



People Soup

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LIBERAL RELIGIOUS YOUTH WAS AN ORGANIZATION DIFFERENT FROM ITS PREDECESSORS IN STRUCTURE AND STYLE. THE LRY OF TODAY IS ALSO DIFFERENT FROM WHAT IT HAS BEEN BEFORE. CHANGES IN CULTURE CREATE CHANGES IN INSTITUTIONS, AND THE HISTORY OF THE YOUTH MOVEMENT MUST BE EXAMINED IN THIS LIGHT AS WELL.

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A Capsule History of the U-U Youth Movement Wayne Arnason

I am pleased to have the opportunity to write this brief history of LRY and the youth movements before it for *People Soup*, but it is also an awkward chore for me. As some of you reading this may know, I have completed a detailed 140 page manuscript of the history of our youth movements. It is entitled *Follow the Glean*, and is currently seeking enough financial backing to be formally published. It is not easy to boil 140 pages down to one *Soup*-length article. In spite of that, I wanted to take this opportunity because I think history is terribly important, and most LRYers have no idea why the movement they are a part of is where it is at today, how it got there, and who was involved in its creation and growth. Very few people have any sense of the continuity of our youth movement.

There is continuity, however. Indeed, there are patterns that have remained fairly constant over the years. Most people are aware that many notable leaders within the Unitarian-Universalist movement began their denominational involvement through the youth groups. Gordon McKeeman, one of the candidates for the UUA Presidency this year, is one of them. In spite of this connection, there has always been a high degree of ambivalence and tension between the churches and their youth counterparts.

LRYers at the local and regional levels have in recent years been critical of the continental level of LRY for its alienation from the grass roots, its inefficiency, and its extravagant spending habits. This same complaint echoes all through the movement's history. Tensions and differences between the various structural levels of the movement have always existed. They reflect the same lack of commitment to centralized institutional framework that characterized the adult churches.

The Continental LRY leaders of today grapple with the problem of how to be helpful and relevant to the peo-

ple at the local level. Yet even when the youth organization was centered mainly in New England, the jump from regional to national or continental office has always represented a quantum leap in perspective and in problems for the people involved.

Finally, meeting the needs of college age people within the youth movement has always been a difficult and usually disappointing task.

I do not wish to point out merely the continuities over the eighty-eight years of the youth movement's history. The second goal of my narrative is to indicate the changes as well. How had the LRY of today, a unique, continent-wide youth organization incorporated, staffed and governed exclusively by people from the ages of fourteen to nineteen, evolved out of a young people's movement brought into being by a small group of New England ministers near the turn of the century?

A dominant theme within our youth movement over the years is summarized in the slogan "youth autonomy". At first glance it appears that "youth autonomy" has been a guiding principle in our approach to youth programming right from the beginning. In the 1924 "youth issue" of the *Universalist Leader*, Stanley Manning, Director of Young People's Work within the Universalist Convention for four and one half years, wrote: "The first joy to be found in such a position is the discovery that no one can be a director of young people's work. There is so much of initiative, of willingness to work, of desire to explore and discover on their part that no one can direct their activities. This does not mean that there is not entire willingness to discuss methods and ways of working, or that there is no desire for advice and assistance; the very genius of young people's work lies in its self-direction."

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