



CANADIAN
UNITARIAN
COUNCIL

CONSEIL
UNITARIEN
DU CANADA

UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 4 - Authenticity 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 4: Authenticity

In this episode, we explore the value of authentic connection within and beyond traditional UU communities by showcasing three affinity groups and a path to ministry that lay outside the congregational expression, followed by a conversation about covenant and the challenges of togetherness.

We talk to:

- Janet Pivnick, Minister in Training
- Anonymous leaders of QUUeer Connecting
- Claire Heistek, with Le Rassemblement unitarien universaliste d'Ottawa
- catharine strickland, UUs of the Salish Sea
- Liz James from Mirth and Dignity
- Z Brimacombe from Loving Justice group
- Camellia Jahanshahi, Rising Together host
- Reverends Anne Barker and Linda Thomson, CUC's Congregational Life Team

Episode playtime is 1:26:17



Music fades	I was reading the principles, they're pretty amazing as a way of understanding ourselves and understanding who we are in the world.
Janet	But what does that actually look like in our day to day lives? That one of the things that attracted me to Unitarianism is the fact that it's a lived religion, that we have these principles and we covenant to try to live out those principles. But what does that actually mean? And, you know, so how do we do that?
	How do we create communities that are rooted in love?
Amber	"Welcome to UU Expressions: Love in real life, a 10 episode docu-series that discovers, celebrates, and challenges how Unitarian Universalism is practiced across Canada in 2024. I am Amber Bellemare.
	I am Erin Horvath
Amber	and we are the Canadian Unitarian Council's Justice and Equity Team. The opening voice was Janet Pivnik asking us to consider how we might live out our principles in communities of love. In this episode, we will explore the value of authentic connection within and beyond traditional UU communities by showcasing 3 affinity groups and a path to ministry that lay outside the congregational expression, followed by a conversation about covenant and the challenges of togetherness.
Erin	Our last episode ended with a wonderful image of a diverse forest, rich with a variety of inhabitants that call it home- a great metaphor to bring forward with us as we examine more closely those groups that are a part of the UU ecosystem.
Amber	This imagery reminds us that it is not necessarily desirable for everyone in the UU ecosystem to be identical in their experiences, desires, or expressions.
Erin	Just like a forest ecosystem sustains and thrives on diversity and interconnectivity, it can be beneficial for differences to exist within UUism as well.
Amber	Right now, the way we envision our aspiration to be radically inclusive is that <i>all of that diversity</i> will show up in congregations on Sunday morning.
Erin	Right. In that case we would be viewing the congregation as the forest and the diverse people as living things within it.
Amber	Which makes it upsetting, discouraging even, when we don't see the diversity we <i>think should be there</i> . But maybe we are looking for evidence of diversity in the wrong places. What if we stepped back to understand if we are fulfilling this essential aspiration?
Erin	As Casey Stainsby suggested when she offered this metaphor in the last episode, another way to view things is to imagine <i>UUism</i> as the forest and the <i>congregational expression</i> as old the big growth trees that have have been an enduring part of UUism for years. The Youth expression might be seen as the mycelium network, and the YA online community expression as a cluster of new sapplings that have sprung up when the tree canopy cleared and sun shone in.



Amber	So not just diverse beings but diverse types of places they inhabit. Within this metaphor then the various creators of the UU ecosystem could live and play within other tree and plant structures too. And while they may not call the old growth trees home, they may still visit those trees, or rest in their shade. Forest creatures may congregate with others similar to them, recognizing they are part of the larger whole.
Erin	Yes. Exactly. I had the privilege of talking to a variety of UU's who told me about the types of UU spaces they enjoy inhabiting and the types of UU beings that they call their people-meaning the people most similar to them and with whom they find companionship. Some said they spend time within congregations and within other expressions such as affinity groups, activist groups, social enterprises, and charitable services. Others said that their only involvement in the UU ecosystem is through the particular group or initiative they are a part of.
Erin	All these beautiful "wildflowers" in the UU ecosystem are emerging out of a deep need to be authentic to their needs, nature, and desires when it comes to Beloved Community. And this is not a bad thing.
Amber	The question is, how do we honour them in a way that legitimizes their existence, and strengthens our national fabric?
Erin	Great question and one that we will consider as we meet people from some of the various UU affinity groups that exist. To stick with our metaphor, these might be different UU habitats that people are enjoying and clusters of UU beings that have found a sense of affinity with each other.
Amber	That's why I really like the natural imagery of an ecological system. We can learn a lot from observing how varieties of plant and animal species coexist in a symbiotic way. The youth and young adults are a great example of why providing protected sacred space is beneficial to the health of the whole movement, and through these interviews, we realize just how often affinity groups are sprouting in the forest.

Erin	The idea of affinity groups within UUism is not entirely new. For instance, in the early 2000s, the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ottawa officially recognized the French language in its congregational life. They have grown to have 2 monthly French language gatherings: a Sunday French church service and a circle meeting focussed on spiritual growth. They receive equal funding as the English speaking congregational expression and have the autonomy to do things as they wish. Meet Claire from Le Rassemblement Unitarien Universaliste d'Ottawa as she explains how her UU Expression works.
Claire Heistek	So what happens is that following we follow basically the ritual of a traditional English service with a chalice lighting Hong Kong, whoever you are, we close with them extinguishing the flame and going out in peace.



	<p>You know that the frame is the same, but the core of the service is led by the facilitator. The Facilitator Theater will speak for about five, 10 minutes at the most on the subject. And again, we go in to circle and share our reaction to the talk. Or since everybody knows what the theme is, some forethought.</p>
	<p>First of all, we do not have a minister. We do have guest speakers, but not every Sunday. And we do have socially since the new board who wanted to to change the format of the services to be more inclusive.</p>
	<p>I can say that the service is often colored by who the service leader is colored in the sense of, of the choice of words, but also the, the, the format.</p>
	<p>However, there is a still a strong component of traditional order of service.</p>
	<p>We will use the concept of a circle. So the concept of a circle is active listening. Okay, So where each person gets a chance to express their reaction to the facilitator.</p>
	<p>But they're so there's no discussion. It's just a sharing of your own reaction.</p>
Erin	<p>In terms of numbers Claire shared that there are usually 12-20 people involved in the Francophone expression. They meet in a building that they own partially with another not-for-profit that provides housing and affordable rent to 18 agencies. They are 12.5% owners. Here's what Claire had to say about the ethnicity of the group and how it is shaping their expression.</p>
	<p>Most of us are Franco Ontarians or Quebeckers, all white but we have three Unitarians that are from Burundi originally, and they are black. These people from Burundi are part of Rev. Fulgence's (Mwibutsa Ndagijimana) congregation and that's really neat to hear.</p>
	<p>Because the speaker we had this last time who became Unitarian after spending ten years with the Jesuits was also of Rev. Fulgence's congregation. And there are other others from Burundi that have come in the past. Part of the issue for them is that especially the ones that are recent refugees there, it's Sunday at 12:00 is a bit of an issue because they're usually working on the Sunday because they're working as service people.</p>
Amber	<p>I just want to clear up the connection with the Flaming Chalice organization that Liz James mentioned earlier that is part of what Myrth and Dignity so diligently support. It's great to see these connections. It's also interesting that they are becoming aware of the inclusion needs of this particular demographic.</p>
Erin	<p>It is. Claire explained to me what this group offers her and many other French-speaking Unitarians in the area; in addition to the ability to speak and think in her own language, find resources in her own language and share those with others- which are all things she said she deeply valued. She went on further to describe the sense of home that it brings and how the language itself changes her experience and perceptions.</p>
Claire	<p>It's not usually knowledge based, it's more perception.</p>



	<p>It's experiential. The words cause a reaction, an inner reaction. I realize that I'm talking culturally. Our words make us vibrate. Our words make us feel. And so the pleasure of having Francophones and Francophiles, exchanging in the language that is experiential and you're all in language that makes you feel at home.</p>
	<p>My home was Francophone, my environment was Anglophone and I functioned well in both, but at my heart is in my home and the same thing happens in our assemble. It's not the space, it's the people. And being able to share what I feel in my language, it's in part familiarity. And even though I have lived as a bilingual person all my life, I have the the French part of me,</p>
	<p>the French part of me perceives slightly differently. I can be very linear when I'm speaking in English, logical step by step. When I'm speaking French, I become more global, more creative.</p>
	<p>And my humour is different. I don't have a sense of humour in English, it's just the way it is. I can laugh more easily in French. It's not so serious. These are just me. One of the reasons that I thought it might be important to share that we live this experience of the assemble is that other minorities, our diverse groups might have a need to live in with their peers, taking nothing away from Unitarianism.</p>
	<p>We are Unitarians. We believe the same principles. But we live in our hearts as Unitarians in at sense.</p>
Amber	<p>There's something really beautiful about being able to be experience oneself with peers. In this case they are centering the francophone experience and so it doesn't need to be discussed or defended or whatever because it's a shared thing. It's put right in the center and then all of the other things can come around it.</p>
Erin	<p>And I loved that Claire was careful to point out that it's not because something is bad about a collective experience where diversity is celebrated. It's a beautiful addition. It can mean being even more welcoming and allow people to customize their UU experience and co-create something that speaks to them. Here's Claire again speaking about her initial resistance to joining this language-based affinity group and why she has come to embrace it.</p>
Claire	<p>At the beginning I didn't want to join the French group, I did the spiritual circle. I perceived that as being something that would nourish me. But the French service, I thought, I don't need that.</p>
	<p>I've got the English service. But after a while I realized that, no, it's not feeding me. I have to go and look at what this other service is. And then I realized, yes, that's what I need. And I can go to the English service. I can be service leader of an English service. When you talk about a performance.</p>
	<p>Yes, I could do that. But I can't perform in the French group. We have to be real. We have to be ourselves from the heart.</p>
Erin	<p>I do love, though, that you don't have to pick one or the other, that people can engage to</p>



	whatever degree they want.
Amber	Aw, so its not just about the experience and perceptions of using the French language but also about how the different format combined with the language, allows her to connect more deeply with her spirituality and other people.
Erin	It seems so. She mentioned that, in hindsight, she has difficulty connecting with the format of the English service- it's very Protestant for her, formal. So having the space to meet in this affinity group allowed them to co-create something that resonates. Claire added this beautiful sentiment.
Claire	We don't all speak the same language in the sense that we don't all use the same words depending on where you come from. Our accents are slightly different, but there definitely is a feeling of heart.
	It's not only the words, but it's the expression of their spirituality. Because even though as Unitarians we follow the same principles and sources, the expression of our spirituality can be different.
Amber	I imagine the French expression of Unitarianism as this beautiful birch tree in the middle of the woods, calling the finches and chickadees and butterflies to take shelter and time together

Amber	Ok, maybe your affinity isn't language, but it's your sexuality or gender expression. How would themes of heart, unique expression, and deep connection manifest then.
Erin	I had the opportunity to speak with some of the organizers of QUQueer Connecting which is an affinity group started by Young Adults. The purpose of Queer Connecting is to have a space for queer and questioning UU's of all ages and lived experiences to get together, and share about the intersection between queerness and UUism. This could happen in person but most often happens online so it is something available to people all across the county. The people I spoke to want to remain anonymous so I'll do my best to share the essence of what they told me. One of them is what they mean when they use the term "queer".
	They were very clear that QUQueer Connecting is not about duplicating the spiritual side of UUism. They focus on building deep relationships between queer folx who want to explore faith rooted in UU values, keeping their mission focused helps them to keep overwhelmed by administrative tasks that can often be associated with coordinating events with many moving parts. Here one explains how they are defining queer after I was inquiring into the various things that may sometimes be considered queer and sometimes not, such as polyamory.



Amber	In this case, there's an intent to be a safe haven for those who experience otherness because of things like sexual identity, gender expression and relationship orientation. While they acknowledge that defining queerness is always going to exclude certain people, they aim to include a range of people who actively want to be part of the community and engage with queerness and each other.
	They also welcome people who are questioning their identities and orientations, and want a safe space to explore that aspect of themselves.
Erin	They explain that they are conscious of the way that intersectionality exists, where there may be more than one way that person is queer.
Amber	For our listeners, an example of intersectionality in this group's case could be that a person involved with this group could be non-binary, so not identify as either man or woman, pan-sexual - has a sexual or romantic attraction that is not dependent on gender or sex - and also polyamorous, which means to be open to having more than one intimate and loving relationship at a time.
Erin	Yes, this group embraces the intersecting expressions of queerness .
Bridge	

Amber	I was also curious why this group felt they needed space specifically for queer UU's as there seems to be so many queer people involved in UUism, including many within leadership positions. Their answer so beautifully describes what it means to them and what it feels like.
Erin	I was curious about the same thing. The answer to this question comes from insight shared by this group as well as from people who have participated in the (CUC's) Inclusivity Forums and Inclusivity Action Groups. I have utmost gratitude, that unlike other faith communities, queer UUs have not felt like they have to choose between their faith and their queerness. However, there have been times where queer UUs have experienced situations of aggression, othering, or general sense of feeling like all parts of who they are wouldn't be embraced within their UU space.
Amber	I imagine this may come as a surprise to some who have the impression that UU spaces must be queer-friendly, because they've done the Welcoming Congregation certification or because there's an openly gay or lesbian minister or same-sex families within the congregation.
Erin	Ya, potentially. Now, in fairness, let's remember every congregation and UU group is different. Some may feel more welcoming than others. Some could be welcoming towards certain types of queerness such as sexual orientation, while being less welcoming when it comes to say, gender identities or relationship orientations.
	Some challenges people are encountering include continually being referred to with the wrong pronoun, even after taking the time to explain and teach. In other cases, it's transphobic comments. In other cases it might happen accidentally, in the way people try



	to become more informed and welcoming
	For instance, a UU group might try to understand what it means to be non-binary but do so in a way that's purely intellectual, treating it like an intellectual exercise instead of a relational one. Which at times has resulted in people feeling like they were someone's subject matter to be debated instead of a person to be connected with in a good and humble way.
Amber	Ah, so there's missing a relational component and treating someone like they are a specimen in a lab or a book study subject.
Erin	Right, engaging the head but not the heart. Another way it might show it up is when people feel like they can not share a part of themselves- for instance, bringing all their partners to a UU event.
Amber	Ok. And that may not be because they fear someone will be rude, but they may feel that doing so will mean that they need to also be prepared to do the extra labour of answering questions of their fellow UUs.
Erin	Yes, that topic of doing the extra emotional labour of educating people came up as an important part of why QUUeer connecting exists and meets an important need for people. Being around people whose life experiences are similar to their own means that they do not need to explain themselves. This feeling was described as an emotional exhale and an opportunity to let their guard down and their hair loose.
Amber	What a powerful way to describe it- the space where a person can let their hair down, exhale, relax.
Erin	And relatable as many of us know <i>who those people are</i> in our own lives- the ones we can just be ourselves with, no need to defend, educate, put on a facade or any other thing that is not authentic.
Amber	Those people who we can speak to with vulnerability knowing that they will hold us in whatever is happening in our lives.
Bridge	
Erin	The need for a safe haven became very apparent to many UU's a round the time of the 8th Principle process. UU's of colour needed their own space to process what was happening in UUism and in themselves. Not only were there social issues of racism at the forefront of society with the Black Lives Matter and other anti-racism movements, but UU spaces became the site of many conversations and debates around whether a principle that dismantles racism and other barriers to full inclusion was even a necessary thing.
Amber	Which is a good example of what we mean when we stay that sometimes issues around inclusion become a topic to be debated rather than remembering that it's people's lived experience we're debating.



Amber	Right, in some spaces the conversation became focussed on debating whether certain UU spaces were racist or not, whether another principle was needed, and all sorts of other things besides listening to UU's of colour share their experiences and believing them.
Camellia Jahanshahi	<p>The 'of colour' portion are people of the global majority portion absolutely colours every part of our conversation and is a really important container that we hold because it allows us to be critical while finding comfort and solace in each other's experiences.</p> <p>It allows us to kind of do a little bit of a reality check of how we feel in our spaces. You know, sometimes it is UU specific. Obviously we talk a lot about the eighth principle. We talk a lot about how we feel about the eighth principle process, how we feel about where we're at now, what we've seen in our congregations, although a lot of our youth have left their congregations.</p> <p>So more it's talking about like what they read about and then how they feel kind of on the outside, because a lot of our young adult are in youth work. So they can't necessarily go to church on Sunday morning. That's certainly the case for me and many of them. So it's not so much what I mean, congregational life is, is part of it, but feelings about being a minority, a racial minority, are very tender.</p> <p>And so it guides how we talk about things. The themes that I bring up in conversation. And then, of course, we don't exist in a vacuum. We talk about global politics. We talk about what's going on. We talk about the trauma that we're experiencing. We talk about the microaggressions. We talk about the triggering things that we see in the news.</p> <p>And all of those juicy, upsetting bits. And it's really important that we talk about it because in this space and this little container that we create virtually, we know that we are safe to be our authentic self and to show our frustration as well as our joy and celebration. But there is a lot of grief, there's a lot of pain, there's a lot of need for processing.</p> <p>And it is interesting to see that across the ages of how youth and young adults feel kind of on the outskirts of congregational life because again, they aren't as involved with it compared to the older adults who are more involved in congregational life and how they feel about all of the different things that have come up pre-dating and since the eighth principle.</p>
	<p>So it's absolutely an important part of of our group that we are all people of color, of various ethnicities and backgrounds, which is also really interesting because people of colour in Unitarian Universalism, some of us chose to join it, some of us didn't, and a lot of us, not myself, but a lot of people in our group are are youth and young adults who have been trans-racially adopted by white UU's.</p> <p>And that creates a really interesting, fruitful area for conversation around navigating identity politics in this largely white space, in predominantly white families, and what it</p>



	is to be a person of color in those spaces.
Erin	Once again, I was curious about how this group approached their time together. Camellia explained that their meetings have a theme which often comes from something on Camellia's heart. They have their chalice lighting, land acknowledgement and general welcome. I'll let Camellia explain what happens next.
Camellia	And then we do a check in.
	And part two usually has like a bit of a deeper dive, about UU values or about white supremacy culture or colonialism and how those things, for example, affect play or how they interact with play for you. And in those sharing times, it's a combination of sharing our reactions, thoughts, feelings, and then often that turns into a bigger conversation, brainstorming, kind of feeding off of each other.
	And in those moments are when we ask for support or resources or, you know, just find ways to help and maybe inspire each other problem solve, things like that.

Erin	Camellia described her Young Adult inspired approach this way:
	I come at things very much from a let's create a container that is just secure enough that we're on topic but loose enough that we can freely and authentically express ourselves.
	So I would say it's kind of inspired by guided meditations, which is something that I also integrate a lot into the work that this is. I like a loose structure that allows for play in the imagination and for whatever is on your heart to actually come up. But yeah, that idea of, of let's have like a loose thing that we know.
	The sharing part is really important. And I think another indicator of the difference between maybe a young adult or a youth space versus a normal traditional congregational space, because it's not just me talking, it's us, brainstorming together collectively to do like a collective care and brainstorm moments. So we get to know each other better while helping each other and ourselves.
Erin	I shared with her the analogy of comparing different approaches of UUism being different types of theatre, with the congregational approach being akin to classical theatre and the Young Adult approach being akin to a contemporary theatre production that is co-created by those acting. Here's her response:
Camellia	Yes. That's so much more eloquent. But yeah, it's and I think that's also a big part of us being people of color as well, is we are really actively decolonizing that rigid structure and congregations to really do the relational work and come together and really build up communities of care and solidarity together.
Erin	And when things are done, relational, it's often unpredictable; at least that's my experience that when we're being real, we don't always know how it'll go. And we can always guarantee that it'll start at the top of the hour. And then that, you know, the next



	<p>top of the hour and be right on time and only take X amount of minutes to do the, you know, the cares and concerns types, things that people have.</p>
	<p>And then the rest of it is the ceremonial focus. So it does make sense. And I'm hearing from other places too, that it's not like they're saying that it's a bad thing to be ceremonially focused. But if you need deeper relationships and you're not finding that in those structures, then there may need to be these affinity groups to, yeah, make that that happen in a way that isn't creating so much work.</p>
Erin	<p>When there is a sense of safety, people report being more vulnerable and authentic. Here is Camellia responding to my question about how things would differ for her if non-coloured UU's were present.</p>
Camellia	<p>Yeah. It would change how I phrase the questions and maybe the themes that I talk about, certainly the wording of questions would differ. And then the vulnerability that we have with each other would absolutely be different, because in those spaces when we are talking about hurt feelings that we have, there's no judgment, there's no shame, there's no, I should have done something differently or better or whatever and at all.</p>
	<p>But when you're in mixed groups, that shame, the grief, the discomfort always shows up when we talk about vulnerability as people of color and it's not like white people or non people of color shouldn't or aren't allowed to see those vulnerabilities. But there's so much more work on our end as people of color to then have to like, process your grief, your resentment, your whatever it is.</p>
	<p>And so in mixed groups it can be a little bit more challenging. I certainly am never as authentic in a group of white people as I am and a group of people of color. And that's something that I've learned the hard way through this work. Like as a light skinned, mixed person, I usually do feel like it's my responsibility to cater in a way to white people to be kind of a bridge for more marginalized bodies.</p>
	<p>And I spent a lot of my twenties doing that, and it was honestly really hurtful and harmful to my own ego and like self-worth and the work that the quality of the work that I was doing really went down because I was so emotionally burnt out from having to hold space for white people's own processing needs. And it's really hard.</p>
	<p>So that was also why I did this shift of wanting to work more for people of color to build up solidarity spaces and community spaces to focus on like life, giving things. I'm not saying that there can't ever be mixed groups or what have you, but it does change the tone. Absolutely. And navigating that tone shift is something that I think is a big learning curve. Learning edge, growing edge, it's a big growing edge for UUs and non-UUs. It's just a challenging thing.</p>
Amber	<p>Camellia's story captures what it feels like to be shouldering the weight of White people's reactions - which underscores the importance of having spaces where UU's of colour do</p>



	not have to take on the extra emotional labour of helping White people process their feelings.
Erin	Here's Camellia elaborating on the benefits of having a place to recharge:
Camellia	Yeah, I think there's, they're both fruitful spaces but I think you hit the nail on the head by saying the word recharge. I definitely feel much more recharged and ready to be in big, mixed up collective spaces when I have the support of my specific group and I've had that that time with them and I feel heard and loved and like my experience matters and without me having to explain my experience and just having that comfort of, of being known makes me feel more excited and ready to be in bigger mixed groups.
Amber	So, another potential benefit of affinity groups is the ability to create different opportunities for spiritual growth and to allow people to choose their own adventure depending on their needs. It gives space for people to recharge when needed and return to a <i>dynamic communal</i> space ready to fully embrace the type of spiritual growth that that kind of environment offers.
Erin	Yes, UU's of the Salish Sea (in British Columbia), the new UU community being shaped with the needs of youth and young adults at the centre, are embracing the concept of affinity groups. Here's catherine strickland to explain more.
catherine strickland	There obviously has to be this kind of fluidity and flow between. But affinity groups are needed because people need a place to go where they don't have to be fighting up against and pushing against something that isn't necessarily fully created for them so that they can both have that shared experience, have that nourishing nourishment and get clarity.
	And it's about getting clarity and then bringing that back to the whole that I think really is the exciting part. We're still grappling with what that looks like and how do you honor and recognize the need for spaces that are affinity spaces, whether it's and do it by age or whether you do it by some other identity dimension?
	And then how do you support the kind of fluid back and forth into the whole and then back out into affinity without becoming siloed, making sure that whatever delineations are fairly permeable.
Amber	And do we have a sense of how other congregations are approaching things like affinity groups?
Erin	With the exception of the francophone group, which is connected to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ottawa, all the affinity groups we spoke to meet online and involve engagement from people across the country. Their main connection is the Canadian Unitarian Council. And while we did not speak to any other congregationally based affinity groups we are told there are at least a few affinity groups within local congregations for People of Colour, Queer folks, seniors, young adults, and of course, youth.
Amber	And for those operating on a national level with a connection to the CUC, has this been



	enough support?
Erin	The groups I spoke to said they felt legitimized and supported. This included support from CUC staff, resources to help them meet such as access to a Zoom account , honorariums to help with facilitators in some cases, and affirming feedback from the UU community as a whole. Though, in the case of Rising Together, Camellia shared that <i>it took some time</i> for this to happen despite having advocated for a CUC-sponsored space for UU's of colour <i>for years</i> . It took the social upheaval of 2020 to have that materialize.
Amber	Since then there has been the voting in of the 8th Principle to spotlight the need to address racism and other barriers to inclusion, the various CUC led forums that brought awareness to barriers to full inclusion. These were based on race, age, gender, relationship orientation, disability, and class.
Erin	Right, and after that the CUC hosted Inclusivity Action groups to begin to take action to address the types of challenging behaviours that could lead people to seek refuge within affinity groups because they feel unwelcome within general UU spaces.
Amber	And it feels important to mention that we had intended these groups to be made up predominantly of allies that would be connected to folks with lived experience of being excluded in UU spaces, but in actuality the majority of people that showed up were the people with lived experience.
Erin	Of all the things I've done in my six years with the CUC, this was one of the most moving things I've been part of. Here are these folks who feel on the outskirts of the faith that they love, coming together to do the work to create a little bit more space for themselves. While there were some dedicated allies, predominantly group members were those with lived experience. This meant the bulk of the workload was left to those who needed the help in the first place.
Amber	If we can pause and look at ourselves collectively, this gives us some valuable information about how these people and groups are relating to the congregational structure.
Erin	We saw a decent amount of attendance to <i>learn</i> about how different groups are feeling excluded, but remarkably less when it came to <i>taking action</i> to address the issues that result in the exclusion.
Amber	And at the time of this recording the CUC has a job posting up for a person to help dismantle racism and other barriers to full inclusion within the institution. This is part of the CUC's commitment to enacting the formal recommendations that came out of the Dismantling Racism Study Group's work.
Erin	So there are, on many fronts anyway, action happening to address some of the dynamics people are seeking refuge from in some of the affinity groups.



Amber	A theme I noticed when I was listening through the interviews is that each affinity group expressed the desire to be intergenerational. This is important because it highlights that meeting with people with similar life experiences fills the need for deep connection with people who understand, but it doesn't fill the desire to feel held and cherished within the strength of a multi-generational community.
Erin	Yes, these meet very different needs and desires. And while some affinity groups have referenced challenges that have prompted them to meet separately, everyone we interviewed stated that this had a positive impact on their feeling of connection to UUism overall.
Bridge	
Erin	For the second part of this episode, we thought we would share with you some things we have been pondering about affinity groups, authenticity, and inclusion during the process of making this podcast and throughout our inclusivity work these past few years. In full disclosure, we are not presenting our thoughts as a declaration of how things should be, but from a place of wondering as fellow journeyers who are also inquiring into cultivating intergenerational community in a good way.

Amber	Think of this like us interviewing ourselves - which is how we get to the heart of a lot of our inclusivity work. On that note, let's go back to Janet Pivnick's question at the beginning of this episode, "How do we create communities of Love?" It seems that affinity groups could be a potential tool if we use them consciously and proactively with the intent of building vibrant diverse communities of faith.
Erin	The challenge is can we do so without requiring others to change to suit our desires before we are willing to show up and engage authentically?
Amber	Exactly. We feel this is very relevant to our discussion about affinity groups since several of our affinity groups exist as a refuge from the collective, not just because of a shared language or special interest. And within UUism now there is a real push for removing barriers to full inclusion. It makes me wonder, is there a way that we can use difference as the divine thread that weaves us all into the tapestry of our faith?
Erin	Here's Janet speaking about a particular way of engaging with difference that she has experienced outside of UUism that she hopes to bring into her ministry in UU spaces
Janet	I've had experiences in community where I've felt like I'm welcomed and I can be fully myself and I'm accepted. And I find when I'm in those communities, I show up in a different way because I don't have to be guarded, I don't have to worry, you know. So I just am me, which makes me a better me.
	And when we're all able to do that, a lot of the issues that come up around the isms, you know, racism and we're able to talk our way through that in ways that are not about the clash. You know, you're white supremacists and, you know, like all of all of that because we all feel honored in who we are.



	And that's not necessarily something that I've experienced in Unitarian congregations that kind of like being feeling like I can show up as myself. So it's got me really curious about how do we do that? How do we create a community where everyone feels like they're actually honored for who they are,?
Amber	So here she is not necessarily saying that everyone has to be the same for them to be themselves, but she has had experiences in non-UU spaces where people who might be a part of different affinity groups, come forward just as they are. Issues can arise, but it doesn't result in a clash that ultimately ruins everything.
Erin	Right, and it's this type of interacting that we want to focus on for the second part of this episode on as we talk about how we can create these types of spaces. It's not an easy thing to do, but when we succeed, the payoff is huge.
Bridge	
Amber	As we have been preparing for this episode, you and I have been pondering different aspects of affinity spaces and collective spaces, including the ethics of change. For instance, who gets to choose who needs to change? Whose comfort do we prioritize? Is it fair to push for change in our community when other UU's do not live up to our own ideals of Beloved Community? Do we actually want congregations to change so that, for instance, younger adults will want to attend instead of existing primarily as an affinity group?
Erin	Maybe the congregational UU expression is better left untouched, and those UU who enjoy inhabiting it should be celebrated for who they are. It's one thing to ask people within those spaces to expand their understanding of how to welcome people instead of alienating them through the things they do and say, but is it ok to ask them to fundamentally become something different?
Amber	It makes me think about what you've said regarding the work you do within fly-in First Nations and how some people ask themselves whether it is appropriate for the youth to demand that the elders change their mindsets and ways of doing things.
Erin	This feels like a lesson in consent. It's one thing to engage a willing party in an ongoing journey of self-change but to demand someone change against their will may not feel like that person is actually being honoured for who they are or for how they choose to show up in the world.
Amber	Ok, this bit about consent is an interesting way to frame it.
Erin	Ya. I've been witnessing my Indigenous friends and colleagues navigate consent recognizing that some of their elders may never want to consider any other ways of viewing things. As children, many were forced to take on another way of thinking, and so the younger generation do not want to tell them now that they need to change. At the same time, these younger adults do not want to be on the receiving end of some of the hurtful comments and attitudes that are levied at them by elders who believe that



	<p>certain things are wrong, such as homosexuality, divorce, and following traditional spirituality.</p>
Amber	<p>So, to relate this to our journey as UU's with an aspiration to co-create intergenerational community- some of us might engage in our UU spaces and ask them to change in some ways, for instance, changing their approach to UUism or shifting their ways of interacting so the space feels more inclusive. And let's say this group is not willing to consent to this and take on the challenge of self-change, should we carry on or relent? Or attempt to enlighten them, or coach them, or persuade them? Or should we gracefully accept that this person or group wishes to remain as they are?</p>
Erin	<p>Yes, it can be a bit tricky and of course there likely isn't one right answer here but I want to share an excerpt of my interview with Liz James of the Hysterical Society where she explained how they deal with this type of thing.</p>
Liz James	<p>Do we use a covenant in any way? We are very mindful about the give and take in relationships. So how are we connected? Are we being good neighbors? Basically, we do a lot of that in terms of do we sit down and say, how are we all going to be together? No, there's a pre-established culture. So when you come into this darker society, these are the rules.</p>
	<p>And if it's not a fit for you, we welcome you to find a different community or create a different community. So when people storm out and say, you're too politically correct or not correct enough or whatever, our response is, there's a lot of different ways to be Unitarian Universalist. And if you'd like a humor group that strikes a slightly different balance, that's great.</p>
	<p>You could make a Second Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. We could change our name to First Unitarian Universalist Historical Society. There could be more than one brand of humor. Nobody has ever taken us up on that. But I would love to see that happen.</p>
Erin	<p>And do you feel these sort of explanations or these rules or what you put forward, do they exist in writing somewhere where people agree and say, yes, if we get that, where would people find them?</p>
	<p>We are pretty militant about if a person is chronically not acting in the way that we are the right community for them. We are much more militant about saying this isn't the place for you than other types of communities would be. I find that very covenantal. Well, if you are a congregation and you kick someone out, you're saying you don't get to be Unitarian.</p>
	<p>We're just saying this Facebook group isn't the right expression of you UUism for you. So it's kind of an easier thing to say. But people get mad sometimes when they're kicked out and we don't worry about it. We'd rather put our energy into the people who are putting their energy into the community and focus on what's working well and taking advantage of that and growing it, then trying to follow anyone who is disgruntled to cause them to</p>



	feel less disgruntled.
	We've found through experience that that doesn't really work very well.

Amber	Now that's not a perspective we hear very often in UU spaces !
Erin	Right!?! They have a strong sense of identity that they bring to the UU sphere and are unapologetically themselves!
Amber	I get the impression that they also encourage other groups to fully be themselves as well.
Erin	Now to be clear, this example is not about people experiencing mistreatment and requesting change, but it certainly is about taking a stance for plurality and diversity in expression. It makes me wonder, about the ethics of asking say, YA spaces to change how they do their community to include all ages, or asking congregations to become more co-creative to engage YA differently.
Amber	True, now what about when the issue of exclusion has to do with things like racism, homophobia, classism and other isms? Is it then ok to request change? Even demand it?
Erin	And these are questions we need to be asking as a national body, and we're not going to try and provide answers right now. but it's an important process for us to be undergoing together. What we do know is when people feel like barriers to full inclusion are not coming down enthusiastically, they may choose to take space, periodically or permanently, or take up the mantle of causing, even forcing change to happen either way. This could move into a sense of advocacy or activism.
Amber	And while you and I are both very supportive of efforts that result in the world being a more kind and accepting place for everyone, we have noted that the adversarial nature of activism can cause a lot of relational tension- especially when that energy is directed inward toward the group. In worst case scenarios, it can be used as a tool to violate consent while feeling justified, not to mention the polarizing effect it has.
Erin	Right, and this is the area that we have been really thinking about as we have been engaging in inclusion work on behalf of the CUC. We've been asking ourselves how to approach inclusivity in such a way that we don't fall into the trap of setting up social rules and expectations that need to be followed lest people get called out for not being woke enough, not politically correct enough.
Amber	Right, because this has a way of shutting down authentic relating as well.

Bridge	
Erin	Another area we have been thinking about is the challenge of co-creating new paths forward within UUism when some people are opting out of engaging authentically with each other because interactions have gone poorly in the past, or perhaps they fear they will receive backlash and find themselves on the outskirts.



Amber	Yes, and this is one we have definitely encountered to varying degrees even in this research as some people have expressed concerns about sharing their perspectives on a national scale.
Amber	Now we certainly do have people who are willing to have the tough conversations but we also have many that are remaining in their silos with what is familiar.
Erin	And predictable. Which makes sense, especially in cases where there has been relational injury without learning and repair. But then we have this problem because we are not communicating with each other.
Erin (Recorded)	I don't know how to sort this out in my head, to be honest, but like when we want the world to change or in this case, we don't want the whole world to change where we've been tackling that, we're looking at Unitarian Universalism in Canada. That's what we're looking at, right. The other sphere. We want that to change.
	We're robbing people of the opportunity to change willingly if they don't understand why. But then for them to understand why, they need to understand not just the facts, but they need to understand the feelings.
	If somebody is unable to say, here is what's really going on, I'm undecided right now in my mind, I guess it would be specific to the environment, but to say I'm upset about something or I'm afraid of something, but I'm not going to tell you what it is. But I hope that you change so that one day I can exist in your space, but you have to do that work because I'm not going to be there to do it, because it's too exhausting and it's too discouraging and it's too non nourishing and I just need to not have that experience right now.
	I mean, that's fair right? But then how does change happen if people are keeping the facts themselves. Right. And even you and I in sharing these interviews you know people are asking us, do you have to share the truth that honestly, can't you just sugarcoat it a little bit? You know, it's not really. They've never said politely, but it's not that pleasant.
	It's not that inviting to share it. You know the facts this way or that way, right? And.
	Yeah. And our take is that if we don't share the facts, then we robbed people of the opportunity to respond to the facts because they won't necessarily know them. And, you know, we could then build up, not you and I personally, but you know, one could build up resentment, thinking, well, something different should have happened. But how how could it happen?
	Right. So I think it's really is calling each other in to say lay the facts as you know them. Right. Because that doesn't mean that's the facts as they are, whatever that is. But just tell us what you can tell us, because it gives us a more complete picture of what's going on, you know, so in our authenticity, right in our authentic expression and our authentic views as flawed as they are, because none of us have figured out how to be like the bird's eye view of the world, right?



	<p>We can only inhabit ourselves and come with that, perspective. Right? But if we are looking at each other's perspectives as something that needs to be censored, if it causes discomfort in us, or something that needs to be changed, if it requires us to do too much emotional work to be in that space. I don't know. It feels to me like we're setting things up for siloing and stagnation.</p>
Amber	<p>This sounds like where we may be right now as we are grappling with how to move forward together in a way that is naturally renewing, with affinity groups being used to enhance intergenerational communities rather than act as alternatives to intergenerational communities.</p>
Erin	<p>It does, and its an area that we would be wise to consider further as these various affinity groups try to co-create bridges toward each other. While it may be challenging, communication is essential.</p>
Bridge	
Amber	<p>This leads to another thing you and I have been contemplating: Could we be conflating the idea of being radically inclusive with utopian ideals of being a safe haven from the world and free from conflict. Like when we imagine a radically inclusive community we think, ah wow that will be so perfect- no tension, everyone is welcome, we're all on the same page. And we'll know we have arrived because we'll spontaneously hold hands and sing kumbaya, kind of thing.</p>
Erin	<p>Right- because that vision is much more appealing then thinking about sharing space with people whose views are very different from our own and whose ways irk us and cause us to want to pull our hair out in frustration. But that is the reality of diversity. It implies difference and with difference comes friction. The topic of being a safe community vs. a dynamic community has come up in our conversations many times over the past few years.</p>
Amber	<p>When we say safe community we're referring to those UU spaces where we feel we can participate and be fairly sure that nothing will happen that feels offensive or aggressive, pushes us out of our comfort zone, or challenges our sense of security. As a result, we may feel unguarded and open- much like we have heard people describe feelings in affinity groups where they are sheltered. Dynamic community on the other hand, is a space where we may feel outside our comfort zone and potentially guarded to some degree as we can't be sure that we will not encounter words and behaviours that feel offensive or aggressive to us, and bring up a sense of insecurity. These tend to be places of friction that, if approached with a growth mindset, can be places where a lot of learning and expansion take place.</p>
Erin	<p>Right. And so we have been wondering, what would happen if we allowed ourselves to drop the idea that a radically inclusive spiritual community should be about comfort and nourishment primarily, and embrace the possibility that, at least at times, it could be about expansion through the dynamic interactions that come with diversity of opinions,</p>



	ways of interacting, speaking, worshipping, etc.
Amber	Then perhaps we would not think we are doing things wrong because there is tension.
Erin	Perhaps. This word utopian first came up in my interview with Rev Danie Webber from the Youth and Young Adults Team who cautioned us about viewing the Young Adult culture as a utopian or way of the future UUism, as gathering for short conferences is not the same as building ongoing intergenerational community, which has historically happened in congregations.
Amber	And Peter Scales said something similar about how older adults can have a similar utopian feel when it comes to the culture of adult conferences and gatherings. Those people leave these short term gathering feeling really great and euphoric. I can attest from personal experience. It's a wonderful feeling.
Erin	Right, often because there is an intense sense of togetherness without much in the way of conflict.

Amber	And we have been wondering if people are interpreting the lack of conflict in these short term get-togethers as much more desirable to the dynamic in congregations which, at times, can feel less warm and fuzzy as people engage in long term relationships together.
Bridge	
Erin recording	In group and team development there's these stages, that groups go through. Right. And it's typically understood to be forming. So the coming together, storming when the idealism falls away and people go, I can't be nicey nicely anymore. This is really getting on my nerves. I need to talk with you. And the storming happens only if there's enough trust for it to occur.
	Otherwise, people tend to take space and they don't go through the storming. So it's forming. Storming and then norming is the reaching of an understanding of how we're going to function together. And then it becomes performing. And performing is like we are excelling now at not just the tasks, the tasks to be done, but in the way of relating.
	Right. It's talking about group development as well as group output of whatever they're trying to create together. And then the last phase is a journey, and that happens. And there can be segments that happen where, you know, it's as folks leave or leaders leave or, whatever changes happen. There's parts of it that wrap up while new people are coming in and some new parts are just forming.
	And so forming, storming, norming, performing, and a journey that's like the life cycle of a group. and if we're talking about with Daniel saying that, it's much easier to hold a utopian space for, you know, a weekend or a week or whatever it is, that's much easier. And you may not even get to the storming phase.



	<p>You've just created your guidelines to say, here's how we will interact with each other. And over three days, nobody steps or takes it out of bounds. And so then there isn't a need. And so what that makes me wonder about is in having these different cultures operating, separately, is it possible that our, our young folks have had these experiences that are apparently conflict free and utopian, and then when met with the reality of a longstanding community, and maybe the long standing community has created a sense of like norming and maybe the norming is because there's enough similarity and nobody rocks the boat.</p>
	<p>Or maybe the norming is because they just remain quiet about certain things or whatever. But the experience of being like, hey, I've had this really great UU experience, and now I'm coming into the space and I don't want to go through storming. Storming to me means conflict. That means something has gone wrong. It means uncomfortable. It's not what I want.</p>
	<p>I want only nourishing things. Nourishing to me means, you know, fill in the blank or whatever it is. And so I'm opting out. I press eject on this community. I want out of here. And I wonder if, you know, we've talked about trying to make the boundaries a little bit fuzzier, where you might have new ways of of doing togetherness being brought into all age of scenarios, but over a length of time that's different than these weeks or weekend type experiences.</p>
	<p>Would we then notice that the utopian ideas fall, ideals fall to the side, and are replaced with the reality that we're going to have to go through storming at some point, like we cannot avoid. Yeah. Conflict storm. Yes. And so I don't know the answer. UUs of the Salish Sea will be one group that will encounter this at some point, because you can set things up to be more inclusive of youth and young adult cultures.</p>
	<p>But at some point you're still going to bump up into differences as people.</p>
Amber	<p>Yeah. And catherine does mention in the interview about building conflict in.</p>
Erin	<p>Catherine is really, really skilled at that which emphasizes that part of us becoming inclusive and diverse is the ability to navigate that stormy phase, and also to, I would say, maybe the.</p>
	<p>Coming to an agreement together that what's nourishing to one's soul may not always be what feels like sunshine, rainbows and puppy dogs all the time. Right? It might be that willingness to say, I will show up in this community of people because I value the relationship with those people. Which reminds me a lot of just biological family. You know, when we choose to invest in biological family, we don't say, I'm only going to show up at my if my family feels good all the time.</p>
	<p>Otherwise I need to, you know, find a different type of family, right? Which now some people do need to find different types of family. Right? This is where chosen family comes into play. And many of us have a hybrid of that. We have biological family and chosen family. and in hopefully best case scenarios there's a sense of welcoming in both of those.</p>



	<p>But, you know, it's not always the case. So I don't want to minimize this or give an impression that people should always be up for discomfort if it's an abusive environment or it really just never has a reciprocity to it where there's an interest in understanding. But, barring all those absolute abusive and harmful experiences, maybe there's something to be learnt.</p>
Amber	<p>So looking at conflict this way, if there is enough trust in the group, then people will lean into the friction but if there isn't enough trust, or enough need (as in the case of long term relationships) then people may find it easier to opt out.</p>
Erin	<p>And in terms of group development, it is often a shared mission or task, that causes a group to persevere through the uncomfortable stages. Catherine Strickland from the UU's of the Salish Sea spoke about how they are anticipating conflict and see it as a natural part of their co-creative experience. Here's Catherine:</p>
Catherine	<p>You need to anticipate and know that conflict will happen, you need to anticipate and know that harm will happen.</p>
	<p>And you need to normalize that. And build into your community ways to attend to that are generative, that bring people together, that don't dip into this idea of shame and wrongness and mistakes even. It's so important to have that as part of your culture and part of your structure or governance or whatever you want to call it, to be very robust in supporting individuals in the community as a collective, to heal and to recover and to restore when these things happen, because they are going to happen.</p>
	<p>And that's a piece that I think can be missing. And the ways that we try to prevent mistakes or prevent conflict or bury conflict or ignore conflict because we don't know how to deal with it in a way that's in alignment with who we are, in alignment with, who we say we are, and we don't have the skills and practices to bring us back together again. That's such a foundational piece for what we're trying to create here.</p>
Amber	<p>It is clear from Catherine's approach that her group aims to co-create a dynamic space where people get to practice how they interact when the friction of engaging with each other, causes them to grow.</p>
Erin	<p>This is very different than a safe space where the approach might look more like agreements on what to do to avoid hurting each other's feelings as opposed to accepting that hurt is inevitable if we are truly going to include all types of people, even those we find abrasive. The key is on how this friction is harnessed for personal and spiritual growth, individually and collectively.</p>
Amber	<p>And just to be clear here, we are not implying that authenticity gives us licence to interact in aggressive or rude ways. There can still be a group expectation that people temper their authenticity with kindness, vulnerability, and respect while they share the full intensity of their feelings and perspectives.</p>



Erin	Which can be a tough balance to reach especially if we are trying to embrace someone whose opinions, beliefs, and ways of being feel in stark contrast to our own. If we are unsure of how to express ourselves authentically and set boundaries in an assertive yet courteous way, then we may hold onto stress, and resentment can grow. Or if someone is concerned that they will get something wrong and be labelled politically incorrect in some way, they may avoid interacting with them all together.
------	--

Amber	Which is too bad because in each of those cases we are passing up the opportunity for deep relating, which is something that younger and older UU's alike have said they desire.
-------	--

Erin	That's true.
------	--------------

Amber	Okay, so what we're talking about is authentic expression versus authentic connection. So how do we authentically connect with one another, as we are authentically expressing ourselves. That's that tender spot, I think, where we're trying to use covenant and principles to navigate that tender area as best we can because our hope, our goal is that we can be so radically inclusive and welcoming.
-------	--

	I've had experiences where my authentic expression was not met the way I expected it to, but it was an authentic response. And those who wanted to try to mend, participated in that authentic connecting, and there was some beautiful mending. And those who did not want anything to do with it decided that that wasn't the place for them anymore and left the community.
--	--

	And the community decided that they were okay with that, that they would prefer for our authentic connection to happen and for the others to find another place.
--	--

Erin	So, and so this makes me think, though.
------	---

	In order for that authentic connection to happen, you had to be secure enough in who you are to not crumble and to be willing to come forward and say, 'Whether you like it or not, here's how I am. This is my reality and whether I like it or not, that's your reaction. And that's your perspective.'
--	---

Amber	And yes, and I was willing to collaborate on how to move forward.
-------	---

	And that meant me making some changes that were maybe not the way I wanted to do it, but I made a few changes on my end and so did they. So it wasn't like those people over there had to make it completely okay for me to walk in from now on. It was like I had to understand their lived reality and what they were working with and and decide if it was okay with me or not to make those concessions.
--	--

	That incident that happened with me sparked the idea of the responsibility covenant because we were about to host an elder circle and the elder circle, we realized that that thing might come up again where someone's authentic expression needed to be protected.
--	--



	<p>So we created a covenant about how to look inward, to manage your personal discomfort as someone that might be in the dominant group to help that authentic connecting happen. And that Responsibility Covenant has been used in a lot of different spaces. Now, it's not the only covenant that's necessary. It was just one that was used when there was a power dynamic, right?</p>
Erin	<p>Covenants are one tool being utilized by groups who are actively co-creating together: agreements on how they will engage with one another. And depending on the group, these covenants read more like roadmaps of how to engage in an optimal way through difficult times, as opposed to aspirational poetry about the utopian community they hope to be one day. Here's Z Brimacombe from Loving Justice, the abolitionist group, to explain more about how they are using it:</p>
Z	<p>Our whole interest in work is really around imagining and implementing responses or ways of being in community...that aren't based in these like punitive carceral systems that we've been talking about. So I understand covenant to be a really beautiful tool in doing that work, in that it's a way of creating agreements with one another that we honour that aren't about rules, but are about how are we going to find ways to stay together in community, particularly if and when there is harm or conflict.</p>
	<p>So the reason we haven't built our covenant yet is because I think we will want to take some more time with it and to talk about what does covenant really mean to us and also what are the values that we want to put into that covenant.</p>
Amber	<p>Much like catherine strickland earlier, we hear this group acknowledging in advance that conflict and tension is inevitable and entering with a plan will help them navigate it, rather than fear it, when the time comes that they have enough trust within their group to go through their first storming together.</p>
Erin	<p>In my conversation with the Congregational Life team I asked Linda Thomson and Anne Barker to share their observations about how covenant is being used within the various generations of UU's presently, and historically. Here's Linda followed by Anne.</p>
Linda Thomson	<p>UUsim has fundamentally been a covenant of faith for hundreds of years because there was not one doctrine that people needed to believe. And so the guiding principle was that we came together in faith, we came together in relationship to be a community of faith. So fundamentally, we are a covenant or not a doctrinal faith. There's no dogma. That got ignored probably for a very long time. And we started talking about it again in a really active way. I want to say, I don't know, the eighties, the nineties showed up in different places..</p>
	<p>There's a book that Anne (Barker) and I both love, which is a collection of essays by a Unitarian minister, Alice Blair Wesley, who really articulated and did the history about why covenant has always been important to us. But it got forgotten for a long time. We forgot the covenant part and we started talking about it again. And when we started talking about it again, one of the places we started talking about it was in groups with</p>



	<p>younger people.</p>
	<p>We made it really foundational for them and we did a good job and we started talking about it in all of the places. But it felt like a lay on in in some of the older people spaces, whereas it was foundational in the younger people spaces. And I think we haven't caught up and it varies from community to community.</p>
	<p>I think almost universally for for older age groups, it's an add on. It's not foundational. That's my take on it.</p>
Anne Barker	<p>I think that's I think that's fair. If your congregation has a more robust blend of age groups, it's more likely that everybody is onside or is just like surrendered to the idea. We have some congregations that hold it really precious and dear and really value it. But same with some of our groups and organizations.</p>
	<p>Some of them are very covenantal. Some of them may not speak about covenant, but they're using the idea in another way, like they're shaping themselves around a particular way of being. And I think about that UU Hysterical Society, they don't have covenant splashed all over the Hysterical Society although they do in the comments (on Facebook) say 'this is a covenantal faith' but they're guiding themselves by covenantal behaviors they're organizing that way, you know, they're shutting down harmful conversations and they're opening up respectful conversations and doing all kinds of interesting things.</p>
	<p>So it's not always called a covenant but it can be a covenant, and I think it exists in more places than than we're aware of.</p>
Amber	<p>That's very interesting. We have definitely seen the trend that younger generations of UU find the covenant to be central to their faith and use it to navigate all sorts of challenges of being in community together and we think this is an area that the rest of the national body may benefit from exploring more deeply as we navigate changing times.</p>
Bridge	
Erin	<p>In addition to having a covenant to navigate tricky aspects of relating while staying in authentic connection, the idea of recognising specific roles for a time is something we have been considering. This is a way of giving permission to people to bring all of who they are to an exchange for the benefit of learning something new together or co-creating something together.</p>
Erin	<p>The first organization, I started when I was 19, and the people involved in starting it were myself and another person who was my age, and we were both women, and then a man who was about 20 years our senior and we had an interesting dynamic because there's gender differences. Right back at the time when I was 19, some of those were fairly pronounced, in a different way than they are now.</p>
	<p>And the other thing is just the different ideologies. And we found ourselves as we tried to build this organization, sometimes coming at each other with like a point to prove. And then what ended up changing it for us was when we created an image, and the image had</p>



	<p>each of us holding a saw, like one of those double sided sword, and the third person, she would joke and say, that her job was to make sure that that saw did something productive.</p>
	<p>So it made sure it stayed on the log and had, a destination. And then our job, myself and and the man who was 20 years my senior, our job was to play our roles to a tee without relenting, knowing that this is the saw that's going to get us somewhere in our endeavor and that we needed the other one to not bail out and not to be like, okay, I, I give up, I relinquish whatever, point here, but also not to be thinking like I'm supposed to win.</p>
	<p>So if I'm on and I'm playing the game of winning, it looks like me pulling the sword towards me and not letting it be pulled the other way. I just want my way. And he could be the same. So what we had to do and what we actually actively spoke about was how do we stay our point and then allow the other person to say their point, not just in a back and forth</p>
	<p>Let's get to the core of this. Whether it was this vision, this mission, this issue, this anything, it was him and I in that dynamic that really mattered. And then it was the third person who said, and I will make sure that when it becomes unproductive that we seize this and you will like honour that, that we're going to break.</p>
	<p>And that really changed things because it suddenly made it feel like our difference was an asset and not a detriment to what we were doing. And I've used that now, like many times throughout my life in interacting with people is this idea of like, and I've seen it done very well in complicated group scenarios where people come with particular needs or particular issues that they're advocating for.</p>
	<p>And I've watched a facilitator where they say, don't drop the ball on whatever it is, because we need you to be watching out for us. And so I could see this being a bit relevant when we were talking about this weaving back together the national fabric of US ism, in that we need people to have the courage to not drop that metaphorical saw as we try to work through where are we going</p>
	<p>And we need people to be playing that tension, because that'll give us enough friction to get somewhere. And then we also need people to be watching that it's productive and not just seesawing the air or something else.</p>
Amber	<p>Right. That's a great place for covenant to come in. Especially around those areas of conflict and opportunity.</p>
Amber	<p>Ah, so it is really about applying friction intentionally and consciously.</p>
	<p>And I'm seeing like because covenant is just a part of the a lot of the culture, not everyone's culture, but that naming, not just how we aspire to interact with each other, but what roles that we are going to choose to play while we go through this journey that has somewhat of a beginning and end, like you talked about them, molting, revolting, right?</p>



Erin	I don't know where forming, forming, storming, norming and performing is going to though. I like that.
Amber	Because if you can see something of having a beginning and probably some sort of end to it, and we, you know, covenanting is usually the most helpful when there is that it's a container. It's not just ongoing forever.
	that it's a great way to say I'm going to hold this role and not necessarily I'm just going to behave this way, but I'm going to really practice what it means to be in this role here. So it's like a new way of been considering how we would covenant together. It's cool.
Amber	So how could we apply something like this to the goal of authentic connection, radical inclusion, and co-creating new paths forward for UUism.
Erin	<p>Well, much of it is about attitude and perspective. If a group of UU's accept that they need to do things differently because they want to thrive in the years to come then they have the basis of embarking on a co-creative journey together to discover what this will be. If one of those purposes is co-creating an expression of UUism that is intergenerational in practice, not just in aspiration, then it might look like one side of the saw being held by some younger UU's while the other side is held by older UU's.</p> <p>As we have been learning in these interviews many younger UU's have set a high bar when it comes to all sorts of inclusion, and they have the skill sets to talk about things such as ableism, classism, transphobia, racism and other forms of isms. They also come with a desire to engage as co-creators, as opposed to audience or cast members in the classical version of UUism.</p>
	<p>Then holding their part of the saw could involve them inviting older UU's to share with them the parts of UUism that that make them come alive and that they would want to see carry on for generations to come. And say the group of older UU's bring with them a desire to preserve ceremony and traditions, as well as some financial resources and potentially a building. Holding their part of the saw could involve making space for younger UU's to tell them when they are engaging in micro-aggressions or being exclusionary. It could look like them practicing letting go of some authority so that there is a back and forth of ways of doing things, not just one way all of the time.</p> <p>It could also involve proactively inviting people, young and old, to demonstrate what it means to co-create and enthusiastically giving it a try. And for younger UU's it might look like them ensuring the survival of classical UUism in some way, shape, or form.</p>
Amber	Ah, I see, and then the third role is that of the UU innovators to facilitate the process of identifying the common things that people care about and give them joy, so they can use the friction of their different perspectives to co-create new things together. The innovators are the ones ensuring the saw is put to the best use possible in service to the vision of setting loose UU values into the world in whatever ways make sense today.



Erin	Exactly! So if that means people use affinity groups as places to recharge and regroup- that's fine. But the commitment is to come back together to do their part of holding the metaphorical saw. It means honouring the role that each brings including the perspectives- even if it's hard. Even if it takes a lot of emotional labour or working through conflict. Now, in this metaphor there were two handles to the saw, but in reality there could be more than two perspectives that we would want to call forward and formalize with roles to ensure that people are looking at things with that perspective in service to the group.
Amber	And I imagine that approach could be used for anything including addressing a barrier to full inclusion, co-creating a new way to approach a workshop, or creating something new like a community based ministry.
Bridge	

Erin	I once worked with a group of young people and a few adults to co-create a theater production that addressed racism in their town, and the racism specifically was about white settler and indigenous racism. And to co-create that play, they brought their own stories and their own life to the discussion, with the goal of creating something on stage that really caused their community to think. What came to my mind was this group then was given permission to say what would really be on their mind and potentially other people's minds, so that the group together could grapple with it.
	And I watched because I was facilitating and I watch people go, oh, but I'm not supposed to say that. And I would always say to them, but do for this time that we've set aside and for this task that we want to accomplish, tell us what it would really be like. And I remember the very first time when they were brave enough to speak it and what that scene was, and it was essentially a scene between a white male young man who was homeschooled and came from a Christian background, talking to an indigenous young man who was raised in foster care and had been involved in gang activity.
	And the question was, why don't indigenous kids finish like, go to college and university if they can, and they can do it for free? The white young man said, like, here I am working my butt off to try to get multiple jobs and it's just really doesn't make sense to me. Why won't indigenous people go to school, right?
	And this was after me encouraging him to ask the question. And the Indigenous young man saying, okay, I will keep my self together and composed, but I will give you some authentic, response in my emotions so you can know how that lands with me, whatever it is you're about to say. So he puts this forward onto the table and this young man goes big, deep breath in and says, you probably don't know that not all of us get to finish high school.
	You probably don't know that there's a ranking system that determines who will get to go to high school. And within, you know, post-secondary decisions. So you probably don't know that. And you probably don't know that I've had a particularly hurtful experience



	<p>with my experience with the decision making process, including with my community. And so you wouldn't know and probably would look at me with contempt.</p>
	<p>And he had a lot of emotion as you speak in this. And then they finished and then they both kind of turned their head and looked at me and I said, okay, take a deep breath. And they did. And I said, that was a really beautiful and meaningful gift that you just gave our project to know this, like to know that really authentic experience you're having.</p>
	<p>And we ended up putting that scene into the production as well as a few others, because there was some really amazing sharing that happened in a vulnerable way because of that. Fast forward several months, they've done this production. It's been brilliant in terms of calling in the community to think about things. And I over here on the other side of the curtain, when I was cleaning up, I overheard a conversation between those two people and the indigenous guy said to the white boy:</p>
	<p>When I first met you, my instincts that I had to fight was to not punch you in the head repetitively as often as possible. And then the white guy goes, I had to, like, figure out how not to, like, be afraid of you because I was supposed to act in scenes with you because they ended up being, like, counter each other on the stage, right?</p>
	<p>Then another kid piped in and said, and I was like, so frustrated with you guys because you complain (this is another indigenous kid) saying you would complain that all your family was going to come and watch you in these shows. And here I am, the only person I have to invite is my a social worker.</p>
	<p>And here you guys are complaining because all your family is going to show up. And I had a hard time not feeling so much resentment towards you because you don't know. And I try not to blame you for being so spoiled that you don't know how hurtful you're being because you're complaining about that. And so they share some of their things that like their deepest feelings that way.</p>
	<p>And then they ended it said. But through all of this, I think I've grown to love and respect you because you're willing to to lay it bare. And they would have used, you know, teenager language to get that message across. But they hugged each other and said, I like my life is better because I've done this. And they were even able to say why it was better.</p>
	<p>So the kid that was growing up in foster care and has no one who said, I think I gained a bit of a family, at least for the time I'm at high school, you know, I bet I've got a group of people that are not just my kids from my community that that are looking out for me. And, you know, they're each able to say you've blown my stereotype out.</p>
	<p>But I wouldn't have known that if you weren't courageous enough to just lay it bare. Yeah. So like, obviously even in telling it, it was such a powerful experience and, the courage like, and that's like, if we can model that kind of courage in this case, the service was to put on a production, a theater production that challenged the community on an issue that everybody thought was important.</p>



	But in UU spaces, what is the thing we're co-creating together that's important enough that we'll go through some discomfort together to really understand one another. Because when we understand one another and have a little bit of safety there, we're able to bring something to the larger community that is greater than we could, if we stayed hush and polite and quiet and removed and siloed.
Amber	Beautiful. It illustrates how all these various ideas can be brought together to create transformative experiences for the people involved as well as things that have a positive impact in the world around us. When approached with courage, vulnerability, skill and intentionality, difference can be harnessed and put to work as a powerful co-creative tool. And if we listened closely, we'll notice the conflict saw analogy in action.
Erin	I had the privilege of working with these young folks for a full year. The first thing they created together was a covenant, and it was revisited before every session. It wasn't called a covenant but it was identical in every other way. It not only outlined how they would stay in relationship with each other during the process of co-creating, but <i>their reason for engaging with each other</i> as White and Indigenous youth in a town that was divided because of significant racism.
Amber	Ok so this wasn't just an interest project, it was meant to make social change: bringing together two racial groups that did not interact in their daily lives, with the intent of co-creating together.
Amber	Wow, that is a powerful way to end this episode and to show how each of these components can come together in a way that is transformative for the people involved, and builds a sense of the collective, and produces something of beauty and value for the larger community. Amazing. The courage and vulnerability of this group is inspiring. I hope as our listeners reflect on this episode and the various stories shared throughout that there will be a sense of curiosity about how we can really use affinity groups and the notion of intentional frictions to co-create bridges toward each other.
Erin	In the next episode we will explore the experiences of groups who are, by choice or circumstance, embracing different expressions of UUism that are not centred around the iconic church building. Be prepared to be inspired by how these groups are really leaning into the idea of being without a building and are innovating new and interesting ways of doing UUism.
Amber	Looking forward to it.

End of Episode 4 transcript



CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL - CONSEIL UNITARIEN DU CANADA
Growing Vital Unitarian Communities
@ Centre for Social Innovation | 192 Spadina Ave | Suite 302 | Toronto ON M5T 2C2
cuc.ca – info@cuc.ca – 1.888.568.5723
