the same as what a congregation needs. No problem. If you see small enough that when we say, can we do this instead they're there. And I wish that the CUC would take more credit for that as a part of that story, because I don't think that a lot of Unitarians on the ground realized that the CUC and other denominational structures have had such an active role in the stuff that we're doing.</p>
	<p>It's the using of the CUC channels to transmit the stories, to help people to understand that this is an expression of UUism that it is something that is currently happening and that there's there's benefit in it being known that this is CUC supported.</p>
	<p>Yeah. And I don't need that for Mirth and Dignity, Erin, I need that for the CUC itself because when I'm looking at what you're trying to do and you're trying to shift people's mindset, I think as a first step to say, "Oh no, we have already done these things. There's this 200,000 person group that drew heavily on us.</p>



	<p>We should take credit for that and have pride in that. Once we start to identify as a community that supports congregations and other kinds of structures, your job suddenly becomes a lot easier. And then you can also go to individual donors and say, we're doing congregational help and, we're creating all these other things as well, and people will be excited by that.</p>
	<p>It's already happening. We just need to recognize it and own it as something that we've done together.</p>
MUSIC	
Amber	<p>So what ever happened with Peter?</p>
Erin	<p>Oh, we unearthed some important questions. In the next episode, we'll look more closely at two defining expressions: congregational culture and young adult culture. How they interact and what it means for the future of UUism. Stay tuned.</p>
MUSIC	

End of Episode 1 transcript
