

Is Our Church Gay? Answering Children's Questions About Homophobia and Sexual Orientation

Meg Riley

Purchase this pamphlet at <http://www.uuabookstore.org/productdetails.cfm?PC=541>

The questions, no doubt about it, will come. Questions that reflect your child's curiosity about sexual orientation. Questions about homophobia, as your child spends time in the neighborhood and classroom, reading the newspaper and watching TV. Questions that try to make sense of a complex world. Questions that may make you squirm.

There is no correct answer for any of these questions. But thinking in advance about your child's concerns and needs may help you to provide more helpful answers to difficult questions. Whether you are a bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, or straight-but-not-narrow parent, it is helpful to know that you're not the only one being put on the spot by inquisitive children-and that your Unitarian Universalist faith can help you give accurate, compassionate responses.

Since 1970, the Unitarian Universalist Association has actively affirmed the inherent worth and dignity of every person, regardless of sexual orientation. Many of our congregations have officially declared themselves to be Welcoming Congregations for bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people.

Unitarian Universalism is one of very few religions that ordains openly bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender people into the ministry. Our ministers may be the only clergy in town to perform services of holy union for same-sex couples. Many gay groups have used Unitarian Universalist churches for meetings.

As children grow up, they become aware that Unitarian Universalism's accepting attitude toward people of varied sexual orientations is different from that of many other institutions and individuals. They will need reassurance, information, and good listening from trusted adults as they sort through these discrepancies and many others between Unitarian Universalist values and the values of society at large.

When young people ask questions, always begin by listening carefully. Clarify what they are asking and find out (unobtrusively) who or what prompted their questions. Depending on their ages, questions, and reasons for asking, they may be seeking very different responses from you.

At different stages of development, you'll need good, clear answers for your child's questions. Here are some conversations that can help you frame a discussion to meet the needs of children of different ages.

If you are uncomfortable about issues related to sexuality and sexual orientation, you might benefit from attending sessions of the Welcoming Congregation program in your congregation. These sessions will provide you with opportunities to explore your own discomfort and to experience a supportive community as you ask some of your own questions. If your congregation is not currently engaged in the Welcoming Congregation program, ask your minister or religious education director how the process can be started.

Three-year-old: "Why does Kathy live with two mommies? Where is her daddy?"

Three- and four-year-olds are sorting out categories of people to create a sense of order in their world. They attach very few value judgments to these categories, although they begin to know at this age how "we"-your family-feel about various situations. With this question, a basic answer such as "Some kids live with two mommies, some kids live with a mommy and a daddy, some kids live with a grandma and a daddy" is usually sufficient. You might want to spend some time thinking about the kinds of families your child knows. At this age, he/she does not need any labels for various kinds of families.

You also might want to affirm what "family" means to help your child with his/her sorting and conceptualizing. You could say, "There are all kinds of different people who are families, but all families are people who take care of each other and love each other." Or, "No matter who is in someone's family, what is important is that they take care of each other."

Six-year-old: "Jimmy's mom says God hates gay people. Is that true?"

Five- to eight-year-olds are creating bigger conceptual maps of the world, trying to connect the pieces. As they do so, they need to know where their home base is. They are particularly interested in hearing the opinions of parents and teachers and will incorporate them, more or less, as true. When a question like this one is raised, it is important to give your child a centering metaphor for your own beliefs, not to explore in depth what Jimmy's mom believes. Visual images are particularly helpful.

You might say, "I believe that God made each of us different from each other and God loves every single one of us." Or, "Every person is very special and very wonderful. I do not believe that there is a God who hates certain people and loves certain people." Or, "Zebras have black and white stripes, and giraffes have spots and long necks. They are different. But do you think God loves one more than the other?"

If your child goes on to ask, "Why would Jimmy's mom say that?" you might say something like, "Probably Jimmy's mom never met someone who is gay or lesbian, and someone else told her something about them that was wrong, but she believed it." Or "Jimmy's mom is saying what she thinks is true. She and I have very different opinions about lots of things."

This is the age when it is appropriate to introduce labels for different sexual identities, as well as language about anti-gay prejudice.

Nine-year-old: "How could two men have gotten married at our church? Only a man and a woman can get married!"

Eight- to ten-year-olds are sorting out the rules of life. They want to know what is right and what is wrong, what works and what doesn't. They are literalists. They like to take things apart and put them together again. Often, they behave like budding lawyers, and any attempt you make to offer vague or general statements will be picked apart.

Be as specific as possible. In this instance you could say, "Legally, two men or two women can't get married in many parts of the United States and Canada. But our church can join them together in the spirit of a marriage: in sickness and in health, for better and for worse, for richer and for poorer. This means that while the government does not recognize them as a married couple, the church can still recognize their union to be just as special as a marriage. For gay or lesbian couples, having a wedding is a chance to have a religious recognition of their commitment and love with the support of their church."

The inquisitive child may persist with questions such as, "Why is it illegal for a man to marry a man?" Or your child might pursue the morality line of questioning, "Is it right for one man to marry another one?" To the latter question, this is a good age to introduce your own ethics of sexual morality: "I don't think it's important whether you love a man or a woman, but how you love them. Do you tell them the truth? Even if you're really mad, do you stop yourself from hitting them or calling them mean names? Do you apologize if you lose your temper sometimes? Do you listen to them when they have something to say? Do you touch them in ways they like to be touched but not in ways that they don't? I think those are the kinds of things that make a relationship right or wrong."

Twelve-year-old: "The kids at school say we go to a gay church. I don't want to go to a gay church."

In early adolescence, youth are very sensitive to being seen as different in any way from each other. They are insecure about their own identity, and family influence is beginning to be eroded by the need for peer group approval. Gender roles are fairly rigid at this age, and homophobic taunting is extremely common. This is a time when youth need reassurance and support.

To answer this question, you could say, "Think about who goes to our church. Are they all gay? Of course we're not a gay church! But we are different from some churches, because we welcome all people, including gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender people, to be part of our community. We believe in the worth and dignity of every person." Or, "We're not a gay church, but we do have gay members. Sometimes our beliefs are different from other people's, and that's okay." Or, "We are a church that always has and always will stand for the freedom, dignity, and worth of all people, no matter who doesn't like them."

Your child's next question may compare your church with classmates' churches: "I like Patty's church better, because no one makes fun of her for going there." You might respond, "I'm really sorry people are making fun of you. But the people who make fun of

you because of your church probably also make fun of other things about other kids. Have you noticed that?"

Because Unitarian Universalist youth may receive homophobic or other types of taunts about their religion, it is important to involve them in Unitarian Universalist youth programs so they can meet others who accept them as they are and honor their values.

Seventeen-year-old: "I don't get it why some people are so homophobic! What's the big deal?"

Older teenagers are beginning to emerge from the tyranny of peer pressure. They are often trying to sort out the behavior of others around them simply because it doesn't make sense. Encourage your teens to attend Young Religious Unitarian Universalist (YRUU) functions. It is vitally important that they have the opportunity to talk with trusted peers and advisors.

They may ask a question such as this because of a particular friend or classmate, or in response to a homophobic initiative in your community. Framing your answers around your own spiritual journey leaves them plenty of room to be on theirs: "In my life I am trying to develop compassion for every person, not to pass judgment on what they do unless it hurts someone else. Does that make sense to you?"

Youth may also have deep concerns about their own sexual identity. Listen carefully to the tone of the questions asked. If you sense any undercurrent of self-questioning, offer general reassurance. Don't assume that what they are thinking about means anything decisive about their sexual identity. Any hint of judgment from you now could close doors that would take a great deal of time to open later.

In raising Unitarian Universalist children who will encounter a changing society and confront ethics and belief systems different from their own, we need to provide children and youth with what they need most: love, support, and the truth as we know it. And we must continue to have a deep and abiding faith in the power of honest, open communication with our children so that, in this complex and beautiful world, they continue to develop and thrive.

The Reverend Meg Riley is director of the UUA Washington Office for Faith in Action. Previously, she served as director of the UUA Youth Office, as director of the Office of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Concerns, and as a religious educator in three UU congregations. She spent her early years as a Unitarian Universalist in a Baptist neighborhood. She credits her mother for good answers to her own youthful questions about racism, eternal damnation, and the Immaculate Conception.