

## Church marks Halloween with Death Café

By: Brenda Suderman

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It's no trick that a local church scheduled an open conversation about death and dying on Halloween night, and they promise it won't be spooky or terrifying.

The timing of a Death Café for 7 p.m. Thursday, at First Unitarian Universalist Church attempts to make people comfortable with talking about death, in contrast to the cultural obsession around skeletons and dead bodies on Halloween, Rev. Meghann Robern said.



"This very common pop-culture holiday has a much deeper meaning to it and how can we tap into that?" she said of the reason for scheduling the free two-hour event on Oct. 31.

The church will also hold a Death Café at 1 p.m. Tuesday.

The name Halloween is a contraction of the name Hallowed Evening, referring to the night before All Saints' Day on Nov. 1, when western Christian traditions celebrate all the saints.

Death Cafés are part of a 15-year-old international movement of deliberate discussions with strangers about death and dying over coffee and dessert.

"It's an open discussion, it's not a support group or grief counselling," said Liz Redston, one of the organizers.

As well as conversations, participants are invited to write down their experience with death as part of an interactive wall exhibit called the Reflection Room, developed by SE Research Centre, an Ontario organization that studies health and social-care problems, including end-of-life issues.

The exhibit includes 15 handwritten, framed responses to death and dying, and space for local participants to attach their reflections.

"It's meant to be an immersive, participatory exhibit," Redston said of the exhibit located in the front hallway of the Wellington Crescent mansion and worship complex.

The exhibit and café are part of a weeklong dialogue on death, which grew out of a realization the congregation of about 400 wanted a safe haven to talk about dying and death, said Andrea James, director of faith development.

"They had significant losses in their lives and they didn't feel OK to talk about it," she said.

That led to planning a total of 18 events for the week, bookended by Sunday worship services, including presentations on greener burials, understanding medical assistance in dying and workshops around funeral planning, advance care directives and how to talk about death. All events are open to the public, and most are free.

Robern said shepherding a grieving family through the planning of a memorial service or funeral remains one of her most important tasks as a spiritual leader, but it always easier when the loved one has left detailed plans.

"I am actively educating people about this because I want all the people to be planning this," she said about keeping a list or record of favourite music, readings and even an obituary or life story.

She said Universalists are willing to discuss big issues together, and they do not have one credo around death or the afterlife.

"We are sowing into the community the understanding that we intentionally and willingly face difficult questions together and how does that bloom through our entire lives," she said.

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### **Brenda Suderman**

*Faith reporter*

Brenda Suderman has been a columnist in the Saturday paper since 2000, first writing about family entertainment, and about faith and religion since 2006.

[Read full biography](#)

### **TALKING ABOUT DEATH**

Death Café, 1 p.m. Tuesday and 7 p.m. Thursday, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Winnipeg, 603 Wellington Cres. Free admission. Dialogue on Death events run all week until Nov. 3. Check out [uuwinnipeg.mb.ca](http://uuwinnipeg.mb.ca) for details and registration.

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