



UU Class Conversations Study Guide

Class Action: The Struggle with Class in Unitarian Universalism UUA Commission on Appraisal

The Commission on Appraisal's report examines the impact of class and classism on the ministries of Unitarian Universalism, the Unitarian Universalist Association, its congregations, its members, and friends. Class and classism can prevent the vital work of building Beloved Community, stifling its impact and stunting its growth as a moral voice for good. Classism separates us from one another, dividing us into groups, both external and self-selected, that make it difficult for us to work together effectively and to acknowledge one another's worth and dignity.

This Study Guide is designed to act as an introduction to the COA's report. UU Class Conversations educates Unitarian Universalists about class awareness and inclusion—empowering our religious movement to dismantle classism within our congregations and communities. The purpose of this document is to help us to begin to understand the role classism plays in our congregations, and how we can begin to loosen the effects.



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Ask a roomful of people to define class and you'll get a different answer from everyone, but one thing is certain: class and classism separate us from one another. Our faith asks us to dismantle oppressive systems that are constructed upon class and then create the beloved community.

Questions for Discussion:

- ❖ How do you personally define class? Has this definition changed over time?
- ❖ What is the class diversity in your congregation?
- ❖ Do you see class separating us from one another and from our world community?

What Is Class?

The term *class* means the various ways people are ranked according to income, social status, occupation, wealth, education, upbringing, and culture. Our identities are greatly influenced by class-related experiences and we can view ourselves and others positively or negatively based on social status. The stigmas attached to various classes can be an inhibitor to our ability to do good works in our community.

As a faith community, we are more empowered to act on behalf of others when we maintain awareness of the various oppressions and opportunities that we observe, participate in and suffer from.

Questions for Discussion:

- ❖ How has how you see yourself affected your life experiences?
- ❖ How can we empower everyone in our congregations to be more fully included, more active, more involved, regardless of their class status?

Intersections and the Barriers to Inclusion

We use the term *intersectionality* to describe the ways that our multiple axes of identity intersect with one another; for example, how a person of color may experience class struggle differently than a white person. To fully understand the way classism affects our lives, we need to understand the ways that it intersects with other forms of oppression, such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, ableism, and racism.

Unitarian Universalism maintains several barriers to greater inclusion. These barriers often follow the various forms of oppression in our society and are often the result of stereotypes we hold about *other* people and these stereotypes lead to incorrect assumptions about who might be interested in being a UU. Unitarian Universalism was grown in a white, upper-class society, and we are now being asked if our congregations will expand beyond these stereotypes to include people from a variety of backgrounds.

Questions for Discussion:

- ❖ How do assumptions about race and class influence thoughts in your congregation about who would be interested in Unitarian Universalism?
- ❖ How might someone of a minority race be welcomed in your congregation?
- ❖ How might a person of a different class be welcomed in your congregation?

The Economy

Over the past 40 years, our economy has been shaped by neoliberalism: deregulation and the rise of corporate power, leaving behind workers and creating an ever-widening wage gap and class division. The changing economic status of our congregants has a direct impact on our congregations and how we minister to one another. By building a ministry and leadership from a more class-diverse membership we will be able to be a more welcoming, open community.

Questions for Discussion

- ❖ How might class diversity in your congregation lead to more diverse perspectives on the best ways to work toward the goals of beloved community and a fair and just society?
- ❖ How do you see economic forces at work in your congregation? How does the economy affect such areas as stewardship, membership, fellowship activities, religious education, and social justice initiatives?

A Faith Examined

Unitarian Universalists draw from many religious traditions and theological perspectives. Most, however, agree that our faith calls us to act for justice and equity in the world. A Unitarian Universalist theology rooted in love, interdependence, equity, and justice can help us to envision a world not plagued with classism—greed, oppression—but one that affirms the worth and dignity of every person.

Our principles speak of being and acting in a way that sees the value in all human beings. We must move beyond simple diversity and tolerance of the “other” and embrace inclusion: embracing the many gifts offered by people with different backgrounds and celebrating the myriad of ways people enrich and strengthen our faith.

Questions for Discussion

- ❖ How are we as Unitarian Universalists called to speak out against the problems associated with classism, toward a society where each person and their gifts are valued and respected, in our congregations, our communities, and in the world?
- ❖ What is your theological grounding for this work? What is it in your beliefs, our UU principles, or something else that calls you to the work of eliminating classism?
- ❖ How can we include more class-aware (as well as race-aware and sexism-aware) materials in our services through music, readings, religious education, and other means?

By Their Fruits Shall You Know Them

Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations are a mixture of classes, from working-class to wealthy, from striving to successful: it is up to us to make sure that our congregations treat each individual equally. To be a truly welcoming, beloved community, we must not assume that everyone is the same (nor that they need to be).

By assuming that most of us are upper-middle-class, highly educated, and financially comfortable, we will automatically act as a barrier to people who do not fill this demographic. Not having the ability to recognize privilege is a major contributor to classism. When we see the world through a single lens, assuming that everyone has the same privileges, we lack the appreciation for another's reality. That lack of appreciation means that we are more likely to conduct our ministry in ways that marginalize or exclude people not included in the dominant class.

Class also can affect how people participate in our congregations and who takes leadership positions. Wisdom, effective management, skills, and philosophical perspectives can be found in all classes and all educational levels. Unfortunately, financial restrictions can hinder the gifted leader from the working class from volunteering and fully participating in our churches. Congregations must be aware of the decisions and assumptions that enforce class separations.

Questions for Discussion

- ❖ Every part of church life conveys a message, saying who is most welcome and who is less. How does your congregation select its music or the topics and readings for the Sunday service. What type of fellowship events do you choose (it can even be telling to see what kind of food looks 'nice' at a potluck)?
- ❖ How can we include more class-aware and intersectional materials in our services, and congregational life through music, readings, religious education, social activities, activism, and other means?
- ❖ What kind of knowledge and experience is required for leadership, what resources must a person have? Are people expected to buy their supplies up front, and then apply for reimbursement? Does your congregation function as though class privilege is a precondition to entering leadership? How might the congregation empower capable leaders who arrive without class privilege?
- ❖ Are people expected to pay their own way to regional or national gatherings?
- ❖ We often expect even our lay leaders to be professionals but often non-professionals have a great deal of experience in the work needed in our congregations and on our committees. What might we gain from tapping into the skills, tastes, and experiences of all of our members members? How could your congregation do this, respectfully?
- ❖ When we ask volunteers to do chores, who do we ask? Who finally takes the job? Are there members of your church who might feel like "the staff?" If yes: how many of this group fill a similar service role in their working life? Do class-privileged members of your church actively seek to do their share in the dishpan, broom closet, and yard?
- ❖ How could your congregation tap into diverse sources of wisdom and strength, respectfully and equitably?



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