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UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 6: Community Ministry

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 6- Community Ministry

In this episode, we will learn how people are harnessing UU values to create meaningful change in their communities.

Our guests include:

- Kathryn Jane Hazel from Nanaimo Unitarian Shelter
- Kayoki Whiteduck and Lynn Kofmel-Preston from Ajaski Project (Ottawa First Unitarian Fellowship)
- Yvette Salinas (Former Executive Director) and Joanna Barrington (Camp Director), Unicamp, Ontario
- Karen Dunk Green, Lay Chaplain, Toronto
- Rev Wendy Luella Perkins, Founder of Soulful Singing

Episode playtime is



Music in	
Katherine Jane Hazel	We started out doing this in the sanctuary, and we realized that wasn't going to work. I think we were a bit naive about the condition of the people that we were trying to help. They were much more vulnerable, physically, more damaged...and emotionally.
Amber Bellemare	Welcome back to UU Expressions: Love in real life. I am your co-host Amber Bellemare, and I am joined by the CUC's Justice and Equity Lead Erin Horvath. If you've been with us since the beginning, you've arrived to Episode 6 of a 10 episode docu-series that discovers, celebrates, and challenges how Unitarian Universalism is practiced across Canada in 2024. In this episode, we will learn how people are harnessing UU (Unitarian Universalist) values to create meaningful change in their communities. That was Katherine Jane Hazel from the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo, describing the beginnings of the Nanaimo Unitarian Shelter they created for those who were unhoused in their city.
	When we think about how people find their way to UUism, we might first think about the congregational expression; however we heard some interesting and exciting stories of people engaging with UUism through a community-based ministry. Some of these are free standing initiatives and others are connected to a particular congregation, but as the name suggests, community ministry is focussed on bringing value to the larger community. It could look like a social service, such as a shelter, it could look like social enterprise, such as a cafe or bike shop, it could look like outreach such the work lay chaplains do, or even community partnerships, such as low income, or Indigenous housing projects.
Erin Horvath	Right, and given that community-based ministries operate differently than congregations, there are different types of conversations that these groups are having about how to meet needs, share their vision, be economically sustainable, and engage others in ways that include partnerships, customers, and employment relationships. Let's start with Wendy Luella Perkins of Soulful singing, a community of singers that meet daily online to explore UU values through song. For those who are just meeting Wendy Luella now, in Episode 1, we learned that her group of about 50 people engages people within Canada, USA, some even farther away, and that 70% of the members are not UU's. I asked Wendy Luella about her plans to build more economic sustainability into her community-based ministry using a grant she recently received from the Unitarian Universalist Association.
Wendy Luella Perkins	But that's part of the plan for the Unitarian Universalist Funding Panel Grant - the "Singing the songs for the journey" process is to develop this home base for my music online and that people would actually subscribe to that. And so it will be an ongoing source of income that I will be putting up new music all the time and that people would subscribe to it with a sliding scale.



	So congregations could subscribe and then have the freedom to use all the music that's there in a year, in worship, in community activities and protests or whatever, and do it in a way that's honoring copyright and also supporting me and my ministry.
Erin	Having an online portal where people can purchase her work is a new endeavor, and a very important one to support her community-based ministry. At the time, she was in the process of considering what models she wanted to use and how she wanted to get the word out. Leaning into the unknown seems to be a theme for her since the start of the pandemic as she has turned what used to be an in-person ministry into a thriving online community using approaches that were new to her, including Tik Tok.
Wendy Luella	So I'm very, very excited. And I have to say the Tik Tok thing, like "what!" Not to really age me but just to say I'm on the other side of 55 and the idea of being on Tik Tok never would have. But there was a person that comes to soulful singing Keith, who was so encouraging. He was like, 'These are wonderful songs. More people need to know about them and I really want to encourage you.'
	And so as I said, "Well, well, what about Tik Tok?" And he goes, "Okay." And so now I have maybe 105 of my own songs on Tik Tok. I think I've had maybe 45,000 views of those songs and I would never have reached those people without all of these cascading things.
	I feel very grateful that the unfolding has happened like this for me personally and my ministry. The Tik Tok thing is hilarious and wonderful!
Amber	Who would have imagined having a Tik Tok ministry. That is such a great example of embracing new ways of building community.
Erin	And having 45,000 views is a substantial reach! Many of which would not be UU's but rather lovers of meaningful music. Building an audience on social media is an example of a strategy that is very common in businesses as is the development of an online portal to sell things.
Amber	Right, and while this approach may be uncommon to other people in professional ministry, it can totally be an effective way to bring her some economic sustainability.
Erin	The people she serves do contribute to her financially, however, many are living in poverty and what they can collectively contribute is not enough to sustain her life. Wendy Luella was clear that right now it's possible for her to engage in her ministry as she does because she has a partner whose income supports their household. Taking this step to generate other revenues is a wonderful way to diversify income sources while staying true to the vision of getting her songs out into the world.
Amber	This reminds me of the conversation with Liz James from Mirth and Dignity.
Erin	Yes, they do so many amazing things to support UU's. In fact, they helped Wendy Luella prepare and submit the grant application to the UUA. One thing though: Mirth and Dignity functions because Liz is in a financial position to volunteer her time and energy to the non profit. And while it is so awesome that both of these people contribute what they do, both



	ministries could cease to exist if circumstances changed and they were no longer able or willing to volunteer their time.
Amber	And as we heard in several interviews, being able to volunteer time is a privilege that some people get to enjoy and others do not. The reality is that to ensure the longevity of a community-based ministry, one would be wise to develop strategies for a diversified income.
MUSIC	
Erin	Unicamp is a well known and loved Unitarian Universalist Camp in Ontario that was started in 1969 and currently has 17 member congregations. However, as we will hear from their current Executive Director Yvette Salinas and Camp Director Joanna Barrington, they have always had to work to balance their mission with their finances, especially now as congregational resources are lower than they have been in past generations.
Erin	Here's Yvette with her perspective on the purpose of Unicamp:
Yvette Salinas	I would say the purpose of Unicamp is to be constantly holding a space for people to figure themselves out and be in community: finding themselves in nature and reflecting on who they are as UU and realizing that nature is reflecting UU back at them and so are the campers around them.
Amber	Not the answer I was expecting. That's cool.
Erin	That's what I said! Here's Joanna expanding on the purpose:
Joanne Barrington	I hear oftentimes people who grow up going to camps who are like queer families, who are going to camp, who don't have a space where they feel safe and welcome. And so this is creating a space for so many people to come and enjoy camp in such a lovely community setting. But then also, you know, being outside, everything is outside.
	You walk outside to go get food, you walk outside to go visit friends. And it's just so nice to be surrounded by trees and plants and wonderful people who have, I want to say the same way of thinking, but yet a different way of thinking. That's why we all think the same is because everyone is like, it's wonderful to be different.
	And that's the kind of community that we're trying to create for people. For children and youth and families that everyone feels welcome in.
Erin	I was curious about how this camp came to be.
Joanna & Yvette	Tom Brown bought it for a dollar from Dave Hartman. He wanted to provide an opportunity for UUs. It was really for children to do RE (religious exploration) during the summer (we need to brush up on our history).
	Somebody bought it and they were like, "you can have it for cheap, but like you're going to do something special with it."
	And then a whole bunch of UUs got together and they're like, "This is what we can do." There were already dorms on there, there were six little bunkies it could fit 36 bunk beds. So



	already it lent itself to a summer camp idea and because it happened to be in the hands of UUs, they decided to use it as an RE program for children.
Amber	RE being religious education
Erin	Yes, so not unlike other churches of that time where kids would have vacation bible school or something of that nature, this was a place for the UU equivalent. Yvette, Joanna and I spoke about how the purpose has expanded over time and shared some stories about the magic of inclusivity people report experiencing there.
	It started with this idea of children's religious education...And then through time, it has become about a space that does have this feeling of inclusivity. And I've heard that by the way, at the Inclusivity Forums and things like that where we've looked at all different types of inclusivity and what groups need. And I remember hearing a variety of stories, some from queer folk, some from polyamorous folks.
	One young person said that they found out that they weren't broken and damaged because they were feeling really in their emotions at Unicamp. And it was about whether they could uphold monogamy. And they were just, in their opinion, not doing it well. And someone sat down and said, "well, I'm polyamorous and this is how it kind of works."
	Then that's how they found their bigger kind of values within their lives, like to understand how they would do things differently and what that meant. It was quite emotional actually, listening to that. beautiful. I love this story. Yeah, it's actually a recorded story because it was from one of the forums that they shared that that's how they found out they weren't irreparably damaged. So we keep hearing these kinds of tales of inclusivity and what it's meant to folks.
Yvette	I wouldn't say people beyond Ontario really understand what's happening there. Before I went there, I had no idea. I thought it was you ship your kids there, they do their thing, they come back. That's done. People are hearing about us, but not understanding what's going on.
	I would love it if every region had its own version of Unicamp. I don't need all Canadians to come to Unicamp, but it would be awesome if they had their own.
Erin	Having interviewed several people in Ontario I can attest to the wonderful impact that Unicamp has had. Luci Dilkus, who spoke to me about Huronia's nomadic approach to UUism expressed that it is one of the locations that she and others will frequent, many of those people being non-UU's. According to Joanna, this is a frequent occurrence.
Joanne	A lot of the people that come to Unicamp heard through word of mouth, you know, they really connect with people in their home communities, whether they're Unitarian or not.
	I like to say <i>identify</i> as a Unitarian, because some people are very Unitarian without knowing that they're Unitarian, you know, and so you meet people who just fit the values and that's why you connect with them. And so, like, I've got a lot of friends and family members who I tell about Unicamp because their values just totally align with what Unitarianism is.



	<p>And so they might actually find out about UUism through Unicamp.</p>
Yvette	<p>But a lot of our most enthusiastic first time visitors came because they heard from somebody else who came and had an awesome experience. It's when they get those awesome stories like you just told us, Erin, that they're like, I want that for myself or I want that for my kids.</p>
Amber	<p>I've been to Unicamp once for a Young Adult retreat but I don't know what else happens there to draw these UU's and non-UU's together.</p>
Erin	<p>Primarily they are a children and youth camp and have about 4-5 weeks dedicated to this each summer. They have a big focus on teenagers and young adults - about 90% of the staff are young adults. In addition they have family camps, weekend programs, workshops, private cottages, private rentals, seasonal campers and a range of special events such as marriages and dance camps where a group rents the whole facility. While there are a variety of reasons people come to camp, Joanna and Yvette were clear that the thing they have in common is their values which include UU values but also the community values they cultivate.</p>
Amber	<p>So they offer experiences of UU community in nature, leadership development for young people, and a venue that can be rented. I would say Unicamp is a form of social enterprise in that it is always balancing the joint goals of social good and financial sustainability. I'm curious then, what is the legal structure of Unicamp?</p>
Erin	<p>So they're a registered charity, which might be surprising to some of our listeners. Here is Yvette explaining more.</p>
Yvette	<p>Officially we do have member congregations, about a dozen member congregations. They are the ones that send delegates to a yearly annual general meeting. Big, big decisions have to go by those members.</p>
	<p>They can tell us whether they want us to go in another direction. And so far it seems they're happy with what we're doing.</p>
Erin	<p>The Board Members are from all the different member congregations and have direct experience with a particular aspect of the camp such as being a former staff member, seasonal camper, parent of children who attend. Joanna and Yvette indicated that about 2 years ago the board undertook a process of creating the covenant that now governs their interactions.</p>
Amber	<p>Ok, I imagine that having a board made up of people with an insider's experience of Unicamp could be both to their benefit and also create some challenges.</p>
Erin	<p>Absolutely. Yvette explained that the covenant was a positive moment in the camp's history as it helped board members create the parameters for how they would relate productively and respectfully together.</p>



Yvette	<p>That was a big shift honestly, and it was a hard process. Getting it actually written down, this is how they're going to be talking, they have to understand that when they're there as a board member, they're not there as a seasonal camper, they're not there as a parent.</p>
	<p>They have to be thinking for the good of the whole organization. And that was part of the covenant. We do revisit it every year as the new board members come in. Yeah, it's been so helpful though, because sometimes we can get really heated about some of our conversations and be able to say, Hey, remember that thing that we all discussed at the beginning?</p>
Erin	<p>While this board is the group the organization is ultimately accountable to, it is not the group that makes decisions about the daily happenings at camp.</p>
Yvette	<p>I've talked about the youth and young adult staff that is our golden treasure at camp. I'm trying as an ED to really keep myself open to things that they would suggest and how we should be running because like they just have so much more passion than maybe they've been given credit for.</p>
	<p>And I want to empower them to bring in things for the good of the kids in the families, that they are the ones that have to implement it. So they would know. Having that 80 plus percent of our staff members being the youth and young adults is awesome.</p>
	<p>We're being more intentional about actually saying we're confident in you. What is it that you think we should be focusing more on? How can we be supporting you? And I think that's working. I think that's one of the reasons that they come back even though the work is hard and your days are super long. But if you ever have an idea like, hey, I'm going to build this bike rack? "Yeah, go for it." I think having that capability is what brings in some more of our youth and young adults into these roles.</p>
Erin	<p>And are these paid roles? Do they get paid a salary or an honorarium or how do they get paid?</p>
Yvette	<p>Yes, weekly salary.</p>
Erin	<p>In addition to being a radically inclusive camp, equipping young people to make meaningful decisions is another thing that makes Unicamp unique. A child or youth attending camp could look up to these young adults and imagine that one day, they too could be in a leadership position helping co-create the future of the place they love. With this youth-focused mission, however, there are some unique considerations in this post-COVID world such as the mental health of youth and young adults that has really taken a hit, not just generally but specifically in terms of the youth that attend the camp and the young adults that run the camp. I asked how this is impacting their social enterprise and here is one example Yvette shared:</p>
Yvette	<p>Their social batteries are a lot a lot shorter, or their ability to be with that group of kids would be for a shorter length of time than they maybe would have before. Energy is depleted a little bit and so on.</p>



	<p>So like this past summer, we tried to bring in more floaters so that they don't actually have their own camp group, but they can step in in case a counselor needs to take a break, trying to do more of that. But of course, that ends up being like another paid role means like, okay, what's the impact on the budget? And there's a domino effect there.</p>
Erin	<p>Both Yvette and Joanna spoke at length about the various supports and resources that they are bringing in to support the youth, not just for their own benefit as people, but because they are understood to be the treasure of Unicamp. When they suffer, so does the whole community. As someone who grew up in Unicamp and was on staff, Joanna shared the differences she has witnessed over time and how it impacts their operations.</p>
Joanna	<p>When I got my first job you would work hard and say yes to every shift and show them I want this job.</p>
	<p>I'm going to work hard to get it. I'm going to bend over backwards just to get there. And we've seen a shift in general where now young people are finally speaking up for themselves and they get a job and say, I can work, but, you know, I have vacation plans with my family for a week here and a week there.</p>
	<p>Where they're able to say yes to the job. But here are my boundaries around all that and so they're finally starting to speak up for themselves, which is amazing.</p>
	<p>You know, we really tried to go back to pre-pandemic, but you add in to that social burnout that we're talking about and then you also add in, youth are finally standing up for themselves.</p>
	<p>So it's been this funny balance of making things back to normal, but yet better and different, if that makes sense. That's the reality of hiring and empowering youth to do this job and teaching them. I was talking earlier about mentorship and we want to create leaders out of these young people. And we want them to become the executive director one day and the camp director one day.</p>
	<p>It's just amazing to think about all the opportunities that we're giving to them. But it's kind of the balance, we're their employer, so we need to tell them, what's what in a sense, but we still need to hear from them. Like Yvette was saying, let's hear about their ideas and what change they want to see happen.</p>
Amber	<p>I recognize the activism training built into this way of relating.</p>
Erin	<p>They shared that these Young Adult staff who have become strong advocates for themselves tend to extend their advocacy to their campers in trying to create a more democratic process even in terms of giving campers choice over what they do with their time instead of programming everything down to a tee. Which they recognize is different from past generations where camp directors and camp counselors called the shots and campers were expected to go along with it.</p>



Amber	So this creates quite a unique set of circumstances where the social goals of being radically inclusive and training up young people to be strong advocates are combined with a reality that people are paying for an experience of beloved community within this venue. Plus, they have to balance income and expenses in a way that ensures that it can not only survive, but thrive for future generations to enjoy.
Erin	Yes, and while they never presented themselves as a social enterprise, and in fact shied away from conversations using words typically associated with business such as brand, customer, profit and loss, and scaling up, the reality is that they are taking on operating a values driven social enterprise.
Amber	It seems Community ministry and Social enterprise have a lot in common, and thinking in these terms might open the doors for more sustainable UU initiatives in the future.
MUSIC	
Erin	First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa is engaged in a community project that is <i>not currently</i> operating as a social enterprise but <i>is</i> grappling with questions related to long term financial sustainability. They have linked up with an Indigenous teacher and horticulturist with a passion for teaching Indigenous youth how to grow their own food. The Ottawa First campus is home base for this initiative.
Kayoki Whiteduck	Hello, My name is Kayoki Whiteduck and I am the lead of the Ajashki project here.
Lynne Kofmel-Preston.	And I'm Lynne Kofmel-Preston. I am a member of the Circle of Support.
Erin	A unique aspect of this initiative is that Kayoki who provides leadership for the initiative is not a UU, however he is supported by the group of UU's that Lynne is a part of. Here's Kayoki explaining what Ajashki is.
Kayoki	So the Ajashki project, we're in our third year now and we're now running as a special reconciliation program here at the First Unitarian Congregation in Ottawa. We are basically an Indigenous learning center. We specialize in food security and climate change and how they're both related.
	So what we do is we take youths, primarily Indigenous youth, the youth being between 13 and 30 to come participate in our program. And they learn how to grow their own food, how to cook their own food. We study a lot about just gardening, different types of gardening. We have an outside garden where we produce food all summer long, and then we also have indoor gardens by the means of hydroponic growing towers, which we can actually grow food in all year long.
	We also do a lot about Indigenous cultures and language, so sometimes we have elders come in. I am myself Algonquin, so we started learning about the Algonquin language.



	<p>This year in our program we've actually had a lot of Inuit participants, so we started learning some Inuktitut. We kind of gear a lot of this program around the needs of the youth. A lot of the youth we have are food insecure. So that's why we have such a heavy focus on the food security aspect. And we also focus a lot on mental wellness.</p>
	<p>A lot of the youth have faced systemic barriers or problems in their own life.</p>
Erin	<p>Kayoki explained the history of this ambitious initiative.</p>
Kayoki	<p>We started officially in 2021, but in 2020, some of the members here at First Unitarian had a meeting in a sharing circle with an elder from my community named Verna MacGregor, and they were asking what they could do around reconciliation. And that's when Verna gave them the idea of an Indigenous learning center, which was, of course, a big step at the time.</p>
	<p>So they started with an Indigenous program, and that's kind of how the idea started about a few months later. These people from First Unitarian, Sharon Bowen, Lynn and a few others got in contact with myself and asked me, "Hey, we're interested in starting an Indigenous gardening program here. Would you-be interested?"</p>
	<p>And that's when I came on. And then in the winter of 2020. So like during the height of COVID is when we actually started planning out exactly what the program would look like. In June of 2021, we planted our first garden, and I believe in July of 2021 is where we got our first participant to the program.</p>
	<p>I think it's great that people are reaching out because they want to engage in some sort of reconciliation.</p>
Erin	<p>I was curious why Kayoki, who did not know of UUism before this project, agreed to be involved. He said it was based on what his community elder Verna MacGregor said to him after her meeting with representatives from Ottawa First.</p>
	<p>They're good people, is what she said. So that solidified for me it's okay for me to work with this organization</p>
Amber	<p>It's somewhat surprising to me that it went that smoothly given the history of churches and Indigenous communities.</p>
Erin	<p>Me too so I asked Kayoki about it.</p>
	<p>"...When you talk about reconciliation and how that goes sometimes between indigenous people and churches, it can be a complicated history. Was there any sort of reservation by you or your community or anybody about that part of it, the church-like, even though Unitarian Universalists have a different value set, right?"</p>
	<p>That's it. And it was the value that I think that kind of made me different from other organizations</p>



Erin	I asked if Ajashki operated with a covenant, as covenant is important within many UU cultures. Kayoki explained that he doesn't work that way, but instead, him and whatever organization he works with signs a simple three point agreement. Lynn mentioned that there are differences in the way that Ajashki operates that were hard for some UU's to embrace at the beginning.
Kayoki	So certainly in the way we run things at Ajashki you would definitely consider more an Indigenous way of having an organization, especially when it comes to a structure. Rather than, of course, First Unitarian are more culturally different.
	Not necessarily...I don't want to use the word colonial, but something more towards that focus where everything has a leader to everything. And this is the procedure that we follow rather than at Ajashki. I take the lead because, you know, we needed the leader to kind of run the show, but everyone else is all the Circle of Support.
	We have many Circle of Support members and they're all just coordinators and we all just help coordinate things. We try to structure Ajashki a little differently than how First U and all the other smaller organizations under First U.
Lynn	When we were first getting together to put this project forward, what we had asked for were sort of outside of the ballpark that people were used to providing here. And so because it was unusual,
	it was treated like change often is, and that some people were a little hesitant about it. But what's happened over the past three years as Ajashki has sort of been more in the public eye here locally and people have come to know what's going on and how the benefits have sort of streamed from it the relationship with the people who were a little bit hesitant at first has changed.
	Like it's just a total change. So we've been very pleased with the evolution. It's difficult to encounter change sometimes. And it just took a little bit of time for people to realize that the change was not going to be a negative change, that there were a lot of positives coming from it.
Erin	The impact of the Ajashki project has been very positive.
Lynn	We've had articles in a local newspaper that Kayoki has spoken at a number of in church and out of church events and that all sort of drew attention to Ajashki that was wider than just the congregation. And they would see those things out in the community and that kind of drew them to realize that this was something that had positive effects in the community and outside of the Unitarian community.
Kayoki	a lot of people that I've talked to who thought with the program, what we're doing here is really great.
	I think I've heard of anybody in my community who's had a negative outlook on Ajashki. We've had a few elders come in. My grandmother, who is a very respected elder in my community, came in to do a prayer for at the end of the year. We have an end of the year



	<p>celebration for our summer program and she thought it was great.</p>
	<p>We also work with a number of different Indigenous organizations within the Ottawa area. For one, there's Inuuqatigiit, which is an organization that serves Inuit people in Ottawa, which has a fairly large Inuit population.</p>
	<p>We get a lot of our participants from them: six or seven workers from them from the last two years. We also worked with an Inuit high school where they would come every once a week during our summer program.</p>
	<p>And their high school kids would work with our youth participants and watch our everyday activities here. We worked with a few different Indigenous organizations in Ottawa, and I personally think our relationship and the feedback we got has been great.</p>
Amber	<p>What a great example of reconciliation in action through this community engaged project.</p>
Erin	<p>Since our recording, Ottawa First has announced that they have another exciting project underway. And this one has to do with housing. This project will create 220 units of almost entirely affordable housing for Ottawa and part of this includes 60 units a building that will be built by Ontario Aboriginal Housing Services So another really exciting example of being relevant within the needs of their community, as well as working with the indigenous community to create projects that have a meaningful impact, not just in what they're creating, but in the ways that they are relating to one another.</p>
MUSIC	
Erin	<p>There was another community engaged UU initiative that I had the privilege of speaking to. This is Kathryn-Jane Hazel of the First Unitarian Fellowship of Nanaimo in British Columbia who spoke at the opening of the episode explaining what the Nanaimo Unitarian Shelter is and why it was started. She goes into more detail here.</p>
Kathryn-Jane	<p>Well, it was started to provide housing for homeless people in Nanaimo back in 2008. There was an increase in the number of homeless, and there were some members of our congregation who were very concerned about this. And it was taken to a vote of the congregation to see if we would be willing to provide some sort of a shelter for the unhoused.</p>
	<p>And at that time, it was just during particular extreme weather conditions. They needed more than just a mat on the floor of the church hall.</p>
	<p>We had been renting out the lower place part of our building to (I never can remember whether it was the Moose or the Elks, but it was one of those animal club groups) and they canceled their lease. And so we moved into that space and started providing shelter and we were volunteer run for almost five years, completely volunteer run, which was quite an undertaking.</p>



	<p>We've always been the workhorse of the homeless shelter services in Nanaimo, we were the only low barrier shelter. And by that I mean if people showed up and they were drunk or stoned, we wouldn't turn them away because for us we felt that's when people are at their most vulnerable. Why would you shut the door to them when they most needed help?</p>
	<p>And we would take them in. We would take away their alcohol or their drugs and say, "You can't use these while you're in the shelter. We will give them back to you when you leave in the morning. But, you know, these are the conditions in which you can take shelter here." And I think we think and others think that this was actually the best approach, because for some of these people, it was the first time they had been in a detox situation or had any experience of it, because from 7 p.m. at night till 7 a.m. in the morning, they were not using drugs or alcohol.</p>
	<p>They were getting nutritious food like a warm meal at dinner time and then breakfast. They were sleeping in clean beds. And there were people there who, if they decided they wanted to move on in their lives, like either by getting into some treatment program or getting housed or whatever, there were some there who would sit down with them and say, okay, what's your plan?</p>
	<p>What would you like to do?</p>
Erin	<p>Apparently those using the shelter are not limited to folks living with addictions and mental health as one might imagine.</p>
Kathryn-Jane	<p>In actual fact, about a quarter of the people coming to our shelter are seniors who have been reno-victed and are either living on the streets or in their cars. We had one man who'd been in a wheelchair living on the streets for almost a year and he'd been reno-victed. There's people who are working.</p>
	<p>There are people who are on minimum wage and they can't get together the rent. So they stay in our shelter until they can save up enough money to find a place to rent. We've even had international students from Vancouver Island University. They can't find anything that's affordable. We've had people with mental illness, of course. I mean, don't get me started on that.</p>
	<p>That's a whole nother area. But you know who can't get treatment and they can't they can't cope with a regular housing situation. They need supports that aren't there for them. We have elderly people. For example, Paul came to the shelter one afternoon and there was an elderly woman with her suitcase, and he started asking her about her situation.</p>
	<p>And she was a woman who's in the beginning stages of dementia. And she'd been taken in by one of these online scams by someone saying, "Oh, you're the most beautiful woman in the world and, you know, I love you." And gradually reeling her in and then asking her to send him money. And she had lost all her retirement funds, basically, and ended up unable to pay her rent.</p>
	<p>And so there she was outside the shelter, you know, with no place to go and, in no fit mental</p>



	state to find a new place to live. So those are the people who are in shelters now.
Erin	This shelter ran for years solely on the volunteer efforts of Fellowship members and financial donations. In 2018, it became a year-round all-weather shelter, which thrust it into a whole other realm that involved negotiating with local and provincial political systems. Their experience with activism was put to good work advocating for the unhoused in their city.
Kathryn Jane	We have gone through major changes. In 2018, we became a year round weather shelter, which was a big improvement. In the early days when we were an extreme weather shelter the system was just absolutely insane. It was like this poker game we played with the city and the provincial government. We would go and meet with the officials and they would say, “okay, we’ll fund you if the temperatures are minus two and sleeting or snowing.
	And we would come back and say, “well, we think it should be plus two and wind and rain” and we’d come to some kind of halfway point. I mean, it was yeah, it was like a poker game and the chips were the unhoused.
Amber	It is so moving to see the UU practice of activism coming to life.
Erin	Indeed, and it wasn't a peripheral part of their congregational life. It was so central that Catherine estimated that it took up 60% of the board's time to fundraise and operate the shelter, as well as advocate for other services to support the unhoused in their area.
Amber	That is some serious dedication for what? 16 years? What a profound impact.
Erin	In the upcoming episode we'll learn more about how this group is taking action to ensure this much needed resource is sustainable into the future, but for now I will lift them up as an example of a community-based UU ministry that operates as a social service.
MUSIC	
Amber	I'm very curious to learn about your conversation with the Lay Chaplains. As you know I was a lay chaplain many moons ago, which is why I suggested we reach out to them. Lay Chaplains are truly a unique flavour of community based ministry.
Erin	I'm glad you did because I got to speak with Karen Dunk-Green, a lay chaplain at the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto who explained so eloquently what lay chaplaincy is.
Karen	Our lay chaplains team are responsible for offering rites of passage or services to any member of the community who comes looking for that.
	We advertise outside of the congregation and we welcome anyone who wants to have a service, a ritual performed for them. So the obvious ones are weddings and memorial services. We also do child naming services. We've done other types of blessings. Recently, there have been requests to provide ritual and service in the context of people who are going through the MAiD- (Medical Assistance in Dying) process even.
	So really providing a way for people to co-create these types of services in ways that might not be done in more traditional religious settings. So we're co-creating every single time with



	people who come and say, I want to mark this moment in my life in an important way that's meaningful to me. How can you help me do that?
	Our ministers look after those things for our members. But for nonmembers, we provide that service. We really as a way of extending our reach into the community as a way of representing Unitarian Universalism across the community and not making that necessarily part of someone joining the congregation or having a permanent relationship with us.
	It's essentially an outreach service.
Erin	Additionally for congregations without a minister, lay chaplains can play critical roles in leading ceremonies and providing leadership. The Lay Chaplaincy initiative began in 1971 through the Canadian Unitarian Council which included the training of carefully chosen lay members. Karen reflected on the historical context for how that came to be.
	A part of the history, was that there was a real rush of demand when same sex marriage became legal in Canada. And people knew Unitarians were open to doing those types of services. But again, there was a capacity issue. And so there was a real match there between what we were open and willing to provide and what the broader marketplace, if you'll call it that, was looking for. And so there was a high volume of activity related to same sex marriage. We don't see that same volume coming to us anymore because that service is available through many other organizations.
Amber	One of the strengths that Unitarian Universalist Lay Chaplains have is their ability to help people navigate and celebrate diversity.
erin	That's what she said! Karen explained how Lay Chaplains bring this to life:
	Quite often we are also contacted by people who are marrying in a multi-faith couple.
	So there might be one person in the couple who is from a Catholic heritage. Another person is from a muslim heritage. Whatever the combinations, we see lots of different combined families bringing different cultures together. They're either not allowed literally in some cases, to have a service in that mixed way in either of their home cultures and that they still want to have a ritual, a ceremony, something that people would recognize as a service.
	And so they come to us, having heard that we're willing to create something with them that will combine the elements of their cultures that make sense to them and that are meaningful to their families. And we really create something unique every single time that is suitable for them. So that happens a lot in the marriage side of things.
Erin	Besides ethnic diversity UU lay chaplains are equipped to co-create ceremonies that celebrate other types of diversities such as relationship structure.
	If we're talking about diversity and actually having people recognize that diverse types of relationships are welcome within our community, that is a particular story that's true around lay chaplaincy.
	I mean, I talked about people of mixed races and mixed cultures. I didn't talk about poly



	<p>(polyamorous) groups, poly poly families, but definitely that's been a demand and it's been a reason why people have come.</p>
	<p>As people have approached me who are in poly relationships and they are getting married and they want someone to marry them who understands the nature of their relationship.</p>
	<p>What I find interesting is in any of the cases where I've been approached that way, in the end, the ceremony has not been different from anyone else's ceremony. There haven't been different words declaring the polyamorous situation. There haven't been extra other partners participating alongside the married couple. All they've really wanted is to be able to say, This is our relationship.</p>
	<p>And I think to be able to say "this is our relationship," and be married by someone who knows that helps people to feel that they've legitimately been married in their relationship. So they want to be able to be who they are and to be open about it with the person who is blessing their marriage. So, I mean, as you know, we're not allowed to do ceremonies that involve polyamorous couples specifically or polyamorous family structures specifically.</p>
	<p>We can't bring more than two people into a ceremony of union. But we can talk to those people and understand and accept and celebrate that they are coming to be married in that larger context of who they are. So I have found it fascinating that no one has asked me to do a ceremony that actually looks any different to anyone else.</p>
	<p>What they want is for me to know that this is who they are.</p>
Erin	<p>I found it fascinating to hear about how UU Chaplains have been navigating the balance between being radically inclusive as UUs, and complying with governmental law.</p>
Amber	<p>And historically, when it came to recognizing same-sex unions, Lay Chaplains and UU ministers were performing non-legal queer unions decades before it became legalized in Canada. It was not only about honouring diversity but was activism as well, which speaks to my heart.</p>
Erin	<p>Right, and a modern times equivalent is in recognizing unions between people who are polyamorous. As Karen said, Lay Chaplains and Ministers have to be very careful not to appear to be joining more than two people at a time, even if no one is becoming legally married under Canadian law. When I inquired about why there doesn't appear to be as much of an activist stance from members of the UU task force on Polyamory, I heard concerns about the potential of Unitarian Universalists coming under scrutiny from the government and losing the ability to marry people.</p>
Amber	<p>It goes to show how things have progressed over time. All this is new to me. And it's interesting because if it was like a "welcome to the family" ceremony where someone was being adopted or welcomed into family intentionally, more than two people could take part, but if it appears to be too similar to a legal marriage then alarm bells sound.</p>



Erin	I appreciate the thoughtful consideration that is going into how to navigate this muddy territory. The Canadian Unitarian Council striking a task force to examine the issues (of polyamory) demonstrates how seriously this form of inclusion is being taken, as well as the desire to take action in a productive way. Some would say there is an opportunity to introduce activism in action here. By hosting a spiritual union ceremony for more than two, as opposed to the legal marriage ceremony, Lay Chaplains could help society move towards greater recognition of a range of relationships and family structures.
Amber	True, and I appreciate that this action, if it were to be taken sometime in the future, would be done with full awareness of the potential consequences. For those listeners interested in learning more, the Polyamory Task force released a report that we will link in the show notes.
MUSIC	
Erin	As we wind down this episode it's worth noting the way in which Lay Chaplains are engaging as they make their services available to the broader community, and in doing so, share UU values in action. Each of the lay chaplains undergo specific training by the Canadian Unitarian Council and in that training they are introduced to the types of ceremonies they may be called upon to design. It is significant here the use of the word design instead of perform, facilitate or execute in that <i>these ceremonies</i> are not cookie cutter, they are designed <i>with</i> the people involved and have <i>specific meaning</i> to them. Here's Karen to explain more:
Karen	You're meeting with family members who have said, We want to do something. We need some support, but they always come with an idea of what it is that they're trying to achieve. And we're always in a long dialog. In some cases about which words are the right words, what rituals are the right rituals, What's the right order of events here?
	What are the right elements that are going to be meaningful to your family as opposed to anything that I might have done in the last ceremony or the last ceremony? I've talked a lot about weddings, but for me, the memorial services are in some ways more meaningful and more interesting because there's even more of a sense that there's just sort of blank slate.
	It's all a co-creation. It's all about bringing together all the elements that are going to be meaningful. And we're a guide and we provide some structure. And I find that most of the time also what we provide is just an assurance that what they feel they want to do is okay, that what they feel they want to have happen in the ceremony is allowed because there's still this sense that there's a way you're supposed to do things.
	And we talk with people right upfront that what you're supposed to do is just what is meaningful to you. It doesn't have to look the way someone else's ceremony looked. So it's very much a representation of this idea that everyone can be involved and that we do this so that it matters and is meaningful each and every time.
	The lay chaplain practice really does capture this idea of co-creation very well.



Erin	Once again we hear the word co-creating being brought up where the ceremony is highly personalized to those involved and is about the experience as opposed to the performance.
Amber	And, it's very similar to what we heard is happening in the other expressions we interviewed who are all aiming to be more intergenerational or creative in their times of worship and community.
Erin	Co-creating is emerging as an approach that is very common within UUism as a whole and so it is exciting and validating that the Lay Chaplains are sharing UU values with the broader community in this way.
Amber	That UU's are known as co-creators of beautiful inclusive ceremonies is such a powerful and telling way to welcome people into our faith, whether it's for long or short time. And we know that their outreach works. I was married by a UU Lay Chaplain, who co-created a custom mixed culture ceremony with me and my then partner, which is how I learned about UUism!
Erin	Oh cool, I didn't know that. And I agree. In the upcoming episodes we'll carry on the conversation with Karen regarding lay chaplaincy. She and I explore ways to amplify the good work this group is already doing <i>and</i> build the collective capacity to outreach deeper into the community. We even began imagining how to incorporate social enterprise aspects to sustain their work and enhance their impact. Very interesting conversation that I look forward to sharing.
Amber	Sounds very rich. I must say there are some impactful community based initiatives happening, and I'm sure that there are more that we haven't yet heard about. These initiatives are bringing UU values to life in the world that really benefit the communities they are a part of.
Erin	Yes, there is a lot of great energy and vibrancy happening. In the next two episodes we'll delve more deeply into these initiatives which will include Episode 7 called Money and Episode 8 called Potential.
Amber	I look forward to it.

End of Episode 6 transcript



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