

Starting Point

Participant Packet

Prep-Work & Resources for Reflection



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I. What is Starting Point?

Starting Point is a unique newcomer experience designed to:

- integrate your welcoming and small group ministries,
- ensure a higher participation rate in your small group program and other “small circle” ministries, thereby increasing newcomer retention,
- provide newcomers with an experience of Unitarian Universalism not just information about it,
- bring new life to UU theology & history by framing it in terms of the “theology of healing disconnection,”
- leave participants with easy-to-remember and easy-to-share understandings of UU theology and history,
- give leaders a flexible structure so they can easily adapt the program to their environments.

Here’s some more detail about what makes Starting Point’s unique:

A Pathway to Small Groups

Many "New to UU" classes focus on directing newcomers toward membership. Starting Point takes a different tack. Instead of orienting newcomers toward membership, it guides them toward small group participation. This shift is about creating a “sticky church.” We know that newcomers who find a home in a small group stay involved. They also become more deeply committed. So here at the start, newcomers are invited to experience the deep listening and sharing practices that occur in UU small groups. This strategy gets them “hooked” and prepared right away.

UUism as a Journey not Set of Beliefs

The “UU path” is central to Starting Point. Inspired by the classic UU slogan, “deeds not creeds,” we present Unitarian Universalism as a particular way of journeying through the world rather than a set of beliefs to which one assents. Today, people are not so much looking for an organization to join as they are searching for companions to walk with. Their question is not so much “Do these people think and believe like I do?” but “Will this place provide me with tools and partners for my journey?”

This emphasis on journey shapes Starting Point’s content and structure. The first session focuses on newcomers’ *personal spiritual journeys* and how it led them to Unitarian Universalism. The second session shift to the *historical journey* of Unitarian Universalism and your congregation. From there, the third session moves into the *shared journey* that one’s congregation walks together. We explain that this shared journey is made up of three fundamental and distinct UU spiritual practices:

- Listening to one’s deepest self,
- opening to life’s gifts and
- serving needs greater than our own.

The program ends by helping newcomers discern which of the many “journey groups” in your congregation will be their “next step.”

Moving Membership Down the Trail

By inviting newcomers to begin their journey with small groups, Starting Point supports our movement's rethinking of membership. Many congregations are moving away from the idea that "joining" is the first step and gateway to full participation in the church community. Instead, it is being repositioned as a later moment on one's journey when one makes a deeper commitment to one's faith community. Small groups are not the prize you get once you've "joined the club." Instead they become the means to better discern if this congregation is truly your church home.

This shift also changes the way people think about church. When small groups and ministry teams are presented as the starting point, church moves from being a place to which one belongs to a place where one discovers companions and tools for the journey.

Inviting Long-Timers to Begin Again

Focusing on small group participation rather than membership also means that Starting Point is not just for newcomers. It has a lot to offer long-time members as well. As our journeys take new or unexpected turns, we all find ourselves looking for new kinds of companions. So if you're a long-timer but never participated in a small group, well then Starting Point is the perfect place for you. Likewise, maybe you're a long-timer looking to fall in love with your church and Unitarian Universalism all over again. Well then consider Starting Point your spiritual "re-starting point."

Experiential Learning

Starting Point is committed to providing newcomers with an experience of Unitarian Universalism not just information about it. For instance, instead of telling newcomers about our commitment to theological diversity, we engage them in activities in which they encounter and work with the diversity in the room. This provides them with a real-life example of how Unitarian Universalism uses engagement with diversity as a doorway to spiritual experience. Another example is how Starting Point doesn't just talk about the deep and disciplined listening that happens in our small groups; it teaches newcomers those practices and asks them to use them throughout the entire class.

A Flexible Structure with Lots of Building Blocks

Every church environment is unique. Starting Point's design takes this into account. It gives leaders a flexible structure and building blocks, so they can easily adapt the curriculum to their setting. The four sessions can be shortened, expanded or combined to fit whatever time period or session structure you like. Within each session, multiple activity options are given, providing leaders with many building blocks to choose from. We also provide a large number of optional resources and readings that can be used to alter or deepen each of the lessons. And since much of the curriculum involves small group discussion, you can control the length of sessions by breaking the group into smaller groups to shorten the time it takes to get through the discussions.

II. Program Decisions

As you adapt Starting Point to fit your unique setting, there are a number of decisions you need to make. Here's a list of the major choices and strategies you will want to consider:

Number & Length of Sessions

This guide is structured with the assumption that each session will be run separately and last two hours. However, by eliminating some of the activities or by adding the optional activities we suggest, you can turn the class into one or two long sessions or five to six short sessions.... [Rest of text not in sample]

Participant Packet and Prep-Work

We include a Participant Packet and suggest homework or "prep-work" for every session. This extra work allows motivated participants to engage the topics in more depth than a short four-session class can cover. The Participant Packet and prep-work are there for you to edit and use as you see fit... [Rest of text not in sample]

Strategic Involvement of Lay Leaders and Long-Time Members

We encourage you to recruit lay leaders and long-time members to participate in every Starting Point class. Involving leaders such as board members, committee chairs and small group facilitators enables important connections. It helps newcomers... [Rest of text not in sample]

A Special Role for Small Group Facilitators

Of all the lay leaders you recruit, it is particularly helpful to involve small group facilitators in the program. Starting Point is designed to channel newcomers immediately into your small group program. One way we do that is by weaving small group practices throughout the program. But the most effective way to ensure a smooth transition into small groups is to have a facilitator or two ready to lead a new small group of interested newcomers.... [Rest of text not in sample]

Intentional Match-Making & Noticing Chemistry

Another strategy to ensure newcomer integration into your small groups and ministry teams is to take notes about participants along the way. Throughout this leader guide, we highlight opportunities to learn about the unique interests of newcomers and notice when participants are making personal connections with each other. With this information, you can.... [Rest of text not in sample]

Role of Ministers & Other Staff

Often the minister or other staff lead the newcomer classes in our congregations. If this is not your practice, we encourage you to strategically invite your minister or other staff to attend and lead at least one of the sessions. For instance.... [Rest of text not in sample]

Food!

Offering food is not a must but it will enhance the experience. Well, we take that back: WE think food is a must! There are many playful ways to use food as a means of hospitality and bonding. We encourage you to [Rest of text not in sample]

**The rest of the content has been
removed from this sample.
Only session covers are included below.
Full Facilitator Packet contains over 60 pages of
curriculum.**

**To purchase Starting Point,
Check out our website at
<https://www.soulmatterssharingcircle.com/starting-point.html>**

Session Plans



Session One

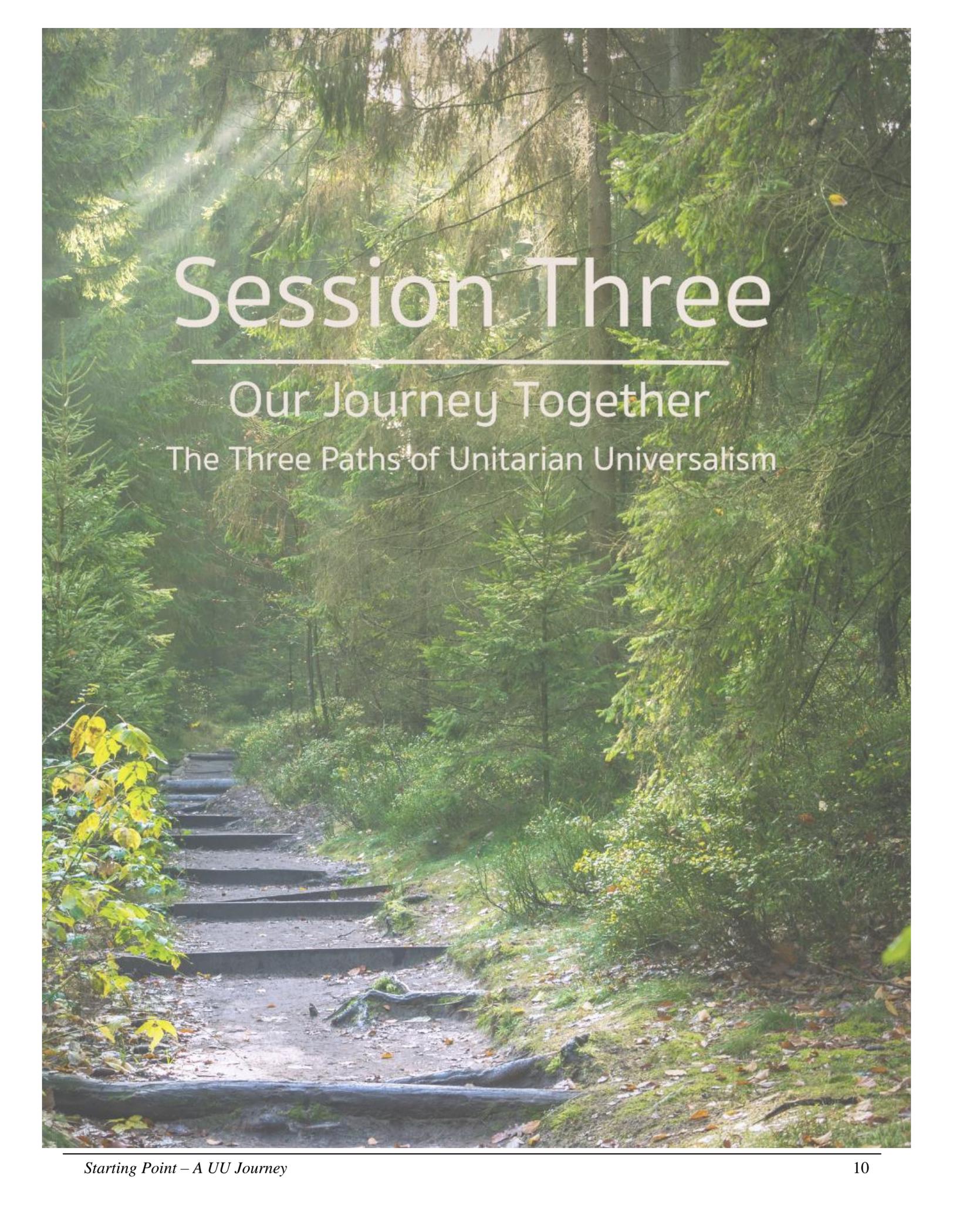
Your Journey:
Sharing Our Stories and Spiritual Roadmaps



Session Two

The Unitarian Universalist Journey
and
The Journey of Our Church





Session Three

Our Journey Together

The Three Paths of Unitarian Universalism

Session Four

Finding Your Journey Group



Appendices

OPEN FAITH

OPEN HEARTS

OPEN MINDS



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