



WHAT ABOUT MEMORIAL SERVICES?

Funerals and memorial services are particularly delicate and challenging services for lay chaplains. They are called upon to quickly connect with a family or individuals and help them plan a meaningful service. Here's how one lay chaplain describes it:

"You get a call, and then there are three or four days where you meet the family, then walk around living and breathing this person you've never met. You have to use all your intuitive skills and find the hidden richness in every life."

WHAT ELSE DO LAY CHAPLAINS DO?

Lay chaplains also perform child dedications, house blessings, pet memorials and other "milestone" ceremonies. In each case, they work with the individuals involved to create a ceremony that is rich in metaphor and meaning, drawing upon the religious or other values of the people who have come to them for support.

WHY DO MEMBERS BECOME LAY CHAPLAINS?

If you've never had a conversation with the lay chaplains in your congregation, ask them about how their experience has encouraged their spiritual growth. You will hear first-hand what a rich experience this can be.

The CUC encourages congregations to celebrate their own lay chaplains' rites of passage – from appointment to retirement. It's particularly important to have smooth transitions and to honour those transitions, given the maximum term of six years. At any one time, a congregation may have an about-to-retire lay chaplain mentoring a lay chaplain in training, along with another one or two hitting their stride in year two or three.

Some congregations have a mentor program whereby a "lay chaplain in training" has a full year to work with the retiring lay chaplain before taking on the role. This provides the support needed for a new person to confidently begin their term and at the same time provides the retiring lay chaplain the opportunity to pass the flame.

WHO TRAINS LAY CHAPLAINS?

As part of the revisions made to the lay chaplaincy program in 2001, the CUC offers enhanced training and enrichment opportunities, for experienced, new and prospective lay chaplains – they're offered several times a year, across the country.

HOW CAN I FIND A UNITARIAN LAY CHAPLAIN?

Call your local congregation, or visit the CUC web site: www.cuc.ca/lay_chaplaincy/index.htm. (Details about upcoming lay chaplaincy training are also on the web site.)

THE LAY CHAPLAINCY PROGRAM



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Published by the Canadian Unitarian Council /
Conseil unitarien du Canada
1-888-568-5723 • www.cuc.ca • info@cuc.ca



Have you ever seen these two terms confused – “rites of passage” and “rights of passage”?

The former term refers to the transitional points in our lives – like marriages, funerals, memorial services, child dedications and other milestones. The latter term just sounds the same!

Despite the confusion, we do believe that people have a *right* to passage – that is, to transition or transform. And it’s a “right” for us as UU members to have someone of our own congregation – our minister or a lay chaplain – assist us in planning and carrying out a ceremony to recognize the transition.

In fact, we believe all people have such a right, which is why we also offer rites of passage to non-members, performed by certified CUC lay chaplains.

HISTORY OF THE PROGRAM

In 2006 the Canadian Unitarian Council’s Lay Chaplaincy Program turned 35! Long before the existence of marriage commissioners, UU ministers often found their time and energy pulled away from their congregations to perform weddings for other individuals, whether unchurched or “differently churched.” And in congregations without ministers, members often did not have access to a *Unitarian* ceremony, so had to make compromises when planning their weddings, funerals or other rites of passage.

That’s why we invented the Unitarian concept of “chaplain” in 1971; in 2001 we modified the term to “lay chaplain” to avoid any confusion with the professional ministry.

PURPOSES OF THE PROGRAM

Today, there are nearly 90 lay chaplains across Canada (an average of two for every congregation). The program is foremost one of ensuring the “right to a rite” for anyone – Unitarian or not – who wants a religious ceremony, custom-designed for them to mark a significant passage in their individual or family life.

Secondly, as ambassadors of our religion, lay chaplains are in a unique position to tell others about us. Some request or even require a couple to attend a Sunday service to ensure there’s a fit between who we are and who they are. Others provide information

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about Unitarianism – a brochure or a web site – to help them understand our approach.

The third purpose of the program is to provide spiritual development for the lay chaplains themselves.

ARE THE WEDDINGS LEGAL?

Yes. Unitarian lay chaplains are licenced through the CUC, by their respective provinces, to legally solemnize weddings. The CUC provides the training for new lay chaplains and its Lay Chaplaincy Committee oversees the program.

WHAT ABOUT SAME-SEX WEDDINGS?

Unitarians have led the way, literally for decades, on same-sex unions and marriages. In 1974, the Rev. Norm Naylor, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Winnipeg, officiated at the first same-sex marriage performed in Canada. In the intervening years, lay

chaplains performed hundreds of “services of union” even though they weren’t legally recognized by the provinces. At the national level, the CUC was part of the lobbying effort that led to the legalization of equal marriage in 2005. Today our lay chaplains perform marriages in every part of Canada regardless of gender expression and sexual orientation.



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