

UUCM Pagan group CUUPS celebrates Samhain



Participants place photos on the altar to remember those close to them during the worship service last year. The ancestor altar will be set up by UUCM Sacred Wheel in the back of the sanctuary during both services on Sunday, Nov. 3, at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Montclair. COURTESY UUCM SACRED WHEEL

By STEPH AUTERI

For Montclair Local

When many people hear the word “Pagan,” they imagine covens meeting in dark forests, casting dark spells. (Thanks a lot, pop culture.) In reality, the Pagan arm of the Unitarian Universalists – the [Covenant of Unitarian Universalist Pagans \(CUUPS\)](#) – is a group in which different branches of the earth-based spirituality can feel comfortable gathering together in order to learn from one another.

While the UU Congregation at Montclair has been hosting the eight Wheel of the Year celebrations for several years, it was only in 2018 that Ann Trip approached the Rev. Scott Sammler-Michael, senior co-minister, about forming an official CUUPS group. The UUCM group has seven regular members who meet once a month, and who also take part in the Wheel of the Year celebrations. Their first meeting was in September of that year, and they became an official chapter of CUUPS in June 2019.

This makes them the second such group in New Jersey, and the only one in Essex County.

Trip explained that the purpose of the group is to provide a welcoming environment for anyone interested in exploring more about these Earth-centered traditions. They regularly hold discussions, host workshops, and address common stereotypes about the Pagan faith. "We all come from different Earth-centered or Pagan paths," says Trip, the head of the group. She has been a practicing Pagan for 20 years and on the Druid path for eight. "We are all constantly learning from one another."

UUCM Sacred Wheel will celebrate Samhain (pronounced Sow-in), a Gaelic festival that marks the end of the harvest season and the beginning of the Celtic New Year, on Friday, Nov. 1, at 7:30 p.m. in the Rotunda of UUCM, 67 Church St.

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It is said that at Samhain the veil that separates the worlds

is at its thinnest. Trip will conduct a ritual whose intent to allow those performing it to connect with their ancestors.

Participants will also receive a piece of yarn, over which they will speak the names of those they most want to remember.

Two days later, on Nov. 3, another ancestor altar will be set up at the back of the church in advance of the Sunday morning service, festooned with fall leaves, and decorated with orange and black.

The idea is that at UUCM, Pagan spirituality is incorporated into the congregation's regular routine. Sammler-Michael sometimes incorporates reflections of these traditions – through readings, songs, or other practices – into Sunday morning worship. This is an embodiment of the larger mission of the Unitarian Universalist church, Trip explained, which welcomes all those in search of truth.

“It’s a great gift to be able to give people a chance to encounter or explore alternative spiritualities outside of the Judeo-Christian norm,” says Sammler-Michael. “Ours is not as simple as some paths. I’m not handed a book from an ecclesiastical authority that says here’s what you’re supposed to believe.”

When asked what he would say to those unfamiliar with Earth-based spiritual traditions, his response is simple. “There’s nothing to be afraid of,” he says. “Mystery is huge and whatever lies behind human knowing and human certainty – which I think is a whole lot – we don’t know exactly what it is.”