

A DENOMINATION? NOT EXACTLY;
AN ASSOCIATION? YOU BET!

Rev. Barbara Child
Unitarian Universalist Church of Indianapolis
October 12, 2008

The message began, “Our sanctuary was razed today.” That’s RAZED. The message was from Rev. Jim VanderWeele, minister of Community Church UU in New Orleans. This was the end of August. They had thought the Community Church building would survive Katrina, unlike the apparently more heavily damaged First Church. But on the 22nd of August this past summer, 3 years after Katrina, the congregation watched while the steam shovel knocked, clawed, and ground the walls down to the ground. And then they watched the remnants of their church hauled off to the local recycling swamp.

It takes your breath away, doesn’t it? It does mine. But the postings from my New Orleans ministerial colleagues lately have not been filled with gloom and doom. No. They have written of the gradual formation of a real cluster of UU congregations there – Community, First Church, and the smaller and so still more precarious Northshore UU Society. It started when some consultants from the UUA came to see about revitalizing and rebuilding these congregations devastated by Katrina, and the UUA sponsored the 3 year capital campaign – to which you may have contributed.

And then those 3 congregations also took the first tiny steps toward some joint programs and ministries. They started some new traditions – shared worship at holidays, an annual Katrina Memorial Dinner, joint service and social justice projects, a book discussion group facilitated alternately by Jim VanderWeele and Melanie Morel-Ensminger, the minister at First Church.

The two congregations with ministers have agreed to loan out a portion of those ministers’ time to give part time ministry to the struggling Northshore congregation that does not have a minister.

Melanie has written: “As time passes, our 3 congregations pull closer even together – friendships deepened, better understanding ... about our differences and our similarities, greater visibility in the wider community

about UUism.” She and Jim recommend to the rest of us that we consider such cooperative ventures. They just say – “don’t wait for a hurricane to do it!”

I believe those New Orleans congregations give all of us Indianapolis Unitarian Universalists much to think upon. I believe they are a superb illustration of what it means to live up to the best intentions of an Association of Congregations.

You know, sometimes I cringe when I hear the tone of voice with which some people say the “UUA” or sneeringly “Boston” or even “25,” which is the address of our headquarters on Beacon Street across from the Boston Common. You would think they somehow “missed the memo” that spells out that we are not a denomination (like Methodists, or Episcopalians, or Presbyterians), in other words, a particular carved out subdivision of the Christian church, with beliefs prescribed by a creed and practices prescribed by a hierarchy.

No. We are an Association of Congregations. And the Statement of Principles and Purposes that appears in a section of the UUA bylaws was not handed down from anybody, but essentially handed up by General Assembly delegates from congregations.

The enormous significance of that is particularly noticeable right now as we are in the midst of a review of whether the current language needs to be revised. And I am most grateful to David Jackoway for arranging a forum for this noon in the Music Room in the brand newly painted Cottage(!) so that your opinions too can be entered into this thoughtful reconsideration.

I challenge the adults this noon to have as stimulating, thought-provoking a discussion as the teens did last Saturday. I facilitated their workshop on the potential revisions of the Principles at the District Con (conference, that is) – and I’m here to say they convinced me to change my thinking on more than one point.

I’ve heard some people say that the Principles define what it is to be a Unitarian Universalist. Very curious statement, that one. It has a slight taste of creed to me. Think about it. The opening language leading to the statement of the Principles does not say, “I believe....” It doesn’t say “I”

anything. It says, “We the member congregations of the UUA covenant to affirm and promote the principles.” Not belief statements. Mutual promises of support and affirmation by the congregations in association.

Today is called Association Sunday. I wonder what you think of when I say “Unitarian Universalist Association” or “UUA.” I hope you haven’t picked up the mistaken idea of some higher-ups handing down dictates about something or other.

I hope instead what comes to mind are at least some of the multitude of resources and services offered to you as a congregation by the Boston office and the Districts, in our case the Heartland District, with its office here in Indianapolis.

I hope you might think of – or become aware of – for instance, the UU Trauma Response Team – ministers and others who got special training in New York City after 9/11 and who have been called upon many, too many, times since, most recently after the shootings in the sanctuary of one of our congregations in Knoxville, Tennessee, last July.

Did you know that our Heartland Acting District Executive Nancy Combs-Morgan was one of the ones who went to help? Did you know that one row of worshippers that morning, in the gun-sights of the shooter, were visiting from the other UU church in town, and one of them was killed?

If we think the one congregation to which we belong can thrive indefinitely without involvement with other Unitarian Universalist congregations, other Unitarian Universalists, we may have another think coming.

And then too --

When you hear a reference to the UUA, I hope you might think of – or become aware of – the UU World Magazine, the InterConnections newsletter and Leaders’ Library on line, the multitude of listservs for every UU interest group imaginable.

I hope you think of – or become aware of – the Office of Young Adult Ministries; the Youth Office; Young Religious UUs (YRUU); The

Washington Office for Advocacy and Witness; the Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender Concerns Office.

I hope you think of – or become aware of – congregational fundraising consultants; congregational loan and grant programs; training opportunities on growth, small group ministry, and conflict management, such as the “Smart Church” program the District sponsored here a couple of weeks ago.

I hope you think of – or become aware of – organizations like the UU Service Committee; the UU Ministry for the Earth; the anti-racism programs like JUUST Change Consultants; the UU Musicians Network; LREDA, the organization for Religious Educators; the Religious Education curricula, such as Our Whole Lives and the new Tapestry of Faith curriculum.

And as you move through this interim period and on into your search for a new called minister, you certainly are or will be aware of the Transitions Office serving congregations and ministers in search, the Compensation Consultant, and the District Ministerial Settlement Representative.

Yes, of course, from time to time somebody in some UUA office or on some UUA committee does something that irks us or that we even consider downright wrong. I can’t begin to tell you how many people right now are irked (to put it mildly) with the Commission on Appraisal on which I sit because it appears to them the proposal for revising the Principles and Purposes that we will put forward won’t say what they want it to. But then, surprise, surprise, this sort of thing happens at the congregational level too. Doesn’t it???

You know, one definition of congregational membership that I find intriguing says that signing the membership book isn’t really what makes you a member of a congregation. That’s just an early threshold step. This theory says you aren’t *really* a member until the congregation or its leadership does something that disillusiones you dramatically – and you realize this is still your tribe all the same. In fact, what is disillusionment? The removal of illusions. The removal of rose-colored glasses perhaps. Isn’t disillusionment after all a process of maturing and accepting the fallibility and imperfections of other human beings and ourselves?

So the UUA is made up of imperfect human beings too. And among all those imperfect beings, an enormous lot of incredibly important and valuable things get done for the benefit of all of us. All those resources and programs and such that I mentioned a minute ago are supported by the UUA Annual Program Fund, not Association Sunday. I am so proud of this congregation for keeping its Annual Program Fund contributions intact every year. Association Sunday every year is for the special needs that are beyond the scope of the Annual Program Fund.

I love it that today's contributions will fund scholarships for promising students preparing for our ministry – some of our ministers have staggering debts from their seminary education – and there will be special support for minister of color.

But most exciting to me is that half of the funding from today will be used for lay theological education, including grants to congregations creating special programs for spiritual and theological deepening. We have long known that some people go to seminary not because they are suited for ministry or even want to become parish ministers but because their congregations don't provide enough adult religious education to meet their needs. How wonderful to think of the day when congregations will be seedbeds for nurturing the spirit. Today's efforts make a great launching for that initiative.

In preparation for Association Sunday, the UUA sent out a whole packet of resources for Sunday worship. Most of them were not really "me." But then I turned a page and there was one of my favorite old stories, the story Robin read earlier of Parker Palmer's encounter with the Outward Bound Program. I couldn't resist. I think that Outward Bound trainer had it just right. We can't get out of one after another predicament we find ourselves in in this life. And if we can't get out of it, we sure better get into it, see what's going on and find what meaning it holds for us.

And time after time, the Unitarian Universalist Association is there for us, to see us through. When I read this congregation's history, I learned that more than once the UUA has come to its aid when it was in financial need. The UUA is worth every dollar of support you give it today.

When we are gathered here on a Sunday morning in one strong body,
may we be grateful for all we have received and for the wider world of
Unitarian Universalists, our Association of Congregations.