



# Turning Points in UU History

**Faith Forward: From Visitor to Leader**  
Sample Session



First Unitarian Church of Dallas

Turning Points in UU History (Updated March 2024)  
Part of the *Faith Forward: From Visitor to Leader*  
ADVANCED Path



First Unitarian Church of Dallas

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This program and additional resources are available at [www.faithforwarduu.org](http://www.faithforwarduu.org)

# A Break Up Story

## Session 1

### SESSION OBJECTIVES

Participants will:

- Understand the dynamics of religious controversies and how change occurs at the margins and in the center of religious movements.
- Learn about the Dedham court decision and its impact on the institutional identity of Unitarianism.

### OVERVIEW

<u>Activity</u>	<u>Minutes</u>
Opening	3
Introduction to Course Themes	15
Covenant-Building	5
Video	5
Activities	42
Closing	5

### MATERIALS FOR SESSION

- Chalice, candle, and lighter
- Video, TV/projector, and laptop with internet access
- Flipchart, markers, and tape
- Handout: Turning Points Texts
  - **If offering online:** The texts for Session 1 are included in the slideshow. Share the handout file in the Zoom chat and by email as well.
- Paper and pens/pencils

## OPENING (3 MINUTES)

**If offering online:** Share the Chalice Lighting slide so that everyone can participate in the opening words.

Light the chalice (or ask a participant to light it) and read the following:

*This light we kindle  
is set in the lamp of our history.  
We inherit this free faith  
from the brave and gentle, fierce and outspoken  
hearts and minds that have come before us.  
Let us be worthy inheritors of this faith  
and through our good works, pass it boldly to a new generation.*

- Rev. Audette Fulbright Fulson  
Unitarian Universalist minister

## INTRODUCTION TO COURSE THEMES (15 MINUTES)

Facilitators briefly introduce themselves and why they are excited to facilitate the Turning Points in UU History series. Then introduce the goals and purposes of the class.

Read or share the following in your own words:

*Turning Points in UU History is a six-session exploration of turning points and controversies in our history. We will delve into the complexities of these historical moments through primary texts, and learn about how they shaped Unitarian Universalism and how they relate to our faith today. In each session, we will reflect on the sides involved in the controversy, and put ourselves in the shoes of those who lived through it. While there is some overlap in content between this series and other Faith Forward offerings, Turning Points in UU History will take your historical understanding to a deeper level, as we learn not only about the moments to celebrate in our history but also the moments when we struggled to define who we are as a movement.*

*Turning Points in UU History is part of the Faith Forward ADVANCED Path and is designed for those who have attended some or all of the Faith Forward CORE Path offerings (Inquirers*

*Series, Roots, Beyond Inquirers, Spiritual Practice, UU History 101, and UU Elevator Speech).* We encourage you to participate in *Turning Points in UU History* as a series, attending all the sessions, in order to get the most out of it.

*Unitarian Universalism is not the only religion with controversies and disagreements that ended up being historical turning points.*

**If offering online:** Share the slide with the brainstorm prompt and reflection question.

Lead a short brainstorm of religious controversies from history (examples include: the Protestant Reformation, the Great Schism between the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches, split in Islam between Sunni and Shia after Mohammed's death, struggles around LGBTQ inclusion/rights/marriage). Reflect briefly as a group about how each of these has shaped religious communities today.

*As with many of these controversies, in Unitarian Universalism we have seen a dynamic repeat itself over and over again – a split between one side that is dominant, mainstream, institutionalist, or at the center of power and another side that is considered rebels, radicals, on the margins of power. Frederick May Eliot, who served as President of the American Unitarian Association from 1937-1958 during a period of significant growth, observed: **“One of the most interesting aspects of our history is the process by which the radicals of one generation have come to be regarded as ‘100% Unitarians’ by the succeeding generations. The truth of the matter is that we are a church in which growth is not only permitted but encouraged – growth in thought, growth in sensitiveness to moral values, growth in courage to put religion to work in the world.”** Often, it was the radicals driving change, such that they became the mainstream. We will bring this perspective as a lens to studying turning points in UU history, examining who were the radicals and who were the institutionalists, who was on the margins and who was at the center of power.*

*In Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, Black feminist scholar bell hooks presents a theory of the center and margin. Some of the key points of her theory are:*

- *For every group, there is a center and a margin, where the center has more power, influence, or control.*
- *People on the margin can only move so close to the center, before those in the center retake power.*
- *Often, being in the center is an unearned privilege (race, class, gender).*
- *It is the responsibility of the center to move out, to de-center themselves, though people more often advocate for the margins making efforts to move toward the center.*

- *Although power is dynamic, there are institutions that keep the power structures in place.*
- *To move toward the center, those on the margins must use those with influence in the community to get at the center.*

*Each time we hear the story of a controversy, disagreement, or turning point in our history, it's important to reflect on who is at the center and who is on the margins, and how that shifts over time.*

## COVENANT BUILDING (5 MINUTES)

Read or share the following in your own words:

*As we seek to grow together, and as we explore historical disagreements and turning points, we may discover disagreements and different perspectives in this room. This is why it's important to have a covenant to serve as a guide for how we will be together in this class.*

Lead a short brainstorm addressing the following question: What can we promise to one another that will help create a respectful learning environment that promotes growth and engagement?

Examples of covenant promises are<sup>1</sup>:

- Share from experience, rather than making generalizations
- Listen to one another deeply
- Make space, take space (a post-ableist adaptation of “step up, step back” to balance those who are eager to speak and those who are reticent)
- Be open to learning
- Assume best intent, attend to impact

Record the covenant promises on a flipchart or white board, to be visible in each class session going forward.

**If offering online:** Share the Covenant Building slide. With a large group, use the Zoom chat for covenant input. With a smaller group, brainstorm aloud and type the participants' ideas into the text box on the slide. Compile the covenant brainstorm into a document and send it to participants after class.

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<sup>1</sup> With some ideas drawn from *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* by adrienne maree brown

## VIDEO (5 MINUTES)

In this first session, in addition to exploring the themes of this series, we learn about an 1820 court decision in Dedham, Massachusetts that radically changed the institutional identity of Unitarianism.

In this video Rev. Beth Dana tells the story of what happened in Dedham and throughout New England in the early 1800s.

**If offering online:** Have the video file already pulled up before class begins. Share your screen, select the window that has the video, and click the box next to “Share sound.”

## ACTIVITY: The Text (7 MINUTES)

Distribute the Handout: Turning Points Texts – a packet of all the primary texts participants will read over the course of the series. Explain that from this session forward, reading these texts will be their homework.

Turn to the Session 1 texts and ask for five volunteers to read aloud the five sections of text.

**If offering online:** The texts for this session are included in the slideshow. Share the handout file in the Zoom chat as well.

## ACTIVITY: Understanding Both Sides (20 MINUTES)

Divide participants into two groups and give each a piece of flipchart paper and a marker. Assign one group as the “Liberal Unitarians” and one group as the “Orthodox Congregationalists.” Give them 10 minutes to discuss and write on the flipchart the main points of their group’s perspective as they have just read and heard. Ask: What was this side all about? What was their “case”?

**If offering online:** Show the discussion questions in the slideshow as you explain the activity. Send participants to two breakout rooms – one Liberal Unitarians and one Orthodox Congregationalists – for 10 minutes to discuss. Copy/paste the discussion questions in the chat and send to the breakout rooms. Make sure each group has a designated note-taker who will report back to the large group.

After 10 minutes, bring the groups back together and spend about 10 minutes debriefing and inviting each small group to share their perspective.

### **ACTIVITY: Slogans (5 MINUTES)**

Many Unitarian Universalists wear t-shirts featuring slogans (religious, political, and otherwise). Invite participants to imagine the Dedham dispute happening in our modern landscape, and lead a quick, fun brainstorm of what each side's t-shirt slogan(s) would be.

**If offering online:** Show the slide with the brainstorm prompt. Depending on the size of the group, either brainstorm aloud or in the Zoom chat.

### **ACTIVITY: Margin and Center (10 MINUTES)**

On a flipchart or white board, draw one large circle with a smaller circle at its center. Label the edge of the large circle "Margin" and the smaller circle "Center."

Ask the participants, based on what they have learned about the controversy in Dedham, to identify who was at the center and who was at the margin. Write their response on the flipchart.

**If offering online:** Show the slide with the margin/center visual and the questions.

Then discuss the following questions:

1. How did who was on the margins and who was at the center change over the course of this controversy? Examples/ideas below.
  - Unitarians had been on the margins theologically compared to the Orthodox Congregationalists, but over the course of the controversy and with the court's decision they ended up the dominant/powerful group with the property, communion silver, and prominent leaders.
2. How has this shaped our experience of Unitarianism Universalism today? Examples/ideas below.
  - We can't seem to figure out whether we are part of the establishment or not. We see ourselves as margin, we are marginal in terms of numbers in the larger religious landscape, but we also possess power and privilege in other ways.



- Friendly relationship today between Unitarian Universalists and the United Church of Christ (descendants of the Congregationalists). Co-developed the Our Whole Lives (OWL) program.

## CLOSING (5 MINUTES)

Thank everyone for their participation in this session, let them know when the next one is. Remind them to read and engage with the primary texts in their Turning Points Texts packet for Session 2.

**If offering online:** Share the Closing slide so that everyone can participate in the closing words.

Extinguish the chalice with these words:

*I. The Past: We sometimes speak as if the past were over and done with: "That's past; that's out of date; that's ended." Yet try to obliterate in your thought all that is past. It is impossible, of course, because in so doing we obliterate ourselves. Without the help of what we call the past we could not live at all.*

*The past, instead of being done with, is, then, the real fiber of the world as we know it. Just as the food we eat nourishes us till it becomes what we act with, so the past is always what we think with.*

*II. The Present: The present. . . is what we make of it, and its size is exactly that size which our hands are capable of grasping.*

*III. The Future: Our future is in our power —not, indeed, what happens to us, but what we do with what happens to us.*

- Adapted from Ella Lyman Cabot  
Unitarian educator and author, 1866-1934