

Co-Moderators' Report to the General Assembly, June 2021

Where We Started

Charles: We came into our time as co-moderators with three amazing gifts:

First, we work with a powerful, strategic board shaped by strong leadership from our predecessors, Rev. Mr. Barb Greve and Elandria Williams. We are so grateful.

Second, we have a focused, effective administration with whom to partner as they manage the UUA's hardworking staff. So much gratitude to Susan Frederick-Gray, Andrew McGeorge, Stephanie Carey Maron and Carey McDonald for your partnership.

And third, we inherited a strong, powerful guidebook for our work, enthusiastically welcomed by the 2020 General Assembly—the report of the Commission on Institutional Change entitled, “*Widening the Circle of Concern.*”

We also came in with particular identities. Both of us can only think of ourselves as middle aged if we live very, very, very long lives. Both of us are white. Both of us are cisgender. Both of us are older than the UUA.

Meg: I came in as I retired from 38 years as a religious professional, serving congregations and the UUA as a religious educator, community minister, organizer, youth worker, minister. I came in knowing many of you from various stages of my life and with deep love and gratitude for this faith which has saved me, over and over, from being the oblivious and entitled person I might have been! And yes, it's true, there's still so much more saving needed for my soul...and I'm grateful it's happening every day!

Charles: I am exactly the type of person who gets lots of opportunities for lay leadership. Because I come from a place of privilege, I have had the time and resources to serve on congregational and district boards, advisory boards, boards for seminaries – I've done a lot of board work. I claim I've done ever volunteer activity in my local San Mateo congregation, except sing in the choir. I love this faith. It has saved my life. And my goal is to get out of the way, lift up and support new transformative leadership.

Our Work

Meg: Together, we function as the moderator team, dividing up areas of attention and time. This year, we have spent a great deal of our energy on a sharp learning curve, getting to know all of the committees and the ins and outs of how things are done. We have continued the work which our predecessors, Rev. Mr. Barb Greve and Elandria Williams, set into motion on several fronts.

Article II

Last year, Elandria described the Article II Study Commission, a group of people who began work after GA to create opportunities for dialogue and decisions about Article II of the UUA bylaws. This process, itself demanded by our bylaws, will have plenty of time for introduction and engagement with all of you at this assembly, and we hope you will take it back to your congregations and communities for further discussion. Article II of the bylaws includes our principles and purposes, a statement of freedom of thought, and the purpose of our Association. We are grateful to Kathy Burek and Greg Boyd for their service as board liaisons to this commission.

We hope you will attend the sessions of GA which engage you in this critical conversation.

Accountability Group

As the *Widening the Circle of Concern* proposed and furthered by a responsive resolution at GA 2020, we have put together a design team to think about what accountability can look like at its best in our religious community. That team will be growing its membership in the course of the years ahead, but for now it is comprised of Rev. Suzanne

Fast and Leslie MacFadyen from the board, joined by Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt and CB Beal. We are grateful for all of those who are thinking about how to create loving and equitable community.

Bylaws

Charles: *Widening the Circle of Concern* also references the complex morass of material which is in our bylaws and the need to become more agile and responsive. We have begun exploration of ways to create more helpful guiding materials, and a few small changes are proposed at this year's GA. We are especially grateful to Board member Barbara de Leeuw for their leadership in this work.

Next, we'll be creating a Bylaws review commission, comprised of people from both the board and the wider community.

Equity and Accessibility in Business Meetings

We applied to be co-moderators in winter of 2019, never imagining the global pandemic which has defined our first year. Along with the real losses and struggles the pandemic brought, there have been real gifts. We have realized that many boards and committees survive just fine virtually, and that business at General Assembly is more inclusive and accessible when it is online. As we begin to imagine the future of General Assembly, we believe that business meetings online will continue to be central. Many of the issues related to income, disability, and accessibility identified in *Widening the Circle of Concern* were improved by meeting online. We are committed to continuing to create accessible GA business meetings online, whether or not some people also meet in person in a city somewhere.

ARAOMC Discomfort

Not all of you are comfortable with our focus on anti-racism, anti-oppressive, multicultural work. Indeed, discomfort is the feeling expressed in the letters and messages I receive. Some of you have suggested that you are lifelong UU's and you have never encountered racist behavior in your congregations. I respond to this small group -- not too gently -- that discomfort is exactly where they need to go. Lean into that discomfort. Let it guide you.

Meg: Some of you reach out to me and say you're on board with the anti-oppression work in general but you don't like particular trainings, or trainers, or language about white supremacy, or you felt shamed, and you didn't like that. And I'm here to promise you that we won't do this perfectly. We will make mistakes every step of the way. Not all trainings, trainers, language, or emotional responses will be perfect. Not all decisions, conversations, strategies will be perfect. I can't guarantee you much, but I can guarantee you that. If you are looking for perfection, you'll have to go someplace else.

Disability Justice

The UUA board engaged Vilissa Thompson, a disability justice activist with a profoundly intersectional understanding, to lead us through learning at two of our three longer meetings this year. We are also working with her to create learning experiences for all of our committee members later this summer. We have created plain language rules for this general assembly, and we are working to use plain language in our reports. (And yes, next year, we expect to improve our use of plain language in this Moderator's report!)

We are profoundly grateful to Suzanne Fast and Bill Young on the board, and to the work of Equal Access, for their help with this. And so grateful to be part of a community which allows us to be imperfect but also demands, lovingly and insistently, that we do better.

YUUP

Charles: We have been excited to witness and participate in the creation of the Young Unitarian Universalist Project (YUUP), a youth-designed and youth-led program. And we are grateful to board members Genevieve Baldwin and Rebecca Throop for their commitment.

Presidential Search Committee

One incomplete project we inherited was the appointment of a Presidential Search Committee. The process for the election of a new UUA President is defined as a rather lengthy process in the bylaws. One of the amendments the General Assembly will consider this year results in a shorter election process. Regardless of the length of the election campaign, we need a search committee to bring forth the nominees.

It has taken most of a year to finish the process and I want to apologize to both those who were selected and those who were not selected to serve on the committee. Some of you have been waiting for a decision for almost two years. There are multiple reasons for the delay and none of those reasons is particularly comforting for those who had to wait.

Please know this. We value all who volunteer to serve on our boards, committees, and commissions. And we continue to reform the process so that applicants experience the same love and appreciation, as they bring with their offer of service to this faith.

A Call to Activism

Meg: Over the years, I have witnessed too many beloved ones, religious professionals and lay leaders alike, suffering from oppressive systems within UUism which, even as we work to transform them, are still at work. White supremacy, transphobia, heterosexism, ableism, ageism, classism, misogyny. And if we are tired of listing these over and over, think about how exhausting it is to live in one of the bodies targeted by those systems of oppression!

Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt asked recently, at a sermon for the ordination of Reverend Ali Kujichagulia Bell, “Who are we using as kindling to ensure that our chalices stay lit? Who are we using as kindling to ensure that our chalices stay lit?” I stopped breathing for a moment when she spoke those words.

I thought of particular beloved ones, their names, faces, bodies. Some alive, some dead, some hollowed out husks of their former selves who fled our faith for their lives. Perhaps you think of particular people, too. Primarily people with marginalized identities, living with disabilities, BIPOC people, trans and non-binary folks. I entered this living tradition when being out as a white lesbian was rare, and frightening, and punished—I have experienced the other side of privilege. And I have witnessed and been part of change, such that being an old white lesbian now is fairly unremarkable in our movement. I know we can do the hard work of transformation; I have lived it.

That work is never more needed than it is now. Dozens of school boards, cities and states across the country want to outlaw what they are calling “critical race theory,” which really means that they want to outlaw any conversation about white supremacy culture and how racism is alive in our world today to the benefit of white people. They say it will make white students feel bad about themselves. I am so grateful to be part of a faith which doesn’t allow white fragility to have the final words, which does not center the comfort of white minds at the expense of the survival of BIPOC bodies, does not center cis people’s discomfort with pronouns at the expense of respect for trans and nonbinary people’s well-being and survival. Our congregations are needed now as they were in the 1990’s when what we called “no promo homo” bills everywhere forbade schools to even acknowledge the existence of non-heterosexual people and we taught comprehensive sexuality education in our communities.

Having failed at those bills, the no promo homo people have now found their new queer target, trans and nonbinary people, with literally hundreds of ordinances at work to deny the existence and certainly the well-being of these beloved ones. Again, our congregations are urgently needed to advocate for a different reality, to create communities of care and resistance, to model gender neutral language and bathrooms and leaders as normative. We can do this! When I hear about congregations in Kentucky and Wisconsin and Arizona and so many other places becoming the hubs of activism for justice like the one where I grew up in West Virginia in the 1960s, I know that we can do this.

We’ve got work to do in the world, but to do it well we need to look within as well as around. The Commission on Institutional Change laid out a plan for us to transform ourselves into the communities we have longed to be for my entire life.

I want our chalices to burn with the flame of love, the fire of commitment, passion for justice. I do not want anyone to be used as kindling. As I came into retirement from professional ministry, the experts told me that part of my process would be to face some of my regrets, to re-experience some of my mistakes. There are plenty of them, believe me. Many of them I must simply live with—failed worship services, missed pastoral moments, communications messes, projects badly done. One of them which I still have time to make some amends about, is that I have not sufficiently understood and paid attention to disability justice in my work. I am grateful that the Board shares my commitment to this urgent work for our collective liberation.

But if you're looking for a community with which to learn, to struggle, to try again, hopefully with love but at least with bottom line willingness, here we are. I think always of Adrienne Rich's words: I have to cast my lot with those who, age after age, perversely, with no extraordinary power, reconstitute the world. I have cast my lot with you, with us, with our living tradition and our future generations. Thank you for casting your lot with this quirky, annoying, imperfect, community as we attempt once more to reconstitute the world.

Circle 'Round for Justice, Healing, and Courage

Charles: Thank you for placing your trust in us. Please stay in touch. We have an open house every month. All our board meetings are open and accessible on zoom.

Join us as we circle 'round for justice, healing, and courage. We are reminded – every day – of the need for justice in this faith and in this land. We are reminded – every day – of the need for healing in this faith and in this land. And, friends, working together, we can develop the courage to bring justice and healing to our beloved faith, and as circles ripple out, to this land. Keep the circle whole. Amen.

Faithfully submitted,

Rev. Meg Riley and Charles Du Mond
Co-Moderators, Unitarian Universalist Association