



UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 2 - The Gap 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 2 - The Gap

Our guests for Episode 2 include:

- Peter Scales, First Unitarian Church of Victoria
- Jim Sannes and Ellen Papenburg, Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice (CUSJ)
- Casey Stainsby and Reverend Danie Webber, former CUC Youth and Young Adult programming staff
- Camellia Jahanshahi, Rising Together host
- Z Brimacombe with Ilara Stafaniuk-Gaudet, Loving Justice group
- Brenagh Rappaport and Maya Ferguson Klinowski, hosts of Gathered Here
- Reverends Anne Barker and Linda Thompson, CUC's Congregational Life Team

MUSIC	
Peter Scales	We have these old people in our congregations, beloved elders, we might call them. Some of them haven't been there for very long. They haven't been Unitarian very long because they were Anglican or they were United or they were Roman Catholic or Jewish. And we only find out during their



	celebration of life that they were at the forefront of medical care to HIV/AIDS men in the 1980s.
	They don't wear that as a badge. They know they did it. We find out that someone stood in front of the bulldozers at some land somewhere, but to the newcomer, to the congregation, they're just an old person. And then sometimes those old people, they're not asked about how to do activism because they're just old people. And some of our younger folks might say, activism, we should do what Greta Thunberg is doing.
	Well, Well, that's one thing. I mean, we could phone Greta and see if she'll answer the phone, or we could ask activists who are in their twenties and thirties now to talk with some of our elders who were activists in the 80s, in the 90s against harvesting whales, for instance. I love that the Unitarian Church of Vancouver has a plaque in one of their meeting rooms acknowledging that Greenpeace was formed in that room because Greenpeace needed a place where they weren't going to be judged or spied on, and the RCMP weren't going to be allowed in.
	I'm not sure if the RCMP was a factor at that point, but they were going to do this important work. They were going to stop nuclear testing in the oceans and they were going to save the whales. And so where did you do that? The Unitarians. And there are Unitarians alive who remember those days and have lessons to teach.
MUSIC	
Erin Horvath	Welcome to UU Expressions: Love in Real Life.
Erin	In this 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. There's a lot of information, so heads up - we will be taking the next 2 episodes to cover everything - starting with young adult culture as it contrasts with "traditional" or older adult culture, where these cultures are situated in the broader social context, and what might address some of the disparity.
Amber Bellemare	You know, I've been thinking about Peter Scales's interview a lot. The image of him and his youth group being 60 years old and still the youngest in his congregation is heartbreaking, especially considering it was this generation of UU's who supported the creation of the CUC's Young Adult programme.



Erin	it is a sad image. But something that Peter shared that was heartwarming is the admiration he has for the UU Elders he interacts with. For example, he recalled a time about 20 years ago when he moved to Victoria and noticed two UU's wearing the Order of Canada pin and met several who were either incredible activists, or notable figures who had done really exceptional things with their lives. At the time, he had no idea that UU's had people of this caliber. And so often they're modest and not broadcasting what they have accomplished. And so sadly, with the passing of so many UU elders we're not just losing the unique skill sets and knowledge they possess. At times we're not even aware until we attend their funerals and learn about their extraordinary lives.
Amber	These UUs are a treasure trove of knowledge. It's a shame we don't know more about them!
Erin	I agree. Which is why I want to introduce everyone to Jim and Ellen from the Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice, CUSJ for short, who are great examples of the types of UU elders Peter is talking about.
Jim Sannes	I was just a social action person in Toronto who was interested in what CUSJ was doing. And I showed up at the annual meeting at Ottawa with the CUC because we always had our meetings together with the CUC annual meeting, and I dreaded getting involved because it was such a lot of work that people were doing. And so I just said "I'll be on the board, but I'll be a member at large in Ontario and I'll try to get people involved from Ontario.
	And I thought "oh it's a nice and easy thing to do. And I'll just be at my local social action group." We organize different things. And one of the things we did was set up our bean project in southern Ontario, where we collected money from the different churches and we went and bought beans from the farmers.
	The farmers said, "that's a great idea." They doubled our donation and we donated these to the food bank. At one time we donated 73,000 pounds of beans to Daily Bread Food Bank in Toronto and these were distributed, of course, the beans became the number one item that people were asking for after peanut butter.
Erin	And their skills match their passion.
Jim	We also got involved with draft dodgers and deserters from the United States at the time during the Vietnam War. And I raised \$75,000 for getting these kids from the States into Canada.



Jim	It was really no big effort on our behalf to raise another \$30,000 for this group of five people that we sponsored in Kitchener, 30 grand.
	We raised it to pay for education for one of the girls to learn her English so she can go on in engineering school.
Jim	It's amazing that we can do this. We know our connections. We know who to talk to.
Erin	Like many other UUs, they're aging, and are finding themselves in difficult positions. They told me about their recent process to decide whether to fold or continue after being active for 25 years.
Jim	And we came to a situation where the board was all aging like we are. We're the youngest. I'm 82, Ellen is 70.
	And so we had a whole conversation as to whether we were going to survive or not as a group. And five of us got together out of the board of eight and said, we don't believe we should shut down. But in the meantime, the president and the secretary and the main people involved decided that they wanted to close it up and make an orderly funeral, if you want to call it.
	And we said no. But then we had to have an all members meeting that we decided we're not going to shut down because we had 50 percent said yes and 50 percent said no. But in order to change the Constitution, we had to have 66 percent.
Ellen Papenburg	But it was not a real win because half of the people thought we should shut down. It's a difficult situation to be in. Lack of volunteerism is everywhere, and we are certainly noticing that it is very hard to get people on the board and we had the five we have now seven.
	So we do have but everybody is, I think, older than me. So that says it all and is a bit of a problem. We are looking to youth places to see if we can get more young adults interested. But there's a little bit of struggle and what we do is, for social action across the country that is basically based on the Unitarian principles of looking out for different viewpoints and social action, especially.
	So we decided to continue on.
Erin	This puts CUSJ in a sort of liminal state, where they have funds to carry on their work for a few more years while they decide how to end or transition their work.
Amber	I imagine it would be difficult to let go of that kind of personal investment.



Erin	Absolutely, especially when there isn't anyone to pass the baton to.
MUSIC	
Amber as music fades	One thing that became apparent when we did the ageism forum back in 2022 is that the cultural differences between the way younger and older folks approach UUism has created a huge gap that makes transitioning into congregational life challenging for young adults. So much so that often, Young adults decide not to transition at all, which is a huge contributor to the declining membership stories we keep hearing. We wanted to explore the YA cultural expressions more deeply to get a better understanding of what might bridge that gap. And by culture, we mean the way people interact with each other, including but not limited to how people communicate, create meaning, make decisions, resolve disagreements, approach change, and demonstrate respect. Culture is a co-created phenomenon, meaning people create it together, and it occurs whether it's designed intentionally or left to default and there's no one way to do it. Of course, there may be people and groups that do not align strictly with one culture or the other, but we feel examining these trends may help us make intentional decisions moving forward.
Erin	So let's switch gears for a moment then and look at our Youth and Young Adult culture. Over these past months, I've had the opportunity to speak with nine young adults, including Reverend Danie Webber and Casey Stainsby, who, at the time of their interview, provided leadership to the youth and young adult programs run by the Canadian Unitarian Council. Both Danie and Casey were raised UU, have been religious educators and OWL sexuality education facilitators, and are now in ministry with Casey, studying to become a Minister at the Vancouver School of Theology. and Reverend Danie serving as a minister at the First Unitarian Church of Hamilton.
	I think the first thing I want to say is just kind of like a blanket context.
	disclaimer is that youth and young adults are not a monolith, right?
Erin	That's Casey.
Casey Stainsby	There's a lot of diversity within these age groups. It's something that I've fallen into the trap of speaking on behalf of all youth and young adults before and have been lovingly and firmly called back in to say, "Hey, hang on, we don't all fit all these descriptions all the time."



	<p>The youth and young adults are all individuals. They all have different stories, different experiences, looking for different things. And you're going to hear a lot of different perspectives from these communities. So with that, I will speak in like two patterns, themes that come up.</p>
Casey	<p>The kinds of things that I really see young people looking for in these spaces is relationship... the biggest overarching thing that that really is like the draw and the reward that comes from that kind of space. And I think that really kind of tracks developmentally too, around life stages, we know teenagers especially are very, very motivated by peer relationships and peer groups.</p>
	<p>Everything revolves around building community, getting to know each other in ways that are more kind of authentic, deeper, more free than in a lot of the other cultural spaces that we find ourselves in.</p>
	<p>There's a big emphasis on being yourself and being loved for exactly who you are, which is a big part of the embodied experience of UUism that gets absorbed from those experiences is that as you are is exactly perfect and whole and good and holy. And with that there's also often threads of leadership development.</p>
	<p>So with that sense, also a sense of like you are capable also like you can do the things that you want to do to create the world that you want to create. Starting with this community. How do we want this community to be and look and feel and let's all be a part of creating that together and a real kind of embodied sense of spirituality within that as well.</p>
	<p>So co-creating ritual and worship together, which is it in a very kind of participatory, experimental kind of way where it's never the same twice and is very much about being, being in and creating that ritual experience together.</p>
Erin	<p>I really wanted to understand more clearly what makes UU young adult culture different from older adult culture. Reverend Danie explained that it isn't just about what people do while together but the ways and durations these gatherings happen.</p>
Danie Webber	<p>When we talk about the difference between youth and young adult culture versus older adult culture, what I've started to tease apart or attempted to understand is what is that distinction and how do we explain it to people? And what I've come up with is that we're actually talking about two different styles of gathering. I think that what's been lifted up most and highlighted the most when we talk about youth and young adult culture over the last year and a half is the weekend conference style culture that is</p>



	created at the national level versus the culture that is created within a congregation on a week to week basis.
	Often these gatherings, either a conference leadership training, camp style conference are an experience of a youth-pulpit community. This whole idea of like we are going to create our own rules, we are going to practice those rules and live into them for this entire weekend.
	And there will be relationships that last longer than that. But the actual structure and space of the gathering is not going to last longer than the 72 hours. So how do we distinguish or capture some of that on a week to week basis? And no matter how hard you try or practice, it doesn't really last much longer than that event.
Erin	The intense yet brief nature of these gatherings is an important distinction to keep in mind. What we don't want to do is to idealize young adult culture or prematurely deem it the way of the UU future. Rev Danie explains.
	That's one of the things that I've been feeling a little bit uncertain about is like, how do you talk about these two different cultures and like one being the way of the future, I suppose, and one being like the thing that's dying. But these are two completely different events or practices or community building styles.
	And so while the way that we talk about youth and young adult culture is very precious and different than the culture that's created in a congregational space. It's also temporary and can be challenging to create longer term. That's part of the distinction that Casey has been alluding to. One of the pieces that we have talked about in the past is this idea of collaborative versus performative community building.
	And that is very relevant in weekly or monthly gatherings that you would see in Congregations for youth and young adults. This idea that we are coming together to create a thing and that is going to look different than having somebody sitting at the front preaching.
Erin	As a minister who has served in several congregations Rev Danie is uniquely positioned to reflect on the gap that still exists between the way that Young Adults are looking to engage and what congregations are considering more collaborative practices.
Danie	Ministers have done their best to create more collaborative style worship services by having multiple voices at the front of the room every Sunday, having worship associates who are doing more than just a reading or a



	chalice lighting, but actually participating in a reflection writing. And so that's a step towards being more collaborative.
	But there is still that one person who's always in charge, it feels. Whereas with youth and young adults, it's much more of who can do it this week, who can do it next week, kind of practice.
Amber	The way young adults meet definitely enables them to delve into a deep type of relationship building where they can experience being fully celebrated for who they are.
Erin	Right, And what they do when they get together is co-created. It really promotes the notion of building the type of community one wants to inhabit through the use of covenants. While they may still meet online to connect once or twice a month, these intensive times together seem to facilitate deep relating that carries on even when they're not in person.
Amber	So I'm just curious then, what's the difference between a young adult-led event and an older adult-led event?
Erin	I asked Camellia Jahanshahi that very question. She's a young adult that facilitates Rising together, the online group for UU's of colour, and the young adult events coordinator for the CUC
	<p>It has been pretty fun and it's really beautiful to see a group of like a 19-year-old, a 30-something year old or a few 30-something year olds. And then you have people in their 50s and 60s coming in and you get some really nice nuggets of wisdom and collective brainstorming around these things. Social justice issues and UUism. So it's been really fruitful to have a whole spectrum of ages.</p> <p>I mean, not to toot my own horn, but I think that the difference that I bring in because I am the lead facilitator and organizer of it, and so when I organize these things, I am keeping in mind the trials and tribulations of youth and emerging young adults, which is what we call 18 to, I think 24 or 25 and then young adults.</p>
	And so it allows us to put our faith into action. I don't want to say this rudely, but in more traditional congregational settings with older leads, often from my experience, the UU factors kind of stayed within the church space. But when young adults lead, we're keeping in mind our work and our friends and our relationships.



	And we talk about those things more actively. And maybe that's also just because we are a very small group and so we get to know each other personally, but there just seems to be a little bit more freeform sharing and relating of our morals and our values and our principles and how they actually interact with our day to day lives.
	You know, we're doing things like talking about how we problem solve based on our values with our roommates and like how we choose our jobs and go through these professional changes and keeping our values in mind and what that looks like as we navigate talking about money or dealing with inappropriate coworkers or all those things that I don't see as often in adult adult spaces, that's really a young adult conversation that it is a beautiful thing to have the influence and perspectives of adult adults and youth in that in that way.
	So I think young adults do tend to breathe new life into these conversations that allows us to practice our values tangibly and really problem solve what that looks like in our day to day. Maybe that's just ego talking, but that's what I think.
Amber	There it is again- that deep relationship-centred focus.
Erin	Yes, it's a common theme that has emerged for sure. In interviewing Illara Stefaniuk Gaudet and Z. Brimacombe of Loving Justice, I heard once again how relationships are foundational within their social justice movement. This is Z explaining why Loving Justice got started.
Z Brimacombe	Loving Justice is a group of UUs. We initially connected following the killing of our community member who was known by several names Dani Cooper or Maiken or DC. And as a lot of folks know, Maiken was killed by police in North Vancouver in November of 2022. We got together following their death because we were seeking a response to that death that held space both for the intersectional forms of violence that they faced during their life and in death, and also to advance the politics that they advocated for throughout their life, which were specifically abolitionist politics.
	So we came together around a shared interest in the politics of abolitionism and in advancing conversations about the role of police in society, especially within our UU communities, and trying to figure out how to respond as a community both to the specific loss and then to these broader systems of power that Maiken was really involved in naming and fighting.
	And also was really impacted by during their life. There's a lot of grief.



Amber	Okay, This is political, but this is also deeply, deeply personal.
Erin	It is. And in this case, UU values, deep relating and activism are braided together in such a way that they are inseparable.
Ilara Stefaniuk Gaudet	And initially, when the first group of folks came together, it was really partially just to grieve together and then to feel that we needed to mobilize that grief into some kind of action because we really felt that that's what DC would have wanted. So we're trying to hold their memory very much in the work of what we're doing, even though not everyone who's involved was very close to them.
	But the majority of us who are currently involved had some relationship with them during their life. So they are kind of very much a part of the work that we're doing. And maybe I'll actually just speak as somebody who didn't know Maiken. And so I'm attracted to the group. I got invited in by one of my friends in the group and I'm attracted to it because of the politics of it.
	So I'm aware of the memory of Maiken being a big piece of the central reason why it formed and my involvement isn't as connected to that piece, I didn't know this human. So I think that a big piece that collectively we've been talking about in the last few months is actually how central we want to keep Maiken a focus of the group and also like what is the vision for the group and how do we want to call people in and how do we want to involve the greater community? So right now, we've been working on visioning and a lot of the conversations have been about visioning the world and what it would look like without policing prisons and carceral systems.
	And there's this very critical piece of being a politicized group of UU's.
	One thing we've been discussing in our visioning is an idea of transforming our other communities into spaces for abolitionist organizing and educating both ourselves and our networks about abolition and also working with UUist theology and this broader spiritual framework to merge that with this sort of political stance and work that needs to be done and overall, to build capacity and community for things like mutual aid, for non-carceral responses to harm.
	We've talked about how to do that work through education and community building. And at the moment there's a lot of interest in I would say the ideology is something we're also quite interested in, or the theology. We all share this view of UU theology as fundamentally compatible with abolitionist theory. And so we want to make that more



	explicit and overt and share those observations and views and use them to mobilize people towards political action
	It's the understanding about visioning a world without policing, prisons and carceral systems, because the understanding is that those systems are based in like dominant and colonial ideologies and practices. And so abolitionism seeks alternative means of harm reduction and community building and strengthening that doesn't rely on those systems.
Amber	Okay, I just want to recap what I heard. When this group speaks of abolitionism, it's not just an issue or philosophy to be dealt with at arms length, it's systemic change that they intend to enact because they have been rocked to their core. It has become too personal to be at arms length.
Erin	Right. Even when I spoke with them, the emotions were close to the surface.
Amber	Kind of like how UU activists in the 70's and 80's were providing space for groups like Greenpeace to get their start or helping with the AIDS epidemic- it was personal and political. Are Loving Justice and Canadian Unitarian for Social Justice connected in some way?
Erin	Well it seems that both groups know of each other, but at the time of this interview, they had not interacted. I asked Z and Ilara about the demographics of their group and their hopes for the future.
Ilara	We would actually love to be more intergenerational right now.
	It just so happens that everybody in our group is either a young adult or a very recent young adult. And so as such, we feel like this structure of our group is kind of within the framework of UU young adult culture, but that's more a result of who is currently a part of the group.
Erin	I was curious to understand if there might be an opportunity for the younger activists and older activists to work together and so I asked Ilara and Z to describe how their group functions. Here is Ilara describing their group culture.
Ilara	We're nonhierarchical, we don't have a chair. We're individuals who care about the same thing and when roles are needed will shift into those roles. But nobody like holds a role within the group at this point in time.
Ilara	So as far as structure goes, we're quite similar to a lot of the young adult and youth structures.



Illara	<p>The amount of skill in the room is also a big part of why that's a factor, because we all have the capability of taking on those roles when it's needed.</p>
Z	<p>And most, if not all of us came up in some way through UU youth organizing and or young adult organizing. So we do have a lot of those skills as well.</p> <p>And I think to some extent where we're at right now is developing ourselves almost as a team and working together and as we continue to bring more folks in, maybe it'll make sense to formalize roles more or to have standing committees. But for the moment we've been assigning and delegating and taking up work as it needs to be done, basically.</p>
Amber	<p>Having been deeply involved in young adult UU culture myself I can recognize how those principles are being brought to life in this activist culture. And it is very different from the way that older UUs operate. It might not be different from how they used to operate, but I have to admit, as time moves on, I do things in a more - I don't know how to say this - "adult" way? I'm not sure if that's a part of growing up, or if it's a matter of exposure to the traditional way of operating.</p>
Erin	<p>So you're correct that there is a culture difference here. While the young adults are working in a less formal non-hierarchical way, the older adults are operating in a more roles-based way that fits with the expectations of a registered not-for-profit organization. It became apparent to me upon hearing this that succession planning wouldn't be as simple as the older activists handing over the reigns of CUSJ to the younger activists as the Young Adults do not necessarily want to operate within that type of structure. That said, Jim and Ellen, and Illara and Z showed a genuine interest in meeting each other.</p>



Erin	The next two young adults I spoke with, Brenagh Rapoport and Maya Ferguson-Klinowski, were raised as UUs. They are active leaders within the YA national movement and imagine a future where they are involved in some version of congregations at a local level. Brenagh leads Gathered Here, a monthly online meetup specifically for young adults. Something that was really interesting in speaking with them is that they engage in the national young adult community and also their local UU community. They learned the culture of both UU subcultures and speak of both with fondness. Brenagh explains the difference between the young adult and congregational cultures she participates in and loves.
Brenagh Rappaport	My experience with participating in UU youth and young adult culture has had quite a few things in common. It is a much more open and collaborative process to existing in community with people with whom you have shared values that tends to thrive in more unstructured ways, that allow people to focus on connecting to each other in ways that are often not as formalized as, for example, a Sunday service or a more congregational approach to UU.
Erin	They explained to me how and why covenanting is a critical part of their culture.
Maya	The young adult community is also very based off of covenant and we revisit it a lot. It's a good way of us connecting on our shared values. And then also, as Brenda was saying, with the sort of unstructured nature of some of our conversation, it allows us to connect on a really deep level and explore our values with our personal lives, really like ingrained into that.
	For myself and folks who grew up UU, I think that the UU principles are definitely one part of an understanding of what makes us UU and what separates our community as UUs from a non-UU community that might otherwise be quite similar. The principles are not the only shared values or ideas that come to form that identity as mentioned.
	So the covenanting process often has similar things brought up time and time again when different covenants are made in different gatherings. And I think that forms its own sense of what our shared values are that's more co-created rather than being agreed upon ahead of time. But the principles and things that come from the broader UU culture, from the CUC, from the UUA That definitely is part of, I think, a larger spectrum of shared ideas we bring to each other.



Amber	My experience of covenanting is that it is helpful when a group of people are coming together to do something that isn't predetermined, scripted, or predictable.
Erin	Like Maya said it is what anchors the sense of shared identity and purpose.
Amber	Exactly, it puts the UU values into the forefront... and if you have people joining in a UU event for the first time, it is a tool that tells them <i>where</i> they have arrived to and what is expected now that they're there.
Erin	I asked Brenagh how new people are arriving at young adult events these days, who they were, and what the draw was.
Brenagh	Mostly folks who, for example, their parents are members of a congregation and they attend their youth group at the congregation.
	The young adult culture tends to be much more separate from congregations, but often they might be somebody who grew up UU and then moved to a place that doesn't have a congregation or who doesn't have time on Sundays to go to service, but not entirely. Some people do come to the UU YA community who weren't raised UU.
	So there's sort of two different paths to coming to that community, but it's definitely less tied to congregations compared to the youth culture. And I would say that a lot of UU young adults are not members of the congregation.
Maya Ferguson Klinowski	Yeah, I agree. I see that combination of different paths towards the YA groups.
Erin	Maya explained why she felt it was so important to have a space for young people to meet because their challenges in life are very unique to this stage.
	There is something particular that people seek out around being with a community of people around a similar age. I think that's really valuable. Young adults are often in various types and stages and phases of transition and are not settled into the type of life and routine that a much older person might fit.
	Going to church every Sunday into a regular part of their life because they know where they'll be living five years from now and what they'll be doing and who they'll be with. And that is a lot less true for many young adults. And so that sort of transition and temporality, I think, draws people together in less frequent or online ways and spaces to share in that that uncertainty together and that that sense of shared points along the



	trajectory of life experience that might not be reflected in in going to a congregation and not seeing other folks your age or not being led by the younger people
Erin	This online community of young adults has been coming together almost every month now for years and get to see each other in person a couple times a year resulting in really good friendships that they cherish. I was inspired by Maya and Brenagh's hope that the UU community will find a way to bridge the gap between YA culture and older adult culture so the momentum can keep growing. Here's Brenagh again.
Brenagh	It's this really strong community that's been birthed. And I think to me that's a sign of people who are interested in taking on this community and getting involved. And I think some somewhere along the way that will lead to it might look different in 20 or 30 years. But I do think having a strong young adult community as it's being created now, I hope that we can find a way of bridging that gap and figuring out how to keep that going as people get older because it's a really exciting time now.
	And I certainly would not be as involved in UU as I am if it wasn't for Gathered Here and sort of this gradual growth of the online young adult community and it's not exactly brought me back to UU but made me much more involved. And certainly the folks that I see regularly online and a couple times a year in person made that much more involved.
	I feel very hopeful that there are people who really care about this and want to see that grow and evolve and connect with the broader community.
Amber	It's so inspiring to know that these young adults are actively creating something that they are excited to be a part of.
Erin	It is and it's so interesting that many of those in leadership positions have come to it from within the UU traditions and are stacked with skills and credentials that truly reflect the ideals that so many Directors of Religious Education and Youth Leaders have been speaking about all along. And in the case of Brenagh and Maya, they both said that if they were to engage in congregational culture in a significant way they would need to have a leadership role of some sort.
Amber	I would say that's true for me, having joined as a youngish adult (I was 22 at the time) and taking on different positions in different congregations. Eventually, I was offered more and more leadership roles with the CUC and now look!



Erin	Casey Stainsby highlighted a difference I wasn't aware of between young adults who have grown up UU and those who came to UUism later in life. As someone born and raised within UUism, she speaks from personal experience and years of observation.
Casey	There is often a kind of like an embodied sense of what this space feels like that's beyond just the the ideas that and and critically, to like those folks tend to not won't have, you know, a different religious experience prior to UUism. Whereas a lot of people who come to it a bit later in life and again not everybody but you know there's a pattern here, may have a prior religious experience where they have rejected something, they've walked away from something that wasn't serving them.
	And so there can be more of a tendency to say, "I'm here because I don't want that." And I think raised UUs especially have this gift of saying, but this is what this is. We're not necessarily here to reject something. We're here to embrace something and to lift up into something. And those things can be fluid and interactive as a person.
	And it's complex, but I think that's one of the strengths that we can bring to this community as a whole. And also just a sense of experimentation, like being okay with trying something out, not being super attached to it, being the thing forever, see if it works or not. If it doesn't, fine. Let it go, move on, try something else and a sense of.
	Yeah, let's just let's just try it. Let's not strike 20 committees to see if that's feasible. Let's just do the thing and see what works. Right? So that's a spirit that I really enjoyed.
Amber	Wow, Casey really captured the essence of how young adult spaces are all about living into what will happen.
Erin	Brennagh referred to this as co-creating and explains how she uses this "follow the relational flow" approach when leading "Gathered Here", which typically averages about 10 people each month.
Brenagh	The nature of having these very co-created spaces and communities, a lot of it is just let's start something and see what happens.
	Gathered Here was let's start this, this monthly gathering and see who shows up. And I know when it started there was not a sense that it would go on and become a multi-year ongoing project and it got passed off to the monthly leadership. It got passed off to folks like Maya and myself who are just participants who were brought up to help hold the space and hosting the gathering.



	<p>So the fact of it becoming something that people wanted to keep going and that we're able to continue doing. So a lot of things are just will start something or will change something and we'll see what happens and maybe we'll make a change and we'll see what happens and if it works for people or it doesn't,</p>
Erin	<p>At first glance, it appears that the Young Adults are functioning in their own peer-led bubble, without much interaction from older adult UUs. But then Brenagh and Maya reminded me that isn't totally the case:</p>
Brenagh	<p>One thing that I really appreciate with Gathered Here is that it's connected to the Young Adult Pastoral Care Team that is supported by the CUC. And so every month there's a young adult like myself hosting and a pastoral care team minister co-hosting.</p>
	<p>For me it's been a cool opportunity to get to know some ministers across Canada and co-host the gathering together. And it does also help connect Young Adults to ministers bringing that UU ministerial role back into that. And I think that Gathered Here would not be what it is if we didn't have ministers with us. In that space it's not ministers taking on a strong leadership role. It's generally the young adult co-host who is planning the gathering and the Minister will do an opening reading and facilitate joys and sorrows and be there as a facilitator, but not in charge of the gathering.</p>
Amber	<p>Now seems like a good time to introduce an analogy we've been using to describe the differences between YA culture and congregational culture. Erin, do you want to describe it for us?</p>
Erin	<p>Sure! We have been likening congregational expression to a classical Shakespearean production, where you have the roles there that people play and the props and the costumes and it's all fine-tuned and beautiful.</p>
	<p>And if somebody can't do a particular role, then someone else replaces them and the show goes on. The play itself is well-refined and it's been around a long time and it's polished, and people love the experience. The ones who do it often especially love the experience of creating that together.</p>
	<p>On the other hand, we have the Young Adult culture that is something more like a contemporary theatre production, where the participants themselves create stories and productions that reflect who they are and the characters are often customized to suit the lives, the stories and what they bring. The play itself is customized to whoever the people are that are bringing those characters to life.</p>



	<p>It may not be as polished. It may not even be repeated over and over again to become polished. But that's not the point. It's the act of coming together to co-create it that provides intimacy, vibrance, and a sense of purpose.</p>
Amber	<p>It wasn't always like that. There was a time when congregations were functioning more or less intergenerationally with a single culture. But recognizing the decline in membership a number of years back, the CUC began investing specifically in youth and young adult programming. The investment worked! Except now the youth and young adults who grew up expressing UUism their own way, don't necessarily want to experience the culture shock of bridging into congregational expressions. Some do happily, but at the same time resoundingly, we hear people say that they miss what they grew up in.</p>
Erin	<p>Now just as Casey cautioned us early to remember that not all youth and younger adults are the same, I would like to remind the listener now that not all older adults are the same, nor is every congregation. There can be adults who would say, "I love doing things in a more co-creative, experimental way", just as there may be young adults that say, "I prefer to engage in classical UUism over that co-creative young adult approach. Additionally, there may be congregations that have integrated co-creative approaches into their ways of doing things to various degrees.</p>
Amber	<p>Exactly. We're talking about trends here while recognizing that things are not necessarily all one thing or the other.</p>
erin	<p>I described the trend to Maya and Brenagh and they added more nuance to it from their perspective:</p>
Brenagh	<p>When I was growing up in my congregation as a kid and a youth, I was fairly engaged with my congregation in relatively co-creative ways. The congregation that I grew up in, my parents chose it because it had a bit less of a, the performance wasn't the same every week and there was more room for participation and different opportunities.</p>
	<p>So that's always been part of my experience in UU and personally. And the idea of this binary between a co-creative and a performance, I don't know that metaphor, I think it's a good representation of how that difference can be very stark. I don't think it necessarily is so completely different from each other, but personally, I would have to have some kind of role in a congregation as a member in the future.</p>



Maya	<p>And I think not having space to have that role can be a place where people don't feel super welcome. But I don't know. What do you think, Maya?</p> <p>Maya: Yeah, I mean, hearing that like the the performative and the co-creative that you mentioned, it really, I feel like articulate something that I haven't been able to articulate very well at all because I've been really in and out of both like the congregational and the YA communities at different times.</p>
	<p>It does feel kind of like there's a lot of room in the congregational setting for there to be more co-creation that I think most of the congregants would be very, very happy about seeing. But it's just like a translation issue at certain points, like a young adult might come into this space and have something that's not quite perfect to present to everybody else, or that's not quite perfect to talk about with someone else.</p>
	<p>That doesn't look the way that the other congregants might want it to look like. But it's their way of expressing and it's perfectly great. And I guess like getting those communications across in a way that can be co-created for both people and not shutting anybody out is a really good way of moving forward.</p>
Brenagh	<p>I see some congregations ... experimenting with nontraditional formats and times and approaches of doing services. The congregation I grew up in, now my parents are still members of and very involved with, they're experimenting with, I think they're going to do a monthly evening service that focuses on different sort of requested themes and then is going to be followed by a particular type of dancing. I don't remember what it's called, but so the service is going to lead into this dance, and it's this new format that they're going to be experimenting with based on a sense of I think they tried it once and a bunch of people from the community showed up who aren't UU.</p>
	<p>And they got excited about the possibility of new people coming in. So this idea of experimenting and trying new approaches, I think that there is a sense now in the broader UU community that that needs to be happening and that getting new people in does mean trying different things and seeing if different things might work. And I think that that is very much in the spirit of the way that the UU youth and young adult spaces are continuously built and rebuilt as people age out and new people come in and take on leadership roles and it evolves over time.</p>
Amber	<p>Right, we can't say there is no creativity or no willingness to try new things within congregations, but we can use the theatre metaphor as a way to understand where an expression may land on the spectrum.</p>



Erin	I agree. And Brenagh touched on something that could explain another interesting phenomenon around membership.
Brenagh	I've definitely been thinking about the question a lot of the sort of lifespan of the UU and when people come into UU and when they sort of leave it or stop participating actively in different ways. I've been a UU all my life and when I was young I had RE or lifespan learning programs that had lots of other kids being raised UU in my home congregation. And when I became a youth, we started going to youth conferences and seeing all these other young people being raised UU in their youth groups and and yet there's this thing that happens where most active UU congregants were not raised UU and most people who are raised UU do not become active congregants in their adult lives.
Brenagh	So you it's this odd thing of I think often other religious communities you know, people raise their children and the children go on to be the adults that raise their children. And of course there's always expansion and conversion and recruitment or whatever. But there's something about this raised UU identity that doesn't necessitate active participation in order for people to still hold it very strongly.
	I have friends who consider themselves really lifelong hardcore UUs that have maybe been to one service in the last five years, you know, and don't participate in any new activities but absolutely identify as UUs.
Amber	Right - there's a difference between actively co-creating a faith community and simply identifying as a UU. The first is a collective experience- the other an individual one. And It brings to mind the 2021 Canadian census numbers where 10,930 respondents identified as Unitarian Universalists; which is a much higher number than the 4033 people actively involved in congregations in 2021.
Erin	Right, so where are these other 6000 or so UU's if they are not in our congregations? What is happening to them that they decide that it isn't essential for them to engage in the UU community in order to be Unitarian Universalist?
Amber	Well for starters, the CUC was set up to serve congregations and the way it structures membership means that only voting members of a congregation are included in the official numbers. So there are currently groups of active UU's who are not considered members because they are not affiliated with a congregation or fellowship. This means there are lots of UU's not being counted and not engaging as voting members for instance, Young Adults, staff at Uni-camp, members of Soulful Singing with



	Rev. Wendy Luella Perkins, folks creating UU social enterprises, and even Ministers who work for the CUC. Even myself, since I moved away from my home congregation almost a decade ago.
Erin	Right. So that's a good number that are right here in our midst that are not being recognized. This doesn't even get into the challenge of understanding the engagement patterns of Younger UU Adults.
Amber	I'm very curious to know what is happening with these young people once they age out of the young adult program at 35 years old.
Erin	There's lots to be explored here. Back when UU's like Peter Scales were growing up, they did leadership training as young adults and then happily joined congregations. There just isn't the same reliable influx of younger people joining congregations these days.
Amber	When we were doing the inclusivity forum on ageism, I remember one of the young adults involved said they didn't feel it was accurate to say they bridge into congregations. It felt more like falling off the cliff and into the abyss because there is such a cultural and relational disconnect. They are apart of a vibrant national community one day, and then the next they aren't.
Erin	The culture gap between what they are used to and what the congregation is offering is just too big, particularly for those who have not built up relationships within local congregations over time. The jarring transition can be stressful for people. Here's Maya explaining how she feels.
Maya	I'm entering into this really strong community and getting really excited about it and really happy to be a part of it. And, and yeah, frankly, it's kind of concerning to me. Like all of my friends who are 35 and aging out, it makes me feel upset, like I don't want to have them stop being part of that community. It makes sense to at some point have an age out but I don't know that having that being a hard deadline is helpful for us.
Amber	I remember that feeling when I aged out. It was actually quite upsetting. I spent years building these relationships and then I was suddenly told I wasn't allowed to be involved anymore. Like I found other ways to be involved through my work with the CUC and engagement and with some local congregations from time to time. But there is grief in losing my connection to this vibrant spiritual community, I have to say.
Erin	From what we have been hearing, you're definitely not alone in this.



Amber	It's interesting that we continue to call someone who is 35 years old a "young" adult when they oftentimes have careers, relationships, children, a home, and family.
Erin	I agree. We are calling a thirty-five-year-old a <i>young adult</i> when a 35-year-old is a legitimate adult by all social standards. And then we're referring to congregants adults as though they reflect all the age ranges when actually they predominantly are seniors.
Amber	I wonder if this misnaming has impacted the growth of UUism in Canada?
Erin	I can't be sure. But what we <i>can</i> see is that there is a missing middle within UU demographics. When we call a 35 year old a "young" adult it's possible that their way of expressing UUism may be considered something other than the norm. So instead of being embraced and allowed to shape the collective culture they remain in this "Young Adult" container. Even though they are adults, they are not centred as the future leaders of UUism.
Amber	Ok, and so when we call <i>seniors</i> "adults," we centre their expression when perhaps that group might be better considered an affinity group? In other denominations where there is a more robust multigenerational dynamic, don't 30-60 year olds take on the larger part of the leadership roles? I imagine that <i>missing middle</i> shapes the current congregational expression as time moves on.
Erin	It's possible and it's certainly something that our collective movement would benefit from pondering. While the findings of these interviews are not meant to declare what is true and what is not, our hope is that raising these questions will result in people talking and hopefully gaining clarity about what's happening.
Amber	And there has already been some conversation around this issue. Not just in what the age range should be, but also what the transition should look like and how they should interact. Casey Stainsby and Rev Danie Webber recently hosted conversations with the youth and young adult community about the age limit conundrum and they shared their findings with us and we've linked them in the show notes.
Erin	There's a lot to be factored in here. This is Casey reflecting on some of the considerations that go into a decision about the age range for young adults.
Casey	I think it's really important to have caucus spaces for our communities, especially the folks who are less represented in the majority culture.



	<p>And young adults are one of those groups. And so I think it's really important to have spaces that are protected for them to be together and, you know, blowing up the top end of that age range would potentially remove that option. Maybe there's a both and kind of solution that we can explore.</p>
	<p>I would really love to see more fluidity I think between these two cultures and I think that that's one one place where that can happen is to have events that are like young adult led, young adult culture style events that are open to all ages. I would love to see more of that. I don't think that means not having young adult only spaces as well.</p>
Amber	<p>This is a good point - maybe we shouldn't be so rigid about our approach to defining age ranges. There's a world of opportunity if we allow for these two cultures to intermingle.</p>
Erin	<p>Intermingling and interacting with intention is something that Rev. Anne Barker and Rev Linda Thompson, the Congregational Life Leads for the CUC, further challenged us to think about. They recommend becoming <i>more fluid</i> in our thinking and our policies around age. We'll start with Anne:</p>
Anne	<p>I wonder if we're actually asking the right question. I think we have artificial borders and boundaries around ages. When we're trying to think about how services have been delivered for different age groups that also can be related to the capacity in your congregation to connect with services and the location you're in.</p>
	<p>There have been surges of young adults joining and coming.</p>
	<p>The thing that worries me is when we divide people into groups. And I think caucus groups are really important, right? I need time with the ministers to have to be able to tell a story and know that the people understand what I'm talking about without explaining it. Our Bipoc folks need caucus groups to be able to be renewing and reassuring to one another.</p>
	<p>We need people who get us, youth, need youth, and we need them connected and we want them connected. Same with young adults. Although when you look at our young adult numbers, is it like 18 to 35? When I was 35, I had two kids. Elementary school age.</p>
Linda Thomson	<p>Ditto, right. And so did I. I was 28. And I had two kids already.</p>



Anne	Right. And I know 35 year olds who are single and still trying to find their way in the world. So this range of humans from 18 to 35, it's a magic imaginary number. And I think we do ourselves a disservice if we program only in groups, because when you hit 35, you're not connected to anything else.
Anne	And I don't want to see our people who found vital relationships in a young adult community disappear when they turn 36. That's pretend numbering, right? We need to find ways as a movement to figure out how to not be held in containers that cut somebody off at some point. The idea that when you turn 36, you're now hanging out in the congregation and not in this other kind of gathering with your friends, it's ridiculous.
Linda	Healthy communities are the ones that involve the ten year olds and the 15 year olds and the 21 year olds and the 28 year olds and the 35 year olds into the life of the congregation and also give them a place to hang out sometimes with their own people.
	If they don't do both, then we've done those people a disservice because they don't know how to be part of a congregation and they reach 36 and they go, "Well, this doesn't work for me." We need to do both. I really think we've done some of our young people a grave harm because we've emphasized too much programming that is for them at the expense of building multigenerational, intergenerational communities.
	I am so glad we have online opportunities for youth and young adults because some of them don't find that cohort in their home congregations or at least not, you know, in a critical mass kind of number. And a lot of young adults leave their home communities and end up elsewhere for education or work.
	And so it's a way for them to remain connected. I think one of the things we need to do is challenge our communities assumption that they don't need to take care of young people. And that's not universal in all of our congregations and communities. But some of them go "well we don't have to have a youth group because they've got this online thing. Or we can only have a youth group so we don't need to figure out how to talk to those kids.



	<p>I think one of our challenges is to really start a conversation about what it means to be a community of all ages. And it feels so precious to me that we're one of the remaining institutions in society that can be that. People used to have lots and lots of extended family around or there were other groups. For a lot of people, that's not real anymore. So how do young people get to know old people? I did an address a while ago, Anne read it. If you ask people over 65 if they've had a meaningful conversation with someone over 65, I forget the time frame, in the last six months it was a very small percentage. And when you took out people they were related to it went down to like 10 percent.</p>
	<p>And congregations can be an antidote to that isolation and that siloing of ages and I think we need to really lift that up as missional for our communities.</p>
Amber	<p>So we know that there are two cultures, two expressions being cultivated in tandem, and parallel to one another. And we know there is no clear strategy that will allow either group to flourish sustainably in the near future. It would be a great loss to me if our movement wasn't able to bridge this gap. The stakes feel really high to me.</p>
Erin	<p>The stakes <i>are</i> high. We are being challenged to think and stretch in ways that might make us uncomfortable. But you know what they say about that comfort zone, right?</p>
Erin	<p>What we <i>have</i> heard from the interviews is there are young adults who yearn for rights of passage, guidance, and real deep relationships with UU elders. They don't necessarily want to show up and play a role in the production that is a congregational Sunday service, but they don't want to be separate either. And then we know there are also older adults who have told us they would love to be involved in a co-creative approach, however they can't participate because the current ways do not allow a say, 55 year old to join- it's prohibited.</p>
Amber	<p>I just want to take a cue from the Young adults in that - it's also totally ok to experiment. We <i>could</i> lift the age restriction, we could allow folks of any age to participate in the young adult culture. We could host young adult style gatherings. We could give space for young adults to meet together. We could try to make our existing congregations more young adult welcoming. Heck, we could create something new entirely. We could just try and see how it goes, like throwing spaghetti on the wall and seeing what sticks.</p>



Erin	Perhaps it's a bit of all of that. I strongly urge anyone who is invested in cultivating intergenerational communities to check out the report we've linked in the show notes. You'll be able to read first hand how young adults experience UUism right now.
Amber	I'm glad we took some time to learn about the two cultures, but it's also important to understand the barriers they face to fully embracing one another. What we do know is our ways of doing things now seem to create some obstacles to engaging. I'm interested to see how we might use the sense of fluidity to live our way into solutions.
Erin	Well you're in luck because in our upcoming episode we'll hear from people who are exploring how to consciously and proactively address this culture gap.
Amber	A la prochaine!!

End of Episode 2 transcript
