

Water Ceremony

As it states on the front cover of your Order of Service, today is our In Gathering and Water Ceremony service. The Water Ceremony, or what some refer to as the “Water Communion,” is a tradition not just in this congregation but in Unitarian Universalist congregations across our country. Many of you have participated in such a service and are familiar with what it entails. For those of you who have never experienced a Water Ceremony or Water Communion service before, welcome. We hope you find this service uplifting and we encourage you to take part in it as you feel comfortable doing so. This is a service that invites and encourages participation by those who are present.

While the Water Ceremony is a well known and practiced tradition in UU churches, I have found that many people don’t know much about its history. So before we begin the sharing of our water and its meaning to us this morning I would like to provide you with some background that I hope you will find informative and meaningful.

Many people are unaware that the seeds that produced this service were germinated in the women’s liberation movement of the 1960’s and 70’s. More particularly, this service was created in response to and in support of the “Women and Religion Resolution” that was presented and passed at the 1977 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The intent of that resolution was to recognize and address how our language, cultural and religious upbringing, and institutions fostered sex-role stereotyping that had been, and to this day continues to be, constraining to women. At that 1977 General Assembly, held in Ithaca, New York, the delegates voted unanimously to adopt the resolution. Yes, you heard that correctly. It was a unanimous vote at a UU gathering concerning a matter of great significance. A unanimous vote is such a setting might be enough to convince some UU’s that miracles really can occur.

But before I veer off into waters that are surely under dispute I think it wise to chart a course back to the Water Ceremony. After the passage of the resolution there was a tremendous amount of work to be done to implement the proposals it contained. This work began to take place across the country. Two years after the passage of the resolution, in November of 1980, a “Women and Religion Convocation on Feminist Theology” occurred in East Lansing, Michigan. It was there that the very first water communion worship service was held. Here is what Rosemary Matson, a woman who was deeply engaged in the work related to the resolution wrote in her memoirs about that first service. “In East Lansing, we experienced a truly feminist worship service when Lucile Longview and Carolyn McDade presented the water ceremony they created, “Coming Home Like Rivers to the Sea.” My own participation was very moving to me, and I am glad so many societies have now introduced the water ceremony to their congregations.”

Today, nearly thirty-six years after that first Water Ceremony service, we recognize that what we are doing has a history that is important and meaningful. Today, very much like that first service, we will unite the waters that have meaning to us. And as we pour our water into the bowl and share what those waters mean to us we will be bringing both the waters and our stories together like rivers coming home to the sea.

In just a few moments we will begin uniting our waters. Some of you have brought water with you this morning. Some of you may have intended to bring water and forgot. Others may not have known that bringing water was part of this service. Whether you brought water or not everyone is invited to participate. We have a pitcher here that you can use as a replacement for the water you would like to have brought. All of the water will be added to the larger community bowl. Pouring water into the community bowl represents our kinship—not only with one another but with all life. After our service the water will be purified and saved for use in special rituals throughout the coming year.

The uniting of our waters is one element of what will soon take place. Another element is the sharing of our brief stories about the meaning the water has for us. So when you come forward please say your name, where your water is from and briefly what, for you, is significant about this water. Since this is a multigenerational service I would invite the children to come up with their parents and share with us as well.

As you will notice in your Order of Service, there will be three separate times during the service when you can come forward with your water. Each time, as has been the tradition here for the past few years, has a specific theme which is included in the Order of Service. The themes fit nicely with the hymn verse that immediately precedes each sharing opportunity.

As we prepare to begin our Water Ceremony then I would like to invite Marie Lynn, our Coordinator of Religious Education, and the children to come forward to lead us in singing “I Have Peace Like a River.” This first time we will only sing the first two verses. The children will sing the first verse by themselves and the congregation is encouraged to join with them in singing verse two.

The sharing of our waters and our stories is about to begin. As you will notice in your Order of Service, the theme of this first session of sharing is on flowing water. Now, to establish a bit of order for this process, I encourage people to come forward along the aisles on both sides of the room. People can then alternate coming up here to the front first from one side and then the other. And the middle aisle can be used to return to your seat. A short line may form but there is no need for anyone to stand in line for long. Everyone who would care to add water and share will have time to do so. I now invite those who would like to share to begin flowing forward along both sides of the room.