

Unitarian Universalist Association Commission on Appraisal Plenary Report to the 2006 General Assembly

Good afternoon everyone. I'm Dr. Jim Casebolt, chair of the UUA Commission on Appraisal. Let me begin by introducing the rest of the group:

- Rev. Orlanda Brugnola serves as Chaplain at the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn and teaches philosophy and world religions at John Jay College
- Rev. Barbara Child, whose home is in Gainesville, Florida, currently serves as Interim Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Ann Arbor, Michigan
- Dr. Mark Hamilton is a lifelong UU and a mathematician, currently living in Calgary, Alberta, Canada.
- Rev. Linda Weaver Horton currently serves as minister in Kelowna, British Columbia
- Rev. Manish Mishra, whose home is Washington D.C., will be relocating this summer to serve as minister at the Unitarian Universalist Church of St. Petersburg, Florida
- Mr. Michael Ohlrogge is a campus ministry professional in Ann Arbor, MI
- Rev. Tom Owen-Towle is interim minister at the Summit UU Fellowship in Santee, California
- Ms. Jacqui C. Williams, Director of Policy and Education for a statewide advocacy organization, lives in Albany, NY and is a member of the Church of the Larger Fellowship. Jacqui was appointed to the Commission in April to fill a seat left open by resignation, and we are happy she joined us.

Our written report appears in the annual report booklet and contains some important news about the Commission and its work. Of note is the fact that the printed copies of the report we released last year, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, have totally sold out, but that the report is still available as a free download from the Commission's website, www.uua.org/coa.

As many of you already know, the Commission on Appraisal has recently decided to take on an important project in the life of our Association. The Bylaws of the UUA require that the text of article II be reviewed at least every 15 years. Twenty-one years have now lapsed, so this review is overdue.

What, exactly, is Article II? The text begins with: "We, the member congregations of the UUA, covenant to affirm and promote..." Everyone is familiar with this text, I'm guessing, and some of us could recite it in our sleep. So Article II contains the Principles, but it also includes other texts that may be less familiar: There are the Sources -- what we as an Association look to for guidance and inspiration -- the Purposes -- what we agree to do as an organization -- and statements of freedom of belief and non-discrimination -- how we'll do it.

Thus Article II is fundamentally our community covenant -- what we agree about how we will be together. As part of our By-laws, we call ourselves to re-examine this covenant every so often. That is the task the Commission has agreed to take on.

Where does this by-law come from, and what does it reflect about the nature of our Association? It is often said that Unitarian Universalism is always changing, always open to new truths and new understandings; our history is told as a series of evolutions of thought. As Universalist Lewis Beals Fisher said, "[We] are often asked to tell where [we] stand. The only true answer to give to this question is that we do not stand at all, we move." And if one of the important, even defining, characteristics of Unitarian Universalism is that we are always changing, then we need to be open to change. The directive to review our collective community covenant is aimed to keep us open: We are called to re-examine the central document of our Association and make sure it still fits.

Why is the Commission on Appraisal taking this on, rather than some other group? The Board felt that the Commission was the appropriate body to oversee this review, and after some reflection, we agreed. We had already done some thinking about the place of the Principles and Purposes in the life of the denomination during our last study, and the idea of doing a deeper examination of them had come up in the preliminary discussions about ideas for the next study, and so it was already a topic that was very much on our minds. Finally, it is also a logical continuation of our last study, in which we recommended that the UUA have an Association-wide conversation about what we have in common. Reviewing the Principles will require exactly that kind of conversation.

We are well aware of the magnitude, and the importance, of this task. At the moment we are still in the very early stages, concentrating for now on the process we will follow in carrying out the review. A covenant is an agreement among the entire community, and so we intend to make our process as collaborative as we can, and maximize input from UUs across the continent, hearing from as broad a diversity of voices as possible. At the same time, we know that there are individuals among us who have put a great deal of thought into this document and its place in our Association, and we especially need to solicit the views of both critics and promoters of the current text.

And so... we are all very excited about doing this work. For the first step, we invite you to join us at our workshop on Saturday afternoon -- please see the details in your program. At this workshop we will give you a chance to think and talk about this important text, and contribute your voice to the review of our community covenant. Thank you for your attention, and we hope to see you at the workshop.