



Street corner evangelists. We've all encountered them, right? Sometimes they are unassuming. Well-dressed people standing quietly on a corner or in a busy shopping area beside a display of religious materials waiting to talk with passersby. Sometimes they're more bold, loudly preaching their message with or without a megaphone, wielding signs, proclaiming warnings, or admonishing people to shape up, or offering messages of inspiration.

Some people stop and talk with them, listening to the evangelists share their good news. Some people stop and challenge them, countering their faith claims with rational arguments. Some look down upon the evangelist, buoyed by a sense of intellectual and theological superiority. Now, I know I'm not the only one whose response is usually to sneak a peek at the evangelist signs and then to ignore them hurrying by so as not to risk engagement. Does anybody else do that? Okay. Now, I figure if their goal is conversion, I'm not their target audience.

But my guess is that this is one of the most common responses among Unitarian Universalists to particularly Christian street corner evangelists. But what if the street corner evangelist was a Unitarian Universalist?

This is the final week in our questioning series in which Reverend TJ and I take on questions submitted by you in recent months. And we received a lot of questions that center around evangelism and sharing our faith and spreading awareness of Unitarian universalism. What role does self-improvement play in Unitarian Universalism? How do we see value in other people's faith when we're troubled by so many of the ways that that faith is expressed?

What obligation do we have, if any, to try to persuade others to do justice and to see humanity in each other? These are all good, important questions. And all of these questions have something to do with faith development. The development of religious identity and an understanding of one's place in the larger whole, and the embodiment and expression of this identity through words and actions. They're about cultivating our capacity for goodness and living our values out

loud.

I would say that all religions, including Unitarian Universalism, value self-improvement. But this quest for self-improvement has a variety of motivations. For some, it's a matter of salvation, being saved and going to heaven. For others, it's about enlightenment. For some, it's about illuminating and accepting deep truths that make for a more meaningful life or a life that honors the God of their understanding.

For others, it's about making the world a better place. For Unitarian Universalists, personal development is inextricably connected to social responsibility. Going back to the 1830s, Unitarians like William Ellery Channing and Elizabeth Palmer Peabody were writing about what they called self-culture.

Self-culture is this belief that we have a moral and a spiritual duty to actively unfold and develop and refine our innate powers and capacities, our intellect, our morality, our ability to face difficulty, our impulse toward benevolence. Our Unitarian Universalist belief in self-culture is the reason that we place so much emphasis on lifelong learning, which doesn't happen in a vacuum, but in relationship with other Unitarian Universalists and people of other faiths who can reflect back to us truths about ourselves, widen our view and grow the breadth and depth of our understanding.

The curriculum that we teach, both the relationships that we form and the written curriculum that we employ, draws from many sources and stories. The goal always is not only personal edification, but a larger impact on the world through the ways that we embody and express our Unitarian Universalist beliefs and values. Now, before I go any further, let me address the vocabulary around all of this.

What does it mean to evangelize, to proselytize, to witness, to testify? What is a missionary? And what does any of this have to do with Unitarian Universalism? I will never forget a story that Reverend John Buehrens tells in the book, *A House for Hope*, which he co-wrote with Reverend Dr. Rebecca Parker. After serving this church in the early 1980s, Reverend Buehrens went on to be the President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In that role, he traveled to India following a devastating earthquake that destroyed more than a million homes.

He was met at the airport by a friend and a colleague who lived there. And as they waited for his bags, they noticed that a curious and increasingly hostile crowd was growing around them. "Is he a missionary?" They said, pointing to Reverend Buehrens. Now these people were Hindu nationalists. And as far as they were concerned, if he was a missionary, he needed to get sent away on a plane immediately. "Yes." Reverend Bjorn's friend shouted, "Yes, he is a missionary. But you have not asked what his mission is. His mission is human rights, not changing anyone's religion. His mission is homes for the homeless of Gujarat, freedom for bonded labors, human dignity for all." And he told them to go away themselves.

All of this in the local language, of course, leaving Reverend Buehrens standing there nervously until it was later translated for him.

But a mission is a mission, a core purpose that guides our actions. Our church's mission is love inspires us to nurture souls, deepen connection, and advance compassion and justice in the world. It's this mission that inspires us to show up in all the ways that we do. We are missionaries for love, soul nurturing, deep connection, compassion, and justice. Now, proselytizing is trying to

get someone to adopt your faith, to convert. It's rooted in the belief that your way of being religious is the true or the right way.

But evangelizing is spreading the word about your faith, not necessarily so that others can become one of you, but so that there is greater awareness and understanding. The root word of evangelism means good news. So evangelism is sharing what you experience as the good news of your faith. Evangelism takes various forms, including testifying and witnessing.

To testify is to speak about the impact of your faith and the impact that it's had on your life. So when I say that being raised as a Unitarian Universalist made me the person I am today, not just a minister, but a person guided by certain values, I am testifying to its power in my life. When you tell your friend, "I've never felt so at home in a religious community, so embraced for who I am," you are testifying to your experience of inclusion in a faith that believes in the inherent worth and dignity of every person and lives that out in how it is.

To witness is to express one's faith through words and actions. When you show up on the side of love wearing that yellow shirt that was in the magic box and speak about injustices in your community explicitly lifting up the connection between your faith and your presence, you're witnessing. I'm here as a Unitarian Universalist because I believe...

Both Unitarianism and Universalism have a history of evangelism, one that not a lot of people know about. In the 1800s, Universalists rode horseback around the United States, preaching the good news of a loving God to anyone who would listen. One of the most prolific of these evangelists, Quillen Shinn, crisscrossed North America preaching in every state and in Canada and Mexico. He founded eight new churches, oversaw the construction of at least 40 church buildings, and organized statewide conferences and summer gatherings and organizations for universalist young people and women and encouraged more than 30 people to take up universalist ministry. He's been called the grasshopper missionary and also the St. Paul of the Universalist Church because he brought universalism to thousands. Shinn said, "Our faith is more truly evangelical than any other. It means something better for all. Is that not good news? The very faith compels every believer to be a missionary," he said.

He also said, "We need a tremendous shaking up. Don't be afraid of enthusiasm. It won't hurt us spiritually. If any are starving today, it is because of trying to live on culture only. Some great icebergs are floating around in these days, called culture," he said. And even the Unitarians had a surge of evangelism post-World War II. From the 1940s to the 1960s, the American Unitarian Association supported what has come to be known as the fellowship movement, recognizing and offering assistance to groups of religious liberals who wanted to form a congregation without a minister. By 1958, 323 new fellowships had been organized, representing 12,500 members, 75% of whom were new to Unitarianism.

Now, clearly their efforts spoke to some need in post-war America. And while opinions are mixed about their success of the movement, part of its legacy was lifting up the role of lay people in the shared ministry of our congregations.

So what do we do to spread awareness of Unitarian universalism today you ask? Well, it looks a little different than it did in the 19th and even in the 20th century. How many of you have ever said, either out loud or to yourself, "I wish I'd found this church sooner?" Bunch of hands. Yeah.

How many of you know someone whom you think could find a spiritual home in Unitarian Universalism if they only knew more about it? A lot of hands there too. Well, if you raised your hand or thought me to either of those questions, I have some homework for you.

Go tell someone about your faith and why you're a part of this church. You don't have to go around knocking on doors or preaching on street corners, but just tell your story and share who you are and what's important to you. It doesn't require fancy theological language or extraordinary charisma. So many Unitarian Universalists hesitate to share about their faith. And at the same time, we fret over the fact that not enough people know about it. These things are in direct conflict. We must carefully consider what is most important to us. Is it striving for a perfect message that's clear and not pushy and as a result, never putting ourselves out there? Or is it letting the world know that this faith we so cherish exists and might be as transformative for others' lives as it's been for ours?

Reverend Rick Davis, a Unitarian Universalist minister, pondering the motivations of street corner evangelists he's encountered, wrote about a radio program that he heard featuring two such evangelists. They mentioned a scene in the movie *Schindler's List* in which Schindler, despite having saved so many Jews from the Nazis, was heartbroken and remorseful. He asked himself why he hadn't gone to greater lengths, selling his valuable belongings so that he could save even more people. And the evangelists on this radio program said that they could relate to Schindler's sentiments. They knew that at the end of their lives, if they hadn't done everything within their power to save as many souls as possible, they would regret it. And they were doing what they believed was most important, saving people's souls from eternal damnation. As he listened to this radio program, Reverend Davis said, "I may not agree with their belief system or their techniques for spreading their faith, but those two were out there trying to do what they honestly felt called to do."

It is possible to see value in other people's faith, even when it is expressed in ways that we may find troubling. Honestly, those who are out there earnestly trying to save people's souls, I'm not worried about them. I am much more concerned with those who spew hate that is antithetical to the tenets of the religion they profess. And I do believe that we have a responsibility to engage in these kinds of situations, perhaps even to convert them back to their own religion, to advocate for justice and seeing the humanity in our neighbors. Reverend Davis wrote, "I worry too. Not about saving people's immortal souls, but about saving them in this life. Saving them from loneliness, despair, alienation, feelings of worthlessness, from perpetual states of hatred and anger and fear, from addictions, poverty, injustice. And I must ask myself, what is my role here? Would telling more people about my faith tradition, inviting them to join and be a part of this community, make a significant difference in the lives of those who are lost?

Could this bring more hope and compassion into their world? Yes, I believe in many cases it would. The thought that I might be missing such opportunities to share something I cherish, something that makes a positive difference in the lives of so many, haunts me. And I think it should."

So lest we be haunted by what we did not say or share or do for fear of being that kind of evangelist, let me assure you, it is not as big and bad as you might think. Unitarian Universalist evangelists don't aim to convert. We converse. We engage. We invite questions and ask questions of others. We don't push our beliefs on others. We embody our beliefs and values. And we're not in the business of marketing. Our practice is storytelling.

My response to the question, "Why don't we do more to spread awareness of Unitarian Universalism?" Is that too often those asking this question are looking in the wrong places. It's no longer about the Yellow Pages listings of churches or the newspaper announcements about church luncheons. I mean, that was a thing back in the day. All of our Women's Alliance luncheons were in the Dallas Newspaper.

And it's not about catchy slogans on billboards or in magazines. Publications that come out of our Unitarian Universalist institutions and tell the stories of people, Unitarian Universalists and others, remain one way that people find out about us. So these publications are one medium that has stood the test of time. But our message is most powerfully amplified these days by you, people, and through the complex web of relationships and algorithms that make up social media.

I want you to listen to these stats shared with me this week by our church's communication staff. Our church's YouTube channel has 6,698 subscribers. And our videos have had 155,000 views just in the last 365 days. On TikTok, Instagram, and Facebook, we have a combined 13,797 followers. And our content has reached over 150,000 people so far in 2026. Our website has had 106,000 visitors just in 2026. And about 40,000 of those are new to the site, first time visitors.

Now, this content that these hundreds of thousands of people are accessing tells a story about this church, about Unitarian Universalism, about what's important to us, organizations and causes we support and how we show up in the world. And every time someone shares one of these videos or posts, it's an act of evangelism. Someone who has never heard of Unitarian Universalism or who at that moment needs our good news desperately may encounter that post and see themselves reflected in the message or in the imagery. Hear something that speaks to a need or a yearning. Remember that they are loved and be assured that there is hope even when times are tough and that there is a community for them. How can we stay silent or hide our light under a bushel when we know that the world really needs more good news right now?

So what is our good news, you ask? Well, Reverend John Corrado articulated it in the form of a call and response kind of responsive reading. And so I want to try this with you all. Your response, is, "Hey, ain't that good news?" So can you try that? Hey, ain't that good news?

Awesome. I love the enthusiasm. We believe there is a place at God's table for each and every child of earth. Hey, ain't that good news? We believe the giver of life has been given many names and loves the givers of all of them. Hey, ain't that good news? We're more interested in getting heaven into people now than getting people into heaven later. Hey, ain't that good news? We believe religious scriptures are open doors rather than sealed vaults. Hey, ain't that good news? We believe there is still some holy writ yet to be written.

Hey, ain't that good news? We believe true evangelism is more preaching practiced than practiced preaching. Hey, ain't that good news? We believe peace and justice are not just words we form with our lips, but realities that we shape with our lives. Hey, ain't that good news?

We believe we are one with the stars and trees and tigers and rivers and all the stuff of life. Hey, ain't that good news? We believe our lives are all about growing hearts that love, minds that seek and hands that serve. Hey, ain't that good news? Amen.

So yes. So how will you embody and express the good news of Unitarian Universalism? What story will you tell? What story will your life tell? As I once heard it phrased, if you were on trial for

being a Unitarian Universalist, would there be enough evidence to convict you? So live with conviction, friends.

Tell people what you see. Tell the truth about your own soul, about the piece of ground from which you see the world, and ask others, "What do you see?" This is how we, all souls, will grow in harmony with the divine. Thus is our covenant, the sacred promise that we make as Unitarian Universalists in community. May it ever be so. And amen.