

2009 General Assembly Report

Rev. William G. Sinkford

June 24, 2009

Thank you Madam Moderator.

This is my last report to the leaders of our congregations as UUA President. Preparing for this evening has been an opportunity for me to reflect on the extraordinary journey we have been on together for the last eight years.

Making History

It began immediately following my election, with media coverage of the first African American to lead an historically white denomination. Major stories in the New York Times, the Boston Globe and dozens of other papers ran on my first day in office.

My election, of course, was seen as a sign of hope that Unitarian Universalism might finally be moving beyond the discrimination and racism that are so much a part of our history and our present, as a faith community and as a nation. This faith has yearned for a sign that our past moral failures might not foretell our future. My election was not the completion of our work, but only another chance to begin again in love. We know, even now, with the first African American President of the United States, that we have yet to fulfill the promise of our democratic ideals. The Beloved Community is still a-building and in the words of the hymn, “all our lives are building stones.”

World-shaking events

I campaigned for this office promising greater visibility for our faith and more effective public witness for our values. We've delivered on that promise. No individual has done more to make that possible than our Director of Communications, John Hurley. Enhanced public witness was our vision, but I had no idea that the first test of that promise would be September, 11th. I was in Washington, DC, on that day and, like all of us, found myself in a state of shock. But I knew the two things I, and we, had to do. First, we needed to provide a pastoral response to the throngs who sought out our sanctuaries and, indeed, the sanctuaries of every faith, seeking comfort and confidence. And second, we needed to reach out to the Muslim and Arab communities among us who were sure to be profiled and targeted. On the morning of the twelfth, I issued my first pastoral letter. I wrote,

“There are Arab and Muslim communities in this country and around the world that grieve as we do, and fear as we do... May our congregations be centers of support where we can bring our questions and our fears, where we can find the presence of the holy in our coming together.”

On September 12th, I met with the leadership of the American Muslim Council to offer support in the difficult days we knew lay ahead.

Our nation’s response to the attacks was the invasion of Afghanistan, where my son served, and the occupation of Iraq. Through those early years I tried to offer not only pastoral counsel to our congregations but also a prophetic voice in support of multi-nationalism and careful, not careless, use of force. I witnessed on behalf of Unitarian Universalism, and I prayed for a national policy that would not use unilateral force as our first and favored approach.

So much of our life as a religious people in these last years has cast us in the role of dissenters. It is a role we know well. But today we need to move beyond protest mode. Today we are not only out on the mall in front of the Capitol, but at the table inside as a new direction for our nation is being charted. This role calls for new skills and new commitments from us. I hope we are up to the task, as Van Jones described it at last year’s GA, of being willing to help govern.

Keynote Issues

Our faith looks not only outward, but inward as well. In my first year, I launched a re-organization of the UUA staff. My motivation was to focus the work of the staff on supporting the health and vitality of our congregations, on making Unitarian Universalism available to those who yearn for a liberal religious home, and on being a credible voice for liberal religious values in the public square. We needed some new structures and new language to guide us.

We needed to talk not just about religious education for children, but about lifespan faith development. We needed to honor and support not just ordained ministers, but all religious professionals. We needed to stop lamenting our racial/cultural homogeneity. Instead, we needed to focus on ministering to those traditionally marginalized persons for whom Unitarian Universalism is their religious home. And we needed to increase support for our public witness efforts and presence in our national’s capital.

We tried to name and claim a mission for the Association’s staff that would point us to a hopeful future.

I have not shied away from controversy. For example, language. In 2003 I preached a sermon in Fort Worth, Texas. It was titled “The Language of Reverence.” I called us to find a language beyond the wonderful ethical words of our principles. A language that would ground our spiritual life in gratitude and awe. And a language that would acknowledge and celebrate the

presence in our lives of that spirit of life which we know by many names that transcends our individual lives and connects us to the holy. A reporter was there and wrote a story for the local paper that suggested that I wanted to put God language into our principles and purposes.

The story was picked up by dozens of other papers. A firestorm erupted. Humanists and other non-theist UUs across the country rose up in protest. I tried to reassure them while staying true to my original message, and I think I was successful. Some of those who were most upset now talk about the language of reverence with ease. But more importantly the conversation that began has yielded substantial benefits for our faith. More ministers feel free to talk honestly about their own spiritual journey. They have been able to “come out of the closet” spiritually. We’ve developed our elevator speeches and are more comfortable talking about what Unitarian Universalism means in our lives. We have taken a step toward reclaiming our identity as a religious people. Perhaps we have matured a bit spiritually.

During this same period, we raised a strong and united voice in the public arena. No issue has defined our life together in these last eight years more clearly than Marriage Equality. From the Massachusetts court decision in 2003 to the decisions by legislatures, governors and courts this year, Unitarian Universalists have been in the forefront of the most important civil rights struggle of our generation. And after more than a few setbacks, we are finally having some success. How many of you here are from Iowa? Raise your hands...keep them raised... From Connecticut?...From Vermont?..... Maine.... New Hampshire..., Washington, DC...and from Massachusetts?

Our work on Marriage Equality is far from complete. We have only to look at the recent California Supreme Court decision to know this. But it helps to remember that it was nineteen years between the 1948 California court decision to legalize inter-racial marriage and the 1967 US Supreme Court case, *Loving v. Virginia*, that finally legalized inter-racial marriage throughout the US. We are committed to standing on the side of love until the freedom to marry is a reality in California and in every other state in the country.

Hearing Our Calling During Times of Tragedy

“Love your neighbor as yourself,” Jesus told his disciples. “But who is my neighbor?” responded Peter. The disciples, if you read the Gospels carefully, never quite get the message of the radical rabbi. And we struggle with it to this day. It sometimes takes tragedy to get our attention.

The images of New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina shone a spotlight on the reality of on-going racism in this land of the free. I wrote then, “These last days have provided a picture of what racism and classism and privilege look like. Racism is not about individual prejudice.

Classism is not about individual poverty. And privilege is so often allowed to be invisible...I am so angry.”

Working in partnership with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee we raised almost \$3.5 million to help our congregations and provide support for the poorest New Orleanians. Our work was, and continues to be, transformative. Thousands of Unitarian Universalists have made the pilgrimage to New Orleans and the Gulf Coast to help those communities re-build. In a time when our government failed us, UUs and other people of faith stepped in to help fill the gap. How many of you have travelled to the Gulf Coast to work and witness?

Who is my neighbor?

Our neighbors are the people of Dafur and Chad.

In 2005, I traveled with Charlie Clements of the UU Service Committee to eastern Chad. Our goal was to visit the camps where refugees from the genocide in Darfur lived, to hear their stories and help bring awareness of their plight to our nation and our nation’s leaders.

The year before, the UUA had become a founding member of the Save Darfur Coalition. And, in an action of civil disobedience, I had been arrested outside the Sudanese embassy in Washington, DC.

The trip to Chad was powerful. The genocide is real. The rapes, the bombings and the beatings are real. The violence continues to this day. What excuse can there be that this genocide has been allowed to continue for six years? Is there not a coalition of the willing that can end this tragedy and bring our neighbors peace?

The spiritual task can be summarized as the process of recognizing and embracing our neighbors. It is certainly an accurate description of the Association’s work over the past eight years, as we’ve responded to crises around the world with new resources and innovative partnerships.

Who is my neighbor?

Our neighbors are the people of the lands devastated by the Indian Ocean tsunami.

Who is my neighbor?

Our neighbors are the Dalits, the untouchables of India, and the tribal peoples and other marginalized groups there who have been served so well by our Holdeen India Program for 25 years.

Who is my neighbor?

Our neighbors are immigrants whose labor is often invisible and whose contributions remain unacknowledged, men, women, and children who came to this country seeking a better life for their families.

Who is my neighbor?

Our neighbors are the poor and the marginalized who exist in every one of the communities in which we minister.

Who is my neighbor?

Few have spoken as eloquently in response to that question as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He talked about building the Beloved Community where every person is valued and every person has a place. He insisted that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

It is my great pleasure to tell you that our own Beacon Press has just completed an agreement with the King family to become the sole trade publisher of Dr. King's writings. There is a wealth of rich material from his life, and Beacon will have access to all of it, all of his sermons, all of his speeches and all of the pictures of Dr. King as he witnessed for justice. The University of California Press will continue to publish scholarly editions of King's works, but for almost a decade there have been no trade books, the kind you and I buy from Borders or Amazon. And many of the books King saw published in his lifetime have gone out of print.

You will hear more about this from Helene Atwan, the Director of the Press, when she reports to you later in the GA. But you should know that Helene, Tom Hallock, and the team at Beacon deserve credit for their creativity and determination as they managed what has been a long and complex negotiation.

One other note about Beacon. Just seven years ago there was active consideration of selling the press. It had been losing money; its cash reserves were dwindling. But for the last six years, Beacon Press has operated at a profit and the purchase of the rights to the King papers is being financed from reserves the press has accumulated. Beacon Press is not only successful in publishing books at the heart of our mission, Beacon is a business success story as well.

Our Place in the World

The Association partners with organizations and faith communities around the world that give life to the interdependence we proclaim. In these eight years I have represented our Association on trips to Transylvania twice, Japan four times, England five times, Amman, Jordan, the Vatican, Spain, the Czech Republic, India, Taiwan and seven African countries.

And as I traveled and talked with leaders around the world, I realized that international engagement can profoundly influence our congregational life. At my request, the UUA Board adopted an international vision statement that centers our work on maximizing the benefit to our congregations of international engagement.

Go to the “Faith Without Borders” program of our International Resources Office to see how the members of your congregation can deepen their faith through international engagement.

There are new partnerships between US congregations and the UU congregations in the Khasi Hills, the Philippines and now the African congregations. And we’re developing congregational partnerships and deepening relationships with the Rissho Kosei-kai and the Tsubaki Grand Shrine, our traditional Japanese partners. We are honored and delighted to welcome many of these international partners to this General Assembly.

Before I leave the international arena, let me ask you to hold the people of Iran in your hearts and prayers. May the violence in that land come to an end and the will of the people be heard.

Setting New Priorities

In the last few years clarity about our mission has helped set new priorities for our work together. I want to say a few words about critical mission-based initiatives that are underway, in some cases well underway, but that will need ongoing attention.

First, youth ministry.

I became a Unitarian Universalist while I was active in Liberal Religious Youth, and our youth ministry has always been near and dear to my heart. Over the last four years, we have been creating a new vision for how we can minister to and with our youth. The process has been one of the most extensive ever undertaken by the Association.

What we found was that our continental youth ministry structure, YRUU, was serving some youth brilliantly, but only the handful that were active at the continental level. We found that our support for congregational youth ministry was spotty, at best. We found that youth want opportunities for service and leadership in their congregations and beyond. We found that we lacked a vision for multi-generational congregational life.

A Summit on Youth Ministry in the summer of 2007 began the process of articulating a new vision. For the last two years, a Youth Ministry Working Group has honed that vision and worked to plan its implementation.

I want to share with you the heart of that vision:

We envision a youth ministry that is central to the articulated mission of Unitarian Universalism, offers multiple pathways for involvement in our faith communities, and is congregationally based; multigenerational; spirit-centered; counter-oppressive, multicultural, and radically inclusive.

You'll hear more about this vision later in GA and, of course, the implementation plan will become the responsibility of the new administration. But I wanted to tell how personally grateful I am to all the youth and adults who participated in its creation. And how excited I am at the prospect of a youth ministry that serves more of our youth, in congregational settings as well as at the district and continental level.

The realization of that vision has already begun. I am pleased to announce one innovative development in our youth ministry – a partnership between our Lifespan Faith Development staff group and Beacon Press author Eboo Patel's Interfaith Youth Corps, thanks to a generous grant from the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock. The goal is to develop a program of interfaith service and leadership for UU youth that fosters multicultural diversity and UU identity.

The second priority I want to highlight is racial and cultural diversity in our ministry.

In 1993 there were 9 ministers of color, Latina/o, Hispanic or Asian American ministers serving our congregations. I attended my first meeting of what was then called the African American UU Ministry in 1991. Fewer than 10 ordained ministers and seminarians gathered. It was such a relief to me to be in their company. But today, due to disappointment, retirement and, sadly, death, only one of that original group is still serving a UU congregation.

By 2001, there were 17 ministers of color serving our congregations. And today there are 40, with another 15 serving in community ministries and on the UUA staff. There are more than 40 seminarians of color currently preparing for our ministry; 7 will receive Preliminary Fellowship at this GA. We should be pleased with this trajectory. We have not reached a tipping point, but one just might be in sight.

The good news is that ministers of color are finding settlements. The bad news is that those settlements tend to be dramatically shorter than those of white ministers and more often end in

negotiated resignations. Cultural differences and differing expectations too often overwhelm the good will of our congregations and their leaders.

The Diversity of Ministry Initiative is designed to work with congregations expressing an interest in settling a minister of color. The task is to prepare them to deal in a direct way with race and culture so that the conversations don't go underground and undermine the ministry. Some small grants are available to help, but the real work is the education and discernment that the JUUST Change consultants provide, well before the normal search cycle. The consultants also provide support to congregations that are calling a minister of color even if they are not in the formal program.

Funding for this effort comes from your gifts to Association Sunday and the first congregations in the program, Ist Unitarian Pittsburgh and the UU Church of Annapolis, called ministers of color this spring.

This initiative, too, will require continued attention and support. We are blessed by the relatively large number of people of color who are called to our ministry. But we need to remember that we have a history of failure... so many ministers of color have left our faith.

We have another chance now. If we fail this time, the opportunity may not come around again.

Growth and Numbers

And then there is the vision for growth.

Virtually every UU leadership group identifies growth as a top priority, as has every UUA President since the 1980's. In the last eight years we have been in experimental mode, trying new approaches to make UUism available to those who yearn for a liberal religious home. We have developed large church starts and regional marketing campaigns, and offered support for innovative ideas at the congregational level. Hundreds of our congregations now proudly display banners proclaiming our Good News. We continue to produce new DVD's and books on congregational growth and vitality. We've celebrated the creativity of Breakthrough Congregations.

We have learned so much in the process and we have some real successes to our credit. But the reported membership numbers have barely budged. Our adult membership has grown by less than 7% in these eight years.

What we know is that there is no secret formula, no one-size-fits-all approach that will lead to growth of our faith. Perhaps only a deepening religious practice of hospitality can finally help us.

The new administration will be blessed with all that we have learned and with far more resources than existed before. But growth will certainly remain a top priority in the years ahead.

Now Is the Time Campaign

We seek growth in numbers, but not only in numbers. The Now is the Time Campaign was designed to support growth in diversity, witness, leadership, and spirit as well. Support for innovative projects like the Diversity of Ministry Team Initiative, Lay Theological Education, the Tapestry of Faith curricula, scholarships for seminarians, improved continuing education for our ministers and our marketing and visibility programs all were made possible by your gifts.

The financial goal of the campaign was ambitious: \$20 million in cash gifts; \$30 million in legacy gifts; a total of \$50 million, almost 60% larger than the campaign we completed just six years ago.

Thanks to your exceptional generosity, I am delighted to announce that the Now is the Time Campaign has exceeded its \$50 million goal and reached it a full year ahead of schedule, making Now is the Time the most successful campaign in our history.

Reaching the financial goal is a real achievement. I was also committed to conducting this campaign not just among our very generous major donors but by giving every UU an opportunity to participate. The wonderful news is that more than 24,000 Unitarian Universalists have contributed to the successful completion of the Now Is The Time Campaign.

How many of you here helped bring this campaign home either through a gift to Association Sunday in your congregation or with a direct gift to the campaign? Please, give yourselves a hand.

In the words of W.E.B. DuBois, “Now is the accepted time, not tomorrow, not some more convenient time. It is today that our best work can be done and not some future day or future year. It is today that we fit ourselves for the greater usefulness of tomorrow.”

Thank you for answering that call.

The whole Stewardship and Development team has worked hard and to bring this campaign home. I hope you all find an opportunity to thank them personally when you visit the Stewardship and Development Booth in the Lower Concourse. But my ... and our special thanks go to Terry Sweetser, Vice President for Stewardship and Development. Terry, we could not have done it without your leadership.

Renewing Our Mission

All of our projects and initiatives are means to one very important end -- living out our deepest values in community. Sometimes it takes hardship, or even tragedy, to remind us just how important our work is. On a Sunday last July, a man entered the sanctuary of the Tennessee Valley UU Church carrying a guitar case. The children of TVUUC and the Westside congregation were performing the musical "Annie" that morning. The man took a shotgun from the case and began blasting. Two people died and several more were injured. Thankfully none of the children were physically injured.

The shooter hated liberals, gays, immigrants and people of color. As he said, he knew where to find liberals.

Members of our district staff and the trauma response ministry were in Knoxville within hours of the shootings, and I joined them the next day. The shootings sent shock waves throughout the religious community. I went to offer my help, but I was overwhelmed by the precious gift they gave me. Their response to the tragedy was an inspiration.

The congregations could have "hunkered down," retreated from their commitments, avoided the public eye. Instead, they decided with one voice that they would not retreat. They decided that they would proclaim a Unitarian Universalist gospel of love and of hope.

As Rev. Chris Buice said, "A man tried to divide us, divide us into liberals and conservatives, gay and straight; instead his actions united us, making us more willing to listen to each other, care for each other, respect each other, and support each other."

Instead of retreating, they threw open their doors and their hearts to the wider community. We were all moved by their courage and generosity. They reminded us all what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Please join me in thanking our sisters and brothers from Knoxville.* (*See addendum, below*)

Standing on the Side of Love

The Knoxville tragedy made crystal clear to me that our saving message, our real good news, is our willingness to stand on the side of love. As we honor the injunction to love our neighbor as ourselves, we touch the very heart of Unitarian Universalism.

In Knoxville, we were attacked because of what our faith stands for, the belief that each and every one of us is worthy, each and every one of us is a child of God. Every day people are

targeted because of identities which are somehow deemed “okay to hate.” We are called to use our public presence to more actively stand up with and for those who are targets for violence, exclusion or oppression because of who they are.

After Knoxville, I asked our media consultant, Fred Garcia, to help us imagine what a visibility campaign, centered on what we stand for, might look like. The result is what we are calling the Standing on the Side of Love Campaign.

Standing on the Side of Love has been closely associated with our support of Marriage Equality and that will continue. But we will be broadening that message, that foundational expression of our Unitarian Universalist values, to include others. Think of the recent immigrant families torn apart by ICE raids. Think of Muslim clerics prevented from boarding airplanes. Think of all the persons targeted for exclusion, oppression, or violence because of their real or perceived identities. We will stand with these people, and we will invite other people of faith and in the secular world who share our values to stand with us on the side of love.

Standing on the Side of Love.

Imagine several dozen of our ministers trained and ready to speak out on these issues. Sadly, we will not lack opportunities for our voice to make a difference.

Imagine a major public relations firm placing our op-eds in newspapers and getting our spokespeople on talk shows and news programs.

And imagine our sponsoring a social media campaign on blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and U-Tube with staff resources to support it. Imagine our being joined by thousands of other Americans who want to stand on the side of love. We want our message to go viral.

The campaign is still being created, and because it will be a living, organic, entity I can't tell you what all will happen. YOU are the ones who will be shaping what unfolds! I hope you will take time this General Assembly to get connected with the campaign.

Have yourself videotaped standing on the side of love. There will be roving camera crews here asking you what standing on the side of love means in your life.

Share the website with your congregational e-mail list.

Come to the public witness event on Friday. We'll be standing on the side of love, with other religious leaders, in support of the immigrant community and the families who are being so vilified and oppressed.

Pick up, and send in, a postcard, available at the back of the hall, urging our legislators to finally approve the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, to protect our BGLT sisters and brothers.

Oh, by the way, the Obama administration's liaison to the religious community thinks that our Standing on the Side of Love campaign is exactly what faith groups ought to be doing.

UUism can make a difference. What will this look like? Last Saturday's Salt Lake City Tribune was all about UUism. A wonderful profile of Rev. Sean Parker Dennison of the South Valley congregation, an interview with me (the least interesting of the pieces), and a joint op-ed by Laurel Hallman and Peter Morales, standing on the side of love. Or the article in "O" magazine this month on adult sex education. All about OWL and our Austin TX congregation.

Unitarian Universalism can make a real difference if we stand on the side of love.

Recession Issues

This winter and spring has been a tough time for many of us to navigate, emotionally and spiritually. On the one hand, the election of Obama was a source of hope, offering not only a change in policy direction on many fronts but an attitude of genuine openness and honesty that we've yearned for. Even those who did not vote for him know how important it is that he deal with the many challenges that face our country today. The stakes very high. And five months into his presidency, most of us are still liking the guy quite a lot.

But at the same time, the stock market meltdown, rising unemployment, the depression that we are still calling a recession have tested our spirits. The past year has felt like emotional whiplash. From the mountain top of hope to the valley of despair... and back again.

And throughout this period our sanctuaries, and the sanctuaries of every other faith, have been full. People need religion to navigate the uncertainty. They need religious community to hold their joys, their sorrows, and their fears.

And in our sanctuaries, people are finding prayer that is more powerful, music that is more soulful, and religious community that is more nurturing of the human spirit. They are finding a liberal religious faith that is living out its promise. We have matured in these last eight years as a religious people. We are, I believe, coming of age.

Returning to the Source/Coming Full Circle

Last November I led a group of four pilgrims on a journey to Africa. We visited UU congregations in South Africa, Uganda, Kenya and Nigeria. We met with justice-making partners of the UUSC and the UU-United Nations Office. We learned about the South African Truth and Reconciliation process. And we visited Goree Island, off the coast of Senegal, one of the transit points in the transatlantic slave trade.

The trip had been a dream of mine for years and it did not disappoint. After my report, you will see images from the trip as a segue into our opening worship, accompanied by the wonderful gift of Dr. Ysaye Barnwell's voice.

One of the high points of the trip was seeing our faith lived out in different cultural contexts, in different languages and in different liturgies. Some of you have had a similar experience visiting Unitarian and Unitarian Universalist congregations in Transylvania, the Khasei Hills of northeast India or the Philippines. In all this diversity, there is a common message of hope and of love that shines through.

But we have so much to do here at home. We have done good work on race in recent years and there are exciting experiments underway that can take us further. But while we have been working the world around us has changed. Our dominant stories about race center on the relationship of Whites and Blacks. But the world, our nation and almost every one of our communities is living in a multi-cultural present that is more than just White and Black, with greater multi-culturalism yet to come.

For some time, we have needed better language and a new vision. Let me offer, as one of my parting gifts, a multi-cultural vision statement that I created with the staff Leadership Council. It reads:

“With humility and courage born of our history, we are called as Unitarian Universalists to build the Beloved Community where all souls are welcome as blessings, and the human family lives whole and reconciled.”

My prayer is that we, as a people, can own that vision and live into that multicultural future.

Thanks

I've been asked more times than I can count what I believe my legacy will be, but it is not my task to determine my legacy... it is yours. Many of you have heard me say that there are no solo acts in ministry. And I mean it. We have been on a journey together for these last eight years. And my legacy will be measured by our life together as a religious people.

No solo acts. I want to thank our extraordinary Moderator who has been a good partner in the dance of leadership of our Association. We've stepped on each others toes a few times, but that happens even to the most experienced dance partners. Gini, it has been a pleasure to lead with you.

I want to thank the staff of the Association. They are dedicated and creative and tireless in their work on our behalf. They've put up with my peculiarities and my passions...and even seemed to enjoy this journey. You have been a blessing to me and to our congregations in these eight years. Give it up for the staff.

I want to specifically mention Kay Montgomery, our Executive Vice President, who has helped my ministry as President be effective in more ways than you will ever know. Kay, I will miss being able to walk down the hall to ask for your wisdom or your encouragement or your help in avoiding the gopher holes in my path.

To Maria, my wife and the love of my life. You had the temerity or the poor judgment to fall in love with and marry a President of the UUA. You call my ministry "happy work" and I think you mean it. You've endured the travel with me, eaten endless potluck meals, and slept in more hotel beds than we will ever want to count. I am so grateful for your presence in my life. How I would have managed these eight years without you at my side I do not know.

And last, but far from least, I want to thank all of you for being willing to journey with me, to accept my leadership, for being faithful critics and ardent supporters. It is you, our congregational leaders and the hundreds of volunteers who serve on committees and task forces, who have been willing to say yes when I have called, it is you that make Unitarian Universalism live.

I want you all to know that I have loved being President of your Association. I've loved the challenges. I've loved the wonderful colleagues with whom I've worked. I've loved the opportunity to give voice to our values. I've loved being minister-at-large to our clan.

These eight years have been a journey of faith for me and for my family as well. It was my son's overdose and my experience of being with him that dark night that led directly to the "language of reverence" sermon. Billy was willing to have his very private life made very public. And Unitarian Universalism was able to make a space to hear my story. My daughter, Danielle, was willing to share me with you. And she was with me in India and in Chad.

I have offered everything I have to this faith in these eight years. And I regret not one day.

As a young man I left this faith, disappointed...betrayed by decisions that we made about race in the early 1970's. The religious community in which I had found a home let me down. Our reality fell too far short of our lofty language and our aspirations.

After my mother's death the love and support of my home congregation drew me back. We are not perfect, but while we struggle to transform ourselves and our world, relationships redeem. During my dozen years wandering in the wilderness, I never joined another church. You see, I have known ever since I found this faith at the age of 14 that this was the only church for me.

It is difficult to be sustained by aspirations alone. But despite how far short we fall, and the gap can be staggering, this faith has been there for me in these eight years. It has been there in the warm welcome I have received in congregation after congregation. It has been there in your willingness to grow and change. It has been there in the support of colleagues and friends who have said, "Yes, this faith saved my life, too," and who have shared their stories.

Who knows what the future holds? Revelation is not sealed. But I do know that Unitarian Universalism can save lives. And I know that there are so many souls, like I was and perhaps you were, down in the valley, searching for home. Our task is to let them know we are here, to keep our liberal religious light shining, and to welcome them home.

This has been a journey of faith. And as I leave office, my heart sings songs of praise and thanks for the privilege of service you have given me.

Thank you.

***Addendum, June 27 2009, delivered at Plenary:**

I'm here to correct a significant oversight on my part. Wednesday night in my report I referred to the tragic shooting last July in Knoxville of members of our Westside and Tennessee Valley congregations. I knew that the Rev. Chris Buice and some members of the Tennessee Valley congregation were here at GA, and I asked them to stand to be acknowledged.

What I didn't know was that the Rev. Mitra Jafarzadeh and members of the Westside UU Church were also here at GA. These UUs from Westside were profoundly affected by the tragedy last July, so now I would like to ask Mitra and the folks from Westside to stand and be acknowledged.

Westside folks, please remain standing while I tell everyone something about your trip here to Salt Lake. When another church experienced the pain of a shooting caused by hate and intolerance, Rev. Jafarzadeh told her congregation that they had received so much love and support from others that it was time to give back. So they created a quilt made up of all their handprints and on their way to GA, they delivered it to the Reformation Lutheran Church in Wichita, Kansas, the home church of Dr. George Tiller who was murdered there last month. As

they presented the quilt to the congregation at Sunday's service, Mitra told the Lutheran children that even though our beliefs are different, our love is the same. This is Unitarian Universalism standing on the side of love.