

## **Our Purposes, Principles, and Sources**

The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen and Ellen Lyon<sup>1</sup>  
Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley  
December 2, 2007

*We did not put our ideas together.  
We put our purposes together. And we agreed.  
Then we decided.*

— from *Popol Vuh*,  
the Mayan sacred book

### **Call to Worship** Ellen Lyon

Usually our Sunday services celebrate our sense of community, of belonging, here at UUCV. There also are times when it is appropriate to celebrate being part of something larger than ourselves. This Sunday, Association Sunday, when we reflect on what it means to be part of the Unitarian Universalist Association, is such a time.

Now we all know that UUs are, generally speaking, a pretty anti-authoritarian and independent-minded bunch. It was hard enough for some of us to join a congregation, let alone to contemplate being part of a larger denomination. But it's important to remember that when we lone wolves howl for liberal religious values it is not a solo performance. We are joined by a chorus coming from 1,040 other UU congregations around the world.

It's nice to know that there are others out there who think like us and who work for the same causes. But you may well ask what has belonging to the Unitarian Universalist Association ever done for UUCV.

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<sup>1</sup>The Rev. Duane H. Fickeisen is parish co-minister of the Unitarian Universalists of the Cumberland Valley, PO Box 207, Boiling Springs PA 17007; 717/249-8944; [www.uucv.net](http://www.uucv.net). Ellen Lyon is a lay worship associate.

Well, for one thing, it got us started. It was a \$50,000 grant from the UUA that helped UUCV form and grow in the congregation's first five years of existence.

And it was the UUA, which is the credentialing body for Unitarian Universalist ministers, that sent us Judy and Duane and trained them in new congregation leadership.

Every Sunday we sing from hymn books and teach our children a religious education curriculum that come from the UUA.

And every year we send delegates to General Assembly where they help elect our denomination's leaders and review its bylaws.

What belonging to the UUA really means is that we do not labor alone in this world for equality, social justice and all the other concerns that animate us. We belong to something larger than ourselves.

### **Sermon**

Duane Fickeisen

Today we celebrate Association Sunday, which gives us the opportunity to remember that we are not an isolated congregation out here in the wilds of the Cumberland Valley, but that we are part of a larger movement, a very rich religious tradition with roots in many of the world's religions, but particularly in early Christianity, in the Radical Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, and in the Pilgrim churches of New England.

We are not alone. Our religious movement is much more mainline and mainstream than many of us recognize or perhaps want to admit. After all, ours were the last of the establishment churches — the parishes that were supported by tax money in Massachusetts. The classic white church on the town square in New England is most likely to be Unitarian and you will often find directional signs nearby pointing up a side street to the less prominently located building of the Trinitarian congregational church.

With 200,000 or so adult members in the United States, we represent only about 1/10 of 1% of the population, yet we have had a very strong influence on progressive social justice issues, having been at the forefront of efforts to abolish slavery, to establish the Red Cross, to extend suffrage to women, to reform pris-

ons, to provide treatment for mental illness, and to welcome diversity. Some of the martyrs of the Civil Rights movement were Unitarian Universalists. We are currently working to extend civil unions and the 1000-plus benefits they bring to support long-term relationships beyond heterosexual couples to include committed relationships between same-sex couples.

Our numbers have been growing slowly, in contrast with most other mainline denominations that have been declining. But our growth is not keeping up with the population growth in the US — our “market share” has been shrinking. Unless we turn that around, we face a bleak and uncertain future.

I believe that there are many, many more potential members who have just not yet found us. How often do you hear both relief and consternation from a newcomer who has just found us and feels they should have been here long ago, had she or he only known. Or maybe you said that yourself when you came in the door the first time. At the same time, I often witness newcomers recognizing people they know already here — saying, “Oh, I didn’t know you came here!” Well, why didn’t they know you not only come here, but that you had found a religious community that really spoke to your values?

We are failing at promotion. We must turn that around as quickly as possible if we are to remain relevant in the religious life of Americans and if we are to realize our potential power to effect change that moves the world toward justice.

The ‘we’ that must act to turn it around is a collective we, but all of us together can’t do anything without the commitment and action of individuals among us. In the parable this morning, the bucket would never have filled up if Higgins had been the only drop to jump into it. The most important character in the story might well have been the second, unnamed drop, the one who finally said, “Well, it’s worth a try! Here I go! Come on you guys!” and encouraged others to follow. But if no one else had decided to jump, the bucket would have still not been full. It took the combined action of many drops, each making individual decisions, to fill the bucket.

If everyone here — every member and friend of UUCV — recruited just one new person to become involved in the next four months, we would double our influence. We’ve got plenty of room for twice as many folks to experience worship with us every

Sunday, and if the sanctuary bucket fills up, we'll get a second bucket by starting another service.

Imagine the vitality of a congregation with twice as many members, with more programs and more opportunities to connect with each other, with an even bigger influence on social justice. Imagine an exciting young adult network, more youth, and more children. Imagine more social events, a choir with twice as many singers, and a stronger voice in the civic discourse. Imagine twice as many potential friends joining our quest.

But mostly imagine more people whose lives have been transformed by finding the hope we offer as our central message to the world, who have come in from the cold to find this faith and this community.

I am asking each of you to make a commitment to bring at least one new participant into this amazing religion that you've discovered between now and the spring equinox and to mentor them into active membership. The winter holidays are a great time to introduce your religion to someone else, and you can get an early start on your commitment if you invite someone to "Come with me to my church on Sunday. Can I pick you up on my way?" Or invite them and their family to join us on Christmas Eve for our candle-lit service of lessons and carols. Make it your New Year resolution this year to share the good news of Unitarian Universalism with at least one other person.

We stand on broad shoulders of liberal and radical religion, in a tradition that has refused to be bound by a fixed creedal statement of faith, yet recognizes that we have arisen from people to whom faith really mattered, mattered enough that some of them died for it before they would recant, and who asserted their heretical beliefs even when they were tied to the stake.

Our theology of hope is a beacon of light in a world that needs it ever more in the face of violence and warfare, of recognition that resources we have taken for granted are limited, and that our use of carbon fuels is a threat to the world's climate. Times are tough and there are signs that they are worsening with the debts of war and an uncertain economy, with rising costs, stagnant incomes, and falling capital values; with new disclosures of unethical behavior and corruption in corporate and governmental leadership; with the rise of global fanatical fundamentalism of many stripes;

with violence in our communities and around the world; with climate change; and a laundry list of other signs.

When times are tough like this, the role of community becomes ever more important. The need for transformation and new direction is clear. Changes that are coming will surely be cause for struggle and suffering. There is perhaps never a time when a healthy and vibrant religious community is more important to our well being, our survival, even. And particularly one that can be a strong advocate for positive change and a locus for networking and collaboration as well as a place to seek respite, solace, and safety along with the courage to act boldly.

In this advent season of expectancy and waiting, let us shine the light of hope brightly, expecting that others will join us in the quest for truth and meaning through justice if we invite them.

But let me turn to our association more particularly, because you ought to know what you are inviting someone into. Ours is an association of congregations, not of individual members, and that is reflected in the official name. — the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Delegates who represent congregations meet in June each year and elect trustees, adopt the bylaws, and pass resolutions that guide the association's social justice and other work. It is the congregations, represented by delegates, who hold the power.

As Ellen mentioned, the UUA provides services to its member congregations and serves as our collective voice in the public arena. Among the services are credentialing clergy (and removing them for cause), acting as a clearinghouse for congregations in search of a minister and ministers in search of a settlement, administering insurance and retirement programs for church staff, publishing curricula for lifespan religious education and materials for worship including hymnbooks, advocating for social justice, marketing and promoting our movement, and supporting congregational leaders with training and resources. The UUA also administers grants and assists in starting new congregations.

The formal purposes of the UUA are defined in the bylaws. The purposes, the seven principles, and the six sources are in a section of the bylaws that is more difficult to amend than the other sections. These so-called "C" bylaws require a vote to admit the proposal to the agenda of the next year's General Assembly and a 2/3 majority vote to adopt it then.

The bylaws mandate a review of the Purposes, Principles, and Sources every 15 years. The current Purposes, Principles, and Sources were adopted in 1985, with the addition of a source related to earth-based religion in 1995. They are printed on an insert in your Order of Service, on blue paper.

The review is being conducted right now by the Commission on Appraisal, a body that is elected by the delegates to the General Assembly and reports to them independently of the board of trustees. They are actively seeking your input, with a deadline in January.

On the back of the blue page is a Feed Forward Form that you can use to make comments that you wish the Commission on Appraisal to consider. Please get them back to me by January 6 and I will compile them and send them to the COA. Don't feel constrained by the form or the questions on it. I'll gladly accept any comments you have and you may use additional pages or send them to me by e-mail.

Since we've been living with them for over 20 years, and many of us resist change, I expect the General Assembly will be pretty conservative when it comes to modifying these bylaws, and I expect the COA will get plenty of comments that say "Leave them alone!" as well as pleas for change.

I'm going to spend a few minutes going over the current Purposes, Principles and Sources and you may want to refer to the printed versions as we go.

Section C-2.2. declares the purposes of the UUA are "to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles." This is the UUA's mission statement — the description of why the organization should exist and what it is to do. Notice again that the focus is on congregations. It can be, and has been, interpreted broadly, and thus has not restricted the UUA from, for example, lobbying Congress on various issues, or supporting international cooperation among religious liberals.

The Seven Principles, which are the first bullet list in Section C-2.1, are probably somewhat more familiar. We often cite one of them as part our chalice lighting, and they are frequently used in publications and web pages. They are the essence of your congre-

gation's covenant with the other member congregations in the UUA.

Notice that they represent a progression from the individual to the global. Some people see these and remark that they don't seem particularly unique to UUs, but represent board value statements that anyone could adopt. But not everyone does.

They certainly present challenges to our daily lives and the decisions and actions we make in our individual lives, within our families, in our workplaces, and in our communities. One of the things I appreciate about them is that they are not easy to live up to and thus represent an aspiration and a benchmark for contemplating a course of action.

Some people have reacted to the COA study by saying it's about time we reexamined these statements and refined them. Some have said they need stronger, more inspiring language and images. Others have said they love them just as they are and hope no changes will be made.

What do you think? Do any of them speak to you with particular eloquence or are there any you would especially like to see changed? Feel free to suggest general changes or specific language when you send me your comments.

I like the general concepts in the first four and the seventh, but I struggle more with the fifth and sixth. It's not that I dislike the right of conscience or stand against peace, liberty, and justice — those seem to be hallmarks of liberal religion, after all. But we don't actually use a pure democratic process much and I worry about the melting-pot effect of world community.

Let me describe some examples where we don't use democratic process. Most congregations, yours included, delegate responsibility for worship to the called and settled minister. Thus while we invite your responses and comments, you don't get to vote on how we'll conduct Joys and Sorrows, for example, or what hymns we'll sing. That makes sense to me — you have called Judy and me to be your spiritual leaders and have entrusted us with the worship life of the congregation. We try to balance your expressed desires — and I should point out that there are almost always conflicting points of view — with our sense of what makes effective worship, attempting always to make the best choices for the health of the congregation.

You delegate most of the administration of the congregation to your Board of Trustees, and elect them to exercise prudent judgment in managing the congregation. They are required to seek your approval of the budget and restricted on how much they can spend without approval. But they don't ask you to vote on hiring or firing employees, on issues relating to building use, or which copier to lease. You probably don't want them to have to come to you for all of those decisions.

The children's version of the principles says that we all get to vote on decisions. But in fact we seldom give kids a vote on curricula or activities in our religious education programs. We presume that parents and professional and volunteer religious educators should have to power to make those decisions.

General Assembly delegates are nearly always chosen from among the members of the congregation who can afford to attend, with at most a small portion of the total cost of travel, registration, food and lodging provided by their congregations. Delegates are seldom instructed by their congregations as to how to cast their votes, and it would be tough to make a case that they truly represent their congregation's members.

It is not all clear to me how including a statement about using democracy in congregational decision making, something we don't even aspire to implement, strengthens our principles. But maybe you think we should give our children more power over the religious education programs or ask the congregation to vote on how we conduct worship. If so, here's your chance to make those comments.

Now is the time to take a critical look at these important statements about us and to comment on them. It's not clear if the COA will suggest changes or not, but any changes will require affirmative votes at each of two successive General Assemblies with 2/3 of the delegates needed for final passage.

The six Sources, which are the second bullet list in Section C-2.1, are intended to indicate the wells from which we draw inspiration. They are intentionally broad and suggest that we bring many traditions. No doubt someone's favorite source has been left out of the list — it would not be possible to create an all-inclusive one.

Some argue that the breadth makes us unfocused and that it would be better to seek more depth rather than try to be all things to all people. They point out that it is lists like this that make it easy for detractors to suggest that UUs don't believe anything at all, or alternatively, they you can believe anything you want and thus we can't be a real religion. (I, of course, disagree with both of those positions.) Others like the idea of drawing from the best of many traditions and honoring the fact that there are indeed many ways to understand and welcome the larger truth.

I'm certainly not opposed to a healthy syncretism — to creating new rituals and experiences from many sources. But I am concerned that we not appropriate the practices of others in ways that are disrespectful. Whenever we borrow a practice without a deep understanding of it, perhaps even without a life-long experience in the culture from which we've borrowed, there is a danger that we'll do unintentional harm by appearing to disrespect the source.

As you review these sources, how do they speak to your religious experience? Do some of them resonate more than others? What comments would you offer to the COA in their review? Do you like the pluralism and breadth they represent? Or do you wish for a deeper, but narrower, set of sources for our collective faith? If so, which would you leave out? Again, write your comments down and send them to me.

We are a part of a great religious tradition, and it is my hope that the current review will not just be an interesting diversion and exercise in navel gazing, but will strengthen our association and enhance our ability to communicate the great message we offer the world — a message of hope and transformation.

We must expand and grow our congregations if we are to remain relevant. And that growth really does depend on you. On individuals making an effort to share this religion with others by inviting them in. The doors are open; our hospitality is broad; we welcome everyone at the table. One of our founders said ten years ago that this congregation is a gift to the Cumberland Valley, that it does not belong to the founders, but is here for all of its members — those already here and those who have not yet been led to our doors. The newcomers, joining with those already here, will together shape the future of this congregation in ways we can at best only imagine in glimpses, but await with expectancy.

Let us be proud of our inheritance and vow to keep it alive — not as a historic relic, but as a living, dynamic, evolving, organic, growing community of faith and hope that maintains its roots in the rich tradition of our past.

May it be so, Amen.

**from Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist  
Association of Congregations**

Section C-2.1. Principles.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;
- Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;
- Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;
- Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;
- Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

Section C-2.2. Purposes.

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

Section C-2.3. Non-Discrimination.

The Association declares and affirms its special responsibility, and that of its member congregations and organizations, to promote the full participation of persons in all of its and their activities and in the full range of human endeavor without regard to race, ethnicity, gender, disability, affectional or sexual orientation, age, language, citizenship status, economic status, or national origin and without requiring adherence to any particular interpretation of religion or to any particular religious belief or creed.

Section C-2.4. Freedom of Belief.

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test.

### **Feed Forward Form**

The UUA Commission on Appraisal wants YOUR input.

***Please return this to Duane Fickeisen by January 6, 2008.***

Compiled responses will be sent to the COA.

Feel free to use additional pages or send your response by e-mail.

1. How are the seven Principles lived out in the life of UUCV?
2. What suggestions do you have for the COA about the Principles?
3. How do the six Sources inform the life of UUCV?
4. What suggestions do you have for the COA about the Sources?
5. What would you say the purpose of the UUA should be?
6. What comments do you have about the clauses that address non-discrimination and freedom of belief?