

Introducing Theme-Based Ministry

My life journey and my ministry has been grounded - whether I've made it explicit or not - in leading a spiritually integrated life. I believe this is also an intrinsic purpose of Unitarian Universalism and our congregations in the 21st century. So what is a spiritually-integrated life?

For me it is trying to live a life closely aligned with my deep values and beliefs. For us as a religious community, I think it is living into our purpose and mission. It's about becoming who we are called to be, both as individuals and as a community. You know each of us has a "calling", right? This is not just an idea limited to clergy and other rarified professionals.

That is the deep spiritual question we are asked and ask ourselves from the very beginning. Even as young children, these questions (and so many others) begin to haunt us. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? What am I here for? What shall I do, as the poet Mary Oliver asks, with my "one wild and precious life"?

Theme-based ministry is a practice adopted by many Unitarian Universalist congregations in the past five or six years. It was originated and made popular by our largest Unitarian Universalist congregation, All Souls in Tulsa, OK. It is a way to fully integrate many aspects of congregational life - worship, religious education, faith development programming and fellowship. It offers us the opportunity to go deeper, to grow and step up to spiritual and ethical living as we explore these themes together. And it is a way for us to approach these ideas and themes from our different, individual theological perspectives.

Each month of the church year has a designated theological theme – this allows for common ground for shared conversation across our theological diversity. In some congregations, every Sunday Service is directly related to the theme. In others at least one worship service of the month relates specifically to the theme.

A group of New Jersey Unitarian Universalist ministers have come together to explore how we can work together. Some of these ministers are already doing "theme-based ministry" and others of us are just stepping into this. We are working together to support one another and find ways to enrich our own work and collaborate on strengthening our faith within and beyond our congregations.

The selected topics provide an axis around which many elements of congregational life can gain more meaning and depth. They provide us with a set of common stories and ideas that become elements of an ongoing community conversation.

So, feeling the call of reawakening our congregation, I am introducing this to TUS this year. Be warned: *Seriously engaging these themes could transform your life!*

Rev. Susan

Here are the themes I'm thinking of for this year:

2013

September *Forgiveness*

the ingathering honors our community, and the High Holy Days center around this theme... essential to all human belonging

October *Belonging*

Beginning with the Blessing of the Animals, we celebrate "our place in the choir"

November *Mortality (death)*

Our continuing dance with the contract of life and death, starting with El Dia de los Muertos and ending the month with our Thanksgiving Communion where gratitude celebrates life

December *Faith*

A central theme of all the winter holidays...

2014

January *Hope*

a new year;; MLK Jr. and his legacy

February *Love*

self explanatory, maybe? "love your neighbor"

March *Justice*

Equality, Women's History Month, Lenten themes

April *Transformation (Resurrection)*

Easter & Affirmation (Coing of Age)

May *Letting Go*

Buddhism and non-attachment in every-day life and in building community

June *Joy*

Growing in faith, hope and love...

All of these will be worked into not only one or two sermons each month, but in some other reference each Sunday. I plan to coordinate this with RE and Family Ministry by having a story each month centered on the theme when we have our Family Sundays. And am looking forward to other ideas and comments.