

**ALL SOULS COMMUNITY CHURCH BRANCHES PROGRAM**  
**INTRODUCTION AND EXPLANATION**  
**FOR LEADERS AND PARTICIPANTS**  
**THE REVEREND DOCTOR BRENT A. SMITH**  
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**The Vision Quest:**  
**The beginning of the BRANCHES experience and the events that formed All Souls**

In the fall of 2001, the group of people who became the “founding mothers and fathers” of what would later become All Souls Community Church, gathered in public parks in the Grand Rapids area to investigate the nature of spiritual fellowship. Early on it became apparent that there was a desire amongst the group to explore what it would mean to be a spiritual community, and by the end of that fall there was expressed by the group a desire to be “gathered” into a Unitarian Universalist Church. However, during the fall meetings, first in public parks and later at Fountain Elementary School, several things stood out.

First, the experience of “gathering” took on a life of its own, designated by the name of the “Vision Quest.” This group saw its meetings to be part of a larger journey of fellowship and discovery.

Secondly, that the kind of fellowship that would characterize the group as a group, would be “spiritual,” broadly considered and variously understood; that is, that there was no need to “define precisely” what spiritual meant, but that it was a kind of fellowship that included deep, personal growth on the part of the individuals that made up the group. Theirs would be a “religious” endeavor, understanding “religious” to have the broadest meaning and application.

Thirdly, it was gradually agreed that the meetings in the fall were aimed towards the establishment of a Unitarian Universalist church; that is, that the spiritual character of the fellowship that defined the group would be out of the Unitarian and Universalist faith traditions. This gave a particularity to an understanding of “spiritual,” a particularity that rooted the emerging church community in faith traditions that bore distinctive understandings and language. It was out of this particularity that words and ideas like, “walking together,” “covenant,” “liberating and cultivating the spirit,” “liberal religion,” and other terms arose. It also gave an organizational form to the group, thereby “institutionalizing” the group in congregational polity, the historic and democratic form of governance in Unitarian Universalism.

And finally, it was acknowledged and accepted that the meetings in the fall were not “worship” per se, but meetings for a different, but related, purpose. The group chose to structure the time during the “Vision Quest” Sunday meetings, in the form of the “BRANCHES experience” Dr. Brent Smith had developed at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in the 1990’s, and brought with him to Fountain Street Church, an independent church not affiliated with the Unitarian Universalists, during his tenure there

(1999-2001). It was there that many of the founders had experience the transformative nature of the BRANCHES experience.

The BRANCHES experience is a small study group experience (variously called “Covenant Groups,” “Small Group ministries,” or “Disciple-Making groups,” depending on the faith tradition), but of a particular kind, which aims to deepen the spiritual life of its members by placing them “in conversation” with the theological and philosophical ideas of a particular historic faith tradition; in this case, Unitarian Universalism. The BRANCHES group experience uses primary and secondary source material from Unitarian Universalist theological, philosophical, and social history, and larger tradition of liberal religion. In reading and discussing that material as a group, each individual in the group comes to understand his or her “spiritual walk” as part of a larger journey of faith through history. It helps to “locate” the individual within Unitarian Universalism, and shape the spiritual identity added to the identity of self. Through reading and guided discussion the participants also engage the primary ideas and concepts that are foundational to Unitarianism and Universalism as distinctive faith traditions. And finally, the participant, in doing this with others of the congregation, comes to understand how the particular church stands within a larger faith tradition, and how the mission of that church is fulfilled through fulfilling its faith identity.

Thus, it is hoped, that through the BRANCHES experience the participant gains a greater sense of his or her spiritual journey and identity by standing within the “conversation” that forms the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition in which both the individual and church stands. Unitarian Universalism becomes an identity added to the identity of self with which the person came to the congregation, through the person consenting to walk with the congregation.

This became the form of the fall 2001 “Vision Quest” meetings, and was distinguished from worship. Readings were selected by a Steering Committee from recommendations received by a consultation with Dr. Smith. Individuals were selected to respond to the chosen readings, and this was the presentational form of the Sunday mornings. Small group discussion of the ideas and concepts embodied in the readings and elaborated upon by the responses, took up the rest of the “spiritual” time. After this additional time was used to address and decide institutional and organizational matters.

Thus, it could be said that All Souls Community Church was founded on the “spiritual walk” as the form of community fellowship; and, that the gathering mothers and fathers of the church shaped the spiritual nature of the community through the readings they chose as foundational to the “Vision Quest,” and the written and delivered responses given to those readings by particular individuals.

In effect, they had produced a “midrash” on the ideas and concepts – theological, philosophical, and historical – that form the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition they were considering “walking inside of” as a spiritual community. Using the term “scripture” here is not meant to be understood as it is used in orthodox, creedal Christianity, but in the liberal religious tradition. In orthodox, creedal Christianity

“scripture” is delivered and sealed once and for all. Written documents compose a canon to which a faith community in that tradition cannot add. By virtue of conceiving of written documents in that manner, orthodox, creedal Christian “scriptures” come to be interpreted by people in those traditions as embodying the idea that revelation - new insight and deeper wisdom - is “closed” and “sealed” at a certain time in history by certain “super” persons more holy than others. Here, the term “scripture” is used alongside of the Jewish term, “midrash,” as a way to suggest they possess the fluid character of a particular time and location; in this instance, the gathering “Vision Quest” of All Souls in 2001. And, yet, that these particular documents, used during that time, are not like any other documents in the world. They are unique in how they are to be considered and used. These readings have a unique history in terms of All Souls, and thereby contain an authority that will deepen with time and use. Yet, they are documents written and selected by men and women with a distinctive purpose: to support and transmit ideas and concepts that are understandings of the spiritual life and spiritual community within the Unitarian Universalist and liberal religious traditions. Thus, new ideas, fuller explanations, and wider understandings can be added to them. As a set of documents written by men and women, they are not “sealed” as revelation is not sealed. They are not “holy” above all others. They are unique, were used for a unique purpose, and should be considered and interpreted in light of that historical reality.

As unique, these written documents possess an authority not to be taken lightly or irreverently, but discreetly and with respect for their place in the formation of All Souls’ spiritual character. They are not to be discarded or ignored. They are a window into time, taking the newcomer back to when the church was founded, and the ideas and concepts that shaped those men and women and children. They are a window into the soul of All Souls at its inception. They are one of the chief characteristics of the congregation’s “DNA.”

And, as is consistent with congregational polity and the local character of fellowship in our faith tradition, the founders of All Souls were well aware that their “version” of Unitarian Universalism was local and, like all Unitarian Universalist churches with which they were and are in fellowship, makes no creedal or doctrinal claims upon any other Unitarian Universalist church, nor is meant to.

It was out of the “Vision Quest” that the BRANCHES experience at All Souls Community Church was structured and its purpose arose.

### **The Purpose of the BRANCHES Experience**

The purpose of the BRANCHES experience at All Souls Community Church, is to fulfill the mission of the church; that is, to liberate and cultivate the spirit. The form that experience takes is small group learning that in the initial phase simulates the “Vision Quest” experience as the paradigm of community formation and individual spiritual identity formation. It is to take the new member into the phase of All Souls community life to which its covenant was derived and upon which its very existence depends.

The initial phase of the BRANCHES experience consists of each BRANCHES group going through the readings that the founders determined to be the “Vision Quest.” These readings characterize the distinctive understanding of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition as incarnated through All Souls, its covenant, and organizational structure. Each BRANCHES group also simulates the covenantal communal form of All Souls by going through a covenant process itself, in order to experience the community formation that shapes All Souls identity as a church.

Typically, the BRANCHES group meets once or twice a month. At these meetings, Opening and Closing words are given and are chosen from out of the congregation’s hymnal. Prayers and/or meditations are offered from Unitarian Universalist resources. Readings from the Vision Quest materials are assigned, and one or more person from the group is chosen to respond to what is read. After the initial BRANCHES experience – lasting typically a year, but covering all of the recourses used as part of the congregation’s Vision Quest – resources will change, and welcome the particularities of each individual’s spiritual journey. But, the purpose of the first phase of the BRANCHES experience is to invite and assist each member to place their spiritual journey within the context of the congregation and Unitarian Universalism.

It is critical both to the spiritual growth of each new member and deepening and broadening the spiritual character of the congregation, that this initial phase be emphasized and completed fully, with reflection and understanding. It is for this reason that at the end of the ROOTS newcomer’s class, when new members are invited to consider moving into the BRANCHES experience, that the minister characterize the first commitment made as a member as “serving All Souls in study.” If part of the aim of the church is the spiritual growth of its members in “liberating and cultivating the spirit,” then in providing as a community an experience that fulfills that aim, the church itself is strengthened.

In this way it could be said that initially the purpose of the BRANCHES experience at All Souls is what other churches call “membership assimilation,” although it has a distinctive meaning here. It is first and foremost a spiritual matter, and not primarily a matter of “committee work” or “running the business operations of the church.” The manner in which the BRANCHES experience “assimilates” a new member is more akin to addressing what is known historically as the “halfway covenant” issue in Unitarian churches. Thus, in imitating “The Vision Quest” in form, structure, and content, the initial phase of the BRANCHES experience is meant to give a new member an experience akin to the gathering process that brought about the formation of the church: its organizational form, its covenant, and the direction of its spiritual walk. Thus, the new member comes to “walk alongside of” longer standing members with an equality of purpose and “ownership” in the covenant of the church.

Thus, by placing one’s spiritual journey within the framework of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition and the history of All Souls, an individual can move into leadership roles. One can more directly help his or her congregation fulfill its mission.

## **The Content of the Initial Phase of the BRANCHES Experience**

Readings from the “Vision Quest,” in the sequence from the current BRANCHES booklet, with divisions into section titles:

### **Section 1. Orthodox and Free Religion**

**SESSION 1:** "Religion, the Church, and Our Mission in the World" John B. Wolf

**SESSION 2:** "Five Smooth Stones of Religious Liberalism" James Luther Adams

### **Section 2. Covenant and the Free Religious Community**

**SESSION 3:** "The Roots and Qualities of the Free Church" Brent A. Smith  
"Individual Response to 'The Roots and Qualities of the Free Church'" Roger Gilles  
(Delivered as one of the “Vision Quest” Sunday presentations during the “gathering” phase)

**SESSION 4:** Excerpt from *Covenant and Polity in Biblical Israel: Biblical Foundations and Jewish Expressions*, Daniel J. Elazar

**SESSION 5:** “The Fundamentals of the Free Church: The Covenant,” “The Fundamentals of the Free Church: The Free Pew,” “The Fundamentals of the Free Church: The Free Pulpit,” Brent A. Smith

### **Section 3. Freedom as a Religious Idea**

**SESSION 6:** *Human Nature* - "Likeness to God" William Ellery Channing

**SESSION 7:** *God and Time* - "A Theology of Time and Character" Alice Blair Wesley

**SESSION 8:** *The World* - "What Must We Do to Be Saved?" A. Powell Davies

**SESSION 9:** *The Religious Life* - "Deeds Not Creeds" F. Forrester Church

**SESSION 10:** *Western Religious Cousins* - "By What Authority?" Paul Tillich

### **Section 4. Our Community – All Souls Community Church**

**SESSION 11:** "The Pilgrims and the Spirit of the Covenant of the Free Church" Alice Blair Wesley

**SESSION 12:** "Walking Together" Conrad Wright

### **The Nature, Structure, Meaning, and Direction of Succeeding Phases of the BRANCHES Experience at All Souls Community Church**

The phases of the BRANCHES experience that succeed the initial one have a purpose derived from the initial phase, which itself has a meaning and structure derived from the “Vision Quest.” Succeeding phases need to maintain the meaning of the BRANCHES experience through expanding the structure of the experience. Thus, will the church community continue “to walk together” towards its future. It will not turn

back to some past experience either of itself or one of its members, or find itself just standing still!

To fulfill the aim of the BRANCHES experience itself as practiced at All Souls, succeeding phases must deepen the spiritual life of the individual while expanding the spiritual character of the congregation. To do this succeeding phases need:

- 1) To expand the understanding of spiritual growth beyond the initial phase's exclusive emphasis on reading, reflection, and discussion.
- 2) To expand upon the educational approach of the BRANCHES experience by addressing a variety of individual learning styles.
- 3) To create different forms of small group interaction.
- 4) To expand the fellowship and bonds existing between All Souls and other Unitarian Universalist congregations and individuals.

Yet, there are essentials to the BRANCHES experience that need to be maintained at the same time. Succeeding phases of the BRANCHES experience need to maintain:

- 1) The focus on spiritual growth through learning and education.
- 2) An interpretative perspective born of liberal religious ideas rooted in the historical faith traditions of Unitarianism and Universalism
- 3) An emphasis on the intellectual (theological and philosophical) and social justice concerns derived from those interpretive perspectives and particular faith traditions.
- 4) Be a means to teach and model good church leadership

In other words, the succeeding phases of the BRANCHES experience are aimed at deepening the spiritual life of the individual by deepening his or her spiritual identity within this particular community (All Souls) embodying a particular faith tradition (Unitarianism and Universalism). And, the succeeding phases need be aimed at expanding the spiritual and institutional strength of All Souls through the learning and understanding of each of its members. Thus, through succeeding phases of the BRANCHES experience, the church endeavors "to walk together" towards the future through deepening its identity and expanding its scope.