

Report to the UUA Board of Trustees
April 20, 2008
Rev. William G. Sinkford, President

The event which has dominated my life recently has been my back surgery, now three weeks ago. The pain in my back and legs had reached a point where there was not a choice about addressing it. A few of you have commented on occasion, and perhaps many of you had noticed, that walking had become a difficult and painful activity for me.

The good news is that that pain is gone. I was free of it from the moment I woke up in the recovery room. But some of the neural connections to my legs will take time to regenerate and it will take both time and discipline for me to correct all of the “adjustments” that my muscles, my posture and my habits had made to compensate and minimize the pain over a period of several years. I’m having to learn to walk all over again. The doctors are very pleased with my progress thus far. I’d been told that recovery would take four to six weeks. Despite my overly optimistic assumptions, I now know it will take the full six. But I will resume my travel schedule in mid-May and expect to be walking with strength, confidence and comfort by the time of GA.

I want to thank those who stood in for me in the last weeks, including you, Gini. None of my commitments went uncovered. And I want to thank many of you for your kind and caring cards and messages. They were a blessing.

I don’t know how many of you had a chance to see the “Compassion Forum” broadcast from Harrisburg, PA on CNN last Sunday evening. It was a remarkable event, regardless of your political leaning or candidate preference. It brought together, for thoughtful conversation, religious leaders from the far religious right to the most progressive. The inspiration for the event and the energy behind it came from an organization called “Faith in Public Life.” That group has a daily e-mail news summary which I commend to you. (faithinpubliclife.org) What you may not know is that the UUAC is a primary partner in this work. Our own Meg Riley chairs the Faith in Public Life Board of Trustees. Meg wrote me this week about the event:

Hi,

I know you're all buried. But there's a very positive story here I hope you will share in your board report, Bill. The first article on yesterday's Daily News from FPL is a great explanation of the work we are doing--I'd suggest printing up copies for all the board members. I think it should be widely promoted and claimed as victory for us. The fact is, if I had not spent the last 15 years obsessed with the religious right and working with a variety of organizations and seen all the ways they fail, I would not have been positioned to chair FPL, which in turn might not have evolved as it has with a young, dynamic, outside the box staff. I totally agree with the Guardian writer that the televised questions and answers are NOT the real story here. And our folks should proudly claim this quantum leap forward as evolving from the UUA's long term support of creative outside the box work in general and strategizing to shift the religious debate in particular. Because that involves backseat work, it is not always visible, so the dots will need to be connected for folks to see the picture.

I have been preaching about the need for UUism to move in from the margins and assume our rightful place in the center of the discourse in the public square. Our broad and inclusive theology positions us, ideally, to invite the many voices of faith together, not for an argument, but to articulate the central moral message of all the world's great faith traditions, as we struggle to create the Beloved Community.

We are no longer just talking about this, we are beginning to live it out. And it is not just at the national level. I was in Fresno, CA earlier this spring, to help dedicate their new building. Fresno is in the Central Valley and, until I showed up to help the Legislative Ministry raise money there three years ago, there was no living memory of a UUA President ever visiting any congregation in the valley. This was my second trip. The Fresno building is not only Leed certified, the first church in California to achieve that status, but it is a real presence in the community. When I stood up to preach, at 1 hour forty minutes into the service, I had to limit my remarks dramatically. The reason the service ran so long was that they had invited their interfaith partners to give testimonials. These folks were not there because this was a special event. The Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Buddhist(2), Muslim, Hindu and Zoroastrian religious leaders were there because this congregation has been active and helping to lead interfaith efforts in Fresno for years. I loved it.

I want to mention some upcoming travel. I have been invited to attend a gathering of 100 world religious leaders just prior to the G-8 Summit in Japan. The hope is to craft a statement of religious imperative that the Japanese government has promised to deliver to the gathering of political leaders from the 8 largest industrial nations. It will be a G-8 religious summit and will take place immediately following our General Assembly. The list of religious leaders is impressive, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to heads of the National and World Councils of Churches. I am the only US denominational leader who has been invited. I hope to take the opportunity of my being in Japan to confer with our traditional Japanese partners about bi-lateral opportunities for engagement, as our involvement in and financial support of IARF is sharply reduced. They welcome this conversation, which will almost certainly involve congregational partnerships, support for young adult engagement, and partnerships to support justice work such as that of our Holdeen India Program.

And in the fall, I will lead a small delegation to Africa. The goals of the trip are multiple: visiting emerging U*U groups in Kenya and Nigeria, meeting with Bishop Desmond Tutu and others in South Africa to learn more about the Truth and Reconciliation Process, visits to the social service and social justice partners of our congregations and the UUSC which address poverty, the plight of orphans and HIV/Aids, and finally a visit to Goree in West Africa, the prison where some of my ancestors were held before they were forced onto the ships owned, no doubt, by some of my other ancestors, to endure the Middle Passage and life in slavery in this country. This is a pilgrimage I have longed to make for many years.

I want to say a word about the broad Excellence in Ministry conversation. The POTE meets Monday and Tuesday to, among other things, review the reports of the 8 projects

on excellence in ministry which the Panel has funded this year. The reports are rich and hopeful, pointing the way to more effective ministerial formation and development and, ultimately, more effective shared ministry in our congregations. But the path here will be complex to navigate, especially as the Panel recommends how to use available resources. You will remember that the Panel has guaranteed our two schools a minimum financial support level of \$200,000 each in the 09 budget year. The most hopeful development is the ownership of this conversation by the UUMA and the MFC, the youth community and the non-UU schools (Harvard and ANTS and others) where so many of our future religious leaders are receiving training. Just imagine, ANTS, which was formed in reaction to the liberal, Unitarian commitments of Harvard in the 1800's, is now asked to enter into a covenant of shared purpose with the Association. By head count, their enrollment qualifies them as the largest UU seminary.

I hope you will have seen the announcement of the filling of the Emerson Chair at HDS. Dan McKanan is a "relatively" young scholar, a 5 year convert to Unitarian Universalism as a result of his scholarship, whose work has focused on the Transcendentalists. The creation of that chair, its funding and now its filling has been a long held dream, creating once again a UU presence on that campus which is so much a part of our history. Dan may or may not become the James Luther Adams of the next generation of UU scholars, that is a very high bar, but I can tell you that the UU students at Harvard are thrilled that the Emerson professorship is now a reality. I will be hosting a reception for Dan in Fort Lauderdale.

I've had some time in the last weeks for reflection on my ministry and our ministry together. I thought it might be helpful for me to offer some observations about real changes I observe, different conversations I'm involved in, as I have travelled UU-land recently.

More and more, I hear people talk about the UUA of Congregations, not the top-down, Boston-based UUA. It's not universal, but it is prevalent. And UU leaders are beginning to "get it" that General Assembly is a "Gathering of Congregations." Every piece of correspondence that goes out from these buildings on Beacon Hill now uses those pieces of language.

I don't take credit for this shift, nor does Gini, I know. The leadership here has been broadly shared, importantly by members of this Board.

It may seem a small thing, but so much of our work is done in words, in language. You've spent, and will continue to spend, time and energy looking at the trees, and in many cases even inspecting some particular leaves and even knot holes on the old growth as you craft board policies. I thought it might be helpful for me to invite you to step back for a moment and look at the forest that is our faith as it shifts and grows.

Think about the conversations that I hear as I travel. "Youth Ministry". No one used that language 7 years ago, not even me. "Excellence in Ministry". It was language that was so threatening to ministers that conversations were simply shut down. Today it is the

language that I hear most often as I travel. “Vision, Mission and Ministry” is informing not only the work of the Board, but our community as well.

A few of our ministers and lay leaders have used these words in their work for years. But a precious few. Mostly from our healthiest and most vital congregations. And they are so, so grateful that our national conversation is finally beginning to connect to the reality of their ministry, so that they can embrace and be supported by our larger faith community. For too long, too many of our best and brightest felt that they needed to keep the larger community at arms length, lest the health of their ministry be compromised by a national conversation which was inadequate and too small by half. Those are blunt statements. But they are true.

I’m so pleased that our advertising, with its tag line “Nurture the Spirit. Help Heal the World” has been embraced so widely in our community. More than 85 congregations have purchased the banners that proclaim that message and display it proudly in public.

I smile to myself as UU’s who believed that I was going to destroy this community now use “the language of reverence” as if they had invented the term. There is less argument about whether humanism or a more spiritual practice should inform our being together in community. And, in more and more of our congregations, worship is more centered and centering, more celebratory and profound than I observed just a few years ago. The decibel level of the conversation which tries to mandate a small theological center for our faith has been much reduced.

Music, and our musical vocabulary has broadened. Though we struggle with what it means to appropriate, or misappropriate music from other cultures, the reality is that in many of our congregations there are more rhythms and harmonies and even languages sung than ever before.

“Faith Development” is now quite broadly claimed as the goal of our education programs, both for young people and for adults. And we are living that out in the Tapestry of Faith Program. I’ll just highlight the new resources for faithful living as couples - *Principled Commitment*: a relationship and faith-focused program for committed couples. We are bringing our faith to bear on where people actually live.

Even in our work on race, we’re making progress. And I believe that the language of reverence, and its handmaidens, humility and gratitude, offer our best hope for white UUs to understand privilege. It is a window through which we must look. Again, very much a work in progress. But the tone and tenor of our collective conversation is beginning to shift.

We are having different conversations today about who we are and what we are called to do. We are talking less about the what of the specific practices and habits we have known (and loved), and more about the “why” we gather as we do. In my world, our conversations are better because we are talking about things that matter to our faith community and to the hurting world in which we minister.

This is not my valedictory. I'll impose that on you all later. But I will be very pleased if this is the legacy which our leadership together passes on to those who will follow us. The trees, even the knotholes on the old growth, need attention, which you are faithfully providing. But do not miss the reality that our leadership together is encouraging the forest to flourish.

It continues to be a privilege to serve our faith and I still awake each day ready to help move us forward.

In faith,

Bill

Faith in Public Life, Fresno

G8

Dan McKanan

Youth-difficult, most important

Excellence in Ministry

Forest/trees

Assoc of Congregations

Vision Mission and Ministry

Youth Ministry

Excellence in Ministry

Faith Development: couples program

Language of reverence vs humanist/spiritual debate