

OPERATION: "CLOSE ENCOUNTERS"

1-on-1 INTERACTIONS WITH POTENTIAL UNITARIANS

NOTES FROM BREAKOUT SESSIONS

This document contains the notes taken in the breakout groups to discuss one-on-one encounters between U*Us and Proto-U*Us^{*} in the following situations:

- Talking with a Friend
- In the Workplace
- At a Cocktail Party
- Community Event/Trade Show
- At Coffee Hour / Congregational Event

^{*} Proto-U*U: Someone who might want to become a U*U, or who might already be U*U but doesn't know it!

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CONVERSATION WITH A FRIEND / ACQUAINTANCE

While the distinction between a friend and an acquaintance may be subtle, or not, there is a significant difference in how a UU would relate to each one with respect to prospective membership in a UU congregation. A friend would likely know that one is a Unitarian, whereas an acquaintance is more likely not to know. How the discussion of Unitarianism may arise, the entry level of the conversation, and how it could lead to an invitation to a service will likely vary accordingly.

Other variables affecting the conversation may be who approaches who, its context, and the ability of the UU to relate to the curiosity or needs of his/her friend/acquaintance.

The Proto UU may be a patient listener to the UU who may have introduced the topic with.... Have I ever told you about my experience with Unitarianism ?and has never considered Unitarianism - or any other faith order. Here the raconteur must choose information carefully and not turn her/his listener off with excessive detail to which the listener cannot relate.

Another Proto UU may be what has been referred to as a tendentious unitarian - i.e. one who has a unitarian tendencies, may even think him/herself a unitarian, but does not belong to a congregation. This individual likely needs a little nourishing and encouragement to come to a service.

The Proto UU may also be one who is searching for something to satisfy an inner need of one kind or another. Such a person may have one or a number of the following characteristics:

- facing a crisis and is searching for some help, guidance, process to meet the crisis head on
- curious about what unitarianism is all about
- may be anywhere on the scale from serious religious commitment to totally turned off with organized religion
- is on a spiritual journey and sees unitarianism as one place where spiritual growth can occur
- is cautious about any kind of commitment
- may initially only want information in a non-threatening, non-coercive manner

It is wise to respect a friend's deeply held religious convictions, if it exists, and not try to attract him/her to unitarianism. Discussions may happen comparing the strengths of

each, but the UU is well advised to back off from any form of value judgments. The friend has already found a spiritual home, and will not be likely interested in change unless circumstances change in his relationship with her/his faith.

The UU on the other side of the conversation would do well to recognize an appropriate situation for opening a discussion. Sensitivity may also be extended to the type of information is relayed and how it is put across. It is recommended that any form of coercion be avoided while briefly addressing three aspects: some specific information about unitarianism, something personal about one's experience with unitarianism, and a "tid-bit" of information to pique the listener's curiosity (e.g. "Did you know that.....was/is a unitarian?"). It has been asked, " what do you say after you say you are unitarian ?" A follow-up could make some mention of our 400 year background and how this compares to other denominations, that we facilitate people finding their own meaning of/in life. All of this could take the form of a 30 second "sound-bite". Of course, the UU should have some backup information in case the friend/acquaintance is ready to hear more.

One of the more effective ways of attracting interest in unitarianism is by example: consistent and reliable friendliness, authentic concern and a willingness to help. To paraphrase Gandhi...You must become the change that you wish to see in the world. It's not so much what we say as unitarians but more how we act.

If the Proto UU/friend has demonstrated some interest in going beyond the initial phase of the discussion, the UU may be required to provide some immediate answers to the friend's more pressing questions. Here, some generic material from CUC, filtered through the UU's own congregation, and made relevant through the UU's own personal experience will be of value. If one senses that more information is being sought, a recommendation can be made to visit the congregation's web site, and/or that of CUC.

If the discussion eventually leads toward an invitation to a service, the UU should try to be more than invitational. Proto may feel some insecurity or reluctance to attend - it's not unusual to be wary of the unknown - and the UU can offset this by offering to accompany Proto to the service. If an arrangement has been made, UU may wish to phone Proto closer to the service date to remind/confirm Proto of the arrangement. At the service, it's important that Proto feels as welcome as possible by being introduced to other members of the congregation, to the service leader/minister, and by receiving a welcome package of information.

It is recommended that UU - or a member of a welcoming committee - call Proto a day or two after the service to discuss the service, Proto's reaction to it, respond to any questions (for example from the welcome package), and encourage her/him to come again next Sunday. If there is a special occasion coming up, now is the time to extend an invitation to Proto. It's important to make Proto feel welcome, comfortable, valued, and above all that unitarianism has something very special to offer him/her.

PREPARATIONS FOR PLANNING

Tools and Other Action Items

A brief history of Unitarianism - no longer than 1/2 to 1 page in length - should be produced and made available to all existing, and new, congregation members. Currently, very few people in congregations realize that Unitarianism goes back 400 years and has had a fascinating history attracting a number of well known persons, especially in the U.S. CUC is a good source for this material.

Recognizing that many congregation members may be reluctant to participate in the process of attracting new members, an “educate the congregation about growth” program is recommended: reasons, methods, and the appropriate information and materials. While a larger congregation brings with it many benefits - especially financial, and expanded internal and outreach programs - it is necessary to emphasize the role that Unitarianism performs for those in search of spiritual growth. As well, we would like to see more of the values held by Unitarians permeating throughout the community at large.

Clear, concise, attractive, and readable materials may be made available for community distribution. A number of these are available through CUC, and individual congregations. There was some feedback in our workshop that postal walks (Canada Post receivescents per delivery) were more effective in the distribution process than were drop-offs. While the latter is more economical, especially with volunteer teenagers who can dedicate this time towards their compulsory 40 hours of volunteer community service, some experience has shown that material received with the daily mail is more likely to be read.

It was suggested that information in a “business card” format could be developed for congregation members to carry and give to those who are engaged in conversation. Such cards would be kept simple with the name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and web site of the congregation. A short aphorism could be added; for example, “Where faith meets reason”.

Greeting cards could be produced, the cover of which having any of the established icons of Unitarianism, or an appropriate art piece developed by one of the youth members, or one of the adult members. On the reverse side of the cover could occur some background information about Unitarianism, or the basic principles, and/or something specific about the congregation. The idea here is to give about six of these to each member of the congregation to send out to friends/acquaintances who may be considered as possible prospects. The congregation could develop a number of personalized invitational messages that the sender could handwrite in the card if he/she was stuck for something to say. After the card is sent, the sender would then contact the recipient to see if she/he received it, and to gently inquire if he/she would consider coming to a service.

Critical Success Factors

In any promotional campaign, a budget must be considered. While some congregations have more funds available than others, it is necessary to consider that if promotion is going to have any success it must be adequately financed. If not, then whatever time and money has been devoted to the task will most likely be in vain.

A Communication Committee should be struck, if one does not already exist, to facilitate the production of invitational and promotional materials. Such a committee - or one specially formed - may take on the responsibility of devising strategies to be taken to the Board of Directors.

Each congregation can draw attention to itself through its actions. This can take the form of developing positions, and acting on, chosen social issues. Valuable outreach programs can be offered to the community: infant, adolescent, and teen-age parenting workshops; couples - e.g how to keep loving your partner; men's groups, women's groups; meditation; fitness; guest lectures; etc.

One of the most critical success factors is commitment from congregation members. It must be made absolutely clear to members that membership involves more than showing up on Sunday and making a financial donation. Survival and growth of a congregation involves the acceptance of responsibilities in some capacity by all members, not just the usual half to one dozen who step forward. This message can be brought forward by the minister as a topic of Sunday service, can be laid out as a condition of membership (as is the case in many "working" yacht clubs and similar organizations). There are a number of ways in which the logistics of this can be worked out.

When considering the scope of membership in any congregation, the question of boundaries is inevitable. While Unitarianism is very open - perhaps uniquely so - to a variety of creeds, dogmas, beliefs, and faiths, certain groups are obviously not welcome, especially those marked with an agenda of racial, ethnic, cultural, sexual, or gender intolerance. The principles of Universalist Unitarianism should be the guideline for establishing boundaries of acceptance. A clear distinction ought to be made between the aforementioned and those who express a variety of differing viewpoints on significant

Inhibitors To Success

How inclusive and exclusive is Unitarianism? Many UUs look to other "isms"- Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, etc. - and the spiritual wisdom of aboriginal cultures for guidance. Many congregation members have been attracted to Unitarianism in response to their disdain for mainstream Christian denominations. This has often led to the rejection of Christian based belief, faith, symbols, and language. However, it must not be forgotten that many traditions of Unitarianism have their roots in Christianity, and that a number of congregation members may be Christian Unitarians.

One of the brakes on growth for any congregation lies in the very nature of Unitarianism itself. Islam is reportedly the fastest growing religion in the world and one may wish to investigate the reasons. It is suggested that Islam offers ready-made rituals, messages, answers, and icons for those looking for an alternative in their spiritual journey. One need only show up and adopt what is carefully prescribed in detail. Unitarianism, by its very nature, seems to be more of a facilitator, engaging members to find their own spiritual path within a community of like-minded people. This may in fact be one of our most understated attractions, which if more widely broadcast may appeal to those turned-off from the orthodoxy of conventional religions and denominations.

Ed Preston,
On behalf of the "Friends" Workshop Group

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IN THE WORKPLACE

U*U perspective:

1. My objectives are:

- Get someone to come to church
- Develop awareness about UUism
- Listen to their needs and help them understand how UUism might help
- Avoid proselytizing
- Fill the gap caused by failure of the public educational system to address religious/spiritual issues.

2. What can I do/say:

- Avoid using “turnoff” words/expressions e.g. “church”
- Talk about an event at my congregation that would interest my colleague
- Become familiar with and use list of “50 things you can do”

3. Am I at ease with the process? No

- To become at ease with the process:
 - Keep it one on one
 - Give out 7 principles card
 - Display a 7 principles list on your office wall (if allowed) OR Scarborough Mission Society’s World Religions poster (which includes us) contact Fr Terry Gallagher at 416 261-7135
 - Use a UU coffee mug, leave some in the office coffee making area
 - Have an “elevator speech” ready to go.

4. Physical materials* that would make the encounter more successful:

- 7 principle cards from CUC
- cups pens pencils car decals key ring fobs
- (ARTIK in the Yellow pages customize promotional give-away items. Say that you are returning UU customer for discounts.)
- Jewellery (CUC, or UUA) posters

5. How can we identify potential U*Us at work?

- Get to know people
- Drop hints you’re a U*U & watch for any reactions
- Be alert to any discussions about marriage i.e. mixed faiths.

Proto U*U perspective

1. We don't feel comfortable with the conventional structure of churches
2. Religion is often a taboo subject at work

Planning Worksheet

Preparation for Planning

1. Tool requirements: In addition to 4* above we thought about tools for the congregation's use;

Newcomer's package: Newsletter

Canadian Unitarian
CUC 7 principles card
R.E. Brochure
Adult Ed. Brochure

Guest book

Give option to have newsletter mailed or e-mailed

Welcoming letter

First time visitors could go with newsletter mailing (Sylvia Andrews via a local U*U who visited a Florida congregation).

2. Critical success factors

Keep tools up to date

Trained greeter teams with specific duties Name tags (all)

Hand out hymnals and orders of service to all, with a smile

Greeting and talking to newcomers after the service (we all agree that we are generally rather poor at chatting to newcomers after the service)

Everybody should wear their name tags

Have an R.E. program, (or activities) for children, baby sitting for infants

Have baby sitting available after the service to prevent children annoying adults i.e. noisy, sliding about etc.

3. Priorities and Goals

R.E. program, helps increase numbers

Membership retention, implement procedure whereby a member who relocates into an area where there is another congregation, is contacted by a receiving congregation (or is told about the CLF thought of after the end of the workshop) CUC could help here.

Strong Sunday Services

Variety of Adult Education Programs

Visibility- Wayside Pulpit (kept up dated) good signage (renting premises can limit the use of sandwich boards etc.

4. Quality Assurance processes

Check guest book regularly

Have someone count heads, children, adults, sermon/talk topic, weather

Analyse data for trends, popular topics, does weather influence attendance

Questionnaire disagreement whether questions about bringing friends

would make people defensive.

Have a space for concerns, most like about congregation, most dislike,

what should be improved.

NEED FOLLOW UP

Sorry, I don't know what was specific about follow up

Yvonne Greig

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AT A COCKTAIL PARTY

We acknowledged that this situation -- cocktail party or special interest event -- offers limited time in which to make a point, so important to ID some effective "soundbites".

Don't need to recite all 7 principles -- or even know them! IS important to pick one or two that resonate strongly for the speaker. Speak to them with conviction and passion.

PROTO U*Us:

- unchurched are better prospects than people already involved in another faith community
- the topic is unlikely to come up on its own. Use conversation triggers, such as relevant topics from books or movies to introduce it
- active listening is required to know where the proto is on their personal journey, what do they currently believe, what gaps in their own situation might they be seeking to fill. ID a specific interest, need or concern, and respond accordingly.

US, the U*Us:

- need clarity on where am I on my own spiritual journey. What does UU'ism mean for me, do for me? What's my own WIIFM?
- possible objectives for the encounter (remember, this is probably a very quick one):
 - give a card with UU info -- principles, access info (congregations, services, websites)
 - move into a serious, fulsome discussion, either right now or subsequently, over an arranged coffee meeting, etc
 - get their email address to forward a sermon or a website address
 - interest in/actual decision to attend a Sunday service

What do I say:

- reference the source (Judeo-Christian tradition, out of the reformation), to create some credibility and listener comfort
- talk about 1 or 2 principles (the more of them that we're familiar with, the easier to pick one of most interest to the listener, but not essential to know them all. Most NB to pick one of interest to us, the speaker)
- respond to concerns: If proto doesn't like the idea/word "religion", note that the definition is broadening, and/or use the word "congregation"
- AVOID turnoffs: the word "should" (as in "*you*" should). Take care with the trigger words: church, worship, etc. ie, understand the listener's connotation of these words. Be careful about positioning canvass events to visitors

What physical materials do I need:

- labels: lapel pin, chalice on a neckchain, etc.
- Cards with Principles/purposes/access/mission info

- access should include website, and Sunday Service place and time

The best evangelists (or proselytizers) will probably be the most fervent believers -- who can empathize with the proto well enough to have an effective dialogue.

There was a general consensus that though tools are available they are not accessed. Why?

- * not available locally

- * poor level of comfort in face to face interactions, not due to already voiced fears, but due to lack of interpersonal skills in voicing beliefs in a manner that will have a positive outcome.

Action Plan

- * local suppliers for advertising goods i.d. logo'd cups, jewelry, T-shirts etc.

- * workshops to address interpersonal skills that would include role playing (of close encounters") in supportive, non-critical learning environment.

We did address excluding groups or individuals from support if they do not evince belief in 7 principles. Yet it is important to still recognize our responsibility to behave in accordance with the principles in dealing with them.

By displaying principles inaction we would spark the curiosity of Proto U.U.'s in the beliefs of U.U.s e.g. donating 50 hours of service to celebrate a U.U. occasion. Actions speak louder....

From myself personally -

We must recall that while championing growth, it is not for its own sake, but to offer a cherished gift to seekers who are unaware and have not yet found us. I think we must in some way identify where these fellow seekers "hang out". I would have been found at a library, bookstore, or taking a course. What about others and how do we make our presence known in such places?

Donna Halliday

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COMMUNITY EVENT / TRADE SHOW

Preparations for Planning

1. Tools Requirements

- Expo Kit or equivalent
- Handouts/ pamphlets
- Sign- indoor- poles

2. Critical Success Factors

- Committed/experienced/oriented participants
- Leadership/planning

3. Priorities and realistic goals

- Set up time
- Personnel
- Tools

4. Establish Quality Assurance Processes

- Constructive feedback-before, during, after
- Roving –checking other booths/environments

5. Next Steps

- Right Fit
- Do it again?
- Results-number of contacts, referrals, cards handed out
- Correct shortcomings in previous plan

Critical Success Factors: Can We Deliver

1. Mission Statement- Not all have one or can articulate it

- Must have principles in presentation

2. Current Capability of Congregation

- Yes with commitment, personnel, tools

3. Willing to share

- Primary function
- Volunteers need to be connected

4. Open to everyone/ need boundaries

- Pick an environment within our principles

5. Inhibitors to success

- Respect volunteers
- Comfort level of volunteers
- Misunderstood or conflicting goals
- Volunteers need to be connected

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AT COFFEE HOUR / A CONGREGATIONAL EVENT

Proto UUs

Q: As a Proto UU, what are my objectives for the encounter?

A: As a visitor to a UU congregation, I know that staying for coffee after the service is taking a risk, because I don't want to "stand out" as an outsider or be ignored.

I want to find someone friendly who may want to strike up a conversation with me.

I may want to learn something or discuss ideas.

I may want to find something in common with someone else.

Q: Where am I on my spiritual journey?

A: I may be: questioning, open to change, curious, looking for fulfillment outside my usual social circle, looking for purpose, dealing with life changes, looking for support.

Q: What are my understandings going into the encounter?

A: Going in, I would like to have choice about the depth of the encounter. I don't want to be probed or pressured. I want to control the conversation to some extent. I may be unsure about UUs' belief system, and not understand UUs very well.

Q: What are my understandings coming out of the encounter?

A: I have found out: whether UUism may provide meaning for me, whether I may "fit" with this church, whether I feel that I am welcome just as I am.

Q: Am I likely to do something as a result of the encounter (e.g., return to the church another time)? How do I feel about the UU as a result of this encounter?

A: This is a function of the welcome I received. Were people interested in me? Did they respect me, and my opinions? I will return if the information I received and emotions I felt make me want to return, and if it is congruent with what I want.

Q: Do I need more information or anything else? If so, how do I get it?

A: Perhaps the church information is obvious, such as material or brochures on a table with a sign that says, "Please help yourself to information". Perhaps a Greeter has given an information package, including newsletter. A person I chat with during coffee hour may direct me to more information if I ask, or may even take the initiative to ask whether I want more information and try to find it for me.

Coffee Hour Encounter Worksheet

UUs

Q: What are my objectives for the encounter?

A: To help a newcomer discover if UU has something to offer him or her. Is UU right for that person?

To help the person feel comfortable and at ease.

To create a positive image of UUs in the community, even if that person chooses not to stay.

Q: Do I know what to do or say?

A: When talking, start with generalities. (“Where do you live?” “How did you hear about us?” “Isn’t this weather something?”)

Be honest and offer something of yourself, such as your own information. (“I really enjoy this coffee time and the chance to meet someone new.” “I found real meaning here because....” “As a parent, I really enjoyed the time for children this Sunday, because...”)

Reflect on the meaning / diversity of services and congregants so a newcomer will want to come back and see more. (“I really liked it when the minister talked about “x” because that’s something I’ve given some thought to.” “Did you find anything interesting in the talk this morning?” “I find that all our services are so different.”)

Q: Am I at ease with the process? If not, what would make it easier (e.g. training)?

A: Focus your attention on the other person, and not on your own comfort level. Learn about their interests. Reflect on your own newcomer experience to figure out what would be helpful to a new person. Open a newcomer’s circle of acquaintances by introducing him or her to others in the congregation, especially others with a similar interest, or who live in the same neighbourhood, etc.

Q: What physical materials (printed materials, props, displays, etc.) would make the encounter more successful?

A: Materials: Newcomer package, visitors’ table with information, internet information, church newsletter showing future services (can be sent to newcomers who request it for three months), follow up calls.

Logistics: Physical layout to facilitate coffee hour encounter, e.g., people will have to pass by the coffee area or visitors’ table or greeter on the way out of the church. Coffee should not be in a separate room or be hard to find.

Coffee Hour Encounter Worksheet

Process Consultants

Q: What are the mechanics of the process?

A: Go gradually. Create the encounter.

Q: What information is exchanged?

A: In a one to one personal exchange, information is exchanged including religious / spiritual information. "Does the church fit the newcomer?"

Q: What is the real-life experience of the group? What works? What doesn't?

A: Works: Welcome to newcomers during the service, e.g., "You belong here because you are here." Telling newcomers, "Every service differs."

Doesn't Work: Pushy, invasive people, lack of acknowledgement of newcomer by others who are 'busy', insider talk (e.g., using code words, such as UUA, UGCT).

Coffee Hour Encounter Worksheet – Action Plans

Preparations for Planning:

1. Summarize Tool Requirements and other Action Items:

Newcomer Package (pamphlets covering: 7 principles, denomination, congregation (children and adult), how to become a member, Welcoming Congregation, chaplaincy services, etc.)

Props – church pen, 7 principles card, fridge magnet

2. Identify Critical Success Factors:

Have a culture where all members own / participate in growth. (“Take 10” – posters, door hangers, 7 principles cards, etc. to spread the word) (New Member Theme – sermon, testimony, newsletter article, Bring a Friend Sunday or Bring a Friend Month, growth brainstorming session)

Critical Success Factors – Can We Deliver?

1. What is the Mission of our congregation / movement?

The Mission is centred on 7 Principles.

2. Mission and Market

We should market our faith to those who would value our community and those who need our community (e.g., parents, single parents, those in life changes, those dissatisfied with traditional faith, gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender people and their friends seeking a Welcoming community, those seeking social justice, social activists, those seeking diversity)

3. Do we still need boundaries, or are we open to everyone?

Our boundaries are based on the 7 Principles.

4. Are there any inhibitors to success (e.g., language, religious terminology)?

We shouldn't think of language as a barrier. Discussing our choices of language shows the essence of UUism (e.g., We discuss our different opinions and try to learn from others, we respect others' opinions and have the right to have our opinions respected, etc.)