

Hope for the Gay Church - Maya Henson

Hello, I am Maya Henson, I'm 15 years old, and I have gone to this Church for a very long time. I am also a Lesbian who has grown up in a church that accepts the LGBTQ community. That makes me bit special, because most people I have known or told about being accepted in my church have been totally mind-blown. The idea that a place of worship could be kind and inviting people of the LGBTQ Community is not something that most people are used to, and hearing about it is both sad and exciting. One, because they wish they had a safe space and two that there is even a safe space to go to. I love that I have had a space like this to go to, but that doesn't mean there aren't problems or a price that comes with that. Growing up as a child being gay, liking girls, was just me. No one questioned it, or said it was wrong, and that's amazing and most people don't have that. The Price of that is I didn't know what the world thought about me being Gay. Again both amazing and bit troubling to go out into the world and hear what people think that it's bad or wrong can be hard. But I had this place where it was okay for me to be gay and to love girls and to drown out the hateful comments in the world and even help future generations, have a clear path and just be me. It is amazing what a few people can do for you just by saying you are not wrong to be who you are and I am so thankful for what everyone here does for the LGBTQ Community, even if it's someone not caring about who you have a crush one. It's like magic, seeing being gay as normal, one of the best feelings... Hope.

UUMAN Pride Testimonial - Kara Sweeney

Hello, my name is Kara Sweeney and I have been a member at UUMAN since 2004. When I started visiting this church, my first child, Maya was about 18 months old. I came alone initially, exploring various groups, committees and activities. I was an immigrant liberal, trying to find my people. There was no question for me whether I needed an inclusive church. But there are a wide range of “inclusive churches” and I dived in to find out where our limits were. I was encouraged to find that we had a Welcoming Congregation Committee that was dedicated to not only embracing our GLBT community, but addressing the thoughts, beliefs and ideas that we held that prevented us from REALLY being welcoming to a group of people who had been systematically marginalized from worship spaces. This was good work and I ended up chairing that committee as we became the 100th UU church to become a Welcoming Congregation.

As the good liberal that I am, I had discussed how we would feel about having gay children with my husband before we married. Both of us had no problem with the idea, other than wondering what difficulties would come that child’s way. Similar to the discussion of how our biracial children would fare in the world. When I found UUMAN, it seemed to tick all the boxes for the environment I wanted my children raised in. Good solid religious education, radical, enduring lessons on the dignity and worth of all people and love and compassion whatever path you take. I didn’t know that I would be raising a gay child here, but we have. UUMAN has been part of the bubble that my children are raised in, where who they liked or loved was celebrated. It is where they know they are cherished and embraced, even when they don’t match or fit in with the wider world. It’s where

they were taught that they might believe different things than many of their schoolmates and fellow UUMANites and that's ok. And what their schoolmates believe is also ok. That foundation has set them up with a confidence about being who they are in the world. I would like to say a fearless confidence, but it's always scary to be yourself in the world. It's particularly terrifying if you are not heterosexual or gender conforming, because the world actively fights you on that.

I remember a story being told during one of the Welcoming Congregation workshops of a gay couple who had come to UUMAN to check us out. At the time we had a giant rainbow flag on the front of the building. This couple described sitting in the car, clinging to each other's hands, wondering if it was safe to go in. That story has always stuck with me. What was jarring about that story was that even with the giant flag waving at them, they were still not sure we would welcome or harm them. Their treatment in the world had been so negative, particularly in worship spaces, that they doubted our attempts to illustrate we wanted them here. Right then I learnt how hard we have to work to overcome the pain that marginalized people walk around with. It's not enough to fly the flags or say a few words about accepting everyone. We have to show up and walk the walk. We have to go above and beyond for those who have been told above and beyond that they are not ok. We have to gain their trust that when we say we love them, that means we stand up for them. It means we show up for them. It means we create a place for them to worship in. It means we show up to Pride and march alongside them. It means we have Youth groups where they are connected to peers. It means we have classes where they are seen and heard. It means we recruit them to positions of leadership where they can show us what

we're missing. It means we teach everyone here how to be an ally. It means we send all our kids out into the world, irrelevant of their sexual or gender identity, knowing how to fight injustice, because they have been treated justly in a place of worship. This is how we save the world and ourselves in the process.

Renewing Our Promise to Pride – Rev. Dave Dunn

A young, gay man felt lost and isolated. He didn't choose to be gay. He just was. He was beginning to feel depressed because it all had been simply so exhausting. It seemed as if resistance was everywhere – all the time and in all directions. Sometimes the resistance was intentional; he was intentionally unwelcome, intentionally told that something was wrong with him, intentionally told that he was a deviant of some sort. But even when this intentional resistance was absent, an unintentional resistance was still there, permeating everything, permeating his entire culture.

It was like always having to walk uphill. At times, he had to fight off the intentional resisters but even if there were no intentional resisters, he still had to slog uphill – always uphill. Yet, it was as if this hill was magical. If he turned around, he'd expect to see some downhill yet magically, it was uphill in that direction too. Imagine that. Imagine having to live your life that way; where it was always uphill in every direction....like always swimming upstream regardless of direction. Exhausting...and can be cause for despair.

Well, one Sunday morning, this young man was walking through the streets of the city and he came across a large church; and enveloping this church was a rainbow banner. It wasn't hanging out front, or by the door, or in a prominent place visible from the street....no, this rainbow banner circumnavigated, surrounded the entire church...an entire city block. A church and an entire city block held together by the largest rainbow banner he had ever seen. The very sight of it took his breath away; and he had to go inside.

Just going inside eased his pain. The hill disappeared for the first time. He sat in the back and let the beauty of the service wash over him.

Now this is a story of a gay man's first encounter with Unitarian Universalism...and to remove a level of abstraction it was his first encounter with a specific Unitarian Universalist church. He dove into his church and eventually became a UU minister. This church also saved his life.

Let's not mince words here. I hope you understand this: It is a fact that Unitarian Universalism has saved lives...but again, though, let's remove a level of abstraction here....Let it be known, let it be said that *this place, this congregation*, the Unitarian Universalist Metro Atlanta North Congregation has saved lives. We are a life-saving congregation. This might seem incredulous to a straight white male, someone like me, but if you take the time to listen to the stories; you'll know. You'll know it to be true.

Twenty years ago, UU participation in the local Pride March was a big deal. It seemed like every church had 30-40 members present....and participation from all the local UU churches was coordinated. If you haven't been to a Pride March...well, think New Orleans style celebration. Although there often counter-protesters at various points along the route, the tenor of the march is generally upbeat, festive and jovial.

Kara and Sheila are organizing UUMAN's participation in this year's Pride March. We've come a long way in support of the LGBT community. I am proud of our work as a denomination. Yet, in addition to this work, we, as Kara said in her statement, "...have to show up and walk the walk.... [And] that when we say we love [our LGBT members, it also means that] we stand up for them. It means we show up for them....It means we show up to Pride and march alongside them."

I know we're all very busy...but Pride Sunday is only once a year. Please join us on the March!

The young, gay man in the story relates that having to walk uphill all the time was malevolently magical. Yet Maya, in her statement relates, with a heart full of gratitude, that it's joyfully magical to be seen as normal here at UUMAN. Again, she says, "and I am so thankful for what everyone here does for the LGBTQ CommunityIt's like magic, seeing being gay as normal, one of the best feelings."