



UU Expressions: Love in Real Life Episode 5: Proximity

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 5 - Proximity

In this episode, we will attempt to legitimize the creative solutions of UU Expressions who are experiencing a sense of place and space in different ways. Whether far from each other geographically, or in terms of how ministry is practiced, how we are situated can play a huge role in strengthening relationships within our movement and beyond.

Our guests include:

- Luci Dilkus, with Huronia Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
- Rev Wendy Luella Perkins, Founder of Soulful Singing
- Janet Pivnick, Minister in Training
- Robyn Newton and Catharine Strickland, UUs of the Salish Sea

Episode playtime is 31:05

MUSIC	
Luci Dilkus	Part of it has to do with the locations because we come from such a wide geographical area and because we're so small, we don't have our own space. So we're always looking for places to meet. And I think that that makes it very interesting.



Amber Bellemare	<p>Welcome back 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. That was the voice of Luci Dilkus of the Huronia Unitarian Fellowship (near Barrie ON), reflecting on how her UU expression is formed by the size and proximity of its membership.</p> <p>I am Amber Bellemare. In this episode, we will attempt to legitimize the creative solutions of UU Expressions who are experiencing a sense of place and space in different ways. Whether far from each other geographically, or in terms of how ministry is practiced, how we are situated can play a huge role in strengthening relationships within our movement and beyond.</p>
MUSIC	
Erin Horvath	<p>Welcome back indeed! I am Erin Horvath. In our last episode we spoke about how affinity groups are one category of UU Expressions that people feel drawn to and enthused by. We also shared some of our reflections about the challenges of honouring affinity groups while also growing a radically inclusive collective. In this episode we will delve more deeply into themes that have arisen talking to UUs who, by choice or circumstance, are exploring different ways to create UU community.</p>
Amber	<p>This is very timely since, in the past year or so, the CUC has experienced a dramatic increase in congregations reaching out to us and each other for support in discovering what comes next for them in these changing times.</p>
Erin	<p>Yes, one thing our guests today have in common is that they do <i>not</i> centre their UU expression around the iconic Church building.</p>
Erin	<p>One thing we learned through these interviews is, no matter what assets UU's are working with, they are those that find innovative ways to express their values in the world</p>
Bridge	
Erin	<p>Meet Huronia Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, a small congregation in Ontario that is embracing the experience of being without a fixed location.</p>
	<p>Here's Luci Dilkus, who opened the episode, explaining in her own words how their expression of UUism is nomadic and how this enhances their time together.</p>
Luci Dilkus	<p>For a while we were meeting at a Conservation Authorities office and it was really a wonderful space that we had. We had permission to go into the building and we would meet in the boardroom, which had lovely windows outside and there was one time when an owl actually came to the window. There were times when we had meetings outdoors at the Conservation Authority under a gazebo, and the theme then was about the birds.</p>
	<p>And we included that into the service. Recently we've been meeting at this art gallery, which, you know, it's a small gallery and the owner of the gallery has a room</p>



	that's kind of apart from the gallery where we can shut the doors.
	And that's where we've been meeting. And sometimes we actually go into the gallery and we have at times used the work that's in the gallery as part of our meditation or to include as part of the discussion. There was one time when the scene we chose was about the environment and it just so happened that there was a landscape show on.
	During the service we went out and we looked at the paintings and we invited people to choose a particular painting to meditate on and then to come back and discuss. So that's some of the things that we do, that's different. A couple of times we decided to have a water service and we met at a Heritage museum that was alongside a river.
	And we had absolutely beautiful services there that were in nature and with nature. We invited a someone from the indigenous community to come in and speak and to sing and to offer some of their teachings to us.
Erin	So part of it at this point is to have your locations be like an active part of your gathering.
Luci	I think it's just turned out that way. I don't know whether that's I don't know whether that kind of intention or that kind of accident is for all of the participants, or whether it's just for myself or for a few of us where we're just very aware of the location that we're in and wanting to use it to somehow enhance whatever theme work that we're working on for the service.
	We're always sort of moving and adjusting depending on how many people are coming to the meetings. I'm quite happy to be nomadic. The idea of having a permanent space does not suit us at all. There's so few of us and we're so widespread. So in a way, the fact that we're nomadic means that we can move to the different areas. We can set up a meeting that's closer to Huntsville because that's where we've got people coming from. Or we've got people coming from Orillia so we can move to Orillia once or twice or something to have meetings there so that those people don't have to travel.
	It takes a lot of pressure off if we don't have our own space that we have to deal with. We don't have the money for it
	We're finding it difficult enough with just the few of us to keep the fellowship going. You know, in terms of administration. We have a board and that's that's enough for us. I really like the opportunity to be in these different spaces and they kind of allow for opportunities for different things to come up and sometimes to connect with different kinds of communities
	Whenever we're at these different places where we're making donations to them to pay for the space.



	So it always helps the community where we're gathering for our own services.
Amber	What a creative and interesting way to meet.
Erin	It is. The term Nomadic UUism emerged as I was listening to Luci share how place influenced and enhanced their gatherings. They might engage with art, meditation, discussion, nature or something else depending on what the context calls forth, all while keeping the hallmarks of classical UUism such as the chalice, joys and sorrows, the principles and songs.
Erin	We'll come back to Luci and the concept of Nomadic UUism but first let's talk with UUs of the Salish Sea, another group that also doesn't have a building. Their leadership is considering the benefits of treating UU resources as collectively owned, and co-creating UU spaces that, together, provide a geographical area with various ways they can engage with UUism.
Erin	Here is catherine strickland replying to my question about how the CUC could support them which merged into a larger conversation about regional hubs.
catherine strickland	One of the things that maybe the CDC can provide leadership or creativity around is this kind of idea of sharing ministers and like, what would that look like and how would you, how would you resource that?
	And, and, and even spaces. You know, part of the reality in Vancouver for us is that there's no way on earth we're ever going to be able to afford to have our own building space, that's multi, multi millions of dollars. We have these physical buildings, two of them, I guess maybe the only ones, I think the other congregations rent space.
	How do we utilize that for the broader movement? I don't know whether it's leadership again or even starting the conversations around this sort of regionality, sharing of resources and these multi expression and the idea that being a diverse, of a faith that welcomes diversity means its diverse expression of what that looks like and supporting that.
	And how do expand the vision that those resources serve all of Unitarianism and all of the expressions as opposed to how they might traditionally think about membership and who gets access?
	And then the other kind of like more the basic level, is there an opportunity for sharing of admin stuff? I do think that we're, as I mentioned, people like Kirsten Moore and and Shawn (Gauthier) and others who have these kind of formalized positions and they're there for really important resource to the wider UU faith in the region.
	I think they're really starting to understand and expand their vision of who they serve and recognize the value of that being a kind of more of a collective resource as opposed to how that used to be. And what would functionality look like or any



	expression of Unitarianism that we needed to or wanted to access, admin support or religious education support or ministry support or whatever.
Erin	The idea of sharing resources makes particular sense given that some UU's in the lower mainland of British Columbia are involved in more than one UU Expression, a wonderful perk of having a cluster within a relatively close geographical distance. Here's catherine explaining how people are engaging on a regional level.
catherine	We have youth and children who are part of multiple congregations right now, they're engaged in certain things, in certain congregations.
	They're engaged with us. And this is one of the exciting pieces to me, because in the Lower Mainland we have now five different UU communities, only one of which has a minister at the moment. And there is a lot of interconnection happening, like I'm currently on the Healthy Relations team at the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. And so I interact quite a bit with them with that team and also in other groups there.
	There's other UUs of the Salish Sea that are attending some of their services at UCV. There is a wider IBPOC (Indigenous, Black, People of Colour) allies group that draws from all of the congregations in the Lower Mainland. So to me that's kind of an exciting piece, is kind of shedding a little bit this idea of being a member of a congregation and evolving and expanding our idea of how we are as a Unitarian geographically connected group.
	And where does it make sense to be more purposeful in our interconnections and sharing of resources? And so even like which congregations have what strengths and where do you for example, where would you have your OWL (Our Whole Lives Sexuality Education) program? Where would that make sense for that to be kept? And to me, this is one of the really exciting pieces that I think is starting to emerge and has support from people certainly at UCV and to some degree at some of the other congregations.
Amber	Not viewing UU life as congregation specific but region wide is such a practical and energizing innovation. All sorts of collaborations could spring from embracing collective co-creativity - not to mention UU community pride. If this framework were to become a reality.,
Erin	Right, and the load of each expression could be decreased by sharing the costs of space, administrative, technological, ministerial, religious education, youth and YA programming, and other types of support that are currently placed on the shoulders of one group.
	Remember the Inquiring Souls group that Catherine and Robyn talked about in episode 3? It's not only multi generational, but also a multi-location programme.
catherine	Jessica and Bill are hosting that for the youth. And again, this is where the lines of like which congregation you're talking about get a bit blurred because there're youth



	from North Shore and UUs of the Salish Sea and possibly Unitarian Church of Vancouver.
Erin	UU's of the Salish Sea are thinking in terms of energy, passion, and not creating a thing that will require more than they have to sustain themselves. As they put it:
	We didn't want to burn out.
Erin	And they aren't alone. When I spoke to Luci from Huronia Fellowship she also lamented the challenges of organizing that are falling on a small group of them:
Luci	We're so small and I had mentioned that we have a hard time just keeping up with administrative duties and the board, the five or six or seven people that are regulars are also the same people that are on the board and the same people that are facilitating the meetings and the same people that are that are constantly in communication.
	Sometimes it just feels tedious, Sometimes it feels a little bit overwhelming, we all have we all have lives and so sometimes it just feels hard. The people have been on the board for years.
	We can't really change it because there's nobody else to replace them with. So I think that's one of the things that's difficult.
	It would be less of a burden if we weren't part of the CUC. But that's not something we want to do, we don't want to disassociate ourselves. And that would certainly eliminate our need for administration, but we don't want to do that.
	There are some things that we do because we want to be connected.
	I'm curious about how geographically what the regions would be.
	It would be nice to connect to a larger community as well, to meet again with UUs, I think that could be really interesting.
Amber	There's a great example of the willingness that we have been hearing about from Congregational Life Leads Reverend Linda Thomson and Reverend Anne Barker. They've been hosting these online congregational conversations to help foster connection and creative problem solving across regional borders, and what they tell us is that, as the tides change, congregations are opening to the possibility of doing things very differently than they have in the past.
Erin	Perhaps not with every congregation, but with many. And when it comes to Huronia, and likely other UU communities, they are spending more time organizing than they'd prefer, and that's no fun.
Amber	Imagine how freed up they'd be to pour themselves into developing their vision if they were connected to a regional hub, with less administrative work. I bet this nomadic expression of UUism could become a pretty popular model.



Bridge	
Erin	After our formal interview, Luci and I were imagining out loud what would happen if they intentionally selected community groups to build relationship with while meeting in their space.
Erin	So this is kind of an interesting alternative with the vision and passion put into, you know, it's not just choosing any old space. It sounds like you've had the art gallery and the conservation authorities and the other church religious community or whatever, right? These are interesting things to me.
	You're creating events and the events have an overlap interest and then you engage whoever wants to be engaged.
	Another option would be other nomadic UU expressions, right? Like that expression becomes a thing. And so then now these groups that are also nomadic UUs create a board or whatever it is to to make life easier and so then it doesn't matter you can be from all across the country, but then you have these connections.
	And this is where, you know, try to do an inventory of what's already happening to know how many other groups are there like yours. And maybe there's some people that are meeting in not congregational buildings like church buildings, but haven't really thought about it as being a ministry or as being an expression or whatever terms that they put.
	But to be in a community engaged nomadic expression, the community developer in me, I see only possibilities when I look at something like that because I highly value community connections and the benefits that happen when you spend your time really understanding someone else's world and that you can end up being a group of people, who end up doing a lot about the local community and have these really deep, meaningful connections.
	And maybe the collective expression looks more once a year and inviting all of these people that you've made connections with to come and have a shared potluck meal and in your whatever shared space, you have 50 people or more people, right? And so these are all the different groups that you've chosen to intentionally connect with over the years, and then you facilitate a social gathering where the congregational folks are meeting up with the Heritage Museum, people who are meeting up with the Women's Group collective that started their thing on Front Street or, you know, all the different things that you become connected with.
Luci	We're always hoping to reach more people, we do have some new members. One member actually came from another congregation from across Canada, they'd moved. So it's not like we're bringing in new people to UU.
	We always believe that there are people out there that are in their heart to UU and hoping that we can connect with them and bring them in to join us.



Erin	<p>One thing that I would say coming out of this conversation with the kind of nomadic UU expression of possibility is not necessarily trying to bring in more UUs as much as it is that idea of your group connecting with these various aspects of the community intentionally. And, depending on how you do it, you might stay three months in one spot, but then deeply engage with the people in that organization or whatever. Right. And then, like I said, if you bring people together, then it's almost like when they're connecting with you, they are connecting with this vision of the communities being interwoven.</p>
	<p>This idea that we all are interconnected, one of the UU values, it's a way of bringing that value to life. So you're not just bringing like minded people, same people together to be UUs in this one way, as much as it is saying we are interconnected, let's find our interconnection together.</p>
	<p>So this idea of let's find our interconnections. Like if that became your practice of how you brought your UU values to life was to say, it doesn't matter if this is like we're going to meet with a war veterans type thing, people with PTSD, we're going to meet in this reserve, we're going to meet in this conservation area.</p>
	<p>We're going to meet with these women who are domestic violence survivors and are using such as such a thing to whatever. Right. Those are your four groups for the year. Yeah. And then you become the center spoke. Yes. And then you're connecting and actually creating what's called social capital for those different groups. All right. So you might choose on purpose, like an intersection of folks that when you end up connecting them and that you bring them into your world.</p>
	<p>Now, their world is richer because a group that maybe has very little is connected with a group that has maybe more or a group that has something to express is connected with a group of artists to express it. To me, that's like, that could be if fleshed out a little bit more, something that becomes a nomadic UU expression, this is what it looks like.</p>
	<p>And if you join in this for the year, you will be having this experience of being connected with more different parts of our area and learning and being and whatever. I would sign up for that shoot. That sounds fantastic.</p>
Luci	<p>I'm actually really excited about it. Thinking about thinking about our nomadic UU approach. You know, I don't think we ever quite looked at spaces that we go to intentionally.</p>
Erin	<p>And I do think that when you talk about community outreach, that's an example of where you could have for a time, or forever, whatever it is, people coming on board because they, too have helped shape who these four will be and they're invested in it.</p>



	<p>And so it could be a totally not currently a UU person - that would become irrelevant - you might have 15 additional people come on board to have the experience of learning and talk about it. And then when you're meeting, you're not just necessarily meeting in someone's space, but you're hearing from them and you're building relationships and then you say you're meeting on a reserve, right?</p>
	<p>And you start to build connections, relationships intentionally, then if you do it so it's not too far away, then you might also invite those people to come and be with you when you meet with the next group. And then they could start to create this collection of people as opposed to only seeing yourselves to go connect with them.</p>
Luci	<p>This idea of the regional hubs, that's you know, that's really cool and that could be really helpful.</p>
Amber	<p>I get goosebumps discovering all the potential there. Being a Nomadic Uu could be a really impactful thing.</p>
Erin	<p>And not in spite of being buildingless, but <i>because</i> of being buildingless</p>
Amber	<p>So this hypothetical example would not only have the load lightened by sharing between different UU expressions but by collaborating with other organizations and groups within the geographical area where UU's live, regardless of whether there is a congregational building or not.</p>
Erin	<p>And the types of doors that could open, in terms of opportunities to co-create greater impact with less effort, are likely far greater than we could dream up in advance. This idea of making intentional connections within communities could be really exciting for those who choose to keep their buildings, too. Besides renting to outside groups, which many are already doing, intentional collaborations could open the door to co-creating new expressions of service to communities, using the UU building as a <i>community</i> resource.</p>
Bridge	
Amber	<p>Earlier we discussed how having a building has a legitimizing effect. I imagine that some people may need to release that concept in order to embrace all the creative possibilities that can exist with or without "the building."</p>
Erin	<p>I agree. A lot of what we have been hearing in these interviews has to do with finding ways to recognize and legitimize all the various authentic expressions of UUism which certainly extends past Church buildings and ministers. Specifically, some Community Ministers we interviewed expressed that being buildingless tends to result in them being viewed as less legitimate.</p>
	<p>Janet Pivinick, who is training to be a Community-based Minister, is deeply reflective about authentic expression. Her heart's calling combines ecology with spirituality, and so she sees her ideal church as nature, not a building.</p>



Janet Pivnick	<p>I'm Jewish by birth and I, I was raised in a secular home, so I never felt a strong connection to Judaism other than there's there's a cultural basis to the religion. As I've been in seminary and exploring ministry and taking all kinds of wonderful courses, I'm recognizing how Jewish I am in the way I see the world even though the actual religion is not necessarily my belief system. So that's one part.</p>
	<p>What actually led me to considering ministry. I've done environmental work most of my life. And at a certain point, I recognized that I had actually always been doing spiritual work.</p>
	<p>And because I don't come from a religious background, I didn't have that frame for it. I never thought of it that way. But it became apparent that the work I was doing was a little bit outside of the environmental mainstream, that actually I'd been doing spiritual work for most of my life.</p>
	<p>I'm really rooted in deep ecology and seeing myself as part of the interdependent web to go with our seventh principle.</p>
	<p>I'd really like to combine my environmental past with my Unitarian ministry future. And so what I envision down the road is probably some kind of community ministry that helps people connect with nature as a way to connect with spirituality.</p>
	<p>One of my jobs many years ago when I was in my twenties was working at outdoor schools and taking kids on nature walks so that they could learn about ecology. And so I could see doing something similar to that, but helping people to connect to Spirit and to themselves.</p>
	<p>So that's one aspect of it. Another part of that is we're facing pretty major environmental crises. And I work at a university and the students are in despair. And so how do we support that? And from a pastoral perspective, how do we help people to deal with the situation that we're in and not just shut down?</p>
	<p>As I'm in formation (for ministry), recognizing the shift I need to go through from being a change agent to being a minister because my entire life has been about supporting change.</p>
	<p>And as a minister, there's a very different lens that you take for that because it is about supporting the people. It's not about supporting the cause. That's something I'm really grappling with personally is, being with people where they are, supporting that. I used to think of it as midwife change.</p>
	<p>To me, it's always been really important to do that work from a place of compassion. But still it's about the change as opposed to about the people. So I'm taking on a new identity.</p>
Erin	<p>When you speak, what comes to my mind is it's almost like different doors to the same issue.</p>



	<p>But for some people they'll meet you at the door of activism and others will meet you at the door of like literally immersing themselves in nature. And some will meet you at the door of their heart and soul, and then some will meet you at the door of their mind. And so all those different places are in my my view anyway, places that are kind of like the entry point, but they're all connected.</p>
	<p>So to me, fine, come through the art doorway, but we're going to engage all parts of you anyway. And then it's just figuring out how to, to balance all of that. That seems to be such a fun thing. Yeah. For those of us who have layers to the work that we do....</p>
Janet	<p>...there's a million ways to get there.</p>
Bridge	
Erin	<p>People don't become ministers out of the blue. It's a calling to be in service to this faith community, and is clear in those we spoke to that they do not take it lightly. UU Ministers, including Community-based ministers, have expressed gratitude and appreciation for the work they do and the affirmations they receive from fellow UU's. Having said that, when I encouraged feedback about how it felt to be a <i>community-based</i> minister, some expressed feeling left out and not supported within the current structure. Wendy Luella Perkins is just one community-based minister we interviewed who expressed feeling this way. She's the founder of Soulful Singing. We are including her words here as an example because she shared her feelings using an image we found particularly helpful.</p>
Wendy-Luella Perkins	<p>I feel like an electron that's very, very far away from the nucleus.</p>
	<p>We have these community ministries that are actually adding a lot of value to our Unitarian Universalist movement, and yet there's no structure to really support them unless I'm hustling, I'm writing grants, I'm making asks.</p>
	<p>But there's not a structure to say, we have four community, great community ministers in Canada. Maybe we're going to invest in them every year. We're going to actually put a number and send some money their way or there's going to be an offering or some way to support those ministries. But it doesn't currently exist.</p>
	<p>I end up feel a bit like a free floating agent out there, like free floating. I am connected to the Kingston Unitarian Fellowship, and I have a good relationship with Beckett (Coppola), the minister there.</p>
Amber	<p>So it sounds like there is definitely an opportunity there for community ministers to have some sense of, first of all, acknowledgment that it's a real and valid expression of UUism. And in some of what she's saying, it's almost challenging us to imagine that it might be even more relevant for some people than the congregational expression that takes place within a typical church building.</p>



	It's not to say that the congregational expression isn't valuable to those who choose to engage that way, but for anyone who doesn't choose to engage that way - UU ministers, Lay Chaplains, or other UUs doing various things like social enterprise, community engaged activities and these sort of things - it may certainly not be the only expression of UUism that they value.
	It is important to note that there is a difference between being relationally supportive and structurally supportive. When we talk about removing barriers to full inclusion it involves looking at how we can structure ourselves so that various expressions of UUism have the resources they need to thrive.
Erin	Because these interviews were meant to give us insight about how UUism might be structured into the future, I asked all our interviewees what support, if any, is missing. Wendy Luella's response captured the essence of what we heard from community-based ministers. She offered one more practical support suggestion.
Wendy Luella	There is the recognition part, because the CUC puts out something every week or every month - here are some of our community ministers, ministries and this is what they're doing, and we commend you to check them out and support them. That is a tangible thing. Because the CUC has connections to all these congregations and to individuals within the congregation. There's that simple lateral promotion.
Erin	Wendy Luella brought up some valuable points related to the sustainability of her work and the work of other community ministers, and we have created an episode dedicated to this important topic.
	But for now it leaves us asking "what potential is there for growth if we can find a way to legitimize and support all ministers and the people they minister to?" because anyone who is not a part of a congregation, are not considered or counted as UUs in Canada, including the ministers themselves and even CUC staff who are not a part of a congregation.
Amber	That feels like a huge oversight.
Erin	Yes. Back when the structure was formed it likely made perfect sense and wasn't exclusionary, And it seems obvious now that UUism has evolved to have expressions that are not just congregationally affiliated. Fortunately, Like all things in life, change is inevitable, and there is an opportunity to adapt.
Amber	Ok. And how do we do that?
Erin	Janet answered that very succinctly.
Janet	I think the way forward is to honor who we all are. And I think Unitarianism is actually a fantastic place to do that.
Amber	And what could that mean as we consider this episode where we've explored whether or not to have a building, the idea of regional hubs, nomadic UUism, and the experiences of Community Ministers?



Erin	The instinct to be curious and ask questions is key, add in the courage to image answers and we are well on our way.
Amber	The digital developer in me is asking so many questions - How could the CUC create another avenue for membership that isn't a congregation? Would it be possible and helpful for the CUC to create regional hubs? If so, how would that work? What type of online space would have enough value that people would join as individuals or organizations? What would it contain? How could the CUC and members bring to life UU values in ways that meet our needs, community needs, and make our hearts sing?
Erin	All great questions that could lead to so many rabbit holes for exploration. Our next episode will get those creative juices flowing even more as we talk with people who are exploring community engaged projects and social enterprises.
Amber	Let's goooooo!

End of Episode 5 transcript
