

one teen as an emissary, but make sure it is a group project. Having youth involved in a Partnership adds a new dimension, new life, and new possibilities for success.

- Guide the follow-up. Mark key points in your Group calendar for writing emails, sending Christmas and Easter cards (way in advance), maybe Skyping with new friends, whatever works for your Group. Consider ways in which the Group might continue to engage in learning about UU roots, and also in the social justice projects needed to support Transylvanian Unitarianism from home. Letter writing campaigns are still successful in the world of social entrepreneurship, and, of course, social media may be the way for the teens to become both educated, and the educators, about this important place and its people.



Thanks to Rev. Jennifer Emrich, First Universalist Church of Yarmouth, ME for writing this flyer.

## NOTES

**Cover quote:** Cousineau, Phil. *The Art of Pilgrimage*. P xxii. San Francisco, CA. Conari Press.

**Pilgrimage vs. Mission:** See Linda-Marie Dellof's excellent little book on mission driven churches and community ministry for this idea and all the others that underpin it. *Public Offerings: Stories from the Front Lines of Community Ministry*. 2002. Bethesda, MD. Alban Institute. P 12. For the composition of a healthy UU congregation, check out *The Prophetic Imperative* by Richard S. Gilbert. 2000. Boston, MA. Skinner House Books.

**Assessment and Safety:** Offering *Our Whole Lives* in your congregation requires specific training. It is highly inadvisable to use the curriculum without the training, and may lead to conflicts with parents and other church leaders. Trainings are offered in many locations, and are incredibly fun. Check out [www.uua.org/re/owl/](http://www.uua.org/re/owl/) to learn more and/or to register for an OWL training near you.

**Preparation:** For a good read about the differences between Liberal and Liberationist faith and work in the world read Paul Razor's *Faith Without Certainty*. And for good examples of what modern liberationist work looks and sounds like in the world try Tracy Kidder's *Mountains Beyond Mountains* and Gregory Boyle's *Tattoos on the Heart*, both highly readable *New York Times* bestsellers.

Also be sure to watch the video about the history of Unitarianism, *Long Strange Trip*—which is included in the UUPCC Travel Service packet sent when you sign up for a pilgrimage.

# The Benefits of a Youth Trip to Transylvania

## A few words about Youth Pilgrimage and Mission in Transylvania



*“If we truly want to know the secret of soulful travel, we need to believe that there is something sacred waiting to be discovered in virtually every journey.”*

—Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*



For more details on UUPCC's Pilgrimages, visit our website at [www.uupcc.org/pilgrimages/pilgrimage-opportunities](http://www.uupcc.org/pilgrimages/pilgrimage-opportunities).

**Any trip you undertake** with the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC) in Transylvania will be a soulful journey, especially when you are traveling with youth. “Transylvania is our Rome!” one gleeful 15 year old participant recently exclaimed after visiting Kolozsvár and the beauty of “First Church.” Our religious roots have a rich past, and a deep and complicated present and future worth discerning and participating in. When our teenagers are exposed to these riches their own faith, often nebulous, sometimes downright shaky, suddenly begins to take a shape and form that they can hold on to. Parents often comment that exposure to Transylvanian Unitarianism has made their teenage daughter or son a “lifelong UU!”

The time that you invest in preparing your youth and your adult chaperones for travel to Romania, and immersion in the Transylvanian Unitarian religion and culture will produce this same rapid faith development not only in your teens, but in your entire congregation. Here are a few suggestions, culled from ministers and lay leaders who have seen such trips engage their youth and grow their congregations, for how to have a safe, productive and transformational experience abroad.

## PILGRIMAGE VS. MISSION

A youth pilgrimage tends to designate a trip focused on ancient and modern Unitarian sites, perhaps viewing and experiencing them in a particular order that you and your Partner Church Council trip leaders feel will lead to insight and the possibility of transformation. On such a pilgrimage you are encouraged to visit with your Partner village, if you have one, or to visit a village in need of a Partner. This will allow you and your teens the chance to see how a great many Transylvanian Unitarians live—in sustenance farming communities deep in the “Széklerföld.”

Mission, on the other hand, adds an extra dimension to your experience. If you already enjoy a vibrant (or even a struggling) Partnership that has some history to it and support in your congregation, then it might be time to determine whether or not there is a work project, requested by your Transylvanian Partner, that your youth may contribute to during their time in Transylvania/Romania.



dinners and parties. Enjoy this! Be gracious guests, tuned in, enthusiastic and polite with your Hungarian phrases, and ready to have a very good time.

- Some of the youth we’ve spoken to had their deepest, and “best” Transylvania experiences while visiting with elders and lay leaders in their homes in the village. Arrange to have an extra translator on hand (especially if your Partner Minister does not speak English) and take two or three youth at a time visiting with your Partner Minister. This might be happening simultaneously with the work project that is going on, allowing a small, rotating group to get away and come back refreshed. Or, it might be the main activity of your village time. In any case, the chance to be in a very small group, invited into people’s homes, is invaluable and will give your youth a deeper insight into village life, and the most recent history of our shared faith.
- Make sure your trip includes a Sunday!
- Saying good-bye will likely be a long process, involving food, speeches, dancing, and *pálinka*—a good time to remind your youth to “just say *nem*.” If you did not present a gift from your congregation to the Partner congregation at church, this is another good time to do so.

## REPORTING BACK

Because healthy churches, like healthy youth groups, are often mission-driven, it’s of great benefit to your home congregation when you “report back” to them after your journey. Here are a few things to consider:

- Assist your teens in creating and leading a worship service about their experience. Guide them into turning their thoughts, feelings and experiences into meaningful Sunday morning and/or Vespers worship. Expect them to have all the ‘raw data’ necessary, but help them ask and answer the questions: *So what? Where’s the sacred in this?*
- And, all that media they were denied while traveling? They should incorporate it now—music, slide shows, a Facebook page or entry about the service, video clips—everything and anything they can think of to include and inspire the congregation in their amazing adventure and what they learned about the root of being UU, and the future of their Transylvanian friends and Partners.
- Give your Partner Church committee/council a preview. Have the adults in your congregation who are most involved in your UUPCC Partnership invite the youth to their next meeting, or better yet—invite them to Youth Group, and allow them to be the first to see and hear what your teens have to say, and what they loved best about the experience. Remember, never send just

- If your Minister, religious education professionals and lay leaders are all invested in what the Youth Group is up to, this trip can and will bring your teens onto center stage in your congregation, and can be very inspiring for the adults. When teens are so obviously willing to invest their time and talents in the Partnership, many adults who were not formerly interested may sit up and take notice. Take this opportunity to explore our Transylvanian religious roots in worship, adult and children’s religious education, and in your social justice program. This integration will open the congregation and draw people in.

## WHILE YOU’RE IN TRANSYLVANIA

- See as much of Romania as you are able. Take time for the cities, the shopping malls, the tourist attractions and lunch outside on a plaza in several towns. Let your teens buy Dracula mugs. Do this before you go to your Partner Village, and talk about all of it. This is the thriving, EU-conscious Romania. If your teens don’t see this, they will not experience the sometimes vast difference between Romania and Transylvania.
- Ask your teens to listen carefully to the history that is provided about Romania, Transylvania, the World Wars, Hungarian Unitarianism, Communism and the realities of post-Communist government. The people speaking have been and are personally affected. This background information is crucial for a deep understanding of the stories that people in the villages will tell when you visit their homes and begin your friendship.
- Hold Group every day, somewhere, somehow. Check-in, debrief, decompress. Sing something familiar, tell stories. Challenge your teens to give voice to what surprises and delights them, as well as what makes them uncomfortable. Challenge them to let go of any sense that being American is the most important thing to be—you’ll be surprised how these messages have resonated with our youth as they’ve grown up, and what happens when they begin to let go of them. Give out treats they weren’t expecting. Make this safe, daily sharing a priority. This is the really good stuff.
- Impress upon the youth that the people of their Partner Village are very excited to see them! There will be children waiting. There will be youth wondering how it’s all going to go. There will be adults planning



## ASSESSMENT AND SAFETY

Is your Youth Group a good candidate for Pilgrimage in Transylvania? —for mission? Here are a few things to consider:

- All healthy Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations are in constant dialogue (conscious and unconscious) around the balance of worship, social justice, caring community and religious education. Pilgrimage can and should touch on all of these dimensions of being UU. Furthermore, if your youth group is certain of its own ethos and identity, it is definitely time to turn those teens to public service, and a project with their Partner Village just can’t be beat in this regard.
- Pilgrimage, with or without a Mission component requires that youth “unplug.” Work with your teens to explore the value in leaving behind their roles and responsibilities while on this sacred trip, which includes leaving behind all electronic devices. They will long for texting, their music library, and gaming... and then they won’t. Unplugging allows any person to find out who they are without their typical external stimuli, and all the posturing that goes with so much of it. Immersion in the Transylvanian Unitarian culture requires listening to the guides, you as facilitator, each other, local music, and the people they meet: unplug, and tune in. Cameras (not on phones!) should be the exception.
- Don’t travel to Transylvania with teenagers you don’t know. Successful youth trips are taken with teenagers and facilitators/ministers who have a long-standing relationship with one another. Insist that your youth attend Group on a regular basis—for the entire church year—if they are going to travel with you to Transylvania
- You need *Our Whole Lives* (O.W.L.). While we are confident that your trip to Transylvania will inspire and transform your Youth Group in myriad ways, it will not magically enable relational skills that you and your Group do not already possess. In fact, it will put your relationship, and your skills to the test. So, if your youth ministry does not already include discussions around healthy relationships, intimacy, self-esteem, body image, gender and sexual orientation, and teenage sexual development and behavior, don’t be surprised if you are ill-equipped to deal with the way these issues play out while you travel! Many successful youth pilgrimage and mission groups engage in the O.W.L. curriculum—not just in the 7th or 8th grade, but as an on-going conversation throughout the high school years. The curriculum is being updated, but exists in its present form as a powerful way to explore issues of want, need, power, control, health, and well-being as they pertain to teens’ sexual lives. Having had this conversation, your Group will be ready for you to have a zero-tolerance policy.



- Some of the most successful youth groups have a zero-tolerance policy while traveling on pilgrimage and/or mission. One minister explains it to parents and teens like this:  
“There will be *no* drugs, *no* sexual or intimate relationships, *no* drinking—no matter how much it’s offered to you—and *no* maligning of fellow Group members or facilitators. This is not about good or bad, this is about two things. Number one, any and all of these behaviors are exclusive behaviors and this is an inclusive trip. All exclusive behaviors will have to go on hold. No exceptions. Number two, I don’t have the resources while in country to deal effectively with any of these behaviors or decisions. My one resource is your family’s checking account: engage in any of these behaviors and I’ll put you on a plane and send you home. That’s a \$1200 mistake on your part. That’s the only resource I’ve got, and I will use it.”
- Youth chaperones, no matter how well-meaning, cannot stay awake at all times, day and night, for a week or more. They cannot be at every activity, every meal, every visit to every site and home in the village. Don’t set up adults from your church to fail. Travel with teens you know, who know their facilitators/Minister and have had deep conversations about relationships and exclusive/inclusive behavior. Have policies in place for the consequences of exclusive behavior that all family members are aware of and agree that they are responsible for. When you are confidently partnered with your own teens, the Partnership in Transylvania becomes the deep and lasting focus of the trip, and the benefits spread far and wide.

## PREPARATION

There will be mystery and magic to your trip no matter what, so it doesn’t hurt to explore several topics in your Group before you go:

- Get online and discover the basic history and geography of Romania as a nation, and then Transylvania as a region within that nation. Uncover the conflictual relationship between Hungary and the Allied Powers, and develop a basic understanding of how our Hungarian Unitarian Partners came to be living within the nation of Romania. Look at a few pictures of the geography—the mountains, the Homorod Valley. Learn how to pronounce the word *Székler* and what it means—these are a very special people waiting to welcome you!



- Explore the difference between our liberal UU faith and the Liberationist religious tradition, which has its deepest roots in Jesuit Catholicism. While we are not Liberationists, and our Transylvanian Partners are certainly not Catholic, when working with a people who have struggled in the way our Transylvanian Partners have struggled, we can learn a lot from liberationist priests, nuns, social workers and doctors. This is especially true if your youth group has decided to engage in a mission trip. For instance, we never tell our Partners what we are going to do for them. We ask them, given a work crew of eager teens coming their way, what kind of project would have meaning for them, and help them to develop their community in the direction they’ve charted. In the Liberationist tradition, God is already there, wherever people are struggling for freedom and dignity—we’re not there to change them, we’re there to allow our interaction with them to change us.
- Get excited! Have a friendly logo-drawing contest and use the new logo to make a t-shirt that everyone can wear while you’re fundraising in your church community, and while you’re at your work site in Transylvania as well. Take extras with you for the Partner minister, and/or for your Partner youth. Create a website with lots of info and updates. Have folks in your congregation who have been to Transylvania come in and give you mini-Hungarian lessons. Skype with your Partner Village—this is a big deal!
- Parents should not be involved in Youth Group meetings, but they’re excited about this big trip, too, so have them help with fundraising. Assess your scholarship needs, and then how much your youth want to donate to your Partner Village and the work/mission project. Put parents in charge of brainstorming a long list of possible fundraisers with the youth, then vote on the top five or six and get parent-youth teams moving on these projects. Congregations have been known to show up in droves for Hungarian Dinners that were served by their teens, and to contribute generously to car washes, bottle drives, dance-a-thons and all manner of extra fundraisers that highlighted the excitement and dedication of UU teens.

