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Monthly Themes at All Souls, Tulsa, Help Congregants Go Deeper

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At All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Okla., the theme for the month of January is “Creation.” In February the theme shifts to “Religious Authority.” When March comes around “Redemption” will be taken up.

Going out further, Senior Minister the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar knows what themes he will be preaching on for the next three years, at which time the themes will start over.

Theme-based ministry—adopting a specific topic for a month and focusing on it in depth in worship, religious education, and other aspects of congregational life—is catching on in Unitarian Universalist congregations. All Souls adopted theme-based ministry nine years ago, shortly after Lavanhar arrived.

“When I was in my first year of ministry here I realized I needed something with a little more structure,” he says. “UU ministers have to work a little harder to come up with sermon topics because for the most part we don’t follow the lectionary that traditional Christian ministers do.” A Christian lectionary is a list of specific scripture passages that are used in developing worship for any given Sunday.

Here’s how theme-based ministry works at 1,800-member All Souls: On the first Sunday of the month Lavanhar preaches on that month’s theme. On other Sundays of the month he is free to preach on other topics. As he does that he finds ways to also touch on the monthly theme.

The themes are not limited to sermons but are infused through the rest of congregational life at All Souls, including religious education and small group ministry. There are newsletter articles on the theme and take-home study materials each month to help congregants go deeper with the topic and talk with their children about it.

There is a more significant reason for using monthly themes than just Lavanhar’s need to be better organized, he notes. “I want our members to have a systematic theology. There are certain core topics that people need to know about to have a good grounding in liberal theology. For example, if I only preached about ‘evil’ every six or seven years there could be people who come and go from All Souls without ever hearing anything on that topic. With theme preaching they’ll hear about it at least every three years.”

The themes also provide a way to introduce Bible stories, he notes, giving children and adults a cultural literacy foundation that’s often missing in Unitarian Universalism. Stories from other traditions are also included “so children learn that stories about forgiveness, for example, are not just found in the Bible.”

Too often, Lavanhar says, we as UUs don’t have the theological grounding we need when we are confronted with life’s crises. “We get a diagnosis, or someone dies. Then we want a crash course on seeking redemption and forgiveness. All the big questions come up. What we need to be doing in our UU congregations is giving people resources when they are well, not when they’re in the middle of an issue. Then when there’s a crisis they’ll have the wisdom and the resources they need. Theme-based ministry helps with that.”

Case in point: Lavanhar’s three-year-old daughter Sienna died suddenly four years ago. Earlier that year death had been one of the monthly themes at All Souls, along with a discussion of brokenness and how it can be transformed into something of value. “We found that during this crisis the congregation had a spiritual maturity that we were able to draw on,” Lavanhar says. “Because we had talked about death earlier people knew how to respond. That brought home the value of the themes to us.”

Lavanhar meets with RE teachers quarterly to talk about themes for the next three months. Then the teachers create and design classes to fit those themes. The All Souls RE program for children and youth has adopted a “rotational” model. Children learn

about the monthly themes by rotating through classrooms that use visual arts, drama, movement, yoga, and music to explain the lessons.

Having topics come up every three years means that by the time youth at All Souls have graduated from high school they have been exposed to each topic at least three times. Throughout their time at All Souls they are given journals and asked to write in them monthly. “When they graduate they have a stack of journals that document their theological and spiritual growth through their childhood,” says Lavanhar. “They can look back and see how their thinking on a particular topic, such as their view of God, has changed over time.”

Adults too, he says, can chart their own growth. “The themes become yardsticks for a spiritual life.” All Souls member Toni Willis says the monthly themes are her family's spiritual practice. “We take the theme of the month and we talk about it all month. I have a son who is five, and he knows exactly what the theme is, and we have conversations about how we view it in the world around us, and that’s really beautiful.”

Kathy Keith, executive director of All Souls, and formerly the director of its religious education program, says the inspiration for theme-based ministry came in part from the children’s program, which had its own monthly biblical themes before the church-wide program was adopted. “Here in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Bible literacy is a survival skill,” she says.

“Theme-based ministry has closed the chasm between ‘big church’ and religious education,” she adds. “It has knit our congregation together. And now adults can volunteer in RE for a month at a time without giving up their entire adult experience.”

Jaclyn Rusher, 17, believes the monthly themes and the opportunity she’s had to experience them during the past nine years through various mediums, has given her a better RE experience. “I don’t remember much of church before we started doing themes and moving from room to room and using drama and acting out what we were learning. But I remember many of the things we’ve done since then. Having something to focus on for a month and having different ways to look at it made church something to look forward to every week.”

All Souls has created a website for its resources on theme-based ministry, including newsletter articles, sermons, discussion ideas for small groups, poems, music, and video clips. Lavanhar says other congregations are also contributing to this database. “We’re increasing the possibilities for what Unitarian Universalism can offer. If we take theme-based ministry seriously it can really raise the quality of Unitarian Universalism and help us have a larger role in shaping U.S. culture.”

The Rev. Thomas Wintle introduced theme-based ministry to his congregation, the 600-member First Parish Church in Weston, Mass., in 2006, after learning about it from Lavanhar. He does a three-year rotation of themes and preaches on the theme all four or five Sundays in a month.

As a Christian UU minister he’s used a lectionary for 20 years to determine worship topics. He was intrigued by the possibility of exploring a topic for a full month in worship and RE. “You can go much deeper than if there’s just one sermon or one RE lesson,” he says. “It assures we have a theologically literate congregation. Our families go home on Sunday and I hear later about these amazing dinner table conversations. And I have to say theme ministry has rejuvenated my preaching.”

He says monthly themes help him collect information for sermons. “I have a file for each topic. When I read something about mercy, or redemption, it goes in the file.”

At the beginning of each year First Parish creates a five-page brochure laying out the themes and mails it to every resident of Weston. “It’s a terrific PR piece,” says Wintle.

Other congregations using or exploring theme-based ministry include West Shore UU Church in Rocky River, Ohio; Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, Minn.; First Parish in Concord, Mass.; the UU Church of Arlington, Va.; Pathways UU Church in Southlake, Tex.; and the UU Society: East in Manchester, Conn.

RESOURCES

More information on All Souls Unitarian Church’s use of theme-based ministry can be found [here](http://www.allsoulschurch.org/monthly-themes) (www.allsoulschurch.org/monthly-themes), including a list of themes, resources for each, and an explanation of this approach to ministry. All Souls and several other congregations using theme-based ministry have created another website,

ThemeBasedMinistry.org (themebasedministry.org/), with additional resources. Congregations using theme-based ministry are invited to submit resources to this latter site.

The “Journeys of Faith—Year at a Glance” brochure for theme ministry at First Parish Church in Weston, Mass., can be found on the church’s **website** (www.firstparishweston.org/programs/index.html).

For more information contact **interconnections @ uua.org**.

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