



Soul Matters

Crossing Paths

Leaders Guide

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Welcome to Crossing Paths

Welcome to the [Crossing Paths](#) journey. This leader's guide provides you with an overview of the program, its unique approach and some tips to support you along the way. We want you to feel prepared. And to ensure that you are prepared, we're excited to share that this 2022-23 version is designed for multi-platform use!

Besides ensuring you are supported; we also want to say thanks. You are offering your youth a great gift. Interfaith understanding and conversations are desperately needed in our culture right now. This year of exploration will not only enrich the spiritual lives of your youth, it will empower them to bring healing to the world. In the face of religious perspectives that try to divide, we need voices that help us connect to and celebrate each other. Our deepest aim is to help our youth be those voices.

You also are helping your youth deepen their faith. Crossing Paths is not just about encountering other faith traditions. It is designed to help youth mature as Unitarian Universalists. With Crossing Paths, they will be challenged to think theologically, learn distinctive UU spiritual practices and strengthen their relationship with their home church community. Yes, this is a journey into the world of other faith traditions. But it is also about nurturing your youth's unique spiritual self.

Finally we hope you discover a deepened sense of UU identity. This is your journey too. So, as you teach your youth, may you also be blessed with new perspectives and insights. As you help your youth engage spiritual practice, may your own spiritual life grow. As you go out and explore the religious home of others, may your love and appreciation for *your* UU home expand.

Thanks for making this path available to your youth. And thanks for allowing us to be your partners.

Katie and Scott, Co-Authors

www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/crossing-paths.html

Katie Covey, DRE, Soul Matters Sharing Circle

soulmattersre@gmail.com

Rev. Scott Tayler, Team Lead, Soul Matters Sharing Circle

Unique Elements of Crossing Paths

Crossing Paths joins the long line of middle school, visit-based UU curriculum going back 70 years. Church Across the Street was published by the UUA in 1947. More recently, we've seen Neighboring Faiths (1997) and Building Bridges (Tapestry of Faith). Our [Soul Matters](#) version, "Crossing Paths," is shaped and inspired by a number of distinct features. Here's an overview of what makes Crossing Paths unique:

1. Building UU Identity

Crossing Paths is about UU Identity Building, not just interfaith learning. We want youth to leave the program with a deeper and more clear understanding of their own faith. We accomplish this through a number of UU identity building strategies, including:

- Teaching youth a simple and memorable theology of UUism (The three lifelines).
- Regularly lifting up that theology in our chalice lightings and closing words.
- Using and teaching the distinctively UU "8 Practices of Welcoming."
- Setting aside "Lake Sunday" to reflect on what personally inspired youth about each religion and integrating that into their personal faith beliefs and practices.
- Reflecting on the similarities and differences between UU and each faith on "Tack Sundays."

2. Our Approach - Religious Pluralism and the Metaphor of "Many Mountains"

Crossing Paths is rooted in religious pluralism. Put simply, this view treats every religion as a unique system. Some models of interfaith engagement emphasize the unity or commonality of all religions. This view might be summed up by the phrase "One Mountain; Many Paths." This perspective argues that there is a fundamental shared goal behind all religious traditions. They are seen as different paths toward the same goal or purpose. This is not the perspective of Crossing Paths.

Crossing Paths celebrates each faith's *unique* aims and ends. Every world faith tradition was born in response to a distinct human struggle. We believe we honor religions best when we work to understand the *particular* challenge and aspiration to which each religion has devoted itself. So instead of using the metaphor of "One Mountain; Many Paths," Crossing Paths invites us to see the religious landscape as "**Many Mountains**, Many Paths." *This metaphor is central to our entire design and lifted up throughout our packets.*

To learn more about this approach of religious pluralism, we recommend the work of religious scholar [Stephen Prothero](#). A good place to begin is with his online videos. You can view them [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#). However, it's also important to recognize that this approach of celebrating religious uniqueness is not just captured in the work of scholars; it is also ingrained in our faith's "[Six Sources](#)." From our beginning, we UUs have looked to our sibling faith traditions as each having something unique to offer us and the world.

3. Weekly Flow - The Four Stages of the Climb

Above we mentioned “many mountains, many paths.” This mountaineering metaphor is woven throughout our entire program and shapes our structure and flow. In a sense, we climb one “mountain of faith” each month. And climbing involves the same steps each time:

- familiarizing yourself with the map of the terrain (Week One: “Map Sunday”),
- preparing your gear (Week Two: “Tack Sunday”),
- making the climb (Week Three: “Summit Sunday”),
- and then sitting back to take it all in (Week Four: “Lake Sunday”).

Here’s a bit more about this four-fold flow and the distinct names we’ve chosen for each week:

Map Sunday

This is the first meeting of each month. During it, youth learn about the basic beliefs of the religion they will visit in a couple of weeks. In other words, this is the day the group looks over the “map of this faith’s terrain.” It is important to note that this doesn’t just involve learning a bunch of stats and downloading information. This is an adventure after all. So we take an experiential learning approach, using ritual, fun activities and sensory experience to get the youth excited about the trip they are about to make.

Tack Sunday

Next comes “Tack Sunday.” You can’t head out on a journey until your gear is packed. So this Sunday is all about “tacking up.” Having reviewed the faith’s foundational beliefs and practices on Map Sunday, the group now adds to their “backpack” an awareness of how the religion compares and contrasts to Unitarian Universalism. The goal is to prepare for and begin a conversation that the group will continue the following week with their interfaith hosts. This is also the week that the group reviews (and tacks up with) the 8 key skills/practices that they will use every time they visit a new faith community. We say more about that in the section below called “The Eight Practices of Welcoming.”

Summit Day

Third comes the big day: the visit! It’s the day of the climb so to speak. Notice we call this “Summit Day” rather than “Summit Sunday.” We do this to honor the fact that many religions don’t meet on Sunday.

Sometimes an actual in-person visit is challenging to set up. For instance, a resurgence of COVID may make in-person visits unwise. Or some congregations may not have a particular house of faith in their town. To help you with this, we’ve built in “virtual visit” alternatives. These include:

- Exploring the faith community’s webpage
- Watching videos of that faith in worship or doing one of their core spiritual practices
- Interviewing, through Zoom, a leader from that faith community (or interviewing someone who is currently practicing in that tradition)

These strategies are part of our commitment to multi-platform religious exploration and learning.

Lake Sunday

No trip is complete without the chance to sit back and reflect on where you’ve been. So on the fourth Sunday, the group “sits by the lake” so to speak and processes their takeaways from their visit. This is a chance to review what was learned and think about what one wants to hold on to and take with them on the rest of their journey. These visits come with gifts. This session helps youth name and integrate those gifts into their own spiritual life.

4. Session Flow - Worship that Leads into Experiential Learning

Just as each month has a regular flow, so do our weekly sessions. Here's an overview:

- **Centering:** The meeting starts with a time of centering and worship. This allows youth to engage the focus religion experientially but also with reverence. We love the fun games and activities we offer the youth. But we want to be sure to balance playful learning with serious and contemplative moments to ensure the youth honor the sacred nature of this journey.
- **Experiential Learning:** Following centering, the group moves into activities and more high-energy experiential learning. Again, our goal is to convey the energy and power of these faith traditions, not just communicate information.
- **Looking Ahead and Closing:** Finally, our weekly sessions end with a look ahead at what's coming next week and closing words that ground them in our UU theology.

5. Faith Traditions - Flexible Options and Scheduling Suggestions

Ten months does not allow us to cover all the world religions. So based on feedback from our subscribers, we offer a targeted group of faith tradition packets for you to choose from:

- Unitarian Universalism
- Judaism
- Christianity
- Christian Evangelicalism (Megachurch)
- Catholicism
- Quakerism
- Islam
- Buddhism
- Hinduism
- Paganism
- Humanism

Scheduling is Up to You

How you order your exploration of these faiths is up to you. Many particular factors determine which month you visit which religion. But here are some thoughts to support your choices.

The arc and order of your visits is important. For instance, we recommend visiting faiths from the Judeo-Christian traditions first since Unitarian Universalism arose from them. In addition, we usually recommend not scheduling a visit during the high holidays of the faith tradition. Previous subscribers have told us this is a way of being sensitive to leaders who already have a lot on their plate. For instance, Muslim leaders are very busy during Ramadan and Jewish leaders are very busy during Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur. At the same time, there are some special cases where the season captures something unique about the faith tradition, for instance visiting a Catholic church during December helps highlight its liturgical beauty.

6. Lenses and “Binoculars”

When mapping the terrain, you need lenses or “binoculars” that help you view the entire landscape. Similarly, Crossing Paths captures the wide breadth of each religion by bringing numerous lenses to it. In keeping with our mountaineering theme, we call these lenses “binoculars.” Here are the lenses that guide us and structure our lessons, especially the lessons in Map Sunday and Tack Sunday:

- **The Problem** (The human struggle that the religion organizes itself around)
- **The Solution/The Path** (What the religion offers in response to that “problem.”)
- **Symbols** of each faith
- **Basic Stats** (size, location, founding date)

In addition, we select 2-4 other lens/components to focus on, based on which ones best capture the distinctiveness of the religion and which ones might best enable the youth to relate to and get excited about the religion:

- Central Spiritual Practice
- Understanding of Divinity
- Key Figures (founder, reformers, exemplars, major figures)
- Holy Days
- Sacred Text
- Central Stories
- Distinctive Music (chanting, hymns, songs, etc.)

7. The Eight Practices of Welcoming

Crossing Paths is not just about gaining wisdom. It is also an invitation to develop and deepen one’s spiritual practices. Our hope is that youth leave Crossing Paths with seeds of spiritual practices they will carry with them throughout their lives. Welcoming and reaching across differences is at the heart of Unitarian Universalist practice. So Crossing Paths focuses on eight of these methods of engaging difference. They are skills that the group brings with them to every visit; they are also skills and practices we hope youth will take with them into their wider relationships. Here’s the list:

1. Be fully present
2. Be curious
3. Be open to being changed
4. Be comfortable with discomfort
5. Be an appreciative listener
6. Be light-hearted
7. Be gentle (allow and heal mistakes)
8. Be yourself

8. Theology of Connection and the Three Lifelines

We work hard to help the youth understand the unique theology of each religion. It's also important to us that our youth understand UUism's distinct theology. To make our unique UU theology clear, Crossing Paths uses a theological framework we call "the theology of connection." Put simply, UU's over time have tended to focus on the problem of "spiritual separation." In general, when we look out at the world, what has struck us UUs and broken our hearts most is the way the world separates people from their deepest self, life's gifts and needs greater than their own. Repairing these three sacred connections has long been the work of our faith. So you might say our UU faith offers people three "lifelines" to restore connection. We use this language of lifelines and "healing spiritual disconnection" throughout the program. It is a powerful and accessible way for our youth to understand what makes UU's theologically unique. We are grateful that other religions offer the world such sacred gifts as forgiveness, enlightenment, liberation and salvation. We also want our youth to be proud of the unique gift that their faith offers the world: connection.

To help the youth remember these three lifelines of UUism, we use three symbols for the lifelines and make them a central piece of our Crossing Paths "altar":

- **A spool of thread or thin rope** to remind us of the fragile and sometimes hard to notice thread that tethers us to our deepest and most authentic self.
- **A jump rope** that reminds us of the importance of staying connected to life's joys and gifts. Sometimes it's easy to focus on life's challenges and troubles. And so a central task of our faith is to remind us about and reconnect us to the joy and gifts that are always available to us.
- **A thick rope tied in a circle** to remind us of the "interdependent web" and our relationships to each other. As our faith tells us, we are all bound up in "an inescapable and interdependent network of mutuality." This interconnectedness comes with a responsibility to care for one another, to serve not only our own needs, but also the needs of others and the world around us.

We also lift up the three lifelines in the Chalice Lighting we say each week:

We light this chalice in gratitude for the path we share, a path that calls us to:

listen to our deepest selves, [HAND SIGN - hands on heart]

open to life's gifts, [HAND SIGN - spread arms wide open]

And serve needs greater than our own. [HAND SIGN - cupped hands together in front of you]

*See [this video](#) for a demonstration of the hand signs. We encourage the addition of the hand signs to better remember and engrain this opening which contains our UU theology in a nutshell.

9. Parent Involvement & "Dinner and Drive Time Tips"

Parent involvement is essential to Crossing Paths. We ask them to engage their youth at home between meetings by having Crossing Path leaders email them "Dinner and Drive Tips" that suggest activities and discussion prompts for parents and youth to engage together. We rely on the pre-session discussions between parents and youth to "prime the pump."

Crossing Paths is also about enriching parents' spiritual lives. This is their journey too. And so the Dinner and Drive Time Tips include readings and reflection questions for parents to explore on their own.

10. Support for Multi-Platform Church & Online Engagement Strategies

While many congregations will use Crossing Paths in-person, we know some will need virtual and online alternatives. For instance, a resurgence of Covid may make in-person activities and visits unwise. Or some congregations may not have a particular house of faith in their town. And there's also the challenge of what to do when a youth can't make a visit. To help you with these various challenges, we've built in numerous multi-platform strategies:

- **Virtual Visit Options:** We provide the tools and ideas to visit each house of faith virtually, including:
 - Exploring that faith community's website.
 - Watching videos of that faith tradition's worship and/or core spiritual practice.
 - Interviewing a leader from that faith community or a person who practices that religion.
- **Games Designed for Online:** For those times when you can't meet together in person, we include great online games for your youth to play on Zoom.
- **Use of Zoom Technology:** In our leader notes we regularly highlight Zoom capabilities that can be harnessed to enhance engagement, such as:
 - Hand raising for games
 - Chat box for meditative sharing ("mindful texting")
 - Playing videos
 - Use of camera on and off to "hide" for games
- **Leader Tech Tips:** We've created and gathered a number of How To resources to help leaders when they run a session or activity online:
 - [How to play music on Zoom](#) & [Soul Matters' How to play music PDF](#)
 - [How to use the "Raise Hand" feature on Zoom](#)
 - [How to use the "Chat" feature on Zoom](#)
 - [How to use the Meeting Controls on Zoom](#) (mute, invite, etc.)
 - [How to toggle between speaker and gallery view](#)

Planning Visits and Trips

There's no escaping it: Crossing Paths involves a lot of logistics. Planning trips, organizing travel and coordinating with hosts means there are dozens of details to keep track of. In each packet, we offer specific planning tips and reminders. Here are some general suggestions for you to keep in mind as you begin to wrap your mind around the responsibility of organizing visits.

Contacting Faith Communities and Structuring the Visit

- **Be clear about the purpose:** Explain the purpose of Crossing Paths in simple terms: "Interfaith learning and relationship building." Lift up UUism's embrace and celebration of religious pluralism.
- **Be clear about your request:** Share your hope that the group can attend a religious service but offer the option of a building tour at another time if worship service attendance is inappropriate or inconvenient.
- **Be clear about the nature of the conversation:** Inquire about the possibility of meeting with a leader or community member after the service or tour to hear more about the basic beliefs and practices of their faith. Ask them what format they are most comfortable with. We offer suggested interview questions which invite the sharing of personal stories, not just facts.
- **Share the interview questions:** If you are able to include a conversation with a leader as part of your visit, we suggest that you bring questions for the youth to ask. We include suggested Interview questions at the end of each packet as part of the preparation for the visit. We suggest you ask the youth which question they would like to ask. Be flexible to allow youth to ask their own questions, paraphrase the question from the handout in their own words, or ask it straight out. We also recommend sending the list of questions ahead of time to the faith leaders you are going to interview. This will allow them to prepare. You might also want to let them know that the youth will be taking turns asking their favorite questions from the list or ones they have generated themselves.
- **Ask how your group can be respectful guests:** Are there any "dos or don'ts"? Discuss whether or not it might be helpful to recognize the presence of guests in the service, and anything the host would like of the group.

Visit Preparation Tips

- Go over the Eight Practices of Welcoming with the youth. Consider handing out a copy of the list.
- Bring offering money for each group member or remind them to bring some, if appropriate

Traveling Tips

- Review your safety requirements with drivers.
- Make sure to collect signed permission slips from group members, with all relevant contact information and emergency numbers. Make a copy to leave at the church, and a copy to bring on the trip.
- Let parents know the approximate time of return and post it on the door of your meeting room.
- Post a "We Will Return Soon" note on your classroom door in case someone comes late, such as "Sorry we missed you. The Crossing Paths group is visiting _____. We will return at _____."

Planning Online Visits

Multi-platform Crossing Paths assumes that, because of Covid or a house of faith not being in your town, you will sometimes need to visit a house of faith virtually. As already mentioned, we include three strategies for these virtual visits:

- Exploring that faith community's website.
- Watching videos of that faith tradition's worship and/or core spiritual practice.
- Interviewing a leader from that faith community or a person who practices that religion.

Happy Trails!

There you go. Consider yourself tacked up.
We can't wait for you to unfold the maps and lean into your Crossing Paths journey!



Crossing Paths Authors

Katie Covey, DRE of Soul Matters Sharing Circle
Rev. Scott Tayler, Team Lead of Soul Matters Sharing Circle



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