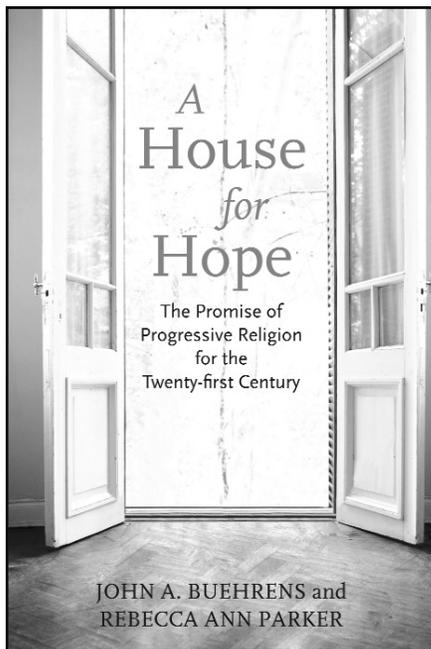


DISCUSSION GUIDE



A House for Hope The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century

JOHN A. BUEHRENS and
REBECCA ANN PARKER

by

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A Discussion Guide for *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century*

Sarah Gibb Millspaugh

Based on *A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion for the Twenty-first Century* by John A. Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker (Beacon Press 2010), this multiple-session program invites participants to meaningfully engage with liberal theology from a Unitarian Universalist perspective.

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Introduction

Hope rises. It rises from the heart of life, here and now, beating with joy and sorrow. Hope longs. It longs for good to be affirmed, for justice and love to prevail, for suffering to be alleviated, and for life to flourish in peace. . . . To thrive, hope requires a home, a sustaining structure of community, meaning, and ritual. Only with such a habitation can hope manifest the spiritual stamina it needs to confront evil, endure through trouble, and “hold fast to that which is good.”

—John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker,
from the Introduction

In *A House for Hope*, John Buehrens and Rebecca Ann Parker engage readers in liberal religion’s rich theological legacy. Using the metaphor of a house to encompass the six great topics of theology, Buehrens and Parker explore what grounds us, what expands us, what shelters us, and what gives us hope.

This guide outlines discussions and activities for adult readers of *A House for Hope*. Each session explores one of liberal theology’s six great topics, helping participants explore Parker and Buehrens’s concepts as well as their own theological thinking. The goals of this Discussion Guide are twofold. Participants will:

- Develop a meaningful understanding of liberal theology.
- Engage in Unitarian Universalism’s “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” by locating their own, and others’, theological understandings within a “House for Hope.”

Liberal theology, like liberal religion and spirituality, is best explored in a conversation. Throughout the workshops, participants will engage in a life-enriching conversation, infusing the diversity of our liberal tradition into their own experiences and outlooks. May their lives be blessed by the gravity and grandeur of *A House for Hope*.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This leader’s guide is designed for flexible use. Facilitators are encouraged to adapt the workshop plans to meet the needs of the group and constraints of

the setting. Each of the seven workshops in this guide represents an hour to an hour and a half of discussion and activities. You may wish to combine workshops to create a shorter series, with as few as three meetings.

Each workshop plan includes a short summary of the chapters' salient points for the facilitator's use, followed by an outline for discussions and activities. Workshops open with large-group discussion, continue with a time of solo reflection and writing, which moves into small-group sharing, and conclude with a large-group activity or discussion.

Each workshop contains a time for reflection and writing. If you choose to lead the seventh workshop, participants will be invited to review their writings and expand upon them, creating "House for Hope" personal theological essays. Participants will share their essays as a culmination of the workshop series.

GETTING STARTED

The group will need a comfortable and accessible room in which to meet, one with flexible seating to allow for the activities that ask the group to split into twos, threes, and fours. Be sure to figure out ahead of time how to best hang newsprint sheets around the room. Pay attention to the warmth and attractiveness of the space, adding lamps or flowers to an "institutional" setting and setting chairs and sofas in a circle to begin each session.

Order *A House for Hope* and begin selling the book at least four weeks before the workshop begins. It can be ordered from the Unitarian Universalist Association Bookstore or directly from Beacon Press. Bulk discounts are available from both sources.

Before the first session, remind participants that they will need to bring a notebook, a pen or pencil, and a copy of *A House for Hope*. They should read the introduction and chapters one and two ("This Holy Ground" and "Last Things First") before the workshop begins. You may wish to print this information, along with the first meeting time, on bookmarks that you sell with the books.

RESOURCES FOR FACILITATORS

Unitarian Universalism strives to be a truly inclusive faith. Inclusion, for adults as well as for children, means creating a space that can be accessed by people with a whole range of physical and cognitive capabilities. In building an accessible "house for hope," you are encouraged to consult some of the UUA's thoughtful suggestions for inclusion of a broad range of adults.

As you guide participants' learning throughout the workshops, you may wish to engage in your own deeper exploration of the theological topics being discussed. This guide includes a list of suggested books for further study.

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**Session 1: "Introduction"
and "The Garden"
*Eschatology***

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

The preparation for this first meeting of *A House for Hope* begins weeks in advance, with publicity for the workshops, ordering and sales of the book, communications with potential participants, and sign-ups. Please see the introduction to the guide for information on ordering copies of *A House for Hope* for your group.

For this first session:

- ❑ Review this guide and decide how you (and your co-facilitator) will conduct the workshop.
- ❑ Create a list of participants, with their contact information.
- ❑ Create and print a workshop schedule, with dates, times, meeting places, subjects, and reading assignments. Include facilitators' contact information. Photocopy this schedule to share with participants.
- ❑ Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- ❑ Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop's Welcome.
- ❑ Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.

SESSION PLAN**90 Minutes****Welcome and Introductions****5 Minutes**

Light the chalice. Welcome participants to *A House for Hope*. Introduce yourself, and invite participants to do the same. You may wish to ask each person to share something about what drew them to *A House for Hope*.

Introduction to the Series**10 Minutes**

Describe the scope of the book and the workshops, using these words or your own:

The book, in its own words,

provides a primer in progressive theology. It recovers and reconsiders the hope-filled religious frameworks that inspired generations of activists to work for women's rights, racial equality, economic justice, and peace. These frameworks embody reverence for the sacred, nourish community life, carry forward the aspirations of our forebears, and respond to legacies of violence and injustice that harm our bodies and souls. They hold promise for our time (pp. ix–x).

It “uses the metaphor of a theological house to articulate the ‘frames that give our dreams shape and meaning’” (p. x). The book, and these workshops, explore the classic topics of theology through a progressive lens.

By participating, we hope that you will develop a meaningful understanding of liberal theology. We seek to engage you in Unitarian Universalism’s “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” by locating your own, and others’, theological understandings within a “House for Hope.”

Liberal theology, like liberal religion and spirituality, is best explored in a conversation. Throughout the workshops, we’ll engage in what we hope will be a life-enriching conversation, infusing the diversity of our liberal tradition into our own experiences and outlooks.

Distribute the handout you created with information about the workshops of the series. Provide a brief overview of the focus of each workshop, and respond to questions about the logistics or scope of the series.

If you will be asking participants to create essays, explain:

Each workshop contains time for reflection and writing. Between the sixth and seventh workshop you will be invited to review your writings, and add to them, creating a “House for Hope” personal theological essay. We will share essays at the final meeting of the workshop.

Group Covenant**10 Minutes**

Engage participants in a discussion about how they will relate to one another in the workshop. Ask:

In our workshops, how will we best live out Unitarian Universalism’s religious tolerance and theological diversity, and make space for people to express their own passionate convictions and theologies?

As you listen to participants respond, frame their answers in the language of covenant, and encourage the group to do the same. For example, “We will speak for ourselves,” and “We will respect others’ viewpoints.” Write the group’s ideas on newsprint, and ask for the whole group’s assent to this covenant before moving on. Keep the covenant posted during this and all future gatherings of *A House for Hope*.

Discussion**30 Minutes**

Introduce the topic of the first two chapters of *A House for Hope*: eschatology. Begin by asking participants to define the term. (Parker defines eschatology on p. 4 as “the theological term for ‘speaking of final things’—ultimate hopes.” Eschatology addresses “Where are we going?” “What is the purpose of existence?” “What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented?”) Then turn to these questions for discussion:

- Have you encountered conservative eschatological teachings? If so, how? What forms did those teachings take? (Examples include souls going to heaven or hell, the cosmic battle of Armageddon, and the Rapture [p. 4] and the millennium [p. 24].) What kinds of messages do those teachings send about the meaning of life? Do you think believing this way would make life easier, or harder?
- What did you like about Parker and Buehrens’s articulation of progressive eschatology? Parker describes three types—Social Gospel eschatology (pp. 6–9), universalist eschatology (pp. 9–12), and radically realized eschatology (pp. 12–15). Do you

identify with one or more of these eschatological beliefs? If so, how? Which one speaks to you the most? What kinds of messages do these progressive teachings send about the meaning of life? Do you think believing this way makes life easier, or harder?

Reflection **15 Minutes**

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own sense of eschatology. Post these questions from p. 4 on newsprint: “Where are we going?” “What is the purpose of existence?” “What is the horizon to which our lives are oriented?” Encourage participants to write from their own beliefs and experience, recognizing that no one can be—or even needs to try to be—certain on these matters. Explain that the activity will conclude with small-group discussion, in which everyone will be invited to share what she or he feels comfortable sharing.

Offer participants 10 to 12 minutes for individual reflection and writing.

Sharing **15 Minutes**

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. Ask individuals to take turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 10 minutes in small groups.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. Ask:

Now that you have discussed, reflected, shared, and listened, what messages about eschatology will you carry with you from today’s workshop?

Closing **5 Minutes**

Offer closing readings from the two chapters. First read Rebecca Parker, p. 17:

Our hope can be that from within the heart of this world paradise will arise. It will arise from the seeds of Eden sown everywhere; from the life that is within us and around us in our communities and cultures; from the gifts of our resistance, compassion, and creativity; and from the very stones crying out their praise for the presence of God who is here, now, already wiping the tears from our eyes.

Then read John Buehrens, p. 29:

So let us begin where we all hope to end: in gratitude—with a radically realized eschatology. After all, if Jesus was an eschatological preacher, warning contemporaries about the consequences of self-indulgence, injustice, and oppression, he also preached that the kingdom of God is right here among us wherever and whenever we make it real by loving the very ground of our being with all our heart, mind, and strength and by refusing to give our allegiance to any oppressive power. It is among us when we love our neighbors, even the very least of these, as we should also love ourselves. . . . So may our final words, at the end of lives, be words of thanks. And may we sustain all our efforts and hopes along the way in that same spirit.

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Session 2: “The Sheltering Walls” Ecclesiology

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

- Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.
- Post the covenant that the group created during the first session.

SESSION PLAN

90 Minutes

Welcome **5 Minutes**

Light the chalice. Welcome participants to *A House for Hope*. If everyone does not yet know one another’s name, ask for names. You may wish to ask each person to briefly share something she or he appreciated in the most recent two chapters of *A House for Hope*. Point out the posted covenant, ask the group if they would

like to make changes to it, and ask the group to agree to uphold it.

Discussion *40 Minutes*

Introduce the topic of the second two chapters of *A House for Hope*: our ecclesiology, or our philosophy of religious community. Questions for discussion:

- Where have you learned about what it means to be in religious community? How and where did you learn these lessons? Do you identify with the wariness of “organized religion” that Parker names on pp. 34 and 35? Why or why not?
- As imperfect as organized religion is, what does *A House for Hope* say about why we need religious community? (Parker celebrates congregations’ potential to be “communities of resistance,” teachers of covenant and interdependence, and sustainers of life-nourishing ritual. Buehrens affirms these aspects and describes congregations’ power to nurture “covenantal hope.”) What is your response to those ideas? What does religious community do, at its best? Why do we “need” religious community?
- How do you understand the role of covenant in liberal religion? What are some of the differences between a covenant-bound community and a creed-bound community?
- How can (or how does) our congregation embody what is best in organized religion, and protect against what is worst in organized religion?

Reflection *20 Minutes*

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own senses of ecclesiology. Post these questions on newsprint: “Is it preferable (or even possible) to be religious alone? Is there an importance to religious community life?” (p. 37) and “Recall stories from your life that have led you away from some ideas of religious community and stories that have led you to where you are now. How do these stories inform your sense of religious community?” Encourage participants to write from their own beliefs and experience, recognizing that no one can be—or even needs to try to be—certain on these matters. Explain that the activity will conclude with small-group discussion, in which everyone will be invited to share what she or he feels comfortable sharing.

Offer participants 15 to 18 minutes for individual

reflection and writing.

Sharing *20 Minutes*

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. Ask individuals to take turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 15 minutes in small groups.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. Ask:

Now that you have discussed, reflected, shared, and listened, what messages about religious community will you carry with you from today’s workshop?

Closing *5 Minutes*

Offer closing readings from the two chapters. Read the final two paragraphs on p. 46, beginning with the quote from Thich Nhat Hanh. Read the final three paragraphs on p. 58, beginning with the description of the quote from Anne Lamott.

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Session 3: “The Roof” *Soteriology*

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

- Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.
- Post the covenant that the group created during the first session.

SESSION PLAN *90 Minutes*

Welcome *5 Minutes*

Light the chalice. Welcome participants. If everyone does not yet know one another’s name, ask for names.

You may wish to ask each person to briefly share something she or he appreciated in the most recent two chapters of *A House for Hope*. Point out the posted covenant, ask the group if they would like to make changes to it, and ask the group to agree to uphold it.

Discussion *40 Minutes*

Introduce the topic of the fifth and sixth chapters of *A House for Hope*: our notion of soteriology—how we are saved. Liberal biblical interpretation is also a major theme in chapter six. Questions for discussion:

- What religious stories about salvation are familiar to you? What beliefs have you—or communities you’ve belonged to—professed about human salvation?
- What meanings has the Christian or Jewish Bible had in your life? (In asking this question, take care to not assume that every participant is familiar with or grew up in a faith that used the Bible.) What did you find most surprising, or most compelling, in Buehrens’s discussion of how the Bible supports progressive interpretations of sin, evil, and salvation?
- How has progressive religion reimagined sin and evil? What are some of the different ways Buehrens and Parker describe sin and evil? What are some of the ways you hear Unitarian Universalists redefining sin and evil?
- How would you say we are saved? How can we resist sin and evil and protect life?

Close the discussion by sharing Parker’s passage at the top of p. 70 that begins “Salvation manifests in wisdom . . .”

Reflection *20 Minutes*

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own sense of soteriology. Post these questions on newsprint: “How is evil countered and its harm redressed or stopped?” (p. 70) “What does salvation mean to you?” “What role does religious scripture play in your spiritual and ethical understandings?”

Offer participants 15 to 18 minutes for individual reflection and writing.

Sharing *20 Minutes*

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. Ask individuals to take

turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 15 minutes in small groups.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. Ask:

Now that you have discussed, reflected, shared, and listened, what messages about salvation, sin, evil, and the Bible will you carry with you from today’s workshop?

Closing *5 Minutes*

Offer a closing reading from the two chapters. Read the final and second-to-last paragraph on p. 75, beginning with “Salvation is fully arriving in this life . . .”

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Session 4: “The Foundations” *Theology*

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

- Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.
- Post the covenant that the group created during the first session.

SESSION PLAN *90 Minutes*

Welcome *5 Minutes*

Light the chalice. Welcome participants. If everyone does not yet know one another’s name, ask for names. You may wish to ask each person to briefly share something she or he appreciated in the most recent two chapters of *A House for Hope*. Point out the posted covenant, ask the group if they would like to make changes to it, and ask the group to agree to uphold it.

Discussion

40 Minutes

Introduce the topic of the sixth and seventh chapters of *A House for Hope*: our notions of deity, or “the ground of our being.” Ask:

- What are some ways you hear the idea of God, or deity, discussed in your congregation?
- What was different about the discussion in *A House for Hope*?
- What rang true to you from Buehrens and Parker’s words?
- What, in their thinking and experiences, challenged you the most?

Share this quote from Parker, p. 101:

Is it reasonable to believe in God? The question “Does God exist?” can be a metallic, hard-edged question about what is factually true. . . . But the question “Does God exist?” arises in another way—not as a cool inquiry into the nature of ultimate reality. It arises in the messy, painful dead ends, on the cold winter afternoons where life is exposed to the raw elements. It arises among the communities of those lacking bare necessities. It arises among the lonely, the hungry, the frightened, and those without voice. In such settings, the question is not about metaphors or about rational arguments. It is more elemental. It is a question borne in the suffering souls of human beings, and its meaning is a cry for hope: Is there any help for pain? Is there anything that will spring green from this bitter winter, with its dirty ice and slush? Is there any hope for the disempowered and silenced? The abandoned? And when everything human fails, and nothing that is within the power of human beings to do can be done, what then? Does God exist? Is there a source of healing and transformation that will bring about justice in heaven or on earth?

Invite further discussion:

Parker invites us into an “inquiry of the heart,” where we ask ourselves, “Is there reason to trust that there is any help available?” “Is there something or someone beyond us that desires that we be free, whole, and joyful; that desires the thriving of life in its beautiful diversity and abundance; and that has the power, in connection with

us, to heal, transform, liberate and enliven our existence?”

You may wish to have a moment of silence for reflection before participants begin to answer—this is a big question, and participants’ first response might be to retreat toward their heads, toward the more easily defended intellectual realm. The questions Parker asks are heart questions—authentic responses may arise from participants’ own memories of powerlessness and vulnerability, which may not be easy for them to access. If the discussion seems to be staying in the “head” realm, name this challenge, remind everyone of the covenant, and encourage responses from the heart.

Reflection

20 Minutes

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own sense of our foundations—“the ground of our being.” Post these questions on newsprint:

- In your own life, how have your ideas about God changed? What changed them? Have those changing ideas changed you?
- What ways of speaking of deity have become idolatrous to you? Or, to put it another way—who is the God you don’t believe in?
- What ways of speaking about deity appeal to you? What kind of God makes sense to you in all your wisdom, experience, community, and intuition?

Offer participants 15 to 18 minutes for individual reflection and writing.

Sharing

20 Minutes

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. Ask individuals to take turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 15 minutes in small groups.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. Ask:

- Which of these questions was easiest to answer? Which was hardest? Why do you think that was?
- Now that you have discussed, reflected, shared, and listened, what messages about deity and “the ground of our being” will you carry with you from today’s workshop?

Closing *5 Minutes*

Offer this closing reading from John Buehrens, p. 119:

Where is God in all that [we] must face? It changes. At times it must feel like a fragile, invisible web that has to be tended. But there is something solid, if changing, underneath it all. Despite every change, every chance of loss, to be upheld by a reliable foundation to shared living. This is to know God. Not the static God of classical theism. That God is dead. But a God who sustains shared hope, as we reconstruct the connections, beyond every human loss and challenge.

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Session 5: “The Welcoming Rooms” Anthropology and Pneumatology

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

- Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.
- Post the covenant that the group created during the first session.

SESSION PLAN *90 Minutes*

Welcome *5 Minutes*

Light the chalice. Welcome participants. You may wish to ask each person to briefly share something she or he appreciated in the most recent three chapters of *A House for Hope*. Point out the posted covenant, ask the group if they would like to make changes to it, and ask the group to agree to uphold it.

Discussion *40 Minutes*

Introduce the topics of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh chapters of *A House for Hope*: our notions of human

nature (our theological anthropology) and the sacred spirit of life (our pneumatology). Ask:

- Parker begins chapter nine by recalling her experience on a national United Methodist Church committee studying homosexuality. She found herself at odds with her fellow committee member Sam about fundamental issues of theological anthropology: what it means to be human, what it means to live in right relationship with the divine, and what it means to love and be loved. What are some of the ways you have seen and heard these questions at play in religious discourse about same-sex love and marriage?
- Parker calls for creating an economic system “that regards human beings as generous, capable, and connected with one another and the earth” (pp. 134–135). What might such an economic system look like? How would it be different from our own?
- Buehrens begins chapter ten by telling the story of the Unitarian Universalist congregation of Knoxville, Tennessee, and their history of hospitality to the marginalized, including their response in the aftermath of a deadly shooting in their sanctuary. What spoke to you in that story? What ideas about human nature do you draw from it?
- What in Unitarian Universalism can help provide an antidote to narcissism and consumerism that are so readily encouraged in the mass media?
- Buehrens and Parker write: “we need a pneumatology that goes beyond the highly individualistic, narcissistic ‘spirituality’ of contemporary culture” (p. 148). In what ways can a sense of the spirit help us find compassion and feel interdependence?

Reflection *20 Minutes*

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own sense of theological anthropology and pneumatology. Post these questions on newsprint:

- What is the role of love in your understanding of human nature? the role of sensuality? of Eros?
- Have you ever felt transformed by worship? If so, how? If not, how might you wish that worship would transform you?

Offer participants 15 to 18 minutes for individual reflection and writing.

Sharing *20 Minutes*

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. Ask individuals to take turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 15 minutes in small groups.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. Invite volunteers to speak briefly about their thoughts on love, and on worship. Ask:

What will you carry forward from today’s discussions and reflections?

Closing *5 Minutes*

Offer this closing reading from Buehrens and Parker, p. 159:

After all, “the great surmise,” as one of our friends puts it, that is both hidden and revealed in Creation’s beauty, is that we creatures were and are loved—more than we can say or sing. Yet before we can truly begin to love others, much less practice the love that embodies itself as sanctuary and as justice, we must remember and reimagine that love.

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Session 6: “The Threshold” Missiology

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

- If your congregation has a mission statement and/or a vision statement, bring copies of them for participants’ use.
- Arrange for an easel, flipchart, markers, and masking tape to be used in the workshop.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Gather writing paper and writing implements for participants who may not have brought their own.
- Post the covenant that the group created during the first session.

SESSION PLAN *90 Minutes*

Welcome *5 Minutes*

Light the chalice. Welcome participants. You may wish to ask each person to briefly share something she or he appreciated in the most recent two chapters of *A House for Hope*. Point out the posted covenant, ask the group if they would like to make changes to it, and ask the group to agree to uphold it.

Discussion *40 Minutes*

Introduce the topics of the final two chapters of *A House for Hope*: our missiology, our sense of mission and the way we as liberal religionists share our “good news.” Ask:

- What is the “good news” of Unitarian Universalism? What of our faith tradition would you declare from the rooftops, or make manifest in the streets?
- Parker writes, “The ecumenical and multireligious mission of progressive faith is to strengthen solidarity by holding fast to what is good, what protects and saves life, in the presence of crucifying powers that threaten earth and earth’s people” (p. 172). How do we do this now? How could we share, spread, and grow this mission?
- Buehrens writes, “It is time for us to stop thinking that we have the burden of bringing enlightenment to other cultures. Rather our mission now is to partner with others who are different from us and to learn from them about the path to creating a more hopeful and life-giving world for all of earth’s peoples” (p. 176). What are some ways you see the legacy of Eurocentrism displayed in Unitarian Universalism? What are some ways you see multiculturalism and cross-cultural partnership developing in Unitarian Universalism?

If your congregation has a mission and/or vision statement, share it with the group. Ask:

- Does this mission (or vision) call to us? If so, where does it call us? Who does it call us to be?
- How does our congregation “care for the sacredness of this world, this life, here and now?” (Parker, p. 170). What mission and vision do you aspire toward for our congregation?

Reflection **20 Minutes**

Invite participants to take some time to reflect on their own sense of missiology. Post these questions on newsprint:

- What is the mission of progressive religion, in your words?
- What is progressive religion’s “good news,” in your words?

Offer participants 15 to 18 minutes for individual reflection and writing.

Sharing **20 Minutes**

Ask the group to divide into pairs or trios to listen and speak about their reflections. (If your group has six or fewer participants, you may wish to have the large group share their words on mission and good news.) Ask individuals to take turns sharing, and to listen appreciatively to one another without interruption. Offer 15 minutes for sharing.

Bring all participants back together for a concluding discussion. If you divided into small groups, ask for a few volunteers to share their reflections. Ask:

- What is the next step you will take toward living the mission of progressive religion?

Closing (5 Minutes)

Offer this closing reading from Buehrens, pp. 181–182:

Sometimes when I had sung [“We Shall Overcome”] the words had rung hollow. Not this time. This time I remembered that enslaved people brought that melody with them from Africa. Civil rights activists that I had known personally had turned it from a personal prayer for endurance into an anthem of collective resistance. It was one that inspired the whole generation in America in which I came of age, making us more determined never to give up—not in the face of fire hoses, billy clubs, jailings, bombings, assassinations; dangers that my partners in India knew all too well. Now I was hearing that same “struggle song”—one brought halfway around the globe and sung back to me by people with whom I share a hope and a mission. Tears rolled down my cheeks as I sang, grateful to have received back from partners the determination of

a hope that I needed not to lose.

To be progressive in religion means to hold on to that hope, to recognize the mission that is inspired by it, and to embrace that mission in partnership with others, bringing all the strength of our diverse cultures, languages, and creeds together to serve justice.

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Session 7: Conclusion and “House Dedication”

FACILITATOR PREPARATION

Before this session:

Ask participants to gather their writings and reflections from the previous six sessions, and to create from them an essay: an essay that describes what resonates with them in progressive theology; an essay that describes their own house for hope.

- Ask participants to bring copies of their essay to share with the group.
- Invite volunteers to bring food and beverages for this closing celebration.
- Photocopy this guide’s Suggestions for Further Reading for distribution.
- Gather a chalice, candle, and matches, plus an altar cloth for use in the workshop’s Welcome.
- Post the group’s covenant.

SESSION PLAN

60 to 90 Minutes

Welcome

5 Minutes

Welcome participants, light the chalice, and offer words for chalice lighting. If participants have brought food and beverages, invite everyone to help themselves.

Sharing

45 to 75 Minutes

Share some words from your heart about how much you have appreciated the experience of reading and discussing *A House for Hope* alongside the people in this workshop.

Affirm that all of us are engaged in a lifelong process of creating religious meaning, and that the ideas we share in this workshop are necessarily provisional. We affirm and promote “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” as our Principles state.

Invite participants to share with one another in that free and responsible search by sharing their essays.

When the sharing is complete, allow time for questions and comments.

Closing 10 Minutes

Ask participants to gather in a circle. Invite each person to share an appreciation for *A House for Hope*—for the book, for the group, for the ideas both awakened.

Distribute copies of the Suggestions for Further Reading to interested participants.

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Suggestions for Further Reading

INTRODUCTION

The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream by Barack Obama (Vintage 2006)

Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation by Eboo Patel (Beacon Press 2007)

THE GARDEN

Chapter 1: This Holy Ground

Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock (Beacon Press 2008)

On the Mystery: Discerning Divinity in Process by Catherine Keller (Fortress Press 2008)

Chapter 2: Last Things First

“The Celestial Railroad” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *Mosses from An Old Manse* (1846), available online and in book format

The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics by Christopher Lasch (Norton 1991)

THE SHELTERING WALLS

Chapter 3: Life Together

Blessing the World: What Can Save Us Now by Rebecca Ann Parker, edited by Rob Hardies (Skinner House Books 2006)

The Essential JLA: Essays by James Luther Adams, edited by G. K. Beach (Skinner House Books 1997)

Chapter 4: Restoring Heartwood

The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial by Robert Bellah (University of Chicago Press 1992)

Liberalism: The Genius of American Ideals by Marcus Raskin (Rowman & Littlefield 2004)

THE ROOF

Chapter 5: Deliver Us from Evil

Proverbs of Ashes: Violence, Redemptive Suffering, and the Search for What Saves Us by Rebecca Ann Parker and Rita Nakashima Brock (Beacon Press 2001)

Jesus and the Disinherited by Howard Thurman (Beacon Press 1976)

Chapter 6: Taking Refuge

Understanding the Bible: An Introduction for Skeptics, Seekers, and Religious Liberals by John A. Buehrens (Beacon Press 2003)

An Unsettling God: The Heart of the Hebrew Bible by Walter Brueggemann (Fortress Press 2009)

THE FOUNDATIONS

Chapter 7: The Rocks Will Cry Out

Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology by William R. Jones (Beacon Press 1997)

I Don't Believe in Atheists by Chris Hedges (Free Press 2008)

Chapter 8: The Changing of the Foundations

Love and Death: My Journey through the Valley of the Shadow by Forrest Church (Beacon Press 2009)

Identifying the Image of God: Radical Christians and Nonviolent Power in the Antebellum United States by Dan McKanan (Oxford University Press 2002)

THE WELCOMING ROOMS**Chapter 9: A Home for Love**

Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk by Delores Williams (Orbis 1995)

Of Divine Economy: Refinancing Redemption by Marion Grau (T & T Clark 2004)

Chapter 10: The Welcome Table

Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope by Brian D. McLaren (Thomas Nelson 2007)

How Much Do We Deserve? An Inquiry into Distributive Justice by Richard Gilbert (Skinner House Books 2001)

Chapter 11: A Sanctuary for the Spirit

Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed: The Story of Le Chambon and How Goodness Happened There by Philip P. Hallie (Harper & Row 1979)

De Musica by Augustine of Hippo (available online and in many formats)

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About the Guide's Author

Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh is a life-long Unitarian Universalist with backgrounds in curriculum development and ministry. Currently co-minister of the UU congregation in Winchester, Massachusetts, Sarah served as intern minister in John Buehrens' congregation in Needham, Massachusetts.

A House for Hope: The Promise of Progressive Religion in the Twenty-first Century (Beacon Press 2010) is available in the following formats:

- Hardcover
- E-book

Order *A House for Hope*

Congregations

Congregations can order copies of *A House for Hope* from the UUA Bookstore:

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Individuals

Individuals can order copies of *A House for Hope* from www.beacon.org or from your favorite bookstore.

This discussion guide is also available for download at www.beacon.org.



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