

# Sample Worship Service

## Guest at Your Table

Celebrating  
human rights  
partnerships



Prepared by Rev. Bill Sinkford

Please adapt this service and its components to fit your normal liturgy.

### Prelude

#### Welcome, Greetings, and Announcements

##### *Chalice Lighting*

Call to Worship

“Come, Come,” adapted from Rumi by Leslie Takahashi Morris<sup>1</sup>

Come, come, whoever you are  
Come with your hurts, your imperfections,  
Your places that feel raw and exposed.  
Come, come, whoever you are  
Come with your strengths that the world shudders to hold,  
Come with your wild imaginings of a better world,  
Come with your hopes that it seems no one wants to hear.

Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving  
We will make a place for you,  
We will build a home together,  
Ours is no caravan of despair.  
We walk together;  
Come, yet again come.

Come, let us worship together.

### Opening Hymn

#368, “Now Let Us Sing,” *Singing the Living Tradition*

### Lighting of the Chalice

#494, by W.E.B. DuBois, *Singing the Living Tradition*

##### *Additional words*

We light this chalice in faith, in hope, and in love.

### Offertory

Our offering this morning will support the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which works through partnerships around the world to secure and sustain human rights on our behalf.

### A Moment for All Ages

“Leaving a Legacy of Forest and Food,” adapted from *Stories of Hope 2014* (see story about Chrisantus Mwandihhi)

This is a story about a village in Kenya, Africa, that is trying to save a rain forest and water sources as well as help reduce the problem of climate change. The people of this village want to leave the rain forest and its water as a legacy for their children and for their children’s children.

These big dreams began with one man, Chrisantus Mwandihhi, and with one small project. Chrisantus saw the people of the village cutting down the trees of the rain forest that surrounded their village. People were burning wood from the rain forest to make charcoal for cooking. They sold the charcoal for money. They used the money from their charcoal to buy food for their families.

<sup>1</sup> Jacqui James and Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *Voices from the Margins: An Anthology of Meditations* (Boston: Skinner House, 2012), 5. Reprinted with permission.

Chrisantus grew very worried about how this was destroying so many trees. He could see that, in the future, people would need the forest and its resources, especially the water. He wanted to leave the legacy of the beautiful forests, with all their animals and their water resources.

Chrisantus also realized that people needed food. They would need to keep cutting and burning the rain forest for charcoal if they had no other way to pay for their food. But he knew that selling charcoal was not the only way to get food. He began to teach others how to grow their own food, and even food to sell, in ways that helped to save the water, soil, and rain forest. He helped teach them that they could care for themselves and their families and for the earth, too. These ideas and ways of farming are called “permaculture.”

Using permaculture methods, with crops that belong in the area and do not need chemicals or special watering systems, people can grow their own food. They do not need to burn the rain forest in order to buy food.

Climate changes have caused problems in Kenya, as in many other parts of the world. Strong heat and storms have damaged the crops. These climate changes are caused by burning fuels and the carbon put into the atmosphere when we use fossil fuels. The trees help to clean the carbon from the air. Keeping the rain forest healthy, with all of its wonderful air-cleaning trees, also helps to reduce the problems of climate change, and to keep our whole earth healthy.

Chrisantus started a larger organization called the SoilFarm Multi-Culture Group. This is a community-led group. By teaching people to live in a healthier relationship with their environment, the SoilFarm Multi-Culture Group is helping reduce the problems of climate change while they change people’s lives for the better. More and more people from other parts of Kenya, including agriculture experts, come to Chrisantus’s organization to learn about permaculture and to start using it for their own projects. Many successful projects have grown from the first small project of one man in one village. Taking action at home can change the world. Chrisantus Mwandihni and the SoilFarm Multi-Culture Group are leaving the rain forest, a precious legacy, for future generations.

## Hymn

#168, “One More Step,” *Singing the Living Tradition*

## Reading

“Psalm,” by Wislawa Szymborska<sup>2</sup>

Find this poem in *Miracle Fair* (citation below) or online at [ow.ly/AkaiD](http://ow.ly/AkaiD).

## Prayer

Will you pray with me now?

Spirit of Life and of Love.

We bring our whole lives into this sanctuary,  
Our successes and our failures,

The burdens we carry willingly and those  
We would put aside if we could.

We also bring our commitments and our dreams,  
Our hopes that love will win in our lives  
And that justice can be found.

Facing the struggles of our own lives, may we find here comfort and support.

Surrounded by this community of love, may we find renewal.

Encouraged to honesty and inspired by stories of hope, may we be reminded of how we want to live.

Remembering all the blessings of our lives, may we live as blessings to others both near and far.

May our lives tell the story of the power of love and the coming of justice, with each step we take.

So may it be.

Amen.

Let us share a few moments of silence together.

## Hymn

#123, “Spirit of Life,” *Singing the Living Tradition*

Sermon

“The Arc of the Universe,” by Rev. Bill Sinkford

“The arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That phrase has become almost a mantra for progressive folks. Martin Luther King Jr. used it. So has President Obama. It is woven into the new rug in the Oval Office and into the fabric of our religious life.

It is a statement more of faith than fact. I can cite plenty of evidence to the contrary. The statement reminds us not to simply throw up our hands or throw in the towel when the journey toward justice seems to be two steps back for every step forward. Building the Beloved Community is long-haul work, but progress is possible.

Though the quote is regularly attributed to King, he was quoting Theodore Parker, a nineteenth-century Unitarian minister who was writing just before the Civil War: “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long one, my eye reaches but little ways; I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by the experience of sight; I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.”

“I do not pretend to understand the moral universe.” Amen to that. Justice can seem so clear and yet so difficult to achieve.

Parker was a remarkable man and minister. He is probably best known as an abolitionist. The sermon the quote is drawn from was about abolition. His congregation in Boston came to number 7,000 and included Louisa May Alcott, William Lloyd Garrison, Julia Ward Howe, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, just to name a few.

As a minister, I stand in awe.

<sup>2</sup> Wislawa Szymborska, *Miracle Fair: Selected Poems of Wislawa Szymborska*, trans. Joanna Trzeciak (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), 40–41.

But even more impressive to me is the number and the breadth of the justice issues that Parker was able to pay attention to. He was involved with and helped lead almost all of the reform movements of his time: abolition, peace, temperance, education, the condition of women, penal legislation, prison discipline, and “the moral and mental destitution of the rich, the physical destitution of the poor,” as John White Chadwick wrote in the biography *Theodore Parker, Preacher and Reformer*.

As a human being who has tried to make a difference on a few issues over the course of my life, that list is intimidating. Parker put a liberal religious stake in the ground and helped frame the progressive response to every major issue of his day.

Are we called to pay attention to every injustice, everywhere? I get tired even thinking about it. The list just as long today as it was in Parker’s time: global warming, income inequality, the New Jim Crow racism, gun violence, the suffering caused by our immigration system, human trafficking — I could go on and so could you.

That’s just the list here in the United States. We know that our concern must cross borders into lands still struggling to recover from colonialism, where poverty that is hard for us even to imagine exists — and where suffering must be addressed with incredibly scarce resources. Global warming will affect, is affecting, the Global South (what are often called “developing nations”) more dramatically than the Global North.

We know that the interdependent web does not stop at our borders, no matter how high the fence we may erect.

News of natural and human-created disasters besieges us. Every tragedy and each injustice speaks to our loving hearts and calls us to get involved, to put our shoulders to the wheel, to invest time and treasure in helping the arc of the universe bend as we hope it will.

It is enough to exhaust our capacity for compassion.

Rev. Meg Barnhouse, in a piece titled “Waitressing in the Sacred Kitchens,” confesses: “The most helpful thing I grasped while waitressing was that some tables are my responsibility and some are not. A waitress gets overwhelmed if she has too many tables, and no one gets good service. In my life, I have certain things to take care of: my children, my relationships, my work, myself and one or two causes. That’s it. Other things are not my table. I would go nuts if I tried to make everybody do the right thing. If I went through my life without ever learning to say, ‘Sorry, that’s not my table, Hon,’ I would burn out and be no good to anybody. I need to have a surly waitress inside myself that I can call on when it seems everyone in the world is waving an empty coffee cup in my direction. My Inner Waitress looks over at them, keeping her six plates balanced and her feet moving, and says, ‘Sorry, Hon, not my table.’”

It is a real dilemma. In this information age, so much need demands our attention — and so fast. We hardly have time to respond to the tsunami in the Indian Ocean before our attention is shifted to the earthquake in Haiti, immigrant children seeking asylum on our southern border, or the refugees of the next war.

Few of us can be like Theodore Parker and respond to every issue. The arc of the moral universe is longer than the 24-hour news cycle. Addressing systemic problems deeply rooted in history is not the work

of weeks but of years. Remember that the abolition of slavery Parker advocated for so eloquently has bequeathed to us the work of dismantling the New Jim Crow.

It is enough to make me sometimes yearn for a theology that deals with evil as powerfully as it speaks of love.

How do we deal with all of the problems that press for our attention? How can we keep from shutting down or narrowing our vision to the most immediate, most personal, and most pressing concerns? How do we sustain the capacity to care and the energy to make a difference?

I have been thinking about the great transformation of the last two decades for the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people — especially the remarkable and now seemingly inevitable achievement of marriage equality here in the United States. Oregon, where I minister, finally embraced marriage equality this spring. We have been celebrating and celebrating marriages ever since.

Unitarian Universalism has been witnessing and advocating on the front lines of that struggle for two decades. In fact, our sustained witness has become central to our religious identity. And our persistence is paying off.

Marriage equality, when it is finally achieved nationally, will not end the need for our witness, any more than the Voting Rights Act ended the need for attention to racial justice. Workplace discrimination will be only one of the issues that will demand our attention out in the world. And even our congregations have more reflection to do about our welcome of trans individuals.

One of the reasons I believe we were able to sustain our attention and be effective in our witness on the marriage issue is that gay and lesbian individuals and families have been so much a part of our congregations for so long. These people are our people — they are us, not “them.” We know and love them. And we have been reminded of the need for justice every week when we greet them.

How can we sustain work for justice when the wrongs we would right are in distant lands, when the people who struggle are strangers?

That is where the UUSC comes in and why I am so happy to support its work.

I remember so vividly the tsunami that struck the Indian Ocean in 2004. The devastation was massive, and the appeals for relief funds were immediate. There are large relief agencies that know how to provide emergency supplies. UUSC played a different role. Their partners in the area knew that life in the fishing villages on the coasts would only return to sustainability if the fisherfolk could replace their splintered boats. So UUSC did not try to duplicate the emergency relief being provided by others; instead, they focused on providing one key element that would allow the people most affected — and with the least resources — to sustain life: boats.

Haiti is still struggling to recover from the 2010 earthquake. UUSC is still there, working with its partners. Together, they are supporting urban container gardening and the creation of eco-villages outside the urban centers, shifting the balance toward building a sustainable and integrated economy in which both town and countryside have places.

When I served as president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, I had the privilege of visiting with UUSC partners working for the safety of GLBT folks in Capetown, South Africa; working against water privatization in Johannesburg; and supporting labor rights for street vendors in Nairobi, Kenya. You can read about many of UUSC's current partners around the world at [uus.org](http://uus.org).

Even Theodore Parker would be impressed by the breadth and the depth of UUSC's commitments. We can do so much more together than any one of us can do alone.

The work that UUSC supports is characterized by concern for the people who are most overlooked. It focuses on empowerment of local partners and support for efforts that have the chance to create sustainable systems and practices.

UUSC puts a stake in the ground, a Unitarian Universalist stake.

I am grateful to be able to stand with UUSC. Grateful in part because what they do works — not always, but very often.

I am also grateful because UUSC allows me to place my small stake in the ground on the side of justice in places and with people far from my immediate concern. That allows me to hold the consciousness of our connectedness and our shared yearnings for justice. UUSC helps me — and us — hold more of the world in our care.

Most of us cannot visit these partners, cannot see their work ourselves or lend a helping hand directly. But we can support that work, and that, too, is a kind of spiritual stake in the ground. It is a religious practice that embodies our commitment. It is a reminder that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” as King once wrote. It is a way of being present to the hope that can be found as, together, we help the arc of the universe bend toward justice.

## Closing Hymn

#1064, “Blue Boat Home,” *Singing the Journey*

## Benediction

#692, by Lauralyn Bellamy, *Singing the Living Tradition*

### *Closing words*

This is the day we have been given. Let us rejoice in it and be glad.

Practice love.

Amen.

## Author biography

Rev. Bill Sinkford serves as the senior minister at First Unitarian Church of Portland, Ore. As president of the Unitarian Universalist Association from 2001 to 2009, he engaged in strong public witness for social justice, and he continues this in his work as minister.

Sinkford's commitment to liberal religion dates to his teenage years, when he was an active member of the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati, Ohio. He served as the president of Liberal Religious Youth, the continental Unitarian Universalist youth organization. After a successful career in the corporate world, he served the Cincinnati church as a lay leader until he answered the call to ministry in 1992.

Sinkford holds a bachelor's degree from Harvard, a master of divinity degree from Starr King School for the Ministry, and honorary doctorates from Tufts University and Meadville Lombard Theological School. The first African American to lead any traditionally white denomination, he was named one of the ten most influential Black religious leaders in the United States in 2005 and 2006. He and his wife, Maria, have four adult children and two grandchildren.