

**Essay Title: Seven Tools that Welcome New Folks      Audio Essay: Disc 2 track 4**

When Laura Shlatter began attending Unity Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota a few years back, she had a hard time making connections. “It’s really amazing that I stayed,” she said. “People didn’t talk to me and I’d go home from coffee hour literally crying at times, wondering how I was ever supposed to connect with people. Finally, I just elbowed my way in, but it was really difficult.”

The culture at Unity has changed since then and Laura helped change it. She joined the Unity staff four years ago as its full time membership coordinator, and she focused much of her energy on integrating new and not-so-new members. In this article, she is sharing the seven tools she uses at Unity to help people get connected:

**The first tool is a series of newcomer classes called Finding Yourself at Unity.** Encompassing seven hours over three sessions, these classes help new people learn about the church. The most valuable feature about the classes, says Laura, may be the opportunities for reflection and small group discussion. There are typically 18 or so people who take the series of classes together. Many times those who participate become good friends. Laura believes that any congregation can create a similar series of classes.

**The second tool is Covenant Groups.** Newcomers are encouraged to join Unity’s Covenant Group program—groups of 7 to 9 people who connect with each other through personal sharing, spiritual exploration, and service projects for the church or community. Places in the groups are always open for newcomers. About two-thirds of UU congregations have covenant groups.

**The third tool is Launching Into Unity.** A group of 18 new people is assigned one or two longtime members as mentors. The group meets socially three to four times over two to three months and may also do a service project. After these goals are met, the group can continue to meet, or not, as it chooses. Laura says that mentoring seems to really help people get connected.

**The next tool is a “Gifts, Talents, and Interests Survey.”** This is a check-off survey that helps Laura identify the talents and interests that newcomers bring. The information goes into a database that Laura uses to help connect members with compatible opportunities. She says, “This helps us reach out to people in ways that are meaningful to them.”

The **Circle Suppers** that occur monthly at Unity are another valuable tool in connecting people. Groups are together for four months, and then new groups are formed. Laura says that the groups are together just long enough to help people really get to know the others in the circle, and over several years it’s possible to create a large circle of friends.

**The Sunday Morning Welcome Teams are the next tool.** The teams usher, prepare and serve coffee, and staff Welcome tables. The teams are a good way to get newcomers involved in a small, but vital way. Laura says, “You can’t be lonely if you’re pouring coffee.” There’s an annual potluck and training for participants. Each team is also encouraged to get together socially a couple times a year and all of that creates an atmosphere of friendship. It’s more than just an obligation. There’s fun involved.

**The last tool Laura uses at Unity is something called “OpportUNITY Sheets.”** These are seven-page handouts with listings of all of the ministry teams (also known as committees) and small groups at Unity. The sheets include the names of whom to contact for each activity.

Do these tools work? Laura says the growth rate in the past several years has been around 4 percent annually, compared to a flat rate previously. “We’ve not closed the back door,” she says “but we’ve narrowed it. It makes me think I’m having an impact. People are getting involved and are staying.”

Laura goes down the list of friends and members every few months “to check in with myself,” she says, “About what I know about what folks are doing.” She also invites specific people to activities she thinks they’d like and she tries to greet people by name.

Information about people’s interests and activities is kept in the church database and that’s helpful, says Laura, “but talking to people is still the best way to find out how they’re doing.”

She adds, “A key thing to remember about these tools is to make them as accessible as possible. Our Welcome Table is set up every Sunday, no matter what, with information on all our

opportunities for involvement. We also publicize them on our website and in the Sunday bulletin and our newsletter.”

Laura continues, “The image I hold in my own head and heart as I think about newcomers is one of embrace – I want people to feel the open arms as they walk in; and to feel that there are paths that feel right to help them connect to the right small community within our larger religious community.”

For more information and resources, go to: [uua.org/leaders](http://uua.org/leaders).

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## **Resources**

Search [uua.org/leaders/leaders' library](http://uua.org/leaders/leaders' library) and search for the name “Laura Schlatter.”

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