

Democracy Uncorrupted

“Democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion.”

-John Dewey

Democracy in the U.S. has always been compromised. At the Nation’s very founding, only white male land owners were allowed to participate in governance. Wealth was created from those excluded: the seizure of land from indigenous peoples who were forcibly removed and exterminated, enslaved Africans, and exploited labor from indentured servants, immigrants, prisoners, and the working poor. As people of faith committed to “the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,” we must strive toward uncorrupted democracy.

As a means to an end, democracy organizes consensus among diverse people and preserves stability while balancing competing interests. But democracy is not merely a means. It is an end in itself, an ethical ideal, a moral and spiritual way of relating to one another.

The promise of democracy is for a life that fashions us as the people we want to be. Terry Tempest Williams asks: “Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?” She calls us to be equitable, and generous, attentive to one another, resolute and courageous in our trust. If democracy has sometimes seemed, as Winston Churchill said, “the worst form of government except for all those other forms,” it is because democracy has been limited and constrained – merely a means for giving powerful interests the appearance of legitimacy.

Government of the people that is by and for the people formally entails majority rule, with the majority’s power limited by rights it may not infringe. Democratic government includes:

- universal voting rights with high voter participation rates;
- free, fair, competitive, and frequent elections;
- beyond voting, meaningful channels of political participation open to all citizens and widely used;
- basic individual liberties that include freedom of speech, press, and religion;
- leaders who reflect the racial, ethnic, gender, and class diversity of the population;
- an independent judiciary and adherence to the rule of law;
- policies implemented by those duly authorized; and
- freedom from influence of foreign or external powers.

Democracy is not only rules and systems, it is the culture and commitments of the people and of those of those entrusted with carrying out the will of the people. A truly democratic culture requires:

- Radical inclusivity (deeply listening, attending to the concerns of the most vulnerable, caring about inclusion and exclusion, and acknowledging that they happen) and transparency;
- Cooperation, bipartisanship, and an orientation of consensus-building for decision-making;
- Accountability and accessibility, being responsive to the public good versus special interests; and

41 ● Respect for the rights and needs of those in the minority on any particular issue.

42 The Nation's founding documents expressed inspiring ideals of democratic equality. Value gaps,
43 however, have undermined our country's prospects for living the promise of true democracy: whites
44 are valued more than people of color, men more than women, the rich more than the poor. These
45 valuations, enshrined in law and custom, amplify the power of the advantaged and the advantages of
46 the powerful, and continue to undercut our expressed ideals.

47 The 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments of 1865-1870, the 19th Amendment of 1920, and civil rights
48 legislation in the 1960s represented expansions of voting rights. Yet, our laws and systems continue to
49 protect privilege and maintain value gaps. White supremacist values and practices permeate America's
50 400-year history. Supremacist values continue today through policies that disproportionately lower
51 voter participation among peoples of color, people with low income, youth, and other disadvantaged
52 people. Such policies include denial of voting rights for felons and ex-felons, voter ID requirements,
53 and cutbacks on early voting opportunities. In addition, gerrymandering limits people of color's
54 electoral power. It can also move legislators further to the extremes, reducing their desire to cooperate
55 or compromise.

56 The outsized influence of wealthy individuals and corporations on elections, always a corruption of
57 democracy, has worsened in recent decades. The costs of campaigning have skyrocketed, increasing
58 legislators' debt to large donors. Additionally, Supreme Court decisions struck down attempts to limit
59 the influence of money in politics: *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976) ruled that spending is a protected form of
60 speech, and *Citizens United* (2010) ruled that corporations are people and therefore their campaign
61 spending may not be restricted. Understanding our democracy requires examining the role of
62 structural racism, patriarchy, environmental degradation for economic production, the increased
63 militarization of society, and other oppressions in the accumulation of wealth and consolidation of
64 political power.

65 At the Association level, Unitarian Universalists also fall short of democratic ideals. The cost and
66 time required to participate in our annual General Assembly excludes many from
67 association-level decision-making. Additionally, our voting procedures sometimes limit important
68 conversations. The formal procedures often feel cumbersome for some. They are rooted in
69 Congressional rules that reflect a competitive orientation of affluent white males, who created the
70 rules. Informal procedures have not addressed the problem. In both cases, excluding people of color
71 from the creation of processes has distanced them from engagement. Informal systems rely on
72 organizational cultures that not everyone is privy to.

73 In our congregations, governance and decision-making varies from top-down and hierarchical to more
74 egalitarian. At both the Associational and congregational levels, realizing true democracy requires
75 expanding and, to use UUA President Rev. Susan Frederick Gray's expression, "growing at the
76 edges."

77 **Theological/Religious Grounding**

78 *"We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and*
79 *promote . . . the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations*

80 *and in society at large.*” Two phrases here warrant attention:

81 *Within our congregations.* The 1648 Cambridge Platform laid the foundation for Unitarian Universalist
82 polity, establishing the autonomy of congregations. Congregational polity puts democratic practice at the center
83 of governance. Our shared religious life depends on honoring every member’s voice and vote.

84 *Society at large.* Our religious commitments extend beyond our congregations’ walls. Excluding our
85 neighbors’ voices impoverishes our souls; hearing all voices expands our spirits. Our faith calls us to live into
86 the requirements of real democracy.

87 Our theology locates healing and wholeness in relationship, in contrast to a theology of sin that sees
88 human nature as fundamentally corrupt. Our tradition locates hope for addressing social problems
89 not in the suppression of basic sinfulness but in building connections open to diverse perspectives.

90 Another source of our religious movement is the Protestant Reformation’s response to the corruption
91 of a church that sold the promise of heaven for a price. Today we face the parallel corruption in which
92 power, rather than heaven, is sold to those who meet the price.

93 **Actions We Could Take**

94 Achieving the ideals of our faith related to democracy, requires new approaches for mobilizing power
95 and influence. This means engaging in radical truth-telling, intersectional organizing, and naming the
96 forces that resist democratic reforms. A truly inclusive democracy challenges the exploitation of
97 peoples and natural resources by corporate and political power. Our collective future calls us to live
98 into what Unitarian theologian Rev. James Luther Adams named “the prophet-hood of all believers.”

99 As individuals we can take actions such as the following.

- 100 • Conduct a personal democracy audit. Review our relationships with systems that
- 101 perpetuate consolidation of wealth and power.
- 102 • Help with voter registration particularly among underrepresented populations.
- 103 • Contribute time and money to democracy-building efforts and to non-profit democracy
- 104 organizations that represent economically oppressed or marginalized people.
- 105 • Direct action toward democratic reforms and integrity through rallies, community organized
- 106 events, and contacts with elected officials. Specific asks include:
- 107 • public financing of campaign reform,
- 108 • expanding ballot access,
- 109 • reforming or eliminating the electoral college,
- 110 • paper ballot backup for voting integrity
- 111 • eliminating gerrymandering,
- 112 • allowing felons and ex-felons to vote, and
- 113 • amending the Constitution to overturn *Citizens United* and end corporate personhood.

114 Our congregations can take actions such as the following.

- 115 • Conduct a congregational democracy audit that includes considerations of practices that continue to
- 116 sustain white supremacy. Take action to address findings.
- 117 • Create study groups based on the needs of democratic reform and investigate how structural racism,
- 118 patriarchy, environmental degradation, and militarization have driven the accumulation of wealth
- 119 and political power.
- 120 • Partner with other UU congregations, other faith communities, non-profits, and unions to work

- 121 on democratic reforms.
- 122 • Organize advocacy initiatives such as postcards, social media campaigns, rallies, sit-ins, petition
 - 123 drives, or other forms of direct action in support of democratic reforms.
 - 124 • Sponsor educational forums about factors contributing to the corruption of democracy.
 - 125 • As part of the offering, ask for funds to support democracy-strengthening efforts.
 - 126 • Adopt resolutions supporting democratic reforms.

127 Clusters or state legislative ministries can work with their congregations and other relevant

128 partners to take actions such as the following.

- 129 • Include voter rights, access, and participation as advocacy priorities.
- 130 • Create and publish report cards on state or local legislators' records on campaign financing and
- 131 issues impacting voter rights, access, and participation.
- 132 • Host bi-partisan forums that bring attention to issues related to democratic processes. Alert
- 133 congregations about sources of information about issues and candidates.
- 134 • Engage in advocacy for democratic reforms including public financing of campaigns; reform of the
- 135 electoral college; voter enrollment and participation; and security of voting systems.
- 136 • Use a variety of advocacy tools including media blasts, social media, and meetings with
- 137 legislators to advocate for issues such as voting rights for ex-felons, campaign finance
- 138 reform, and election security.
- 139 • Study gerrymandering issues within the state and advise advocates about recommended
- 140 actions to ensure fair representation that reflects the diversity of each district.
- 141 • Monitor moves to contract out government functions to for-profit corporations and intervene to
- 142 limit and reverse such contracts as feasible. Insist on accountability from state contractors that
- 143 provide services normally provided by government such as private prisons and schools.

144 As an association we can take actions such as the following.

- 145 • Conduct periodic association-wide democracy audits that include consideration of practices that
- 146 continue to sustain white supremacy. Take action to address the findings.
- 147 • Invest in state legislative ministries and advocacy at the national level.
- 148 • Participate in interfaith and multiracial coalitions and other social justice groups that work
- 149 toward achieving democratic reforms.
- 150 • Follow the lead of communities of color and support their cultivation of candidates for elected
- 151 office.
- 152 • Advocate for democratic reforms, including the removal of money in politics and amending the
- 153 constitution to eliminate corporations as persons.
- 154 • Provide resources for member congregations that promote effective democratic engagement.
- 155 • Actively explore opportunities for virtually engaging more Unitarian Universalists in the
- 156 Association's governance.
- 157 • Make the Association's collective decision-making processes more democratic.

158 Rev. Barbara Pescan expresses both our debt and our ongoing responsibility: "Because of those who

159 came before, we are; in spite of their failings, we believe; because of, and in spite of the horizons of

160 their vision, we, too dream." The Nation's founders pointed in the direction of a horizon they

161 themselves could not see. It falls now to us to make real the dream of democracy uncorrupted.