

*Radical Hospitality*  
Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill  
Sunday, March 26, 2023  
Lynda Dillon; Paula Gribble, DLFE; Rev. Margret A. O’Neill

We begin with Lynda Dillon, long time and passionately committed member of our Welcoming and Membership Team, sharing her thoughts on why she loves the welcome we provide here at UUCCH. Lynda.

**My Commitment to Welcoming/Membership**

Lynda Dillon

This part of UUCCH is my passion. I am enthused about greeting new and returning folks every Sunday and getting to know them and answer the questions they might have. My welcoming partner Peggy Morgan and I hope you reach out to us because we care about making you feel comfortable and welcome.

When I first started coming to the church in 2011, it wasn't easy for my husband, Harry and I to find out where we fit in. Along came Paula Horton and Sylvia Barclay who reached out and made us feel at home and let us know no question was off limits. In the meantime, my husband passed away and while not having much family in the area, the church reached out to me. That acceptance will never be forgotten.

That was when I started visiting groups, trying to determine where I fit in. All groups were welcoming, but I knew I wanted to be part of our Welcoming team right away. Over time I became a part of Caring, COW, Woman & Religion and our monthly Fellowship meetings. To quote Kate Sloan, I fit in and found a family!

Being a part of the New Member Recognition service means the world to me - you are making our circle wide - Welcome!

**Radical Hospitality**

Rev. Margret

Thank you, Lynda. Today as we welcome those who have most recently made the membership commitment here, this is a good time to talk about welcoming, belonging, and our commitment to creating a circle that draws us all in. Ms Paula usually provides our etymology lessons, but I asked her if I could do it just this once. Today we are talking about radical hospitality -- what do those words mean?

Well, the word “radical” dates back to the 1300s, and is based on the Latin word *wrād*, meaning root. Think “radish” – the edible part is the root, that red bulb that grows under the ground. And so from that basic word come all the meanings of radical -- *originating in the ground*, *vital to life*, and then the expanded meaning of *thoroughgoing* or *extreme*. In the 1800s the word started to be applied to political positions, meaning reformers who were seeking extreme changes, changes that go back to the roots of society. So when we hear that anything is “radical” we can wonder, what are the roots, the foundation, what is deepest and most vital here?

And hospitality? To quote from an online source, The word hospitality evolved to describe the relationship between guest and host, “as it took its root from *hospes*, the word for host, guest, stranger, or visitor.” The deep meaning of this word is actually quite complex, since the variations

that emerged from the original term range from welcoming a friendly guest, to the welcome we provide for an unknown stranger, to even more challenging relationships such as *hostile* and *hostage*. These varied meanings remind us that true hospitality goes beyond greeting those with whom we are already comfortable, to include random arrivals, strangers or even potential adversaries, welcoming them into expanding circles of connection.

And so the call to practice radical hospitality invites us to go deeper and wider – deeper into the roots of our commitment to honor all human dignity and worthiness, and wider into an expanding circle that embraces all our ways of being, all of who we are.

### **The Circle Widens**

Paula Gribble

Thanks Rev. Margret. Expanding circle...hmmm...that reminds me of a song. Singing: Draw the Circle Wide

You may have heard that song from me, and the kids hear it often in classes. We especially make sure we sing it when there are new people in class.

The thing is,

your circle depends on you. It can be a tight, small one...or one that is expansive. Sometimes when people come to a new place, like church, they can encounter people in tight circles: circles of friends, circles of people discussing something...heck even our tables in Fellowship Hall are circles.

BUT how wide the circles are is up to us. Being welcoming to new folks, or children, or even long-term folks who you haven't gotten to know...these things widen the circle. Being the best of yourself in those circles, this widens the circle.

And that doesn't burst the bubble of you own circle. It can stretch and widen, and it can contract and be smaller. Sometimes we need a close circle around us.

But most of the time, we can open up and draw that circle wider. Sometimes this means just smiling and meeting people's eyes when you see them, if you are able. Sometimes this means waving to people across the room. Sometimes it's approaching someone you don't know and introducing yourself. And sometimes it's talking to someone you don't always talk to.

One of the challenges of church community is that we come in and fold into our areas of interest, groups of folks, and enjoy that connection...but then we can also draw a tight circle around that, and not open it or ourselves to others.

This can happen in the world as well. We gather with folks like us, and we separate from those who differ. And it takes courage, energy, and time to widen that circle and let people in.

You may remember when you first came here and felt that inner joy of comfort and acceptance. And if you've been here a while, you might later find that comfort in small groups, a committee you work with, or a social justice group. That's so great that you find these!

But it helps to remember that initial feeling you had. Because it allows you to empathize with newer folks who come here, may have trepidation, and they are looking for that comfort and acceptance.

I invite you to give that feeling out as widely as you can. Grow that circle so that "no one stands alone," as the song says. Make it a point to reach out.

I'll finish with this. Edwin Markham, a writer with Universalist connections, said this:

He drew a circle that shut me out-  
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.  
But love and I had the wit to win:  
We drew a circle and took him in!

### **The Platinum Rule**

Rev. Margret

Thank you, Paula. We drew a circle and took him in! You know, the UU Society of Schenectady, where I served as minister a few years ago, took that poem by Edwin Markham as a guide when they designed their church, building a sanctuary in the round, with all the seating in a circle, to bring the circle of inclusion literally into concrete reality.

We draw our circles in so many sizes and if we are intentional, we can draw a circle that takes in everyone. According to experts on the practice of radical hospitality in churches, “The difference between friendliness and radical hospitality is intentionality... Intentional hospitality surprises and delights people by making them feel noticed, giving them personal attention, and providing excellent follow-through.” What a lovely thought, that we could surprise and delight everyone who comes through our doors, helping them to feel “comfortable, accepted, and valued,” by going to the roots of our values, bringing forth the best and most welcoming of who we really are.

First, hospitality requires that we notice – noticing means that we don't just see people as they arrive here, but that we really *see* them, that we stop whatever else we are doing to focus on them with open minds and open hearts, which prepares us for the second element of intentional hospitality, offering them personal attention.

With attention we bring our gentle curiosity to learn who they are, what they might be seeking in a relationship with us, what they hope for as they find their way into this beloved community of church. We show hospitality when we wear our name tags, when we introduce ourselves, offer them a name tag, learn and remember their names – or in my own case, we introduce ourselves and then I have to apologize and ask again, since I get so caught up in conversation I learn about who they are but forget their names! We can expand the circle of connection by introducing our new friends to those around us, and reach out to an even wider circle, inviting others to meet them as well.

And then we don't just stop there, but we follow up – we might invite them to come with us downstairs to the social hour, and perhaps help connect them with others who might share their interests, check in to see how they are doing, help them learn more about things going on in the church, and invite them into deeper conversation when they are ready for that.

This church has so much going on that it can be a bit overwhelming when you are new, so it is good to have specific ways to get to know the people and activities here, to learn about how we do things. And then after a while perhaps they will consider becoming a member, because belonging is a wonderful thing when people are ready to make a commitment to be part of this community.

Radical hospitality is also intentional in helping people find their best fit in a church, and we might need to meet them halfway. Last week Paula talked about the difference between the golden rule

and the platinum rule – the gold being to treat others as you wish to be treated, and the platinum – more precious than gold – is to treat folks as *they* wish to be treated.

To do that, to practice intentionally radical hospitality, we have to be open to learning how others want to be treated, what will best suit them. If you are puzzled by that – why wouldn't someone else want to be treated the same as I would want? - let me give a simple example. I love good artisanal bread – and I love baking it myself -- and so it is a point of pride and joy for me to offer yummy fresh-baked bread and a good specialty butter to guests in my home.

But my daughter-in-law cannot eat gluten, and my son cannot eat dairy, so if I only offer them bread and butter we all end up frustrated. I will admit it took me a while, but I finally figured out I could offer choices, cornbread as well as wheat rolls; a butter substitute as well as butter – as I practice true hospitality by paying attention to their needs more than just to what I want to cook, stretching myself to create a wider circle of welcome.

Radical hospitality in a church goes beyond baking bread, or not, of course. I learned a style of church from those who came before me, and I am learning now that to practice radical hospitality I need to open my mind and my heart to new generations who are coming into adulthood now, with their own experiences, needs and expectations.

A young Unitarian Universalist blogger named Tanner Linden reminds us that making our churches a welcoming place for young adults requires that we understand who they are and what they are looking for. We need to understand the issues that teens and young adults are most passionate about, the media they watch and use to communicate, the diverse and pluralistic community they are seeking, and the challenges they face in a world much different than we experienced when I was their age, a half century ago.

I grew up thinking that church was a good thing, and was used to attending regularly, so when I decided the church of my childhood was no longer a good fit, I found a UU church that worked for me and my family. Recent research has shown that “young adults today have had entirely different religious and social experiences than previous generations did, and increasingly, they did not grow up with a positive connection to a religious tradition.” Every generation of adults over recent decades is somewhat less religious than the generation that preceded it, and they tend to be skeptical about the social benefits of religion. Churches in general do not enjoy the same status and public confidence they once had, and “it is clear that trust and confidence in organized religion have plummeted over the past two decades.”

My recent conversations with folks new to the church have reflected this emerging reality. They tell me they like what they see here, they like our public presence, social justice commitments, and our open approach to theology, but their experiences with “religion” or “church” are so negative that they wonder why we even use those words. Even though I am comfortable with traditional religious language myself, since I bring my own meanings to the words, if I want to offer a true welcome it is vital that I understand where they are coming from and figure out our places of mutual understanding.

To practice radical hospitality, to create a community of welcome and belonging, we need to accept that everyone has their own experience and be open to the changes they bring. Lynda talked earlier about her experience of welcome and acceptance here, which ignited in her a passion to offer that welcome to others. Paula described how we can expand our own circles, take a bit of risk to open up our own bubbles, to create that experience of acceptance for all those coming through our doors.

