

# Report of the President

*Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations  
40th General Assembly  
Cleveland, Ohio  
Friday, June 22, 2001*

Thank you, Wayne. I'm glad everyone is as concerned about the dignity of my office as I so clearly have been.

When I told my daughters that I'd be giving my final report as President just blocks from the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, they replied: "Just don't expect to be inducted, Dad!" and, "Yeah, you may have rolled, Dad, but you have never rocked."

People have been asking me if I plan to issue any pardons during my last few days as President. My reply is consistently, "No, only to ask for them!"

So let me start with the person who has had to pardon me more often and more deeply than anyone -- for twenty-nine years now, but especially these last eight - my wife, the Rev. Gwen Langdoc Buehrens. Dear, stand and be recognized, with Erica and Mary!

As they know all too well, over the last eight years my travels have taken me to every one of the 50 states, seven Canadian provinces, and 20 countries overseas. I've touched base with over 600 of our 1050 congregations and taken part in over 135 building dedications.

When review what has changed among us in the last eight years several things stand out: We have literally five times as many high school youth as we did eight years ago. There are more than six times as many campus groups, and our young adult network has expanded enormously. We've not only been growing, but growing younger! We've also been growing in commitment. Last year pledges to our local congregations reportedly went up 9.3%! In constant dollars, over 10 years, our per capita local giving has doubled! And this doesn't even count all the building campaigns! Giving to common mission through the Association and its districts - Not to mention the seminaries and the Service Committee - Hasn't quite kept that pace. But it has still improved markedly. Most importantly, we are no longer quite so self-marginalized and defensive, but instead a vital force in interfaith cooperation for justice - whether through the Interfaith Alliance, Progressive Religious Partners, the Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing, or international groups like the World Conference on Religion and Peace, the International Association for Religious Freedom, or our outstanding Unitarian Universalist Holdeen India Program. We're more spiritually mature, as we mark our 40th birthday as an Association -

though God knows we still wrestle with unrealistic expectations and persistent authority problems, if I may be permitted to say so.

You know how many Unitarian Universalists it takes to change a light bulb, don't you? One hundred; just one to handle the light bulb, but ninety-nine others to make sure the power doesn't go to his head!

I have no illusions. What has been accomplished in these years has been collective work. Greatly helped, I'm convinced, by our annual gatherings in General Assembly. After all, it's no accident that what we have made the most progress on were the very themes we took up at earlier GAs: in '94, the theology of money; in '95, young adults; '96, youth; '97, interfaith cooperation; '98 through this year, "Fulfilling our Promise," through better covenantal relations, greater clarity of mission focus at every level of our work together.

So while I feel good about what has been accomplished during my presidency, I also have no delusions of being personally indispensable. My illustrious predecessor, Bill Schulz, now the Executive Director of Amnesty International USA, and author of a wonderful new Beacon book, *In Our Own Best Interest: How Defending Human Rights Benefits Us All*, I was in the back of crowded elevator eight years ago, at his last GA as President. Up front he heard two people in the front saying, "Wasn't that a great speech yesterday? Things have gone so well. Whatever are we going to do without him as President?" "Yes, I know," said the other, "things at the UUA just won't be the same without Bob Schwarz." Kay Montgomery gave me a button made the next day: "I remember Bob Schwarz."

You're going to have just as hard a time without good old Jim Barrons, I warn you! Just remember, not me, but the strength and continuity provided by folks like Kay - our extraordinarily capable Executive Vice President for 16 years now. Please stand up, Kay! And by all the hardworking UUA staff! And by your other elected leaders, on the Board and committees of this Association!

I want to offer a special thank-you to my assistant for the past six years, the always gracious and irrepressibly good-humored Peggy Potter-Smith.

Last year I spoke about herding cats -- 150,000 of them - and trying to get an effective process of strategic planning for our common future. This year I want you to know that the processes are now in place for us to do exactly that - if we'll just start to use them.

One process is congregational self-assessment. Not just when seeking a minister. Not just when considering a building campaign. And not just by asking preferences and opinions, doing an internal consumer survey. Rather by joining in partnership with other UU's, and with one's own community, to ask: "How can we better fulfill our mission as a liberal religious presence in this place? What are our strengths, weakness, opportunities, threats? What are the unmet spiritual and moral needs around us we have the gifts or resources to try to address?"

A T-shirt I saw on a teenager last year carried the memorable message: "Only you can prevent narcissism!"

It brought to mind how much we need to work together to get a more honest picture of what we are still doing to block fulfilling our promise a progressive religious movement. People ask me why we aren't growing more rapidly. Or why we aren't more racially and culturally inclusive. I have a simple answer: We don't want to be, and we don't want to grow. Not yet. Not really. Like most people, we're more comfortable seeing ourselves reflected in people who remind us of ourselves than we are in living with difference. Sometimes I think we need a collective version of the spiritual practice Mary Pipher says can help keep a marriage solid: looking in the mirror periodically and saying to yourself, "You know, you're no prize either!"

Because we still do have work to do. Imagine it. People who are really different from each other- with dissimilar backgrounds, ideas, and religious practice choosing to gather together in spiritually transforming, moral significant communities of hope and compassion. It is the real meaning of our deep commitment to making the UUA a more anti-racist, multi-cultural movement, putting our faith into action for justice.

In order to do that, however, we need to learn not to be afraid of, or to avoid building, our own institutional and spiritual strength. Too often in a narcissistic pursuit of individuality we've done that to ourselves. But as I've said, we're slowly getting better. We are no longer cut off from the larger religious community and interfaith cooperation is now central to our mission. We're more generous. We're doing more for our youth. We're less given to using our critical capacities just to beat up on ourselves in unfocussed or unrealistic self-criticism, and we are more apt to undertake the hard work of realistic strategic planning. So there's hope for us. Lots of it.

Earlier this year I was in nearby Erie, Pennsylvania, to help our congregation there dedicate their new meeting house. Two members of the Erie church, the well-known musicians Kelly Armor and her husband David Sturtevant, contributed a song they had written for the occasion. I'm going to ask them to share it with us later. "The Next One By " is basically a piece of UU gospel, full of gratitude, but also full of the confession that we too often focus on what I want, I need, and I seek. When they got to their line about how it takes realizing how much we have, we get and we find, as they put it, "givin' back comes to mind."

When they got to a line about how "I get backed up and busy, and don't realize that it's a gift to have this work to do," I could really identify with what they were singing. So often I've been so impatient for us collectively to live up to our potential that I fear I've been unwittingly and ungratefully impatient with individuals - and so do I ask the pardon of anyone with whom I have been less understanding, generous, or compassionate than I could have been. Because that's what it's all about, isn't it?

In order to really fulfill the great potential we have as a force for good in this world, in order to really give back enough to make a difference, there are some things we clearly need to do better in the years ahead. These are all things that I haven't just noticed by myself. They're things I have heard you asking for, yearning for. Things of which I know we are capable, if we will just take the steps necessary.

First, we need to strengthen public awareness of our faith as a religious alternative. Through

personal witness and collective public witness. We each need to learn how to speak more articulately about what Unitarian Universalism means to us. With its challenge to each of us to develop fully our intellectual, spiritual, moral, social being. And to do so not just for ourselves alone, but so that others less privileged than we can also have a role in helping to shape history, and not just be pushed around by it.

To really give our saving message back to the culture the UUA needs a full-time Office of Public Witness to assist the next president. To help, among other things, get the word out about our path-breaking work in the field of socially responsibly investing and effective use of shareholder democracy. Just recently, you may know, the UUA led an effort to get a major corporation to add sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policies. And won! I have had some media opportunities on our behalf, but I know we continue to miss too many, so giving back more of our good news often comes to mind.

We need public witness training for our clergy and media/marketing training for more of our congregations. Innovative work in places like San Diego, in line with our values, can help show the way. Being heard and known in our communities is part of giving back and it's come to mind.

Our beloved Beacon press needs a capital infusion to find and keep authors who express our values while challenging contemporary complacency. People like Geoff Canada, Nancy Mairs, E.J. Graff, Cornel West, Roger Wilkins - not to mention our own Marilyn Sewell, Forrest Church, and Bill Schulz. Confronting the shallow narrowness, narcissism, and consumerism of our age with our values helps give back worthy alternatives, and keep better ways in mind.

We need a whole new generation of curricula for our young people and their families. Full of stories that will convey the passion and compassion behind this faith of ours, so that its deeper meanings will come to mind and hold the loyalty of more of our young, who, after all, will be "the next ones by."

Our youth can become our prayers in motion, carrying beyond the horizon of our years our deepest aspirations. But to do that, they need our help, our partnership with them in developing their full spiritual, moral devotion and potential. If we are to give something back, let's do it by providing them with training for their spiritual growth and moral engagement, funding for leadership development and support for the transition to young adulthood.

Let's help more congregations learn how to really open up to young adults, to support a UU presence on college campuses, and let's make sure that the next ones by and the ones who gain most from our giving back!

There are still too many communities in North America where we don't even show up. Places where our children and grandchildren, if they went looking for a UU congregation, wouldn't find one. Or would find just a little club. Did you know that out of the 234 largest cities in the US, there are 52 with no UU presence, and nine more where the congregation has less than 30 members in a city of over 100,000? We need to get serious about establishing new congregations, using not just Veatch money, but some of our own! Helping them right from the

beginning not only with ministry, but religious education, outreach, and with a down payment for a building. We still have too many congregations renting, without a home of their own, where more seekers can more reliably find them. Not able to be found by the next ones by.

Finally, we still need leadership training. Not just for our clergy. Though that's challenge enough when a year in seminary can cost \$30,000 or more and scholarship funds are still desperately needed. We also need lay leadership training, in an era when more and more of us come with no deep experience of 'how to do church,' especially for a community trying to embody diversity. Workshops at GA, valuable as they are, simply aren't enough. We need 'local deliverables' - in conflict management, fundraising, volunteer development, and lay ministry. It's happening out there. It just needs to be shared. For the next ones by.

It's come to your mind by now, I suspect, that these are some of the goals for which I have been wielding my badge of office, "The Sacred Tin Cup" here. And you're right! Along with Jan and Stu Sendell and other members of the UUA Presidents' Council --along with the UUA Board, and many other generous and committed Unitarian Universalists -- I've been working with the development staff for the last eighteen months on the advance phase of a \$32 million "Campaign for Unitarian Universalism." It's designed to help all of us give back some of what will be needed by the next ones by.

I've criss-crossed the country, met with nearly a thousand committed UUs in eight regional forums, listened carefully, and found both overwhelming affirmation and some great ideas for program planning to meet these needs. Here's what you have said:

That we **MUST** strengthen our public visibility and witness - raising for the purpose at least eight million dollars.

That we **MUST** have a new curricular series of UU lifespan religious education , aimed making our children our prayers in motion, with a million dollars to get it started NOW. That we should help our underpaid religious educators with continuing education with another million. Help our youth with two million, our young adults and campus ministries with an equal amount. In October of 2002, a year from this fall, we will ask every congregation to observe a Youth and Young Adult Sunday, raising funds to give something back to the next ones by.

You've said that we simply **MUST** start new churches, and fund them better from the start, help house the homeless, and use a regional and cluster approach to planning how best to strengthen our presence. That we need at least ten million dollars to do this right.

You've affirmed that we need to strengthen training for clergy and laity alike. With at least three million dollars in new scholarship funds, at least two million for lay leadership training and development

Today I'm proud to announce that my successor will receive from me the Sacred Tin Cup with it already more than half full. In fact, pledges, verbal and written, now amount to over \$20 million! The campaign has three more years to raise at least \$12 million more. We can do this! I know we can!

There is one person, above all others, who has been my strong partner in strengthening our movement these last years. I need her up here beside me now: our truly beloved Moderator, Denny Davidoff!

Today I also want to announce that the \$2 million portion of the Campaign devoted to lay leadership will be known as The Davidoff Fund for Lay Leadership Training and Development. It will honor of the dedicated work Denny and Jerry Davidoff have done for so many years to strengthen this movement. It is kicked off with a generous gift from their children, Doug and Amy, John and Jacki Davidoff, all local UU lay leaders themselves. I hope everyone here at this General Assembly will want to honor the Davidoffs by making a gift to this fund as a down-payment on an even deeper investment, through the Campaign, in the future of Unitarian Universalism.

Denny, these last eight years, for both us of us, have been a privilege, haven't they? But now both of us know, it's time to stand aside - for the next ones by. So let's listen as Armor and Sturtevant perform for us their expression of the UU gospel!