

**“Engaging Our Theological Diversity”**  
**An Adult Religious Education Course**  
**in Five Two-Hour Sessions**  
**Designed by Rev. Barbara Child**

This course is based on the 2005 Report of the UUA Commission on Appraisal, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*. It is available at [www.uua.org/coa/TheoDiversity/EngagingOurTheoDiversity.pdf](http://www.uua.org/coa/TheoDiversity/EngagingOurTheoDiversity.pdf).

**Session 1**

Preface (pp.vii-ix)

Framing the Question: What Holds Us Together?(pp.1-15)

History: Where Do We Come From? (pp.17–30)

**Session 2**

Culture: Who Are We? (pp. 31–43)

Values: To What Do We Aspire? (pp.45–63)

**Session 3**

Theology: How Do We Frame the World? (pp.65–96)

**Session 4**

Worship: How Do We Celebrate? (pp.97–107)

Justice Making: How Shall We Serve? (pp.109–116)

Community: How Do We Come Together? (pp.117–133)

**Session 5**

Conclusions and Recommendations (pp.135–155)

2004 Statement of Agreements and Tensions pp.155–158)

# ENGAGING OUR THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

## Session 1

### Material To Be Covered:

Preface – pp. vii-ix

Framing the Question: What Holds Us Together? – pp. 1-15

History: Where Do We Come From? – pp. 17-30

### Ingathering

**Chalice lighting** – words from Wayne Arnason

We light this chalice to affirm –  
That new light is ever waiting  
to break through to enlighten our ways;  
  
That new truth is ever waiting  
to break through to illumine our minds;  
  
And that new love is ever waiting  
to break through to warm our hearts.

### Getting to know each other

#### Rounds:

- What is something that drew you to take this class?
- How long have you been coming here? Are you a member?
- The chalice lighting words spoke of possibilities here for enlightening our ways, illumining our minds, and warming our hearts. Just for this moment, which particularly appeals to you?

### Introductory words on the Commission on Appraisal and this report

- What the Commission is – independent think tank, elected by General Assembly.
- Its mission – to provoke deep reflection, energizing and revitalizing Unitarian Universalism.
- How it works – charged by Bylaws to “review any function or activity of Association which in its judgment will benefit from an independent review.”
- This report is COA’s 11<sup>th</sup> since merger in 1961. It is written by Commissioners, the product of four years of study, including:
  - survey of congregational worship practices
  - hearings and focus groups
  - interviews with individuals, especially seminary faculty and students, representatives of affiliate groups
  - ministerial study groups, sermons

## Class Discussion

### on “Framing the Question: What Holds Us Together?”

- What are the implications of our being an Association of Congregations rather than a denomination, and of having a covenant rather than a creed? (Hand out copies of Principles and Purposes.)
- Everyone, write on a card your answer to the question: What holds us together? [Put the cards in a basket. Pass it around for everyone to take and read aloud a card other than their own. See whether there are frequent themes or great diversity of opinion.]
- The Commission suspected that finding and articulating a source of unity in our diversity might actually be necessary for our survival as an association of congregations. Have you experienced our theological diversity as a problem, and do you wish we had more explicitly shared beliefs? Do you agree with Walter Herz: “Theological diversity alone is an entirely inadequate basis for a strongly associated congregation of individuals, or for a truly functional association of congregations.” (quoted at p. 3)
- What do you tell people who ask you about Unitarian Universalism or this congregation? Do you think we have a message for the world? What is it?
- COA discusses our cranky pride in being questioners and individualists and wonders whether it’s time for us to “grow up” and “come in from the margins” (p. 4). Some people have said we have made an idol of our First Principle and used it as an excuse to say “anything goes,” to our detriment. What do you think?
- The report talks about the stresses between “come-inners” and “born-inners.” Is anyone in this class a birthright UU? Do you find any sense of that stress in this congregation? Even if there are no birthright UU’s in this class, what about stresses between long-time members of this congregation and relative newcomers?
- The report says that there is apparently fairly little conversation about theology or beliefs in our congregations and that the very existence of this report and the invitation to discuss it is a way of breaking a taboo. Did you have any idea that by signing up for this course you might be breaking a taboo here? Or does such a notion simply not apply here?
- The report mentions some of the questions that COA asked people at hearings. How would you answer if asked: “What is the center of your personal faith?” Or “What is the center of the common faith of your congregation?” [This would be another good question to have people answer in writing first before discussing.] See also Martin Buber quote at p. 11 – What visual image would serve as the

vehicle for a metaphor? (for example, the central post on a merry-go-round, the core of a fruit, the nucleus of cell, the heart of a body, a shared tie, a common thread, the thing at the center of a circle of people that Parker Palmer says is necessary to keep them from focusing on nothing but their own egos)

- Or is the important thing the circle as boundary – the difference between us and not us? Are there beliefs that aren't acceptable here? Behaviors?
- Discuss in pairs these questions:
  - From Rebecca Parker: What features of Unitarian Universalism, if you took them away, would leave us with something that is no longer Unitarian Universalism?
  - What, if you added it, would make Unitarian Universalism no longer Unitarian Universalism?
  - What would a person have to do to get thrown out of a UU church? This one?
- Share what you wish of your answers with the whole class.

### on “History: Where Do We Come From?”

- Can you tell a story from UU history or tell about any important figure in our history? Do you believe you can be a good UU and know nothing or virtually nothing of the history?
- What do you know about the theology of Unitarianism and Universalism? [See how much of what they know is popular myth.]
- Discuss the two denominations at time of merger (see pp. 20-21) and what happened theologically through merger.
- Talk about the four “valuations” that characterize religious liberals: this-worldly concerns, strong ethical responsibility, deep commitment to democracy, and religiously based community. (p. 23)
- Trace the history of tensions over belief reflected in the Winchester Profession, Channing's Baltimore Sermon, and Gannett's “Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us” (pp. 24-25) and the 1936 statement of agreements and points of tension (p. 26). Draw up your lists, first independently, then through sharing in small groups, and finally out loud to the whole group.
- Take up the recommendations listed in the first COA report, *Free Church in a Changing World*, 1963 (listed at p. 28) and current COA's conclusion: our tendency to express our legacy in ethical, non-Judeo-Christian terms. Consider the problem that other great religions use narrative and metaphor to link theology, ethics, and practice. Since we don't clearly articulate how UU narrative, metaphor, theology, ethics, and practice relate to each other, why should we be

surprised if UU's turn to other traditions for their theology? Is COA right that we need to strengthen UU institutional identity, clarify our heritage, define it as sacred story, and articulate it as theology, ethics, and practice?

## **Closing**

### **Rounds:**

- One thing that is at the center of my faith is \_\_\_\_\_.
- One question this session has caused me to want to think about or chew on some more is \_\_\_\_\_.

### **Extinguishing chalice** – words adapted from Robert Mabry Doss

If you came here seeking God, may God go with you.

If you came seeking friendship,  
may you feel the stirrings of new warmth in your heart.

If you came seeking a new way for your life,  
may you discover a path, and the courage to take it, step by step.

## ENGAGING OUR THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

### Session 2

#### **Material To Be Covered:**

Culture: Who Are We? – pp. 31-43

Values: To What Do We Aspire? – 45-63

#### **Ingathering**

**Chalice lighting** – words from Mark Mosher DeWolfe

Facing this world of mystery with wonder, even awe, we gather as women and men have always gathered, to share that sense of high value which pervades our lives. We know when we are away from it; we know when we are with it; it is our wellspring of inspiration, our source of hope, our fondest love.

O mystery of life, bring us together in your company.  
Help us follow the calling of our hearts, as they reach to the farthest star  
or peer into matter to the smallest subparticle, the smallest event.

Light in our hearts a candle of hope and a beacon of vision,  
as we light this candle to symbolize the flame of freedom, the light of love, the  
beacon of truth.

May this candle burn in our lives in the days ahead,  
a symbol of the free faith which is the guide of our lives.

#### **Check-in**

Mark DeWolfe speaks of “that sense of high value which pervades our lives.” He describes it as the “wellspring of inspiration, our source of hope.” He says “we know when we are away from it; we know when we are with it.”

#### **Rounds:**

- What is a wellspring of inspiration for you?
- What is a source of hope for you?
- Think about today. Were you with that wellspring or source, or away from it? How do you know?

#### **Class Discussion**

##### **on “Culture: Who Are We?”**

- How do you think this congregation got to be the size it is?

- COA says it's critical for congregations to understand their identity to be more than a club, a social-action organization, or a surrogate family. Is this congregation more than any one or all of those? What more is there here?
- Robert Bellah warned us in his 1998 General Assembly speech about "overweening individualism" as potential anathema to sense of community. Which matters more here – individualism or community? Are they in healthy tension here or does all the weight tip to one end?
- Write on a card [with list on the board ahead of time] which one term best describes you: theist, humanist, Christian, Buddhist, Jewish, earth/nature centered, mystic, Muslim, Hindu, UU, eclectic, N/A, other (identify).
  - Do you feel marginalized in this congregation on account of your religious beliefs? (yes/no on card first, then out loud)
  - Do you ever have conversation here in any class or committee or other group about your beliefs? (yes/no on card first, then out loud)
  - Do you think this class is typical of the congregation on these matters? What are the implications, either way?
- The National Survey of Religious Identification has indicated that UUs tend to be urban, Democrat, female, highly educated, over half working full time, high income, property owners with high social status.
  - Is this congregation typical?
  - If so or if not, what are the implications for congregational life?
  - What about our claim that we are or at least want to be diverse?
  - Is our attention to transformation and intellectual freedom keeping our appeal limited to the privileged?
- The Commission mentions the dramatic effect on Unitarian Universalism of the women's movement, and more recently and to a somewhat lesser extent the men's movement. Have you noticed any particular effect of either on this congregation?
- How well do different generations mix here? Do we have a baby-boomer culture here of people searching for meaning in an unfulfilling materialistic culture, or "bowling alone" and preferring not to make commitment to the group? Have the institution-builders and managers become passé? What about the generation X here, those who have grown up in a culture dominated by TV and computers?
- Bill Sinkford in recent years has encouraged us to develop our "elevator speech" to explain quickly and clearly to others what it means to us to be a UU. But the Commission says elevator speeches are not enough. We must be able and interested to engage in deeper interfaith dialogue. Have you found opportunities to do that in this community? Do you feel equipped for such conversations? What would help?

- The Commission says: “UU congregations strive to serve the needs of their members but often seem reluctant to require commitment.” True here? If so, with what effect?
- The Commission praises congregations that seek to be more inclusive across culture lines by such means as “experimenting with the use of media, articulating the power of community to address troubling social trends, forming intentional partnerships across the generations, welcoming the diversity of immigrants from around the world, and creating religious education curricula around *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings*.” Any of this happening here? Your response?

### on “Values: To What Do We Aspire?”

- The psychological profile of UUs described by Brandon Lael Miller says we are (1) generally open to novelty and ambiguity and people of different opinions, (2) risk-takers who find change more intriguing than threatening, and (3) creative, taking authority with a grain of salt, seeing things in shades of gray rather than black and white, more independent than conforming, willing to entertain and express irrational impulses, valuing humor, free rather than rigidly controlled. But Irving Murray says this may be our idealized view of ourselves, one that we don’t actually live up to. Your impression?
- Myers-Briggs study of us has said we are more Intuitive than Sensing, and a mix of Thinking and Feeling. Read descriptions at p. 47, and then write whether you see yourself as an Intuitive Thinker or an Intuitive Feeler. Discuss, and then take up Richardson’s point that the influx of women in ministry brought a shift from Thinking to Feeling. Does your experience bear that out?
- COA found that UUs tend to see themselves as outsiders, on the margins. Is this so of this congregation? Has it made the congregation more sensitive to others on the margin (victims of prejudice, etc.)? Has it led to the congregation building bridges for the benefit of others on some margin?
- In terms of James Fowler’s model of stages of faith development, COA speculates that Unitarian Universalists are moving from stage 4 to 5 (from individuation and independence to interdependence and openness to integrating wisdom from many sources). They wonder about our fixation with abstract reason and dismissal of concreteness as possible explanations for why we lose our teens and have trouble attracting young adults. They point to covenant groups as a good sign of moving toward better hearing the “other.” What do you make of all this?
- COA discusses a study by Robert L’H. Miller in 1976 that identifies us as ranking high terminal values (self-respect, wisdom, inner-harmony, mature love, a world of beauty, and an exciting life) and instrumental values (loving, independent, intellectual, imaginative, and logical), which show an orientation towards

competence rather than morality and stress personal realization, individual self-fulfillment, and self-actualization. Do the words of affirmation we repeat at every Sunday service affirm these values?

- Respondents to COA's survey expressed relational values as most strong: love, compassion, connection, covenant, caring, community. And COA says the importance of community is growing. Which of the following relational values are most important for you: (1) love/community, (2) service/justice-making, (3) diversity/embracing other?
- Values around the search for meaning – Would you put in your core of faith statement any word such as “quest,” “transformation,” “search,” “growth,” “learning”? Would the statement “I dwell in possibility” appeal to you?
- If you consider yourself a searcher, is the object of your search more likely: (1) truth (with the understanding that there are plural truths, that we can find new truths any time, and that no one has the whole truth) or (2) freedom (as in free thinking, creating my own spirituality, questioning, having freedom of conscience, being free to choose)?
- Values around wholeness – Do you equate more with wholeness: (1) the worth and dignity of every person, (2) goodness, ethical action, right relations, integrity, courage, honesty, or (3) inner harmony?
- Values around looking beyond ourselves– When you reach beyond yourself, are you more inclined towards: (1) appreciation of beauty in the natural world, (2) faith in the interdependence of all life, (3) wonder at the insights and learnings of science, (4) appreciation of human artistic creations, or (5) harmony with the divine or holy or spirit of life or God?

## Closing

### Rounds or Popcorn Responses:

- We opened with Mark DeWolfe's words for chalice lighting, which said in part:

Light in our hearts a candle of hope and a beacon of vision,  
as we light this candle to symbolize the flame of freedom, the light  
of love, the beacon of truth.

Does our chalice flame symbolize for you more the flame of freedom, the light of love, or the beacon of truth?

- This session has caused me to change my mind about\_\_\_\_\_.

- This session has caused me to want to think some more about or follow up on \_\_\_\_\_.

**Extinguishing the Chalice** -- words from Steve J. Crump

That which is worthy of doing, create with your hands.  
That which is worthy of repeating, speak with a clear voice.  
That which is worthy of remembering, hold in your hearts.  
And that which is worthy of living, go and live it now.

## ENGAGING OUR THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

### Session 3

#### **Material To Be Covered:**

Theology: How Do We Frame the World? – pp. 65-96

#### **Ingathering**

**Chalice Lighting** – words adapted from Martha L. Munson

This [congregation] was founded on the faith that love  
is a more positive force for good than fear.

It exists as a haven of religious freedom – offering fellowship,  
knowledge and inspiration to all who would seek truth,  
live responsibly and courageously,  
and be of service to humanity.

The light we kindle is a symbol of the warmth of love  
and its power to overcome fear.

The light we kindle is a symbol of religious freedom.

Light illuminates the truth and the truth shall make us free.

The light we kindle is a symbol of our aspirations  
and highest religious ideals, our striving for inclusiveness.

As the wick joins the flame and the candle,  
may our separate selves be joined in one community  
of warmth and light.

#### **Check-in**

Martha Munson says congregation exists to offer fellowship, knowledge and inspiration.

- Tonight are you looking more for fellowship, knowledge, or inspiration?

She says our chalice light is a symbol of (1) the warmth of love that has the power to overcome fear, (2) illumination of truth that can make us free, and (3) aspiration and striving for inclusiveness.

- Tonight which symbol is most powerful for you?

She wishes for our separate selves to be joined in community.

- If we could meet in a larger room without the constraint of a table, how would you arrange us?

## Class Discussion

### on “Theology: How Do We Frame the World?”

- Is your personal experience the most important source of or authority for your religious convictions? Is religion for you more about experience than beliefs? How important is reason as a source? How important is dialogue with others (or being in community or the congregation)?
- Do you think there is any significant tension in this congregation between those whose major source of authority is reason and those for whom some experience outside the realm of reason is primary?
- How do the UU Principles function for you? Are they a major source of religious convictions? Are they the embodiment of UU theology? Do you worry that after all they are functioning as a creed, so that questioning any of them becomes the equivalent of politically incorrect? Or are you critical of them for not going deep enough?
- The listing of the various sources of our living tradition is a way not only to acknowledge but also to lift up our theological diversity as a positive and distinctive marker of who we are. Would it have been better if last week I had asked you to identify all the theological descriptors that fit you rather than just one that you considered to describe you best? Why or why not?
- UU cosmology: the Commission points to our Seventh Principle idea that humans are part of an interconnected web as significantly distinguishing us from the Judeo-Christian traditional idea that humans hold dominion over all other creatures, or even the evolution of that idea in the more liberal idea that we are the custodians of creation, with an obligation to look after it well. COA found that UUs are of one mind more in our cosmology than perhaps anything else. It plays out in our declining to make a division between the sacred and the profane or secular, that on Sunday we may as likely read from a contemporary poem as from the scripture of any religion, and that our stories are as important to us as Biblical stories. Your comments on any of this?
- Sin and Evil: Growing out of dissent against the Calvinist ideas about sin and election, and coming through the Universalist tradition that all are saved or savable, UUs evolved through the humanist era to greater and greater emphasis on the optimistic belief that humans were constantly striving upward and making the world a better place, and that if we would just keep at it, all would be well. For a long time, it was not fashionable in UU circles to talk about sin or evil. Then the Ministerial Fellowship Committee began asking candidates for ministry what we believed about sin and evil. There began to be concern about UU hubris, or at least complacent self-satisfaction. 9/11 seems to have been a

wake-up call for everyone, not just UUs, about the capacity for sin and evil in the world. This leaves us with the question: What are we doing about it?

- The question about good and evil – about the nature of human beings – can focus for us as individuals how much we have inherited from Unitarianism and how much from Universalism. As Thandeka suggests (p. 77): Are we children of Channing, believing that the essence of a human being is an independent, disembodied mind, and an autonomous self in charge of one's own destiny? Or are we children of Ballou, believing that the essence of a human being is inter-relational, and that our feeling self has real effect on the state of our mind? How much meaningful tension exists within the congregation between the Channing in us and the Ballou?
- The Commission found that most UUs value both spirituality and reason, so that trying to cook up an argument between them is likely to no good purpose. "Spirituality" is an elusive term. If we assume that it points beyond the ordinary, beyond the narrowness of "me, my possessions, my experience," that it brings us to be in touch with life force or depths – then we might say it is whatever helps us seek wholeness or transformation. If both humanists and theists care about these things, then why is the use of "God" language by some so disturbing to others? And what can we do to settle this down?
- Scott Alexander describes spiritual practices: "activity or attitude in which you can regularly and intentionally engage, and which significantly deepens the quality of your relationship with the miracle of life both within and beyond you." Write on which of these is most "you": (1) love and service, engaging the will, (2) community, engaging the heart, (3) understanding, engaging the mind, or (4) interior harmony, engaging body and soul.
- Who has inspired you? Write down five names. (Then read them and let's see how many UUs are in the lot.) If not many, what should we make of it? Do about it?
- What changes have you observed, if any, in this congregation: more eclectic and less humanist? more spiritual? more theistic? more comfortable with religious language? more attention to "right relations"? more inclusive? more mission-focused? more new age? How do you feel about these changes or lack of change?
- John Cobb, process theologian, points out the challenge to us to evolve on from our Enlightenment fixation with freedom, reason, and tolerance (individualistic, introspective, autonomous) or risk being left behind in the sweep of culture. Process theologian Henry Nelson Wieman defines evil as resistance to change and to the flow of creativity. Is the growth of whatever it is that people

mean when they refer to spirituality evidence that we are actually meeting Cobb's and Wieman's challenges?

- Is contemporary UUism actually an embodiment of the best of postmodernism—pluralistic, radically inclusive, syncretic? And if so, is it foolish of us to be worrying about having an easily identifiable and shared core?
- The Commission says it's time we make peace with our Christian roots, stop being afraid of talking about our heritage, make peace with our personal religious backgrounds, get past an orientation of reactivity. Your thoughts?
- The Commission mentions related problems of cultural and religious misappropriation and exoticism. In other words, just as anti-Christianity is "in," Eastern and Native American religions are "in." The problem is in uncritically accepting the latter, but also picking and choosing whatever appeals to us, without any real grounding in the beliefs or practices from which we borrow. In the extreme, this is racist tokenism. Are we becoming a mile wide and an inch deep? Are we short on the time, attention, discipline, and focus needed to reap the benefits of any spiritual path? Do you have the sense that there really is no such thing as a "UU spiritual path"?
- The Commission concludes this chapter with a description of UU theology as this kind of faith: (1) grounded in UU history and ideas, (2) ecological and connected by the interdependent web, (3) human in our focus on the well-being of this world, (4) taking responsibility for the state of the world, (5) focused more on experience than beliefs, (6) free in recognizing the authenticity and integrity of each individual's journey, (7) imaginative in engagement with image and story, (8) relational rather than creedal in our caring for community and covenant, (9) curious, (10) reasonable, and (11) hopeful in our interest in transformation and justice. Does this sound like us to you? How so, or how not?
- We are subject to critique. The neopagans among us want us to have a more embodied faith with more attention to ritual and beauty? How are we doing?
- The Buddhists among us want us to be more mindful, admitting to more discipline, being more present in the moment, more deep and compassionate. How are we doing?
- The feminists and liberation theologians among us want us to be a more prophetic faith, taking greater risks, daring to name what is broken, challenging assumptions, taking actions that require discomfort and sacrifice. They remind us that talking is not enough. How are we doing?

## **Closing**

Read the Chalice Lighting words again. First, invite people to have pen in hand and jot down individual words (just one or two or three) that seem especially powerful. Maybe read the Chalice Lighting words twice: First time, just listen for your two or three words. Second time, write them down. Then, while I extinguish the chalice, invite people to say their words at once as often as they wish until there comes silence. Then we are done.

## **ENGAGING OUR THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY**

### **Session 4**

#### **Material To Be Covered:**

Worship: How Do We Celebrate? – pp. 97-107

Justice Making: How Shall We Serve: -- p[p. 109-116

Community: How Do We Come Together? – pp. 117-33

#### **Ingathering**

**Chalice Lighting** – words from Christine Robinson

We gather this hour as people of faith  
With joys and sorrows, gifts and needs.  
We light this beacon of hope,  
sign of our quest for truth and meaning,  
in celebration of the life we share together.

#### **Check-in Rounds:**

- What are you doing here tonight? Why did you come?
- What did you give up to be here?
- Christine Robinson calls the chalice a beacon of hope. Is the chalice of special importance to you? If so, what does it represent? What is it like for you to have a chalice lit at the beginning of a class as well as in a Sunday service?

#### **Class Discussion**

##### **on “Worship: How Do We Celebrate?”**

- Christine Robinson says we come on Sunday morning with joys and sorrows, gifts and needs; we come on a quest for truth and meaning; we come to celebrate life together. Is one of these more usually true for you than the others? How much would you generalize about why people come to Sunday services here?
- Are Sunday services here a way to find a common center in the midst of our diversity, or does the content of services underscore conflict rather than achieving unity?
- Anything you want to get off your chest about announcements, joys and sorrows, readings, sermon response?
- Are the words of affirmation important to you? Quick now, what are they? Would you miss them if they disappeared?

- Do you wish there were more variety in music, or more singing familiar songs? Any favorites? Any you'd just as soon never hear again?
- How important are these "special services" to you: water ceremony, flower ceremony, teen service, college students' service, men's service, women's service, Seder, intergenerational services? other?
- What about special ceremonies within regular services: dedication of children, ingathering of new members, commissioning of new Board, dedication of teachers?
- This chapter ends with a pointed critique based on the four most common elements in UU services today: announcements, flower ceremony, "Spirit of Life" as most regularly sung song, and literary and UU sources being most common in readings. The critique is based on the writing of Robin W. Lovin of Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. The Commission says: "If members think they are sharing, they might heed [one] of Lovin's cautions: 'What's important to people who are "sharing" ... is that everybody else receive what is shared and nobody challenges or changes it.' For worship to be what it can be, 'you have to do things that break the cultural assumption that when we give, what we are doing is "sharing" in expectation of recognition and affirmation.'" The problem is that everything is all about us and our feeling good. COA: "If UUs do not somehow begin to reclaim the experience of offering in worship, they may well find that their theological diversity and differing interests will slowly move them further and further apart. ... [W] have a chance to employ the enormous richness of our theological diversity in the service of making worship a place to learn how to be more authentic and generous in our personal and public relations and commitments. .... It is not whether we call upon the Spirit of Life or God/Goddess and see that energy operative in our lives but what *we offer to life*. It is not enough to want readings or sermons to inspire us; we have to be *willing* to be inspired, even if it might mean we have to rethink things and possibly do things differently. This doesn't require a particular theology or theistic thinking. It requires an attitude shift from self-cherishing to a sense of openness and interdependence in our worship." What does all this mean to you?

### on "Justice Making: How Shall We Serve?"

- Do the five mission affirmations COA found to be common seem to you to be reflective of this congregation's mission/purpose: (1) We challenge ourselves and our world to look for options other than violence to resolve differences. (2) We need to challenge ourselves and our world to build bridges of understanding and respect across differences. (3) We are committed to the work of dismantling prejudice, racism, and all types of oppression. (4) We challenge ourselves to question values (such as consumerism and conformity) permeating our society. (5) Right relationship with the natural world means cooperating and protecting,

not controlling. Do we do anything more than pay lip service in support of these challenges and commitments?

- What makes social action a thriving part of a congregation's life? Do the activists think they're carrying the load for the rest of the congregation? How does activism get to be part of the whole congregation's approach to congregational life rather than the bailiwick of one committee? What does it take to view justice-making as part of the ministry? What's the story here? How close is reality to the ideal?
- What stories can you tell to illustrate whether social action has brought unity and sense of purpose to this congregation or divided it? What lessons for the future?

### **on "Community: How Do We Come Together?"**

- What is your response to Paul Razor's comment: "Liberals want to create a strong and inclusive community but we often want to do it without giving up anything, without letting down the barriers we erect around ourselves in the name of individual autonomy"?
- This chapter is primarily on the theme of "hospitality." It goes deeper than greeter tables and name tags. It asks how welcoming we actually are of those who are different from ourselves. COA quotes Sister Joan Chittister: "[H]ospitality is the way we come out of ourselves. It is the first step toward dismantling the barriers of the world." COA says: "Hospitality does not necessarily change people, but it frees up the space in which people can embrace change." UUs can offer a list of reasons as long as your arm for why our congregations are not more diverse. Get beneath those reasons. Why aren't we really? How much do we know about the differences beneath the surface between those already here? What kind of opportunities do we make for ourselves to find out?
- Why do we lose our young people? Is this congregation significantly better off on this score than most? Why or why not? What do you make of young adults' complaint that UUism lacks depth, passion, and focus?
- Have we taken too far our desire not to indoctrinate our children? Might the truth be that, instead of not wanting to "give them all the answers," we don't have enough answers? Have we made a foolish obsession of the cliché that "to question is the answer"?
- What is the effect of having a "teen service" and a "college students' service"? What would happen if we incorporated some more of the elements of youth worship into Sunday services regularly?

- COA notes “that the unifying energy of the Principles and Purposes was inspired, at least in part, by a widely felt desire for religious definition, for some concrete statement of common identity as Unitarian Universalists. .... The process and language of the Principles and Purposes represented a huge, historic shift from emphasis on independent belief toward corporate covenant.” Does comprehending that make the Principles and Purposes more significant than you thought them before?
- COA says: Promises must be risked openly and publicly, unlike beliefs, which can be held in the privacy of one’s own soul. Promises are fulfilled only in communal life. Promises require companions and signal institutional allegiance. Promises remind us that we are connected and beholden to sisters and brothers in our chosen faith. We are spiritual kin, bound together in the interdependent web. Promises support partnerships through fair and foul weather. Promises foster and sustain beloved communities.” Let’s see what effect it has on us to read the Principles and Purposes aloud together.
- COA says: “Promises remind us to remain firm yet flexible, to choose again what we chose before.” What would you think of an opening service in the fall that had less to do with mingling waters and more to do with recovenanting, promising again?
- Promises may have greater weight and power if they are expressed by way of new specifics rather than repeated generalities. COA ends this chapter with five promises that they say spring from the Seventh Principle, commitment to the interdependent web. Write some specific thing you promise to do to live out each general promise: (1) We promise to live relationally, not just with tolerance but with acceptance. (2) We promise to live ethically. (3) We promise to live pluralistically. (4) We promise to live as advocates and ambassadors for Unitarian Universalism, affirming and promoting our values in the world. (5) We promise to live globally as stewards of the earth.

## Closing

- I read each of the five promises, and then they read aloud what they have written under each as they are willing.
- Words for extinguishing the chalice by Elizabeth Selle Jones

We extinguish this flame,  
but not the light of truth,  
the warmth of community,  
or the fire of commitment.

These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

## ENGAGING OUR THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

### Session 5

#### Material To Be Covered:

Conclusions and Recommendations – pp. 135-155  
2004 Statement of Agreements and Tensions – pp. 155—158

#### Ingathering

**Chalice lighting** – words from Max Landau Moss

Let there be light to drive away the darkness.  
Let there be wisdom to shine on the unknown.  
Let there be love to heal our aloneness.  
Let each of us be a light for one another.

#### Check-in Rounds:

- What do you bring to this group tonight?
- Max Landau Moss hopes that each of us might be a light for one another. What kind of light do you need tonight – a clear light, steady light, bright light, soft light, sparkling light, etc? What kind would serve you well tonight?

#### Class Discussion

##### on “Conclusions and Recommendations”

- COA poses several statements of faith as commonly believed among us as individuals. I will read them out loud in brief form. Then you please reflect in writing on whether and how they apply for you. After writing, there will be a chance to share as you wish.
  - “We base our convictions upon *our own experience of the depth dimensions* of life, which is richer and more complex than any words or concepts we use to describe it.... Such profound encounters often have the power to transform us as we cannot willfully transform ourselves.”
  - “We embrace a *sense of possibility* – an openness to what is unknown – the not-yet, the new, the different – an openness that fosters qualities of authenticity, curiosity, creativity, courage and compassion....”
  - “We are *committed to being people of character*. We value education, examples, and disciplines that strengthen our ability to be responsible citizens of the earth and our society....”

- Use the same process with COA's proposed statements of faith regarding the congregational community.
  - "We claim a vision of religious community that protects and respects individual freedom, fosters acceptance ... and supports an active quest for greater understanding and deeper meaning and purpose."
  - "We share a conviction that wisdom emerges from the process of dialoguing across our differences in community."
  - "We are committed to religious community as a place where we work together for a more just and compassionate world. It is not enough to gather in a safe, supportive sanctuary for ourselves alone."
  
- Use the same process with COA's proposed statements of faith regarding the wider world.
  - "We acknowledge a primary responsibility to value persons and to serve humankind.... Therefore we are moved to challenge societal assumptions and practices that are counter to those values."
  - "We affirm a vision of the natural world as an interdependent web, of which we are inextricably a part—not as dominators but as companions and at times protectors. Our cosmology draws heavily from the teachings of science."
  
- COA now returns to its original questions: What are we calling people into community *for*? If we are a community, what is the common unity that binds us together? And if we are a religious community, should we be able to articulate theologically and religiously what it is that united us? I asked at our first session: "What holds us together?" Have your answers changed? Has this course affected your thinking in any way? [Hand out composite list of answers from Session 1, assuming people will be able to identify their own original answer.]
  
- COA says that "ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what UUs are about religiously may be our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to achieving our potential as an empowering and liberating faith.... The fear that any such articulation somehow threatens the integrity or right of conscience of any individual is institutionally disabling and must be overcome by mutual trust and a sense of common purpose." Is COA right? If so, what do we do about it?
  
- What sense do you have of the congregation's relationship with the District and UUA?
  
- If this congregation undertook a fuller Adult Religious Education curriculum with multiple classes on UU in thought and practice, how do you think it would be

received? Would you personally be interested in more, or has this class been enough for you?

- How safe is this congregation “theologically” for Christians, humanists, pagans, mystics, etc? How wide is the range of theologies that would be able to thrive here in your professional ministry?
- How much of a problem is there here of people still being so busy saying “no” to their religious past that they are not really capable of saying “yes” to UU pluralism?
- How much do you know about what is taught in RE here? Are children and youth learning what it means to be UU? Do this congregation’s youth leave UU when they grow up? Why or why not? What role does campus ministry play in all this?
- Is the young adult group anything more than a social group? Should it be?
- How much “cultural competency” is there here? How welcome actually is “the other” here? Who is “the other” here?
- Other than in this class, what experience have you had here engaging in conversation about the theological diversity represented in the congregation? When members of this congregation gather in small groups, what do and don’t they talk about?
- If you were to think of this class as the first in a series (or of a pair), what would you like to see the sequel be?

### **on “2004 Statement of Agreements and Tensions”**

- Based on what you have heard in class discussion during these five sessions, and assuming that this class is the entire “universe of UUs,” write what you see as significant agreements and tensions. Share out loud and see if lists are consistent.

### **Closing**

#### **Rounds:**

- What, if anything, have you changed your mind about over these 5 weeks?
- What is something you will take and keep from this class?

#### **Extinguishing the Chalice and Closing Words**

May the flame, which has brightened our time together,  
light our paths as we go our separate ways. (Jerry Wright)  
May we leave this place

Seeking an uncharted and freely chosen way to wholeness  
Knowing we have companions along the way. (Bets Wienecke)