

Taking It Home: Families and Faith

Tools for Deepening Your Faith at Home

Let's Talk About Interfaith Families

by Sparrow F. Alden

Contents

[How to Use This Guide](#)

[What Are Interfaith Families?](#)

[Interfaith Families and UU Faith](#)

[Interfaith Families Across the Lifespan](#)

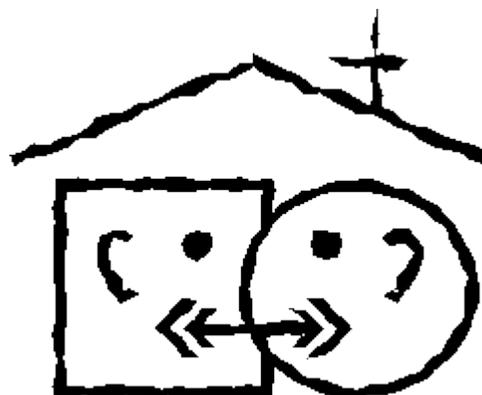
[Activities](#)

[Footnotes](#)

[Resources](#)

[UU Principles \(Adult and Children's versions\)](#)

[About the Authors, About FMTF, About the Series](#)



An interfaith family is like mixing oil and water religiously. But family conversations provide opportunities to understand interfaith issues as enriching, not enraging.
--Rev. Lucinda Duncan

When you love, you should not say, "God is in my heart but rather I am in the heart of God. And I think not that you can direct the course of love. For love, if it finds you worthy, directs your course."
--Kahlil Gibran

When it comes to our children, love is the answer, no matter what the question.
--Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

What religion am I? A strange question to ask, in my eyes. Can you not see I am not a religion but a child of God with many colors, reflections, and hues
--Lisa Jean Paldino (intermarried poet)

The perennial December dilemma, "to tree or not to tree," is only the tip of the iceberg. It's the part underwater, the unshapen fears and assumptions that can sink the family ship.
--Mary Rosenbaum, *Dovetail*

It's not our differences that separate us, but our reluctance to recognize those differences.
--Audre Lorde

The important thing is that children be companioned in their religious thinking and encouraged to continue in it.

--Rev. Jeanne Nieuwejaar



How to Use This Guide

Use this guide with a light heart. You may have opened these pages with curiosity or you may have done so in a search for help that feels almost desperate. Let your reading and thinking be a celebration of your loving family, an acceptance of challenges, and a sign of your hope for the human family of Earth.

To get the most from this booklet, tuck a folded piece of blank paper into the cover and clip on a pen. This reader's journal will help you to keep track of your own thoughts and responses to the themes covered and to capture those fleeting brilliant ideas. We can lead hurried lives, and the time you carve out for reading and responding to this booklet may be moments snatched while waiting for preschool to let out or for a file to download. Use the reader's journal to help provide continuity in your study and reflection.

Use the [Resources](#) section as suggestions for your own further reading or for gifts for family members. This guide offers writing, discussing, and doing activities, and a good book at one's own pace in privacy is one that complements many people's learning styles.

This booklet is designed to help us explore how we live our lives as UU people who embrace a pluralistic and inclusive faith. It will help us to think about and to discuss the concept and the reality of *interfaith families*. The booklet begins with a discussion of faith structures and practices and how we integrate different faith stances into family life. It then suggests ways to build bridges of understanding and create interfaith ceremonies and celebrations for UU families.

Interfaith family dynamics contain difficult and complex issues for families to discuss. We may not even be aware of the value judgments, past history, and cultural assumptions we carry across the generations. What's more, families have different preferred styles of dealing with important topics such as faith, interfaith, and family faith. Some find that *casual conversations* offer surprising insights into their family members' deepest thoughts. Others enjoy creating a family ritual one evening a week, when they can focus together on important events in their lives and share in a *structured activity*. Still others may want to *gather with a group of families in their congregation*, building a sense of community as they explore this topic together. You will find throughout this booklet questions titled **What Do You Think?** These questions can be used to spark fresh thoughts on this topic and to launch conversations at mealtimes, bath times, or bedtimes; in the car or on a walk; or even while shopping or watching television. Give yourself a few moments for each--fully engaging in each exercise will allow you to reap the full benefits. It may be a visualization or a chance to write in your reader's journal or recall a memory from long ago. In your conversations or as you ponder your own answers, listen for statements of personal values around faith structures and practices, religious backgrounds, and family time. Anecdotes of choices made, whether perceived as good or bad choices, will offer insight, as will "should" statements. The phrase **Try This** accompanies many of these questions and introduces an activity that will help make the concepts more concrete. For structured activities that build on each other from week to week, turn to the section titled [Activities](#). These suggestions can be used at home or with intergenerational groups in your congregation.

How to Begin

Read through the two essays that follow--[What Are Interfaith Families?](#) and [Interfaith Families and Unitarian Universalist Faith](#)--and note what thoughts, images, and experiences they bring to mind. [Interfaith Families Across the Lifespan](#) then looks at aspects of interfaith dynamics relevant to each age group, from infants to elders. The information and practical suggestions offered here will help you focus on elements that are most appropriate for your family. The [Activities](#) section provides exercises for scheduled times together as a family or with an intergenerational group in your congregation. [Resources](#) lists books and web sites keyed to different ages that will take your family's exploration of interfaith issues and resources even deeper. At the end of the booklet, you will find the [Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes](#) and the [Principles in Language for Children](#). The concluding paragraphs offer additional information about the [Taking It Home](#) series.

What Are Interfaith Families?

Perhaps we should ask, "Who are interfaith families?" Someone in a family is reading this. Someone in a family--perhaps two parents, perhaps a grandmother--will be a cornerstone in the foundation of an interfaith family.

Interfaith families are groups of people related by ties of relationship (like romantic partnership, adoption, or birth) who share resources (like a home) and whose members follow or have heritage in different faith traditions.

While the definition may be clear-cut, the situations rarely are. Whether the partners in the family come from different faith backgrounds or one of the adolescent children has embraced a new faith different from the family's shared tradition, families face a dynamic tension between upholding and relying on family cohesion and honoring religious freedom.

The personal, idiosyncratic nature of spiritual journey might encourage us to think of every family as an interfaith family. People raised in the same faith tradition, in the same congregation even, nonetheless enjoy a unique understanding and experience of Spirit. These understandings can certainly resist articulation. No wonder that people of different faith traditions find it challenging to live together in a family in a way that supports each person's spiritual growth!

What Do You Think? *What words do you use to define interfaith families? How do you identify interfaith families? What religions and cultures are included in your definitions?*

Try This: *In your reader's journal, make a quick sketch of the structure of your nuclear family--perhaps initials joined by lines. Add in those family members who may not live with you but who have great influence on you. Keep the sketch nearby as a reminder of whom you're thinking of as you read.*

What Is Faith?

Every person makes meaning out of life. A person's faith is that constellation of beliefs, values,

behaviors, and responses to life that are both consciously taught and indelibly imprinted by the patterns, activities, and expectations of their families and their culture. A person's faith is always changing as a person gains years of experience and addresses issues of ultimate concern.

Faith development theorist Rev. Dr. James Fowler speaks of faith as a dynamic verb, as an active not static thinking. He talks of "faithing, something we do, a process of wrestling meaning from life, testing it through action, and subjecting it again and again to the scrutiny of our minds, to the leap of our hearts, to the reality of action."¹ Therefore, faith can be defined in a three-fold way as including **belief**--the cognitive (conclusions of our minds), as **feeling**--the affective (those allegiances of our hearts), and as **action**--the behavioral (those things we are willing to put our lives on the line for).

Faith is also a cultural-linguistic context for understanding and responding to life. Faith acts as a structure for living because it defines human nature, names the nature of God (the ultimate), and identifies patterns of expectation for individual and social relationships and for our relationship to the earth.

Every person has a **faith structure**, regardless of whether she or he is **religious** and regardless of whether the faith is formed around a theistic belief in God or a humanistic belief in the ultimate potential of every person's ability to respond to the good.² A faith structure emerges from our critical growing-up years. It determines what we see and what we fail to notice, how we conceptualize, how we express what is meaningful, and how we arrive at our personal sense of appropriate responsibilities and roles. Faith is an expression of meaning revealed in the way a person lives his/her life--the ultimacy and intimacy that underlie one's worldview and value system.

***What Do You Think?** How do you use the word faith? How do you express your faith? Your understanding of faith and faith development probably has changed over the years. As you reflect on your faith history, who influenced your meaning-making decisions?*

***Try This:** Think back to a person who influenced your faith development as you were growing up. It can be someone from your own (or your family's) religious tradition or it can be anyone you noticed or thought about in this way. Write down in your journal the name of this person, the age of this person, your age at the time of your remembrance, what qualities or behaviors made this person faithful or religious, and what influences this person had on your faith development or religious identity.*

Tools of the Journey

The members and structure of each unique family shape its character. Your experience as an interfaith family certainly cannot be pigeonholed. Interviews with different interfaith families do show common themes, however. A few examples will illustrate the tools that each of these families found indispensable in their interfaith journeys.

Knowing Yourself, Educating Yourself: Ed and Kathy have a strong marriage with two bright and wonderful sons. Ed's Muslim family accepts Kathy's Christian one as "People of the Book"--fellow monotheists and spiritual descendants of Abraham. Kathy enjoys her in-laws very much and knows they're wonderful grandparents, but she has a hard time thinking about their family's

mixed faith. Her childhood church filled her with images of damnation for all who did not fit into that church's community. Although she rejects that notion intellectually, she is bothered by the emotional images from her childhood.

Kathy observes that strong self-awareness has been her key to addressing her inner conflict. She has honed the skill of observing herself when she feels anxious about matters of faith. "Is this anxiety coming from me?" she asks. When the answer is yes, she reminds herself to respond to the present situation calmly and save her anxiety for personal reflection time later. When the answer is no, the anxiety is really coming from the situation, she can rely on the strength of her relationship with Ed to address it directly.

She has begun reviewing her memories of her childhood church. She recalls the moments that she treasures--feelings of community, beautiful music, and a strong sense of God's love. Kathy carries these gifts from her church of origin forward into her spiritual life today and hopes for these to be part of her sons' spiritual lives. This memory review allows Kathy to separate out the memories of her childhood church that she doesn't need--ideas about fear and exclusivity that are not part of her adult understanding of her own spiritual life.

About once a year, Kathy learns something new about Islam. Sometimes she reads a book ("In January," she says, "when all I want to do is curl up with a book and a cup of tea."). Sometimes she attends religious observances with her husband; since they live in a rural area, the trip involves a long drive home when she can ask questions. Once she traveled with her boys and husband and in-laws to Iran to visit Ed's cousins, where she experienced immersion in Islamic culture.

Knowing herself, understanding her religious past, and learning more about Ed's faith tradition have deepened Kathy's clarity about her own and her family's spiritual path.

What Do You Think? *What mementos or photographs come to mind when you think back on your childhood religious experiences? Do any symbols or events evoke painful (or happy) memories?*

Try This: *Jot down one memory from your childhood spiritual life (even if you didn't attend religious services). Decide and note if this memory is one to draw from now in your spiritual journey or one to let go.*

Communication: Nancy grew up attending church weekly with her parents, who were very active in church leadership. Jan grew up in a family that rejected religion and taught her a very strong skepticism of anything unempirical. They've been partners for almost fifteen years and find that communication has been key to honoring one another's spiritual path.

Jan tells us, "In the beginning of our relationship, whenever I said anything about Nancy's church, it sounded as though I were belittling her experience." Nancy didn't want to keep part of her life separate from Jan, so she spoke up and they talked about what was happening. Now both partners think before they bring up a sensitive subject.

"I make sure that my nonverbal message matches my words," says Jan. And she's set aside her

drive to "score points" for being more scientific.

Meanwhile, Nancy invited Jan to attend a service when she knew the topic would be of particular interest to Jan. "Half of communication is listening. Going to the service helped me to learn more about this important part of Nancy's life." Nancy has made it clear that she doesn't expect Jan to become a churchgoer--and that she will continue to invite her when she thinks Jan would particularly enjoy the service.

Interfaith Relationships

In talking about interfaith issues and relationships, Rev. Lucinda Duncan, in her adult education program on interfaith issues, looks at the twin issues of intimacy and loss to understand how grief accompanies religious change. She posits that often interfaith couples or individuals who have left their faith of origin sometimes express feeling of a growing sense of religious loss and an inability to understand one another's motivations or responses.

Many people in interfaith relationships harbor fear that if they push too hard to maintain one system of intimacy (religious) they will necessarily lose the other (primary relationship). It's important for partners and family members across the generations to express their religious feelings, memories, and expectations. It takes courage to risk expressing your innermost faith stance, especially if you feel that someone close to you may disagree or not empathize with your religious perspective.

Many authors addressing interfaith relationships write about the importance of understanding that to enter into an interfaith relationship is to walk into an extended period of religious transition. Sometimes there is the loss felt by realizing that you may have to let go of the certainty and fullness of your "cradle" religion. At another level, the ambiguity and uncertainty that you feel may be a mask for the fear that part of your inner identity may have to be opened to examination and discussion. Rev. Debra Haffner offers some Tips for UU Interfaith Families: Be sure the children know about their religious heritage; Communicate about religious differences with love and respect; Look for ways to adapt traditional religious practices; Get together with other interfaith families; Give your family skills to stand up for interfaith families when people attack intermarriage.³

What Do You Think? Take yourself back in time and remember a family member who gave you a sense of your religious identity. This family member can be living or dead, a parent or grandparent, extended family member, or someone else living with you. Who are you thinking of? Why? What do you remember learning or doing with this person? Have you shared this memory with someone close to you? Why or why not?

Our family identity is based on unstated multigenerational assumptions about *who we are*, what constitutes our unique family, and about *whose we are*. There are visible and invisible *heritage-carriers*, *loyalty-carriers*, and *identity-carriers* in families. In interfaith families these persons and carriers often complicate and destabilize family systems as well as identify and define family systems.

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Boundaries

Lauren and Will had interfaith challenges from the moment that they announced their engagement. Lauren's family had definite ideas about what they wanted at the wedding, and began planning almost without consulting either bride or groom. Members of Will's family either issued dire predictions about the fate of the marriage, or ignored Lauren and the approaching celebration altogether.

They could not possibly please everyone. They agreed to care for one another's needs first and then respect other family members by expecting them to behave with thoughtfulness and maturity. Absolutely top of their list was the expectation that jokes about the other family's religion would cease and desist.

Establishing clear boundaries like that was no magic cure for the situation. Resistance was expressed on both sides, but both Lauren and Will have politely restated their boundaries over and over. Lauren and Will have thanked Lauren's family for their enthusiasm about the celebration and firmly took over all planning for the ceremony itself. Will's family members have received a letter from Lauren and a visit from Will expressing hope that they would attend the wedding and reception in a spirit of community with and happiness for the new couple.

Try this: *Honestly consider whether you are good at setting and keeping boundaries; also are you good at respecting others' limits? Write down one boundary you will set, enforce, or respect this week that has been troublesome for you in the past. Next week, write about your success.*

A Sense of Humor

Sometimes the obstacles lend themselves to diffusion through laughter. When everyone involved acts out of kindness, the unintended conflicts can provide a good chuckle when they are pointed out.

Andrea and Len grew up as neighbors, attending the church across the street from one another. These congregations are both conservative Protestant churches, their pastors are colleagues, they enjoy an annual summer softball game and picnic together, and Andrea's church opened its doors

wide to offer worship space to Len's congregation when their sanctuary burned down several years ago. Separated by points of church polity and some specific elements of liturgy, Andrea and Len were unprepared for the difficulties presented when they married. Each loved their home congregation and continued to worship there. Members of the two different congregations expected "the other" spouse in this family to become a member of their own congregation.

"I understand exactly what's going on," Len says to the elders in his congregation when they ask when they will see Andrea in church. "Everyone wants to hold the baby." He has responded to their situation with laughter and helped others see that no competition exists between the congregations - except in softball.

What do you think? When and how have you used humor to diffuse an interfaith family dilemma? Does humor work better with some family relationships and not with others? Why?

Interfaith Families and UU Faith

I think that one of our most important tasks is to convince others that there's nothing to fear in difference; that difference, in fact, is one of the healthiest and most invigorating of human characteristics without which life would become meaningless. Here lies the power of the liberal way: not in making the whole world Unitarian, but in helping ourselves and others to see some of the possibilities inherent in viewpoints other than one's own; in encouraging the free interchange of ideas; in welcoming fresh approaches to the problems of life; in urging the fullest, most vigorous use of critical self-examination.

--Adlai Stevenson, Unitarian layperson, quoted in *A Chosen Faith* by John Buehrens and Forrest Church

A basic premise of our Unitarian Universalist faith is the guarantee that we are non-creedal as a collective faith. Our living tradition draws "wisdom from the world's religions, which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life." *Deeds not creeds* is the hidden unity in Unitarian Universalism.

This basic Unitarian Universalist tenet--respect for each person's right to formulate his or her own religious perspectives within the context of our Principles and Purposes-- provides the foundation for working with interfaith couples and interfaith families exploring their changing faith perspectives. Indeed, every one of our congregations is, in essence, an interfaith body. All Unitarian Universalists are "building their own theology" as they welcome families with diverse configurations and a wide variety of faith perspectives and religious backgrounds.

Will our family be accepted?

This is probably the most crucial question many families ask, and we hope that you find the answer to be yes. Unitarian Universalist congregations are deliberate in their welcoming of all kinds of families; we feel that diversity is a treasure that enriches us all.

What can interfaith families expect to find here?

In many Unitarian Universalist congregations, they can expect to find that they are far from alone! We are often the "right fit" for interfaith families. Many congregations honor major

Jewish, Christian, and other religious holidays. A Seder might be held days before an Easter service, for instance. Both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures, along with the sacred writings and thought of many other religions, form the basis of many of our curricula. We know there is value in all of them.

-- Gaia Brown, *UU Religious Education and Your Child*

The first Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms the inherent worth and dignity of every person. Interfaith families will find themselves welcome and supported--whether your interfaith paths are a struggle or a joy for your family. Children in Sunday School will learn through study of this Principle that each person is a gift whom we treat with respect and kindness.

The eighteenth-century minister Hosea Ballou zealously studied scripture for clues about the nature of God and the concept of damnation. He found a God of infinite love and mercy, incapable of consigning souls to a position outside of Grace. Ballou's uplifting and hopeful preaching about universal salvation was one of the cornerstones of early American Universalism.

A UU congregation is a place to examine and let go of old images of damnation or exclusion of people from another faith tradition and any other ideas that are not constructive to your interfaith family. In UU Sunday services and informal gatherings, leaders and members strive to make their connections inclusive.

Our third Unitarian Universalist Principle affirms our acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth. The religious heritage and past experience of every person are honored in a Unitarian Universalist congregation as steps on each person's idiosyncratic path of lifelong spiritual development. We are working together to know one another and to celebrate one another's unique gifts and contributions to the congregation. Children in religious education will learn that this Principle reminds us to learn about one another and celebrate the diversity of people who share the journey.

Our fourth Principle of Unitarian Universalism affirms a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Every thoughtful religious heritage carries truth and beauty, and we gratefully receive wisdom from them as we learn.

We have no creed that each member is expected to believe and profess. Rather the search is free. The search may therefore be much more difficult! A UU minister or congregation is not about to hand anyone a solution to the tough religious questions.

We come together to support one another on our individual searches and to share our stories. A UU congregation is a place to cherish the wisdom, traditions, spirituality, and beauty of your own faith tradition(s), celebrating those facets that are true and right for you.

We hope interfaith families find a hospitable setting in Unitarian Universalism to process their experiences, fears, and hopes; to acquire helpful family assistance with complicated interfaith issues; and to live faithfully, regardless of religious backgrounds. May our congregations be safe places to engage in personal reflections and interfaith discussions. May our congregations

provide opportunities for spiritual growth and family explorations into interfaith issues and constructions of religious meaning. Our goal for every interfaith family is effective interfaith communications leading to mutual insights and family dialogue nurturing mutual respect.

When Interfaith Partners Need Help: Turn to a Therapist or a Minister

Interfaith cultural differences do matter! Denial of their differences can sometimes drive couples apart more powerfully than clashes over them. When interfaith partners do struggle with their differences, the greatest potential for destruction of their relationship lies in how they manage conflict, not in the actual differences.

All couples wrestle with the tension between disagreement over faith issues and remaining close. All interfaith partners try to achieve a balance between intimacy and religious identity. Interfaith differences can easily upset that balance. At crucial moments in the life cycle of the relationship—planning the wedding, the birth of a child, deciding on family rituals and celebrations, rites of passage for children, sickness, death—the balance is upset. Not all couples run into trouble over these challenges, but many do.

Paul Sanders and Susan Sances are both clinical psychologists in Chicago and they are an interfaith married couple. Together they founded Interfaith Holidays, a consultation service committed to helping interfaith couples share their traditions (www.interfaithholidays.com). They articulate three ways that religious/cultural tensions can put a marriage at risk and how counseling can help.

- *Avoidance of Difference* - Sometimes the marriage is not working and one or both partners are dissatisfied but unaware of the impact of their religious and cultural differences. Couples who try to deny and conceal cultural tensions actually tend to become more emotionally distant, isolated, lonely, secretly resentful, and depleted. Interfaith concerns may be among several significant issues they are ignoring. Because they try to avoid conflict at all costs, they are vulnerable to unexpected outbursts or serious withdrawal. With avoidant partners who deny potentially explosive feelings, therapists and ministers may need to reinforce general skills for tolerating and managing conflict as they begin to address unacknowledged tensions.
- *Gridlock* - Sometimes couples are aware of their interfaith differences but don't know what to do about them. These relationships are thrown into upheaval at the prospect of an emotionally loaded religious/cultural event. How well partners navigate this sort of upset ultimately depends on how effectively and respectfully they wrestle with each other's needs and one another's identity. Helping interfaith couples get past the usual arguments to the deeper meanings can be difficult work. The goal for therapists and ministers is to help these couples share the anxiety, guilt, and insecurities evoked by their most troublesome differences.
- *Yearning for Spiritual Connection* - Sometimes interfaith partners seek help to get through an impasse in their spiritual life together. When a couple worries that their relationship cannot handle conflict, they avoid tension for the sake of harmony, and over

time their rituals fail to reflect the richness of their individual differences. The goal for ministers is to support partners as they discuss unmet spiritual needs more boldly so that they can creatively explore fresh and evocative practices.

- *Final Note* - According to Sanders and Sances, the unwavering goal of the therapist or minister is to provide safety and the tools couples need to address differences while remaining close. As in all good relationships, a flexible balance between conflict and intimacy is key.⁴

What Do You Think? *If you are an interfaith couple, what issue is so important to you that you are afraid to raise it with your partner for fear of destroying your relationship? Who could you talk to about this fear and this interfaith issue? Could you both talk about this matter with your minister?*

Try This: *Answer these questions in your journal: What are some of the traditions from your religious background that are important to bring into your family today? If you could bring one tradition from your faith tradition into your life now, what would it be? Why?*

Coping With Conflict: Focus on Common Values

The merger of two separate individuals into a single family is bound to cause conflict, even if both partners come from the same cultural and religious backgrounds. Conflict usually erupts around a few central issues, which include the distribution of power in the marriage, the distribution of wealth, interfamily dynamics, and the raising of children.

With interfaith unions, these important issues often take a backseat to more pressing interfaith conflicts. Religion is often used as a tool for division and exclusion. To succeed in an interfaith marriage, couples need to be open to common faith values. Interfaith couples need to spend time moving past the outward signs of their faith and learn the real meaning behind religious practices and understand the values that those practices are meant to support.

Interfaith couples need to move their common values to the center of their family culture. We learn about values and ethics from our parents and community and from the culture around us. They shape what we say and do throughout our lives. As interfaith couples face external pressures to their marriages, they need to pay attention to two basic principles--first the motivation that led them to marry and become a family and second the common values that nurture their important relationships.

What Do You Think? *Are you aware of the values and ethics that shape your life? Do you know which values you want to pass along to your children? How do you express, demonstrate, and model your core values to your children?*

The common values that bind you together as an interfaith couple need to come alive in your family, and the growth of these values needs to be encouraged in the lives of your children. In creating a new family, interfaith partners have to define for themselves how they live and how they act and reflect their shared common values.

Raising children in a society that condones hate, anger, and violence and accepts crude, rude, and violent behavior can be difficult. But we can celebrate the fact that children learn by example, and we know that parental and familial influences on them are primary. Couples/partners with successful intermarriages realize that they are blazing new paths through interfaith territory. Most couples make their own way as they go along, but it's vitally important to remain consistent in their common values and loving attitudes. Each interfaith couple is creating a new family. And they have to define themselves, how they live, and how they act (and react) to daily situations in ways that reflect the common values that they share.

***Try This:** Think about what interfaith issues are difficult in your family. Write in your journal responses to the following questions and then discuss with your partner the similarities and differences in your responses. When does conflict arise? How have these issues been resolved? Does your practice of Unitarian Universalism help or hinder these differences? Give examples.*

The Gifts of a UU Faith Community

A faith community is a central component in religious identity and faith development. Unitarian Universalist congregations welcome people from all faith traditions to bring their doubts and their conviction, their hopes and their fears, their failures and their aspirations. To be religious means to be in relationship with others. The religious qualities of love and justice become real only when they are experienced, tested, and deepened in community. The Unitarian Universalist values of respect and acceptance, compassion and forgiveness, peace and justice become real when they are learned and practiced in a community whose hearts and minds are open to one another. In Unitarian Universalist congregations, interfaith couples, interfaith parents, interfaith children, and interfaith families can learn to develop their interfaith identity as they are coached and held accountable for their family values as they are expected to live them out.

When an interfaith family's path is difficult, your Unitarian Universalist congregation offers assistance in the form of pastoral care, education, and community.

***What Do You Think?** Who can you go to in your congregation when you need care, advice, or guidance? What educational opportunities are available for interfaith families? How does your congregation give you a sense of belonging and community?*

***Try This:** Jot down in your reader's journal one hope and one concern you have about being an interfaith family in a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Imagine both thoughts working out as well as possible.*

Interfaith Families across the Lifespan

Babies

Babies can bring a family together in joyous celebration of new life. They can also raise questions about the religion(s) in which the child will be raised. New parents who are just working on getting enough sleep might find themselves overwhelmed by well-meaning new grandparents and aunts and uncles.

Every faith tradition has a ceremony to welcome babies. This ceremony expresses all the hopes

and love that a family and congregation have to offer the child. While it may not be important to the baby in the moment, it is a memory to be shared with the child, linking the child to her/his family and her/his heritage.

Often the child's name is given and the baby is dedicated to a particular religious tradition. You will find in a Unitarian Universalist congregation that the minister will work with the parents to craft a ceremony in which the child is dedicated to a pluralistic faith and that congregation dedicates itself to the raising of the child. Any elements that have meaning to the parents can be included in the ceremony--especially those traditional elements from the parents' and grandparents' faiths. Grandparents will find a community committed to raising the baby in a loving, peaceful, free, and just world and that honors the wisdom of the baby's family faith traditions.

Babies' faith development does not depend on a particular creed or faith tradition. One of a baby's greatest learning tasks in the first year is the concept of object permanence--the idea that parents exist when the baby can't perceive them and will return to perception later. This idea lays the foundation for faith in "things not seen"--in knowing that Spirit exists outside of normal perception.

***Try This:** Look at the order of service for a friend's interfaith baby dedication ceremony or a sample Unitarian Universalist baby/child dedication celebration. What vows were spoken in the ceremony? What promises were made to the child in the ceremony? How are these vows and promises interfaith and/or Unitarian Universalist? Write in your journal the important elements of a baby dedication that you will have/have had in your family celebration.*

Children

Once a child is communicating, listening to stories, and asking questions, parents will find themselves the primary religious educators of a bundle of curiosity. Your UU congregation can help along the way, creating a place where the children are free to search, to ask, and to learn what is true and right for themselves. The children will learn that

The living tradition we share draws from many sources...

Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life.

--Unitarian Universalist Association *Principles and Purposes*

Children in an interfaith family need clarity about who they are. An ever-evolving (and often complex) religious identity gives them ground to stand on, holidays to celebrate, and a way to have similarities with and differences from other children to explore and accept. The adults in their life have the responsibility of helping them learn that they are not just part of a "neutral" religion. Their family's constellation of traditions may be a work in progress--but the core values and ethics embodied in those traditions will be constant.

Children left to "find their own way" in religious exploration don't even have landmarks on the journey. Children who have a regular experience of religion, even if they choose to follow a faith tradition different from the one in which they were raised, will know what healthy, sustainable

religion looks and feels like. They will look at an abusive cult and know that it is not religion at all.

Try This: Elementary school children love to make things and tell/listen to stories. As you share timeless stories from different cultures and religions-such as "The Blind Man and the Elephant," "The Golden Rule," "Wise King Solomon," and "The Wind and the Sun," all found in *From Long Ago and Many Lands* by Sophia Fahs -name some of the abiding questions and universal values from different wisdom traditions. Make candles with your family and decide who will light these family candles and when and where.

Adolescents

Adulthood ceremonies come at different ages in different religions and cultures. In adolescence, many traditions celebrate a child's personal commitment to the faith. Young people can experience these rituals as affirmations of themselves as well as of their faith. A gathering of those who love them and support them and hold them to high standards will be an anchoring memory as they enter difficult years. Relatives will tell stories about their bar mitzvah, baptism, or confirmation and will want that serious and joyful ceremony for each child in the family. At this age it is about the young person's faith and needs. Working with parents and a religious professional, the child of an interfaith family will find a way to express his/her own credo while honoring the relatives and traditions which are his/her foundation. It will rarely be simple, but it is meaningful work that someone engaged in a Coming of Age program is ready for.

What Do You Think? During the adolescent years, the issues of identity and belonging are most important. While driving/shopping/eating with teenagers, ask them questions like the following about friendship and their friends from different faiths:

- *When you are with your peers is there inclusion or exclusion in your group based on religious affiliation? What faith traditions are "dissed"? What faith traditions are respected?*
- *Name the teachers and coaches who model values that you respect. Are these values particular to one religion?*
- *What qualities do you value in your friends? If a friend came to you and told you that she/he thinks she is a lesbian/gay, how would you respond? What religious values empower your response?*

Try This: Many adolescents celebrate Coming of Age ceremonies. What are some elements of this rite of passage that are valued in your interfaith family? Brainstorm ways that you can honor the interfaith heritages of your family in a Unitarian Universalist Coming of Age ceremony? Share these components with your religious educator and minister.

Adults

Many books are full of advice about interfaith marriages! A civil union or wedding or commitment ceremony is about the couple's love. Prenuptial counseling will help define the

cornerstones of the new family that is being created. Let those features be central to the ceremony and celebration--honoring those traditions that are loved by and appropriate to the couple. New in-laws of an interfaith marriage have a special opportunity on the day of the ceremony. Bless this couple and wish them happiness ; demonstrate your love and support; and lay the foundations of trust and communication that they and you can rely on for decades to come.

Sometimes interfaith couples decide to enter into an interfaith pre-nuptial pact. Questionnaires have been designed to insure vital communication that can help prevent problems arising from an interfaith marriage. *Dovetail* (May/June 2002)⁵ outlines a sample Intermarriage Pact that includes a religious inventory of each partner and the following components:

1. *Religious Identity*: Pledge that, if each of you has decided to keep your own religious identity without conversion, there will be no pressure to convert brought to bear after the marriage.
2. *Home Environment*: Determine whether there will be religious symbols in the home.
3. *Holidays*: Who will attend what religious services? Will religious celebrations be observed in the home?
4. *Children*: Will your children be given a single religious identity?
5. *Residence*: What type of neighborhood do you favor?
6. *Finances*: Determine whether a portion of the family's financial resources will be contributed toward the support of religious organizations.
7. *Death*: When you die, would you want a member of the clergy to officiate?

Elders

Aging itself may go unrecognized by many faith traditions, but all religions speak to death. When the end of life approaches, a dying person may crave the help of his/her childhood religion or that faith to which his/her adult quest has led him/her. The elder's choices may surprise or disquiet family members. The loving family who surrounds the elder will help her/him get the ministering she/he wishes.

In a case of unexpected death, the grieving family members can find themselves reaching to different sources for strength and comfort. While maintaining respect for the rest of the family, each member should feel comfortable expressing grief and exploring questions about death in the way that makes sense to them.

Funeral and memorial services in an interfaith family can be deeply moving services, a celebration of life, and an honor to the loved one who has died. In planning for the service, let the family remember the principles of knowing themselves and good communication to support one another. Let the farewell service be an event that will fittingly contribute to the memory of the dead. One UU family held a simple graveside memorial service for their elderly husband/father/grandfather who had no belief in an afterlife. After the service they walked down to the nearby beach and set a little wooden model of a Viking longboat adrift on the tide, as he had wished, because he said he hoped to be pleasantly surprised.

Try This: Draw a lifetime line in your journal and note the stages of life which you associate with religious observances. Ask others in your family to do the same activity and compare your responses.

Try This: Interfaith elders have wisdom from different faith traditions and years of experience to share with their family. Honor the elders in your family, congregation, and community by providing them with opportunities to reflect on their lifetime and to share their interfaith legacy across the generations. Ask them to share components of their faith tradition(s) that sustain them, that provide them with courage to face mortality, and that bring them peace and understanding at their age.

Activities

The following section offers ways to structure activities around interfaith family issues, to be used either at home or within your congregation. Let these suggestions inspire your own creativity. Build on them and adapt them for your particular needs. Let the needs and values of your interfaith family be your guide.

At Home

Family stories are important. Families talk about their faith together by telling stories that serve as ways into how they understand and find meaning in their experiences and how they make sense of their life experiences, both as individuals and as a family. Stories reveal meaning and purpose of shared lives and the faith family members have--on one another, in what they value, and in God.⁶ Stories help families remember what they want to remember. They say, "This is who we are." Stories give families a sense of identity and of belonging.



Interfaith families have stories to tell that express their religious identity and values from a mixture of faith traditions. Every family has an evolving set of values, beliefs, goals, priorities, and expectations about themselves in relationship to each other and about their family in

relationship to the community. Families develop within the family unit a shared understanding, trust, and acceptance, usually formed in spiritual values and ethical practices that give meaning to their life together.

To tell your interfaith family stories, try the following suggestions. Also use the **Try This** suggestions throughout the booklet to match the needs and challenges of your family members.

Granny's Memories: The elders of your family have many years of memories that hold meaning and the keys to your religious heritage. Sit down with the grandparents or great aunts and uncles of your family and simply ask about them. Maybe you'll have to use the phone or e-mail to reach the elders of your family; whatever it takes, reach out. Listen deeply and patiently. Your notebook might put off some folks; if so, listen even more carefully and record your learnings immediately after the interview.

Some folks will require prompting to begin to share their tales, so you might choose to prepare some questions. Concrete questions about where your granny attended religious services and what she wore to worship will get the memories flowing. Don't shy away from theology either! Ask, What did you think about God as a child? What did you think as a young adult? Not only do the questions honor the elder you are interviewing, but the answers can give you insight into the whole family's religious assumptions and heritage!

Spiritual Autobiography: As individuals or as a group, invite the adults in your family to record their spiritual autobiography. Dan Wakefield's book *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography* is a great guide to this project; perhaps you can borrow it from your UU congregation's library. The records may be shared or summarized or kept private as desired. The process itself allows individuals to synthesize their memories and regard their spiritual paths holistically.

Circle of the Year: You will need

- a large sheet of paper, such as newsprint or unwrinkled packing paper.
- a supply of crayons or markers
- a chalice, candle, and matches (a chalice can be any fire-safe candleholder!)

This is definitely a group project, so plan ahead together for family time when everyone is at home, no guests are visiting, and no one is busy with other activities like homework, chores, or training the dog. Nurse the baby and change him just beforehand.

As the time approaches, give each person about ten minutes warning to transition from their current activity to Family Time. Deliver your message in an unusual way: You might approach each person and touch him or her, or strike a chime, or put a special piece of music on the stereo.

Set up by spreading the paper on a table and marking it into twelve "pie pieces" with a black

crayon or marker. Write the name of each month in a different area, moving in order around the year and around the table. This is not the time to fret about the symmetry of your artwork, just to make sure that each month's area is accessible from the edge of the paper. Set your chalice in the center of the pie and scatter the crayons around the paper.

When the ten minutes are up and all have gathered around the table, light your chalice with your own words or these:

We gather this hour as people of faith
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.
We light this beacon of hope,
sign of our quest
for truth and meaning,
in celebration of the life we share together.

--Christine Robinson, reading #448 in *Singing the Living Tradition*



Explain to your family that you want to understand the expectations and joys that each one has as the year cycles round and round.

The flow of ideas should not be hampered by comments from other people, so the first part of the exercise will be carried out quietly.

Assign a scribe to any person who cannot yet write.

Instruct your family to move slowly around the table, writing in the events in each month that they treasure as an important part of their faith or as a cherished tradition, even if it is secular. If the date of the event is

changeable, write it in the right vicinity for this particular year coming up (such as dates on a lunar calendar).

Allow plenty of time for this part of the exercise. Make sure everyone has gone around at least once.

Suggest to people that they have a minute to go back to add holidays they had overlooked.

One at a time, ask questions or make comments about the wheel of the year spread before you. Look for surprises and coincidences and conflicts. You may discover that Granny still thinks of her wedding anniversary every year although Grandpa died years ago. You may discover a part of the year with no special observances and choose to create a family holiday at that time. You may discover that many holy days from one tradition fall near those of another tradition and could be celebrated in a way that honors their similarities.

What you choose to do with your new knowledge is up to you. Each member of the family may participate in every annual holiday. Each may follow her or his own path separately but with a new appreciation for the ebb and flow of one another's special days.

This circle of the year can serve as the catalyst for discussions, suggesting questions that respectfully bring up the topic of one another's faith paths.

The chart that you have created may point out to the whole family that you just can't do it all every year. It may be appropriate to choose three or four most special holidays to observe annually together and to let other holidays be celebrated less frequently, by fewer of you, or in smaller ways.

You might even decide that you have put together a great deal of information, and decisions can wait until everyone's had chance to absorb it for a few days.

Thank everyone for joining together for family time. Extinguish your chalice. Try to leave the circle of the year in place for a few days so everyone can look it over and take it in.

In Your Congregation

Many of the *Try This* suggestions in this booklet can be adapted for use in religious education classes or at intergenerational gatherings.

Food

Coming together for a meal, coffee hour, or shared food during the service welcomes every congregant. Prepare dishes from your family's diverse religious and cultural heritages to share those traditions in a way accessible to all and threatening to none. You will find that having a few copies of the recipe on hand will help those congregants with chemical sensitivities or dietary restrictions choose whether or not to try your offering.

Family Pledge of Nonviolence

Now read through the **Family Pledge of Nonviolence** from the Institute for Peace and Justice (www.ipj-ppj.org/pledge).

Talk about each of the values-respect, communication, listening, forgiveness, play, care, and courage-and decide if/when your family members want to take the Pledge. Print copies of the Pledge for every family and sign it in a ceremony that you have designed.

Family Pledge of Nonviolence

Making peace must start within ourselves and in our family. Each of us, members of the _____ family, commits ourselves today, _____, as best we can to become nonviolent and peaceable people.

To Respect Self and Others

To respect myself, to affirm others and to avoid uncaring criticism, hateful words, physical attacks, and self-destructive behavior.

To Communicate Better

To share my feelings honestly, to look for safe ways to express my anger, and to work at solving problems peacefully.

To Listen

To listen carefully to one another, especially those who disagree with me, and to consider others' feelings and needs rather than insist on having my own way.

To Forgive

To apologize and make amends when I have hurt another, to forgive others, and to keep from holding grudges.

To Respect Nature

To treat the environment and all living things, including our pets, with respect and care.

To Play Creatively

To select entertainment and toys that support our family's values and to avoid entertainment that makes violence look exciting, funny, or acceptable.

To Be Courageous

To challenge violence in all its forms whenever I encounter it, whether at home, at school, at work, or in the community, and to stand with others who are treated unfairly.

This is our pledge. These are our goals. We will check ourselves on what we have pledged once a month on the _____ for the next twelve months so that we can help each other become more peaceable people.

A Suggested Ritual for Families Taking the Pledge: Setting: Gather around the family table. Symbolic items on the table could include a family candle, a peace crane, an olive branch, a family crest or banner, and/or a family UU chalice. You may want to play your favorite meditation music or a family member could play an instrument.

Opening Prayer by Makaanah Morriss:

Mystery of Life, Source of All Being, we are thankful for the gifts of life and being, of love and connection. We are thankful for all the wonders of the world around us. We are thankful for each other and for all the members of our global family. As we make our Family Pledge, may we have eyes that see, hearts that love, and hands that are ready to serve in love and in kindness, with caring and with courage. Blessed be.

Candle Lighting: Each family member carries a small lighted candle and together they light the family candle/UU chalice as a sign of unity.

Signing the Pledge: The leader of the ceremony explains why they are making a family pledge. Then each family member briefly expresses which points of the pledge will be the most challenging for them personally and where they will need encouragement. The leader reassures everyone that they are committed together to help each other keep the pledge. With meditative music or a peace song in the background, the family reads the pledge in unison and each member signs the document. As a seal of commitment, family members exchange a sign of peace (for example, hugs).

Closing: Sing a favorite song, such as "Let There Be Peace on Earth," "Shalom," or "Go Now in Peace." Enjoy a favorite family snack or meal in celebration.

Holiday Observance

Plan with your minister to share elements of your traditions with the congregation in worship on holy days. The minister will be delighted to know what traditions are precious to the congregation and probably eager to have congregants involved with preparing or presenting the services. Members of your congregation come from a wide variety of religious backgrounds. This opportunity will probably evoke memories for some; for many, the similarities between your experience and theirs will renew their understanding of the synchronicities of all the world's religions.

In your children's religious education program, you have an excellent opportunity to lift up your child and his or her heritage and to teach lessons of diversity and world community. Work with your religious educator or your child's teacher to create an experience that will reach the children at their own level and learning style.

Interfaith Family Ceremonies

There are many gifts to be shared in a Unitarian Universalist interfaith community--the mixing of generations, the diversity of viewpoints and exchange of ideas, and the enduring nature of relationships. Here interfaith families share the values of respect, trust, and care as they create and recreate their religious identity and strive to live their faith(s).

Many interfaith families create interfaith ceremonies to reflect their evolving interfaith identity. Gather a group of interfaith families together for an Interfaith Holiday Workshop. Invite them to

reflect on and discuss the following questions: What holiday traditions do you want to celebrate? What lifecycle ceremonies do you want to celebrate? How can your Unitarian Universalist community and/or Unitarian Universalist religious professionals help you design and implement these celebrations?

In another Interfaith Family Workshop, invite interfaith families to create an interfaith ceremony of their choice. Ask them to write/draw in their family journal their responses to the following questions: What type of ceremony will you create? What makes it easy to plan? What makes it difficult to plan? Who needs to participate and what are their roles? Where and when will this ceremony take place? Invite your congregation to your interfaith ceremony and include people of different faiths in your celebration. After your interfaith ceremony is celebrated reflect on its meaning, your decisions, and your interfaith Unitarian Universalist commitments.

Wisdom

Since Unitarian Universalism affirms that wisdom from the world's religions informs our spiritual journey, drawing from the religious paths of your interfaith family will come naturally. Many congregations celebrate a Time for All Ages, a story time shared by the adults and children together. Offer a story from your religious heritage from which each listener can learn. Working with the minister and religious educator, you can present a story that informs both the sermon and the Sunday School lesson.

Some children's religious education programs are based on stories. Often the program will specifically choose stories from religious traditions. We encourage our children to seek the truth and beauty inherent in every religion and integrate them into their own spiritual lives.

When your congregation's sacred space is enhanced with artwork, in the minister's stole or a stained glass window for example, enjoy this opportunity to use a nonverbal medium to affirm our rich religious, interfaith heritage.

Lifespan Religious Education

Your congregation may offer a number of courses and discussion groups of interest and help to your interfaith family. Work with your minister, religious educator, or religious education committee to bring them to your congregation. These are a few suggestions:

- *Beyond the December Dilemma: An Adult Education Program for UU Interfaith Families* by Debra W. Haffner
- *Family Heritage: An Intergenerational Program* by Rev. Patricia Hoertdoerfer, a two-session program for adults and children
- *Building Your Own Theology* by Richard Gilbert, a ten-session course for adults that explores personal theology.

- *Parents as Spiritual Guide* and *Parents as Resident Theologians* by Roberta and Christopher Nelson are 6-session programs for parents.
- *Owning Your Religious Past: The Haunting Church* by Bonnie Stauffacher, five-session course for adults in which participants retrieve and examine their religious past to enrich their present involvement as UUs. This program is out of print but available on loan from congregations, district libraries, and the UUA Lifespan Faith Development Loan Library.
- Spiritual Autobiography class in your congregation based on Dan Wakefield's book, *The Story of Your Life: Writing a Spiritual Autobiography*.

Footnotes

1. Fowler, James. *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).
2. Fowler, James and Sam Kean. *Life Maps: Conversation on the Journey of Faith* (Waco, TX: Ward Books, 1980).
3. Haffner, Debra. *Beyond the December Dilemma: An Adult Education Program for UU Interfaith Families*
4. *Dovetail* July/August 2002
5. *Dovetail* is a journal by and for Jewish/Christian families published six times a year. Their mission is to provide a channel of communication for interfaith couples, their parents and their children.
6. Garland, Diana. *Sacred Stories of Ordinary Families: Living the Faith Every Day* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

Resources

Books/Curricula/Programs

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- Polacco, Patricia. *The Keeping Quilt*. New York: Alladin Paperbooks, 2001.
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Journal

- *Dovetail: A Journal by and for Jewish and Christian Families*

Websites

- www.uua.org/families UU Family Network and Family Matters Task Force resources for Unitarian Universalist families
- www.dovetailinstitute.org Dovetail Institute with resources for Jewish/Christian families
- www.lffp.org LAU Friends for Peace, resources for family peacemaking
- www.ipj-ppj.org Parenting for Peace and Justice and FAVAN: Families Against Violence Advocacy Network

- www.Torahuara.com Jewish values and peacemaking

Pamphlets

- Brown, Rev. Gaia. *UU Religious Education and Your Child: Frequently Asked Questions*. Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston.
<http://www.uua.org/pamphlet/3102.html>

Unitarian Universalist Principles and Purposes

We, the member congregations of the UUA, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life

- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against the idolatries of the mind and spirit
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

From the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Principles in Language for Children

- Every person is important and valuable.
- All people should be treated fairly.
- Our churches are places where we should accept one another and learn together.
- Each person should be free to search for what is true and right.
- All people have the right to speak out and vote on things that matter to them.
- We should help build a peaceful, fair, and free world.
- We need to take care of the earth, the home we share with all living things.

From *We Believe: Learning and Living Our UU Principles* edited by Ann Fields and Joan Goodwin

About the Author

Sparrow F. Alden is a parent, religious educator, and co-owner/builder of a straw bale cabin in the New Hampshire woods. She is a lifelong UU and a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. She serves as the Director of Religious Education of a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Vermont.

Sparrow wishes to acknowledge the time, thoughtfulness, and efforts of those families who gave interviews for this project. Your insights and wisdom will encourage many families of faith.

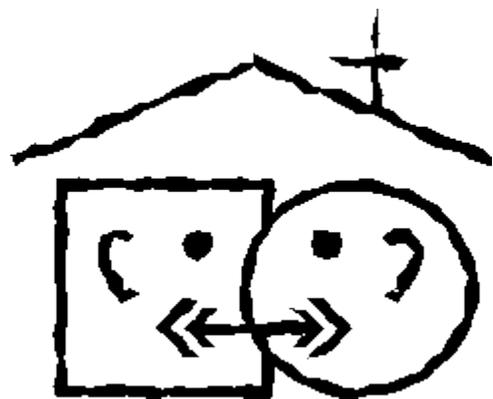
About the Family Matters Task Force

The mission of the UUA Family Matters Task Force is to transform Unitarian Universalism into a community of families empowered through faith, celebration, support, education, advocacy, and service. Visit their web site at www.uua.org/families for more information about their endeavors, programs, and resources in the service of ministry with Unitarian Universalist families.

About the Series: Taking It Home--Families and Faith

The booklets in this series provide the Unitarian Universalist community with resources to support families in deepening their faith, expanding their future, and supporting their love. The other booklets in this series are *Let's Talk About Respect*, *Let's Talk About Time/Money Balance*, *Let's Talk About Marriage and Committed Relationships*, *Let's Talk About Divorce and Broken Relationships*, *Let's Talk About Families and Loss*.

This booklet series is sponsored by the UUA Family Matters Task Force.



We appreciate the funding support of the Fund for Unitarian Universalism and the Unitarian Sunday School Society for this FMTF project.

www.uua.org/families

Let's talk. Mon., Nov. 14, 2011. With the holiday season fast approaching, the Star is preparing a series on children of interfaith families. If you're raising an interfaith family — any combination of faiths — please tell us how you approach spirituality and ritual with your children and how they respond, not just during the holidays, but all year round. Write to Josh Tapper at jtapper@thestar.ca. Get some good advice in your inbox.