

Ten Good Ideas for Adult Faith Development Programming In Unitarian Universalist Congregations

1. Consider the characteristics of adult learners.

You do not have to be a professional educator to understand the basics of adult development and learning. Adult learning is an ongoing activity; it is often accidental and an outcome of some other activity. By contrast, adult education is a planned activity, often having specific short- or long-term objectives. Adult religious education is a set of planned activities that enable people who share similar religious values, sense of spirituality, or a similar faith stance to work together for spiritual awakening and faith development—religious growth.

Adult learners come with experience. They ask questions. Some Unitarian Universalists are skeptical and challenging; others are goal-oriented. They may be looking for spiritual growth and a sense of connection, not only with other people, but with the mystery of being alive. They may be eager to figure out how they can help to bring more love and justice into the world. Most adults make commitments to particular types of learning that has relevance in their lives. They are voluntary learners who are self-directed and highly motivated under the right conditions. They seek particular kinds of information and experiences to supplement what they already know.

2. Conduct a Needs Assessment before planning your program.

Conduct a simple needs assessment in your congregation to determine what kind of offerings interest people in your congregation. Although this can be done informally by asking for input from lay and professional leaders and from congregants, the assessment will be more inclusive if you use a more formal process—a written survey or focus group—to determine the perceived needs of congregants. If appropriate, a survey might be inserted in the Sunday Order of Service, or given to each congregant as he or she enters the sanctuary on a particular Sunday. Such a survey might simply list a dozen or so possible kinds of programs, and invite participants to check four or five that are of interest to them and which they would consider attending. Be sure to offer a space for suggestions as well.

As part of your needs assessment process, invite input as to what times are best for the adults in your congregation (e.g. Sunday afternoons, Wednesday evenings, Saturdays) and whether or not on-site childcare would make it more likely that they would attend an adult program.

3. Use needs assessment to begin your planning.

Take into account the results of the needs assessment as well as considering the capacity of volunteers and staff to offer programming. Do you have budgeted funds that would enable you to engage an outside presenter or facilitator?

It is best to plan for fewer offerings and have a successful experience, rather than plan for more than your congregation can support.

4. Offer a variety of program formats.

It is important to consider that learning styles may be as varied as the number of people in a given group. Some respond best to visual learning while others learn through auditory senses, and still others through kinesthetic approaches. Some may prefer an intellectual approach while others prefer an experiential approach. Some people are reflective learners, while others are

concrete thinkers. Some will prefer a formal presentation, while others prefer a less-formal structure. Try not to restrict your offerings to classroom lectures, but include reading and discussion groups, worship and celebration, field trips (e.g., events that lead to cultural exploration and cultural critique), reflection on issues leading to social action, and opportunities for service or witness.

5. Balance your program.

Once you have made a preliminary plan for your congregation, consider the question of balance in your programming. Ask if your proposed program includes:

- Opportunities to be introduced to new ideas and experiences
- Opportunities for people to tell their own stories
- Opportunities to deepen understanding of Unitarian Universalism
- Encounters with wisdom from the sources of our living Unitarian Universalist tradition—direct experience, words and deeds of prophetic people, the world's religions, Jewish and Christian tradition, humanist teachings and the guidance of reason, and spiritual teachings of earth-centered traditions
- Communities of care, support, and concern
- Engagement with ethical and moral questions
- A Call to faith in action, working within the congregation and in the wider world to build communities of justice and love
- Spiritual experiences which inspire, transform, and sustain

A comprehensive adult religious education program should include offerings in several areas and can be rotated over time.

6. Recruit volunteers carefully and support them well.

If your congregation is not already in the habit of collecting information such as interests and skills from new members, you may wish to encourage such a practice. This is a good way to begin an assessment of who is already within the congregation that may have something valuable to share with others. Alternatively, include a question about skills and knowledge in your needs assessment. You may also make an announcement in the church bulletin or in the worship service. Once you have identified those who will facilitate, consider what supports they will need in order for the experience to be a good one both for them and for the group. Do they need training? If so, who will provide it? Who will support them if concerns or issues arise during the course of a program?

7. Search the [Tapestry of Faith](#) page on uua.org to find complete programs for adults.

Tapestry of Faith is a series of programs and resources for all ages that nurture Unitarian Universalist identity, spiritual growth, a transforming faith, and vital communities of justice and love. The UUA is developing these resources out of a broad series of conversations and denomination-wide focus groups that articulated a future direction for Unitarian Universalist religious growth and learning. These programs offer a variety of resources—downloadable, printed, viewable, interactive, and more—a religious growth and learning program for the twenty-first century.

Adult programs available on line now include Principled Commitment (for committed couples), Spirit of Life, Spirit in Practice, and Harvest the Power: Developing Lay Leadership. Coming soon are What Moves Us: Unitarian Universalist Theology (10 workshops), a thematic history of Unitarian Universalism (16 workshops), and a history of Unitarian Universalist social justice work (16 workshops).

8. Find resources for adult forums and discussion groups.

Search the Beacon Press website for [on-line discussion guides](#) for some of Beacon Press's offerings of particular interest to Unitarian Universalists. Peruse a list of recommended resources including books and films, when you are choosing subjects for book and movie discussion groups (see webinar resources- soon to be on the UUA website).

9. Find information about starting or supporting a small group ministry or covenant program.

Helpful guidance can be found in the book [The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving the World Ten at a Time](#), by Robert L. Hill, or at the website of the [Center for Community Values](#), an organization of Unitarian Universalists supporting the spiritual practice of small group ministry in our congregations.

10. Keep these good practices in mind when planning adult faith development programs:

- A job description and a system of accountability for paid or volunteer coordinator and/or adult faith development oversight committee
- Intentional creation of links between congregational work (e.g., board and committees) and adult spiritual growth/development
- Inclusion of faith in action projects that encourage community involvement
- Community-building activities and programs
- Offerings for people at all levels of commitment to Unitarian Universalism as well as all ages and stages of adult growth and learning
- Different time and length offerings (from a few hours to multiple weeks)
- Child care or concurrent children's programming
- Training for facilitators
- Food ... for the body and soul
- Make it multigenerational! Look for ways to include young people and young adults for a session or make a special invitation to teens and young adults to participate