

“Our Place in the Web of Life”

An introduction to environmental justice

This highly engaging, five-session class invites participants to look deeply at how the consequences of their actions on people and the environment ripple out from their neighborhood in ever widening circles across the U.S. and world. Through film, music, research, mapping, ethical reflection, meditation and ritual, participants wrestle with what it means to be faithfully and justly part of an inter-connected community of life.

Sponsored by Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth (UUMFE), with generous support from the Unitarian Universalist Funding Program and UUMFE donors, this curriculum is a powerful pathway to **Respect life. Restore Earth. Renew spirit.**

Course Overview

The course is designed so that each session builds on each other in a cumulative fashion.

Session 1: Gratitude for Our Place in the World

The conversations and reflection exercises in this session aim to begin to build a sense of community amongst the participants, in large part by examining foundational themes related to identity, place and connectedness. To begin, class members identify and explore various dimensions of “place” – geographic, biological, social, cultural, and economic. This sets the foundation for future conversations about your congregation’s place in the web of life and all the relationships that connect you.

Conversation questions also work to spark new awareness of how much our identity determines what we love and feel connected to. How and why do we bring different experiences, expectations, and perspectives to conversations about justice and the environment/Nature? As members of a religious community we are called to participate in the healing and restoration of our world out of love, gratitude, respect, and connection. In this way we act from our highest selves. We end this session talking about the role of gratitude as a religious response to being alive, as the starting point for how we live in the world, and how we live in community.

Session 2: Mindfulness and the “Stuff” of Life

Our society is set up to distract us and make it difficult to be conscious and intentional – living fully aligned with our deepest values and from a place of gratitude. Using the popular animated film “The Story of Stuff” as a jumping off point, this session begins a discussion of the impact of our values and behaviors on other humans and our planet’s limited natural resources. How are our values and behaviors influenced by our socio-economic, cultural, historical, and generational “place” in the web of life?

This conversation lays the groundwork for the research participants will do before Session 3 relating to the environmental, social, health, and economic impact your congregation has. Participants will break into teams and determine their research assignments. A short demonstration video gives everyone a “sneak peak” at the technique used to conduct Session 3.

Session 3: Mapping Congregational Impact

By now, your class will have identified one or two themes that you will explore in detail in this session. Note: we suggest that you choose one or two themes from this list: water, energy, air, waste, land, and food. A narrower focus will produce greater depth and better conversation. Regardless of the theme(s) you choose, classes are encouraged to integrate climate change in their analysis.

You may have taken some field trips to meet with community experts and investigate particular situations through the eyes and voices of those affected. You may have invited some local resource people to join you for this session. All of this is valuable input to depict in the “Ah-Hah!” visual map/mural you will create along with other research done by participants. By tracing the consequences of your congregation’s decisions “upstream” and “downstream” to people and more-than-human communities nearby and far away, your class hopefully should have some big “Ah-Hah!” insights by the end of this session.

Note: Some facilitators find that given the amount of material they want to discuss at this juncture in the process, they add an extra session here or schedule this for a weekend when more time is available for the conversation.

Session 4: Ethical Reflections on Our Place in the Web of Life

The class steps back from the picture developed in Session 3 to assess the implications – taking their analysis to the next level. Together you will identify and consider the racial, economic, and environmental justice implications of your congregation’s behavior. You will also reflect on the spiritual and ethical challenges related to what you see as your congregation’s role in certain situations you’ve highlighted for deeper study.

Through a structured set of questions for small groups, participants will build what is often difficult for congregations to do – a systemic or structural analysis of oppression and discrimination. Small groups will also envision what “Beloved Community” would look like in the situations they’ve prioritized. They will report their findings in Session 5. In this way, Session 4 sets the stage for developing a plan for future study, action, and sustained spiritual deepening that emerges in Session 5.

Session 5: Lessons Learned, Next Steps and Evaluation

Facilitators are encouraged to consider beginning with a celebratory meal, which might affect the scheduling of this final session. Participants will discuss the meaning of accountability for your congregation and identify priority areas for becoming more accountable. They will talk about the root meaning of atonement – “at-one-ment” – and write prayers for the closing ritual.

Based on the small group reports of work done in Session 4, the class develops an action plan: how their insights and learnings can be shared with the broader congregation and inform your justice work in the world. The session also contains time for oral and written evaluations to bring things to full closure.