

Rationale

Introduction. If any of us on the Commission had doubted the power of words, which of course we did not, this review would have convinced us of that power. At every step of the way when the Commission sought comments and responses to particular choices of words, we received impassioned arguments for and against whatever we presented. We were not surprised, and we grew accustomed to standing back and taking a long view.

To begin with, the Commission anticipated there would be some resistance to any changes at all in Article II, particularly in the Principles and Sources sections. Consequently, when respondents resisted draft changes, we investigated that resistance and weighed it carefully against the many suggestions for change that we received.

We took into consideration the differences between the mid-1980's context and the current one. In the mid-1980's, the revision of Article II grew from grass-roots efforts by those who wanted to remove sexist language and those who wanted the bylaws to reflect more clearly changing theological ideas. In contrast, when the Commission took up this review, there was no grass-roots effort bringing forward any proposal for change. There was only the Bylaw section mandating review every fifteen years. We did not want simply to survey people's opinion. We wanted to engage them in thoughtful reflection and discussion about Unitarian Universalism today and the role in congregational life of not only the Principles and Purposes but the whole of Article II.

We are happy to say that our outreach efforts bore fruit. We know that from the high volume of comments we received at every stage, the intricate arguments people posed, and their enthusiastic and passionate expressions of thought and opinion. It readily became clear that the natural resistance of human beings to change, any change, would not prevail against the waves of suggestions for revision of Article II.

Those who instituted the bylaw mandating review every fifteen years clearly knew what they were doing. By 2006, when this review began, the world had changed, and Unitarian Universalism had changed. The Commission's task has been to reflect these changes in ways that will sustain this Association of Congregations for at least the next fifteen years.

The responses we received were not easily quantifiable, and there were varying degrees of cross-reference among them. They said what sometimes seemed to be the same thing, but not with certainty, in different ways. They approved or disapproved of some idea or wording for different reasons. As soon as we began collecting responses, we learned that it was not going to work for us simply to operate as "bean counters," redrafting to reflect whatever the majority wanted on any given matter. In response, the Commission's work required more than the ability to calculate; it required discernment and a delicately calibrated weighing scale. It was good that there are nine of us – nine very different Unitarian Universalists – because we had many, many occasions to reflect together, to attempt to persuade each other, and sometimes to let go of preferences in view of more widely held perceptions. New rounds of comments would often cause us to rethink something that had seemed settled.

Here are the matters that drew the most attention from respondents, and thus from the Commission. The results appear in the proposed revision of Article II.

Covenant. Even though the current wording of Article II says that congregations “covenant to affirm and promote” the Principles, the Commission encountered substantial commentary in favor of reinforcing the idea that we are covenantal rather than creedal. Some expressed dismay that the children’s version of the Principles begins with language that says: “We believe.” On the other hand, some said they wished the Principles were expressed in language easier to memorize. Clearly, many Unitarian Universalists do regard the Principles as a belief statement – their personal belief statement. When we arrived at “Covenant” as our proposed title for the whole of Article II, it came of addressing the fact that the current title “Principles and Purposes” does not cover the whole of Article II. Also, the whole of what is covered in the Article, including the final two sections on Inclusion and Freedom of Belief, are germane to the relationships among congregations. We found ourselves walking a tightrope with bylaw language applicable to the Association at one pole and at the other aspirational language applicable to individual Unitarian Universalists. The resulting ambiguity in language throughout our proposal is thus intentional. Article II must speak to and about both the Association and individual Unitarian Universalists.

Sequence and Titles of Sections. The Commission gave considerable attention to the sequence of material in the current Article II and reordered it (1) to establish the Purposes as the legal bona fides of the Association at the outset, (2) to set out the Sources before the Principles so that the former can properly serve as a foundation for the latter, (3) to put the Sources and Principles in separate sections for easy finding and reference, and finally (4) to address Inclusion and Freedom of Belief. It has been clear from the earliest rounds of commentary that the final two sections have been bafflingly convoluted and needed overhauling, not to change their substance but to clarify it.

Respondents expressed a great wish to turn “Non-Discrimination” into a positive provision, and we did that in what is now the section on “Inclusion.” We also took up the question of whether to list specific categories of people that the Association and individual Unitarian Universalists seek to protect from discrimination. We found it worthwhile to avoid the dangers resulting from excluding some specific unmentioned group in a list of specifics. On the other hand, we heard the clear voices of those who insisted that the general proclamation that “all are welcome” is not enough and carries its own dangers. We found a middle way.

The “Freedom of Belief” section needed to be restructured for clarity. We did that. Some people hoped we would revise that section so as to make clear that “Unitarian Universalists are not free to believe whatever they want”; however, we decided that was beyond the scope of what this bylaw could accomplish.

Sources. By far the most scrutiny by respondents went to the Sources. Clearly the Sources deserved a section of their own. Perhaps the most strongly expressed wish was that Article II would give Unitarianism and Universalism their due as sources of present-day Unitarian Universalism. This prompted considerable conversation as to whether the bylaw is intended to address the sources of Unitarian Universalism or the sources of contemporary

individual Unitarian Universalists' spiritual and religious life. Respondents saw this both ways often enough to persuade us to accommodate both views.

Respondents gave considerable attention to the format of Sources in the current Article II as a list. Many were dissatisfied with the "which" clauses describing individual Sources. For instance, words and deeds of prophetic women and men do more than challenge us. Jewish and Christian teachings are not the only ones that teach us to love our neighbor. The valuable teachings of the sciences come to us not only through the conduit of humanism. In short, the pattern of making some observation about each Source has been problematical for many people. In response, we eliminated that pattern.

Issues arose regarding the listing of specifics in this section as well. Some people would prefer an unvarnished reference to "all of the world's religions" without reference to Jewish and Christian teachings or any other. Some people would prefer additional religions be named, in particular Buddhism and/or Islam. Others wanted other sources listed, most notably sources related to the arts or to other bodies of thought or theology, not specifically nameable as religions. Many people drew inferences from the sequence of the listing of Sources and wanted it changed though not in the same way. The Commission found that many of the sequence-related concerns would be diminished by naming the Sources in a paragraph rather than in a list. Although we declined to add specific religions by name, we were persuaded to add "Eastern religions" as well as other bodies of thought and theologies that have come into their own in Unitarian Universalist religious and spiritual life in recent years. Some Unitarian Universalist humanists argued that our preliminary revision appeared to discount the role of humanism in Unitarian Universalism. Although that was never our intention, we took particular care in the final proposal to avoid any such impression.

The additional issue that arose in regard to the Sources related to what is often called misappropriation. Some respondents argued that it is not enough to say we are grateful for pluralism but that one of the major marks of current Unitarian Universalism is its attention to anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism. There has been strong effort among respondents to have Article II reflect this. Others have written about the difficulties of defining exactly what misappropriation is and about the importance of avoiding the use of a bylaw as a tool that could stifle the impulse to teach and appreciate religions and traditions other than our own. In the final paragraph of the "Sources" section, the Commission honors both noble intents.

Principles. The Commission has been fascinated to see the recent proliferation of a variety of publications and other materials stating the Principles, and most recently, an invitation from Skinner House to congregations' Religious Education departments to propose still more publications further institutionalizing the Principles as currently stated. At the same time, the Commission received many, many suggestions for changing the Principles. The most common suggestions were to reorder them, making the last first, or to reduce the number significantly. This latter suggestion appeared to relate to a wish to aid memorization. A fair number of people have come to be critical of implicit individualism in the first Principle and its relation to the idea that all the evil in the world is "out there" rather than possibly "in here" too. Others have stressed to the Commission that the ease with which people refer to "our first Principle" indicates that they really do believe it is the most important. Some like that. Others abhor it.

The Commission ultimately decided not to propose either changing the sequence of the Principles or reducing their number. The widespread resistance to such changes and the many forms of that resistance were persuasive. When we sent out the August draft for commentary, we included after each Principle a short paragraph elucidating the aspirations associated with it. Most commentators did not like these paragraphs. The paragraphs did serve a useful purpose, however. They taught us what people understood the Principles to mean and how specific changes would be received.

In response to persuasive arguments, we did make a few changes in wording, changes that will not interfere in any real way with continued use of publications and other materials that carry the current wording. The proposed version of the third Principle recognizes spiritual growth outside of the context of the congregation. The proposed version of the fifth Principle recognizes that more than one process can be understood as democratic. The proposed version of the seventh Principle now elevates the response to the interdependent web from respect to reverence.

One proposed change of wording within the Principles themselves that received substantial commentary was the proposal to change the first Principle to refer to “all beings” rather than “every person.” Given that it truly would be a significant substantive change and given that we received far more staunch support for retaining the present wording of the first Principle than for probably any other particular matter, we did not adopt the proposed change.

The prefatory language that introduces the Principles was a natural place to reinforce the foundation of our covenantal religion. We chose the introductory verbs “honor and uphold” as being more reverential and less promotional than “affirm and promote.” As one commenter put it, the proposed new language expresses our own obligations rather than seeking to obligate others. Likewise, we chose concluding language that reinforces the implications of being in covenantal relationship.

Conclusion. The Commission has conducted a thorough review of Article II. We have accomplished our wish to engage a large number of individuals, congregations, and communities of Unitarian Universalists in important shared reflection and study about what it means to be Unitarian Universalists in the early twenty-first century. Our proposal is the culmination of all that reflection and study on the part of many, many people, including ourselves. We look forward to the conversation going forward through having the proposal on the Agenda at the 2009 General Assembly. Assuming the Board sends it to the Planning Committee for inclusion on the Agenda, we will of course provide congregations substantially more detail about our process, the results of the surveys, and the rationale for our decisions. In other words, this review and its results, can indeed have significant impact on the future of American Unitarian Universalism for the next fifteen years. We are honored to take this part in the life of our Association, and we are grateful for this opportunity to share our work with the Board of Trustees. May we thrive together.