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Unitarian Universalists honor transgender deaths

Congregations becoming more aware of transgender issues, say advocates.

By Donald E. Skinner

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[Photo: <<http://bit.ly/gxlvfQ>> Attendees at the first Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together Steering Committee retreat: from left, Mr. Barb Greve, the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie, the Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, the Rev. Paul Langston Daley, the Rev. Laurie Auffant, Jamison Green (retreat facilitator, not on the committee), and the Rev. Dr. Rebecca Parker. (Mr. Barb Greve) ]

Last month the Unitarian Universalist Church at Washington Crossing in Titusville, N.J., held its first-ever Transgender Day of Remembrance service to remember transgender and gender-variant people who had killed themselves or were killed by others.

Around 40 other Unitarian Universalist congregations held similar services or gathered with interfaith groups around November 20 to remember those who had died.

A recent report, Toward a Sexually Healthy and Responsible Unitarian Universalist Association <<http://www.uua.org/aboutus/governance/boardtrustees/agendas/171975.shtml>>, by the Rev. Debra W. Haffner, found that gay and lesbian people are well integrated into our congregations as congregants and as ministers. But congregations have not been as welcoming to people who are bisexual or transgender, said Haffner, a UU minister who is executive director of the Religious Institute. She presented her report to the UUA Board of Trustees in June meeting and then updated it after the General Assembly.

Haffner found that 42 percent of UU ministers (compared to 8 percent of mainline clergy) believe that their congregations include people of transgender experience.

The UUA General Assembly approved a resolution supporting transgender inclusion in 2007.

UU observances

The Transgender Day of Remembrance events held by UU congregations this year ranged from marches to candlelight vigils.

The UU Church of Davis, Calif., sponsored an interfaith service and a reading of more than 100 names of transgender people killed around the world in the past year. In Enid, Okla., the Enid UU Fellowship participated in another reading of names, and lighting of candles for

those lost. At the Unitarian Universalist Association headquarters in Boston, UUA staff held a Transgender Day of Remembrance chapel service <<http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/transgender-day-of-remembrance-service-at-the-uua/>>

The UU Church at Washington Crossing held its transgender remembrance service on Sunday, November 21 following the regular service. Around 35 people gathered to read the names of those who had died, ringing a chime for every name and lighting a candle for every ten names. "We felt that this was an important thing to do," said the Rev. Charles Stephens. "It was unbelievably powerful to hear the names."

Stephens said his congregation was motivated to hold the ceremony of remembrance in part because of the publicity earlier this fall about the death of Tyler Clementi, a young man perceived to be gay, who committed suicide after being outed on the Internet by his roommate at Rutgers University.

In Hartford, Conn., around 200 people marched to the State House in support of a transgender civil rights bill that is expected to be introduced in January. The Rev. Josh Pawelek, minister of the UU Society: East in Manchester, Conn., and about 10 members of his congregation participated <<http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/trans-day-of-remembrance-rally-at-ct-state-house-calls-for-action/>>

Pawelek's congregation is making a concerted effort to raise its awareness of transgender issues. This fall a transgender person spoke to the youth group. A transgender Metropolitan Community Church minister will deliver a sermon in January, and an adult class, "Transgender 101," is also being planned. "When you run that level of programming you create lots of opportunities for people to learn," said Pawelek. "The lives of transgender people show us we don't have to be boxed in. We can fully be who we want to be."

#### Accepting trans members and ministers

Some congregations have welcomed transgender people warmly, but others have not, says the Rev. Sean Parker Dennison, a transgender man who was called by the South Valley UU Society in Salt Lake City, Utah, in 2002 and served there for seven years. He is now interim minister at the UU Fellowship of San Luis Obispo County in San Luis Obispo, Calif.

"When transgender people show up in congregations there's been a very slow increase in the willingness of a congregation to challenge its discomfort," said Dennison.

A lot depends on the congregation's previous experience with transgender people, he noted. "If they've had one good experience, then generally the second one goes better. People know they should not exclude others, so I do believe congregations are trying harder."

Acceptance of transgender religious professionals has been more of a challenge for congregations. "As far as I know, there are no out

transgender ministers currently serving as settled ministers or directors of religious education in permanent positions,” said Dennison.

Of the five UU ministers and directors of religious education who are “strongly out” as transgender people, all are in interim or consulting ministry positions or interim religious education positions, he said. “It takes a super strong search committee to recommend a transgender person because people still believe calling a transgender religious professional is risky.” A number of transgender UUs are in seminary and within two years at least 10 transgender religious professionals will probably be available to serve congregations, he said. “But truthfully they don’t know if they should be out in the search process. They know it will make it harder.”

### Raising UU awareness

This is the twelfth year for Transgender Day of Remembrance. The UUA’s Standing on the Side of Love website actively encouraged <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/what-if-living-authentically-could-cost-you-your-life/> congregations to hold such events this year. UUA President Peter Morales also issued a statement <http://www.uua.org/news/newssubmissions/173981.shtml> supporting a Transgender Day of Remembrance and people who are transgender. In the past year 179 transgender or gender-variant people have been killed around the world, including 14 in the United States and Puerto Rico, according to [http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en\\_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor2010.htm](http://www.transrespect-transphobia.org/en_US/tvt-project/tmm-results/tdor2010.htm) to Transgender Europe. In the past 35 months 45 have been killed in the United States and Puerto Rico.

Dan Furmansky, campaign manager for Standing on the Side of Love, a UUA campaign against identity-based oppression, credits Allison Woolbert, a transgender member of the UU Congregation of Princeton, N.J., and transgender advocate, with helping inspire congregations to hold transgender remembrance events. In a Standing on the Side of Love blog post, Woolbert pointed out the lack of attention <http://www.standingonthesideoflove.org/blog/is-there-justice-for-all/> given by media and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community to transgender deaths, compared to the wealth of attention lavished on the deaths of several young men this spring who were perceived to be gay.

Woolbert said the horrific nature of the deaths of many transgender people needs to be acknowledged. “They are not simply murdered. Many are tortured and mutilated and some are dismembered. These are acts of brutality and hatred. Part of the reason we hold the annual vigil is to raise awareness that gender bias kills.”

To help raise awareness and to support each other, UU transgender religious professionals and their allies have formed TRUUsT <http://truust.org/>, Transgender Religious professional Unitarian Universalists Together.

TRUUsT responded to the attention given to the Transgender Day of Remembrance by asking congregations to do three things to “make our

religious communities more hospitable and life-saving spaces for transgender people.”

\* Use language that includes all transgender people. This means going beyond gender binary language such as “brothers and sisters” and “his or her” in order to create an affirming atmosphere for multiple gender identities. Use language like “people together” and “people of all genders and all gender expressions.” Thinking of people as only male or female invites violence to people who aren’t perceived as fitting neatly into those categories, says TRUUsT.

\* Educate congregants through books, films, and websites about transgender experiences.

\* Advocate for the affirmation and advancement of transgender religious leaders. Supporting transgender religious leaders will enable our Unitarian Universalist movement to become a much more welcoming and supportive environment for at-risk transgender people.

Dennison said that he recently talked with a new-member class and was reminded that people all want to live in a way that makes sense to them. “That’s the quest we’re all on, trying to live with integrity. That’s why I transitioned. If I could have our congregations get one message it’s that transgender people are just trying to do the same thing everyone else is, and that is to be whole.”

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See sidebar for links to related resources.

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## RELATED RESOURCES

Transgender Religious professional UUs Together <<http://truust.org/>> . Emerging organization that advocates for the gifts, safety, liberation, and leadership of transgender religious professionals in Unitarian Universalist ministries and institutions.

Religious Institute <<http://www.religioustheology.org/mission>> . Organization whose mission is to change the way that America understands the relationship of sexuality and religion.

Standing on the Side of Love blog entry  
<<http://www.uua.org/aboutus/governance/boardtrustees/agendas/171975.shtml>>  
by Allison Woolbert. Report by the Rev. Debra Haffner, August 2010.

## FROM THE ARCHIVES

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