

## **CUUPS Chapters in the Twenty First Century**

### **Written by Mary Ann Somerville**

*[Editor's Note: CUUPS (the Covenant of UU Pagans) was founded in 1987 as an Independent Affiliate of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Initially, CUUPS was largely an organization of individuals within the UUA who held Pagan beliefs. Over the years, the number of CUUPS chapters affiliated with different congregations has increased. Chapter/congregation relations have developed and evolved and we have learned a great deal about how **not** to build strong chapter/congregation relationships. Fortunately, we have also learned a great deal about how **to build** strong and supportive relationships between chapters and home congregations. This document, provided by Mary Ann Somerville and Spelcastor of MoonPath CUUPS in Ft. Lauderdale and Rev. Gail Tapscott of the UU Church in Ft. Lauderdale, is a tool to help chapters navigate the tricky waters of right relationship with their home congregations.]*

CUUPS has come a long way in our nineteen-year history. We have chapters in nearly seventy Unitarian Universalist congregations. Individuals and groups of CUUPS members or prospective members are a presence in additional congregations as well as at various UU camps and conferences. Throughout a large part of our denomination we have moved from the fringe into the mainstream, from marginal toleration to full acceptance. It is good that we pause and view our successes and pat ourselves on the back. But it is also necessary that we continue forward, adding new chapters, improving old ones. As we move steadily into the twenty-first century, we again look at the role and behavior of the **Well Grounded CUUPS Chapter**.

### **Right-Relationships with Our Home Churches**

In our interactions with our home congregations, it is vital that CUUPS chapters recognize the important part that congregations play in our support, our very existence. Yes, CUUPS is a UU affiliate. Yet we are also a guest of the home congregation and should conduct ourselves accordingly. Paganism has become far more accepted by the denomination and by society as a whole than it was at our inception in 1987. But we must continue to remain alert to the comfort zones of congregants and go gently into areas of discomfort. If seeing pentacles in their domicile is still a bit unnerving to some, it's best not to wear one the size of a grapefruit to Sunday services. Just as we would not want non-Pagan UUs to change our rituals, so, too, we must respect the liturgy of their worship services. A number of useful ideas and suggestions for the chapter wishing to create or maintain a right relationship with its home congregation are listed below.

### **Understanding the UU in CUUPS**

It is essential that CUUPS chapters understand and respect the Unitarian Universalist tradition which supports their existence. The **Principles of the UUA** should guide the operation of a CUUPS chapter as clearly as they guide the operation

of the home church. UUs invite diversity. They encourage spiritual growth and promote a search for truth and meaning among their members. As CUUPS members, we must embrace the diversity of the many Pagan paths, claiming none as the true or representative Pagan tradition. UUs respect the inherent worth and dignity of every person, encourage acceptance of all, and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. So, too, do we as Pagans respond humanely in our interactions with our home congregation, with Pagans of diverse paths, with one another. UUs affirm the use of the democratic process. That value is reflected in the lack of hierarchy in CUUPS chapters. Responsibility for governing the chapter and its events and for creating rituals is shared by all members. UUs and CUUPS members are also in agreement in our respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part, and in our goal of world community. These principles unite us in values and in action. CUUPS members who came to Paganism from a background in Unitarian Universalism are aware of our Principles and Purposes and are therefore in tune with the interests of their church. Members who came to CUUPS from a background in Paganism will quickly learn that they already share many values with their home congregation. They are encouraged to learn, perhaps from UU CUUPS members or perhaps through an Adult RE Program, about UUism, its values, history, and goals. Copies of the Principles and Purposes are available from the UUA Bookstore on bookmarks and wallet cards at very reasonable prices. A solid introductory step would be to distribute them among new and prospective CUUPS members. Distributing a similar summary of Pagan values to the church board might help them recognize our similarities. We have much in common, the UUs and the Pagans. Understanding those commonalities from the start would serve to unite the two groups and to ward off possible misunderstandings. The two groups compliment each other nicely. Unitarian Universalist tend to be intellectual and analytical, while Pagans are generally emotional and spontaneous. UUs, then, provide the head while Pagans bring in the heart.

### **Relationships with the Church Governing Board**

Maintaining good relationships with the board is essential to any chapter's existence. Our CUUPS chapters, like most Pagan groups, function primarily by consensus and without a hierarchy. But regarding interactions with the home congregation, chapter members must defer to those who belong to the church. The reality is that the church board is not about to turn over the keys to someone who is not a part of their congregation. The keeper of the keys should be a person with one foot planted firmly within the chapter and the other equally firmly within the congregation. Knowing not only the UU values, but also the concerns of this particular UU church will provide stability in maintaining positive interactions. The minister and board will be far more comfortable about the CUUPS chapter if at least one member is a well known and respected member of the congregation. The longer the history of this person with the church, the greater the comfort level of both board and minister with a CUUPS chapter. Open communication between the chapter and the home congregation is essential. Sensitive issues must be dealt with rather than ignored, preferably before they erupt. Someone in the chapter should

serve as a liaison between the church and the chapter, possibly even attending board meetings so both groups are aware of upcoming activities and events. Church newsletters can be valuable tools in building good chapter church relations. CUUPS events should always be publicized in the church newsletter.

Announcements, with details, of our activities would serve to make congregation members aware of them and would include an invitation to participate. An occasional educational piece about Paganism, perhaps seasonally, would also serve a positive function. Equally, church events, including fund raisers, should be publicized in the CUUPS newsletter or electronic equivalent. It is helpful to emphasize in our initial contacts regarding Sunday services and educational programming that we share the UU tradition of not proselytizing. Our role is to provide worship and information. What we present will resonate with some, who may join us, and not at all with others, who may choose to avoid our events. When we as a chapter do something which generates positive publicity, that publicity should be shared with our congregation. It is of extreme importance, however, that each and every event which could possibly result in publicity should be shared with the minister well in advance of the activity. Ministers tend not to like surprises of the variety that involve questions from the press about church activities of which they were unaware. CUUPS chapters are not empowered to make policy decisions for their home congregations, so when speaking to the press, chapter members must be extremely careful in their use of language.

Obviously all CUUPS activities must be within the law as well as within the guidelines of the home congregation. The law prohibits illegal substances, as do chapter policies. The law prohibits serving alcohol to minors. CUUPS rituals which include "cakes and ale" always provide a non-alcoholic alternative, not just for young people, but for any adults who may prefer that choice. It would certainly be necessary to check the church's policy regarding alcoholic beverages before using alcohol in a ritual, or at a CUUPS sponsored get together. The law prohibits public nudity and many chapters have that same prohibition for any rituals. If a sky clad ritual were to be planned within a CUUPS chapter, great care should be taken to avoid offending anyone. It should be a very closed ritual in a very private location. Young people should not be included, and it would certainly not be a time to invite new and prospective members!

### **Providing Religious Education within the Home Congregation**

A CUUPS chapter also has a responsibility to its church. It is a part of the CUUPS chapter's responsibility to their home congregation to provide alternative worship services as often as is suitable for both groups. CUUPS led services could include a traditional seasonal ritual, a teaching ritual which is interspersed with explanations of its various aspects, or a service which is closer to the model used by their home congregation with the addition of Pagan elements such as chants, visualizations, poetry and dance. Some chapters are regularly responsible for certain Sunday worship services, such as a Samhain service for remembrance or an Ostara service for Spring. Education is another responsibility of CUUPS chapters to their home congregations. We can make ourselves available for both adult and child religious education. Every Sunday School needs volunteers. CUUPS members can meet that

need by volunteering a few Sundays in the children's RE classes to talk about Paganism. Circle Round, by Starhawk, etc. is an excellent resource for stories and activities you might use with a Sunday School group. Volunteering to lead an adult RE series for several weeks should also be well received. CUUPS chapters might want to offer two established UU adult programs--Cakes for the Queen of Heaven (now out of print, but available in most district libraries) or Rise Up and Call Her Name. Many churches already own these curricula. In addition, CUUPS has an adult RE class titled Exploring Paganism, which is designed to help the non-Pagan decide if this spiritual path merits deeper exploration. Paganism: An Introduction to Earth Centered Religions by Joyce and River Higginbotham is the text for this class, and an excellent resource for every CUUPS library. CUUPS also has several pamphlets on Paganism available in the *Resources* section on the web site that can be printed and shared.

### **Finance**

If we want the support of our home congregations, it is essential that we support them as well. Chapter members should be encouraged to become active in the church by attending Sunday services, joining the church, pledging, and participating in church events and fund raisers.

Chapters may also want to give back, financially, to their home congregation in some way. Some chapters take a collection at every ritual, and donate the proceeds to the church. Other chapters make sure that all church fund raising events are supported by one or two CUUPS volunteers. A chapter may decide to support their home church by identifying a specific church fund raiser they wish to run every year. One exceedingly well organized chapter conducts the church's annual canvass. There are a wide variety of creative ways in which your chapter can show appreciation of their home congregation financially.

Our financial contributions as a chapter not only demonstrate our support, they also put our name in the church account books, forming an additional bond. Some chapters run their accounts through church books in order to be on record, but prefer that their actual contributions to the congregation be in the form of gifts that will be of value to both. For example, we expect to clean up our own mess, and that is certainly expected of us. It's part of being a considerate guest. But if the church vacuum cleaner was manufactured in the late 40s, we might give them a new one. Our clean up is made easier and they see us as a contributing organization. A gift might also take the form of a donation in their name as well as ours to a service agency. Admission to an appropriate festival, for example, might be nonperishable foods for a local food bank. The bags and boxes collected at the Saturday festival are arranged on the podium for all to see at the Sunday service. Then on Monday they are taken to the food bank as a donation credited to both the chapter and the church.

### **Chapters and their Members**

Pagans come together in CUUPS for the various benefits to themselves, both as a collective and as individuals, from belonging to a recognized Pagan organization. When the karma is right, and all are willing to do the necessary work, a community

may be created. UU Paganism brings together individuals from various traditions. In so doing, we become a unique tradition of our own. We accept that there is no single path or right way to implement a ritual. Instead, we honor the individuality and creativity of our members and the traditions which they represent, viewing our diversity as an opportunity for learning and sharing. Our rituals should demonstrate aspects of the various traditions within our membership. A regularly scheduled study group and classes are another positive venue for spiritual and intellectual growth through diversity.

A worthy goal for a chapter is to celebrate each of the eight holidays on the Wheel of the Year. One or more of these celebrations should be an open ritual with invitations to members of the home congregations and even to the local community. An open ritual would provide an opportunity for our home congregation to experience who we are and what we're about. A broad invitation may bring in spiritual searchers and solitaries seeking group affiliation as well as enlightening the merely curious. Networking among individual Pagans and non-UU Pagan groups is often a positive result of our open rituals. Bringing in large numbers of people at open rituals also adds to the energy that we raise. In places where there are several chapters within driving distance of each other, multiple chapters may come together to plan and celebrate some or all of the Sabbats. This would, of course, require cooperation, planning, and sharing among the chapters involved--all valuable skills in and of themselves.

CUUPS is not an initiatory tradition. However, a chapter may create a dedication ritual for someone beginning a course of serious study of Paganism. By the same token a ritual honoring an individual's completion of their year and a day of study might be undertaken. Rituals which are observed within a CUUPS chapter will vary with the needs and desires of the members. Rites of passage celebrating birth and acknowledging death, recognition of pubescence, honoring of the crone and sage, handfastings are all among the rituals which may be requested by chapter members. A regular newsletter is an excellent means of keeping in touch with each other, but the mailing list must be in the hands of only one or two trusted members. Better still is an e-mail newsletter (no expense for stamps and no destruction of trees) but it must be sent out as a blind copy and the mailing list must be protected. A well maintained and regularly updated web page is a further protection of privacy, as individuals may access the site anonymously. Privacy extends also to the use of cameras at rituals and other CUUPS events. No photography should be allowed without prior consent. Press photographers and reporters should not be allowed to attend CUUPS events unless they have been granted permission, and then they must be accompanied by a knowledgeable escort from the chapter.

### **Role of CUUPS, Inc.**

In order to establish and maintain a CUUPS chapter, it is required that there be three people in it who are members of both CUUPS Continental and the home congregation. Please understand that this is a minimum requirement. Ideally, all members of a chapter would be members of CUUPS Continental and actively

involved as congregation members. Joining the church is of benefit to both the congregation and the individual. Membership provides to Pagans a way to gain a public expression of their private religion. It allows their children an affiliation which may be more comfortable to explain to peers than Paganism. UU membership means belonging not just to a local congregation, but to a vast network which extends around the world. From time to time, problems will erupt. Most CUUPS chapters have had their share of experiences with difficult church boards and toxic chapter members. When such situations arise, chapters should be aware that the home congregation is only one of their sources of support. CUUPS, Inc. board members are also available to be called upon if difficulties arise. In addition, there are close to seventy other chapters who have made their way through the ups and downs of functioning as part of a UU home congregation. There are CUUPS e-mail group to connect chapters and individuals. You might take a look at the [cuups-chapcontact](#) list and see if this resource will work for you. Don't hesitate to reach out when in need. There are resources available. You are a part of a larger whole and you are not alone.

CUUPS, Inc. membership, both chapter and individual, is what keeps our UU affiliate alive. All board members are volunteers. Dues and donations to CUUPS provide paper and postage for our newsletter and pay the phone bill for communication among our board members who are scattered across the nation. Active membership in our home congregation will do a great deal to ensure not only acceptance of the chapter, but embracing it. As chapter members regularly attend services, serve on committees, participate in work projects, contribute time and energy to service projects and dollars to the pledge drive, we will be recognized for our sincerity and for being a part of Unitarian Universalism.

### **CUUPS Member Services**

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