



Winter 2026 Retreat

Toddhall Retreat Center near St Louis, MO

February 27-March 1



The Unitarian Universalist Women's Connection will host its 2026 Winter Retreat from February 27 to March 1 at the Toddhall Retreat Center near Columbia, Illinois, just south of St. Louis. This beloved annual gathering invites women from across the MidAmerica Region to come together for a rejuvenating weekend of community, reflection, and restoration in a peaceful natural setting.

The 2026 retreat theme emphasizes rest, connection, and self-care. Described as a "spa weekend with spirit," the event includes homemade meals prepared by the Toddhall kitchen, creative workshops, small group discussions, and evening programs that foster mindfulness and shared joy. The Blackburn Lodge at Toddhall—featuring cozy rooms, a fireside meeting area, and tranquil woodland surroundings—serves as the heart of the retreat experience.

Kathy, a Connection Council leader, will coordinate this year's retreat, continuing the group's tradition of offering four seasonal gatherings annually for Unitarian Universalist women. **Registration opens December 5, 2025**, with limited capacity of 27 participants, ensuring an intimate and nurturing environment. The weekend wraps up with a closing circle and reflective service on Sunday morning, sending each participant home refreshed in body, mind, and spirit.

Having Fun While Learning and Advocating at our Fall Retreat

by Karen Kortsch



Our Fall Retreat at Cedar Valley in West Bend, Wisconsin was a weekend full of activities and relaxation. The weather was perfect, which gave participants a great opportunity to enjoy the beautiful grounds of the retreat center.

Kerry Hagy told us all about the Permaculture that she and her husband have cultivated on the grounds surrounding their home. It was quite fascinating and inspiring. The earth is our mother and caring for her should be a priority for us all. Ingrid Daudert spoke to us about "The Skin of Mother Earth," which reinforced a lot

of the information that Kerry shared with us. We also had a craft workshop that involved making ink prints using fruits and vegetables, thanks to Sage.

We managed to fit some advocacy in by taking a field trip to the No Kings March at the local county courthouse. There we met up with our dear friend, Dana and her husband. Lucky for us, Jody had some sign making materials in her car so we could put some together for the occasion.

Our evenings were spent doing puzzles, drumming, singing, reading poems and book excerpts, shopping at our vendors and enjoying the company of such amazing women. I am already looking forward to our next retreat.



Living a Joyful Life part 1 redux

Previously Finding Joy

by Nyx Ember

I started this series in 2023. And at that time I thought I knew what joy was and that moments of joy were all I wanted. I was really still learning. My journey was in its infancy. When I wrote my original article, I was less than a year out of an abusive relationship and I had never in my life been able to do anything I truly wanted to do. I was not completely cognizant of what I wanted or who I was. I have come to the conclusion that joy is actually a continuous journey instead a destination. The definition of joy is "a feeling of great pleasure and happiness." What I was really seeking was a peaceful and joyful life. Having lived in so much pain and chaos, even a moment of joy was a relief. We all experience moments of joy but a joyful life is somehow a bit more complicated as it requires you to be intentional. I have found that seeking the wisdom of my elders has taught me some absolutely invaluable lessons in this journey. They have invested in me something so priceless: their words, memories and LOVE. I have spent as much time as I could sitting in the presence of some of the wisest and bravest women I could find. Women who have done amazing things often during a time when they faced challenges we struggle to understand today. Things they bring up in passing that cause you to do a double take as you ask them to repeat what they said for a story. And they always have a story, a rich thread woven through time. These stories are all lessons.

The most important lesson was to be unapologetically authentic to myself. No matter how scary that may be and sometimes it's truly terrifying. We live in a world where women are expected to be quiet and cooperative. Agreeable. However, I think being loud, proud and present is a lot more fun. It heals. Shrinking yourself into a box kills the spirit. Standing on what you believe in grows confidence and a greater sense of self. My beautiful elders have shown me that they are clear on what they believe, they are assertive. They know who they are and are unafraid to tell you who that is. They have earned their sense of self. Their strength is undeniable.

I have also noticed how happy my elders are. They have removed themselves from situations that move them to anger. Of course, there is anger for the causes that matter most but they have replaced anger with reasonable action. These days, I'm rarely angry for long. Situations that upset me aren't situations I'm meant to be part of. If there are ways I can work to help the greater good, I will. I have learned not to let things consume me. I do what I can. I pass along needed information to others who can do more than I am capable. I smile more. I'm healthier. I feel lighter. I have more energy and mental capacity to make good trouble. This is truly wisdom that may have saved my life as I was consumed with anxiety and all of the wrong problems.

They have taught me curiosity. They ask questions both for knowledge and genuine concern for the well being of others. They want to learn. These women have a very clear understanding for the immeasurable value of knowledge and information. Even as elders they are still learning. I know I'll be learning and growing my entire life. You can't be wise, peaceful or joyful without knowledge. And they care. They taught me how to love in healthy ways.

I'm trying to learn to rest. I've been taught, but going on this journey has made the world a much brighter, brilliant place to be. Sounds and colors are richer. I'm so excited to see this place and the people in it that I haven't followed the words of my elders very well in that area. I want to hear all the stories and stand in all the spaces they have been. I've gone so far, I've seen so much and accomplished many amazing things.

My hope is to write more. To (hopefully) be continued.



Spring Retreat

May 28-31, 2026

Three nights! Make plans to join us at Pilgrim Park near Princeton, Illinois.

Photo by Dawn Weller

Summer Retreat

August 14-16, 2026

OUR 10TH YEAR at Ronora Lodge and Retreat Center near Watervliet, MI

photo by Gretchen Ohmann



Fall Retreat

October 16-18, 2026

We'll return to Cedar Valley Retreat Center near West Bend, Wisconsin

photo courtesy of Cedar Valley

Tea & Talk and Book Club dates

January 17, 2026 Host: to be announced

Book Club: We are open to book recommendations!

All our events are listed on our [CALENDAR](#)

Meet the Connection Council

Karen Kortsch, President (-2026)

info@uuwomensconnection.org



An active member of North Shore Unitarian Church in Deerfield, IL, Karen also volunteers for several other organizations working to advance gender equity, including the American Association of University Women, National Organization for Women, and National Nurses United. Karen has been a board member of [International Convocation of UU Women](#) from June 2018 and its president from June 2020 - June 2024. She is currently ICUUW Executive Director.

A registered nurse, she worked with the mentally ill at Capt. James Lovell Federal Health Care Facility in Chicago, Illinois.

Gretchen Ohmann, VP/newsletter/website (-2026)



Gretchen is a long-time UU. After holding various leadership positions in her local congregation, she joined the Central MidWest UU Women and Religion Committee where she served as treasurer, conference liaison, and webweaver, then part-time office manager, computer trainer and archivist. She began on the Continental UU Women and Religion core group as CMwD representative, and is now one of the co-convenors. Now retired from her day job as Technology Coordinator for the UUA MidAmerica Region, she is part-time Marketing Director for the [International Convocation of UU Women](#), and also [designs and hosts web sites](#).

She believes that gathering and connecting women is one of the keys to re-balancing power in society, along with reverence for Mother Earth and the interconnected web of our existence.

Join the Council!

There are two spaces open on the Council beginning January 1, 2026. Council members are asked to attend quarterly meetings via Zoom and the Annual Meeting in December, participate in email communications, decision-making and retreat planning, and are encouraged to attend as many retreats as possible.

These are three-year terms.

Would you be interested? Contact Karen Kortsch, Council President, by December 1st, at info@uuwomensconnection.org.

UU Women's Connection Council

Karen Kortsch, President (-2026)

info@uuwomensconnection.org

Gretchen Ohmann, Vice-President/Newsletter (-2026)

Patricia Hyams, Secretary/Newsletter (-2025)

Janet Adams, Treasurer (-2025)

treasurer@uuwomensconnection.org

Nyx Firebourn, At Large (-2027)

Sage Hagy, At-Large (-2026)

Kathy Miller, At-Large (-2026)

Tori Johnson, At-Large (2027)

Jenn Johnson, At-Large (-2027)

What are women doing in YOUR congregation?

UU Women's Connection Newsletter "Voices of Women" returns in the Winter.

Deadline for submissions is January 15th! newsletter@uuwomensconnection.org

UU Women's News

Visit our siblings' websites for more information.

UU Women and Religion uuwr.org

- [NEW - Book 7! Whistling Girls and Crowing Hens Series](#)
- [Songs for Earthlings](#)
- [Pomegoddess Notecards](#)
- [WomanSpirit](#)

International Convocation of UU Women icuuw.org

- [UU Faith in Kenya](#)
- [In Search of New Executive Director](#)
- [Choir at Unitarian Church Jowai India](#)

SisterSoUUrce sistersource.org

- [Sister Source Facebook page](#)
- [Passing the Flame: Rev. Crystal Saiyge new Exec Director](#)

UU Women's Federation uuwf.org

- [Once Upon a Time, Long Ago...](#)
- [What's Tylenol Got To Do With It?](#)
- [Rise not in fear, but in remembering](#)

Women and Religion Pacific Central pcduwr.org

- [Spring Retreat 2026](#)

UUA Top Stories

- [Congregational Salary Program](#)
- [UUs Are Helping During the SNAP Crisis](#)
- [Broken and Belonging: Part 2 of 3](#)

Did you know?

Once upon a time there were TWO UU women's groups in the midwest that held conferences or retreats. Connection held Spring and Fall events, while the other group did Winter and Summer Conferences. The other group unfortunately dissolved in 2019. UU Women's Connection has been stepping up, and now we are offering FOUR retreats during the year in a wider geographic area from St. Louis to mid-Wisconsin and eastward to Michigan.



Unitarian Universalist Women's Connection

Connecting people who identify as women and gender-expansive folks in the MidAmerica Region UUA



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