

The Commission on Appraisal

Presentation to the 2005 General Assembly

The presentation began with a short video introduction.

Voice 1 (singing): Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?

Voice 2: I have a vision of the UU movement as inter-religious dialogue.

Voice 3: We offer the hope of a spiritual journey, but we offer no tools to do it with.

Voice 4: I'm scared to death that there's nothing, and honestly I'd rather believe in God and heaven and die believing I'm going somewhere than just dying and saying, "I'm going nowhere." Sometimes I really wish I were Christian just so that I'm not scared at night.

Voice 5: It's the care and respect and compassion that we all have for each other, it's the support network for all these people who may not get that hammock of caring and of love that they need.

Voice 6: We tell the story of the increasing tolerance always, but we don't say, "And people lost their church."

Voice 7: I think that's part of the pain of talking about trying to find a center, because we're all so terribly worried that we're going to find a center that excludes somebody.

First speaker: Rev. Earl Holt

One of our fine younger scholars, Ken Oliff, citing a series of observations from manifold sources, including the 1997 Report of the Commission on Appraisal, drew the following conclusion: "The most conspicuous element identified in these quotes is the absence of a principle of union in religious liberalism. This is variously expressed as a theological center, a common faith, a common story, or a shared system of beliefs. Most importantly, a principle of union is a shared understanding of what a church means theologically that moves beyond rejection and reactivity as a basis for religious liberalism."

It was a similar concern about the conspicuous absence of a shared and articulated understanding of what Unitarian Universalism means theologically that motivated the Commission on Appraisal to choose the topic of the study we formally present to you tonight, originally formulated around the question: "Where is the Unity in our Theological Diversity?"

The importance of this issue has been attested by the extraordinary amount of interest it has generated. We have been encouraged by this response, and we are grateful to the large numbers of you and others around the country who have participated in our workshops, hearings, and focus groups, and otherwise communicated with us on this topic. We have read with interest the

many sermons that have been written and papers that have been published. We are particularly grateful for the response to our worship practices survey, to which more than a third of our congregations responded.

The word, "Diversity", both cultural and religious, has been the watchword of our recent past, and insofar as it indicates our sincere desire institutionally to be truly open and welcoming of people of all sorts and conditions into our fellowship that emphasis is all to the good. The world today, as perhaps never before, urgently needs communities of faith, indeed communities of all kinds, which are models of inclusion and pluralism, where human differences do not divide. But diversity by itself, important as it is, is an insufficient institutional goal. More pressing is the question of what we are calling people into community for? If we are a "comm-unity", what are the common unities that bind us together? And if we are a religious community, shouldn't we be able to articulate theologically, religiously, what it is that unites us?

As we have wrestled with these questions, we have differed among ourselves even about how best to ask them. Initially, we encountered some suspicion of a hidden agenda, fear that we intended to create or promote a common creed or its equivalent. Others even suspected us of ulterior motives including the desire to exclude, on theological grounds, one or another of the expressions of religious thought current among us. But our desire from the beginning has been to articulate what we hold in common, and there is virtually no principle or value more widely shared among us than that of individual freedom of belief. With Ken Oliff, we affirm that, "The strength of the contemporary liberal church lies in its openness, its respect for difference, and in the value that the church places on the sanctity of individual conscience." But we also agree with his observation that, "Where the church falls short is in its lack of clarity regarding an explicit theological vision, and an ensuing ambiguity regarding mission, purpose and commitment."

Such ambiguity and a concomitant tentativeness in articulating what we are about religiously is presently perhaps our greatest liability and the greatest obstacle to Unitarian Universalism achieving the fulfillment of its potential as an empowering and liberating faith for the twenty-first century. 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, the belief that we are joined together in religious association for more than merely instrumental reasons.

There are also those who have argued that in the Purposes and Principles, we already have an adequate statement of our unity. And it is true that in many places and in many ways this section of the UUA Bylaws has been adopted for use as the common expression of a common faith, recited in worship, printed on orders of worship, adapted in the place of individual congregational covenants, prominently placed at the head of the hymnal, even reformulated as a series of "Unitarian Universalist believe" statements for children in religious education classes.

The Principles began with a much more modest intention, to replace the statement adopted at the time of merger, which had come to be seen by many as dated in terms of language and otherwise. But the process of amendment soon took on an energetic life of its own, rivaling only merger itself in focusing and rallying denomination-wide interest and attention. And as it turned out their adoption was only the beginning of their influence. As Warren Ross comments in his history of

the UUA, "To an astonishing extent today's Purposes and Principles... have won a lasting place in UU hearts and been woven intimately into the fabric of our denominational life." We posit that all this energy and effort was inspired in part by a widely felt desire for religious definition, for a statement of our common identity as Unitarian Universalists.

It is actually somewhat ironical that the Principles have emerged as a symbol of unity. The irony is that they were intended primarily to be a statement of broad inclusiveness, that is, of a wide, even all-embracing, diversity -- appropriate to the bylaws of a religiously heterodox movement but designed to the greatest extent possible, to be theologically neutral, and in regard to the sources of our tradition, religiously eclectic. In the words of the Committee chair, Walter Royal Jones, Jr., "We really wanted to assure everyone that no point of view was going to be left out. We wanted to say to everyone, 'You belong.'" In that intent they notably succeeded. The Hymnbook Resources Commission, in the Preface to the new UUA hymnal in 1993, acknowledged the importance of the Principles and Purposes "as the touchstones of our decision to proclaim our diversity."

The penultimate sentence of the "Principles" reads as follows: "Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision." This statement, however, begs the question, which is the subject of this report: what is the substance of "our faith"? The Purposes and Principles were built upon the presumption of our theological diversity; we suggest that our priority now should be to engage our diversity, by asking such questions as these: Just what is the faith that is enriched and ennobled by the religious pluralism for which we are grateful? How do we deepen our religious understanding and expand our theological vision? And, if we mean to say to everyone, "you belong", just what is it that we are inviting them to belong to?

Second Speaker: Dr. Jim Casebolt

In the course of our project, one of the ways we gathered information was through a survey of worship practices sent to every congregation in the UUA. We found that announcements, for good or bad, are the most commonly included service element. Given this result, it seems only fitting that, following Rev. Holt's opening words and before we get to the "sermon" of our presentation, we should make our own announcements.

A free copy of our report, *Engaging Our Theological Diversity*, will be arriving at every congregation in the UUA by the first week of July. For those of you who just can't wait, or would like to have your own personal copy, they are available at the UUA Bookstore booth in the exhibit hall.

If what you are about to hear this evening makes you want to learn more-- and we hope it will-- then we invite you to attend our workshop and hearing during this General Assembly [video to PowerPoint slide]. It will be held on Monday morning at 10:15 in room 204B. In addition to further discussion about our newly published report, you will also be invited to share your feelings about the UUA and Unitarian Universalism in general, with an eye toward other issues and areas of concern the Commission may study in the future. This workshop is not in your

program book, regretfully, so we will give you another reminder about it at the end of this plenary presentation.

Third speaker: Rev. Dr. Linda Weaver Horton

Just what is the faith that is enriched and ennobled by the religious pluralism for which we are grateful?

Our self-definition, while lifting up freedom of conscience from the beginning, began to focus upon pluralism more explicitly in the past century. There has never been a wider spectrum than there is at this moment in our history. Yet the Commission's explorations suggest that theological tensions, such as the venerable "humanist-theist" debate, have become much less important in defining many peoples' religious positions. We were struck by the large number of people who, when asked to describe themselves, reached for bridging language – such as mystical humanist, or even "a Christian who does not believe in God." There is for many a growing desire to transcend categories.

Many people at our hearings indicated interest in tools of dialogue that can help us to engage our pluralism respectfully, as well as surfacing underlying attitudes and ways of seeing the world that cut across the traditionally defined theological boxes. Definition has become for many less an objective description of specific convictions than a subjective statement about growing edges, dancing edges, even fighting edges. Our self-naming lifts up ways that we frame our worlds to evoke meaning, acknowledges spiritual disciplines that work for us, and honours what has given depth to our lives and even transformed us. Such naming has come to be more about meaning than truth for many. The post-modern spirit is alive and well in our midst, especially among younger generations and women.

Whether we choose to name ourselves pagans, humanists, Christians, Buddhist UUs, mystics, feminists or any combination of these and many others, there are ways we frame our worlds similarly. The cosmos of the interdependent web is forever in process and dynamically related. It is home to humans who are regarded with chastened optimism, and to myriad other living beings that have as much right to be here as we do. Personal experience, reflected upon with inquiring minds and in the context of community through time and space, tends to be our source of religious conviction. Religious naturalism and process philosophy appear to form warp strands upon which the diverse colours of our chosen spiritual disciplines and sources of wisdom can be woven together into a strong and supportive cable.

When we understand the interaction of the polarities within our movement as a dance, rather than a confrontation, we all move towards greater wholeness. Each strand has attended to some aspects of human experience more closely than others. We have much to learn from one another if we listen from the heart, with humility and a genuine desire to understand what has given meaning and sparked transformation in the lives of others in our beloved communities.

Fourth speaker: Joyce Gilbert

One of the questions we used to shape this report was, "Who are we?" A simple answer is that contemporary Unitarian Universalists are people from a liberal religious tradition, living in a time of religious and social conservatism, a time of "church-shopping consumerism" and "personally-defined spirituality." We are also residents of a country which is becoming increasingly diverse racially and religiously, putting the American pluralist experiment to truly challenging tests.

If we believe what we say about ourselves and our congregations,

- we're theologically eclectic
- we have a message that the world needs (but we're not sure what it is, exactly)
- we tend to be more liberal in a number of ways than is the general population
- we avoid conflict about matters theological
- we're economically and educationally above average
- we have sought a congregation as part of a search for community
- we believe that as religious people, we should be involved both personally and congregationally in efforts to make our world a safe, sustainable, and beautiful place.

What do others say about us?

- We're small in a time of "bigger is better," and growing smaller as a percentage of the US population.
- We may tend to practice "overweening individualism" at the expense of "community," in the words of sociologist of religion Robert Bellah at the UUA GA of 1998.
- Two-thirds of people who call themselves UU do NOT join our congregations.
- We're from the "emergent" middle class, and many of us are "at ease in Babylon."

A number of observers have said we're in a "post-denominational" period. Others have pointed out for years that generations reflect their time, place, and world. We're inundated with information through a wide range of media.

Another question: how do denominations function in such a setting?

An answer: we need clarity about the undergirding religious values that inform our actions and beliefs. Further, this must be expressed in language which communicates effectively both within and beyond our congregations.

Fifth speaker: Manish Mishra

In undertaking our study of Unitarian Universalism and theology another of the questions we examined was how, exactly, Unitarian Universalists frame the world. What are the lenses through which we understand the world and make meaning? There were several clear trends we observed and have noted in our report.

Our Principles and Sources indicate that we are a pluralistic faith, one that is open to "wisdom from the world's religions..." Yet this sense of pluralism that many of us care about so deeply is frequently incomplete. We UUs tend to exhibit a sense of exuberance for some religious traditions while being highly wary and critical of others.

Hinduism, Buddhism, Native American spiritualities, and earth-centered spiritualities, for example, are generally embraced by UUs; there is a sense that there is wisdom in these traditions, that there is something which we can learn and take-away. It is therefore not uncommon or surprising to hear theological terms such as "moksha," "dharma," "nirvana," or "gaia" used in UU circles.

However, the use of similar theological terms rooted in the English language (and therefore rooted in the Judeo-Christian traditions) elicits intense scrutiny, even criticism. It is PC in UU circles to talk about dharma and gaia, but it is not PC to talk about salvation, redemption, or grace. Attempts to draw on, and reinterpret, Judeo-Christian theological language and metaphor frequently results in skepticism or downright hostility.

Our UU espousal of religious pluralism, thus, winds up remaining a goal not always reflected in practice. Hyper-criticalness is frequently directed towards the Jewish and Christian traditions, while religions that are more exotic, or more "fashionable," are less critically examined and embraced with open arms.

Our research over the past four years has lifted up the fact that we UUs have work to do in thinking about how we approach the religions of the world. Are we aware of the assumptions we bring with us as we encounter Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, and the other world religions? How do we react and why do we react differently to the various faiths we encounter?

Is it the case that some of those who come to UUism from earlier Christian backgrounds carry unresolved wounds from their religious past? Is it the pain of these wounds that we are confronted with when we hear, in our churches, hyper-criticalness directed towards Christianity? If so, can we tend to these wounds, these unresolved theological hurts, so that a more holistic pluralism is genuinely possible?

We additionally have work to do in terms of thinking about the knee-jerk exuberance many of us feel towards religions that are considered exotic or trendy. Are we UUs bringing an adequately critical eye to those traditions? We need also to think about what it means to appropriate, to make and use as our own, the symbols, rituals, and stories of various peoples who may not be American or Caucasian in origin. When do we cross the line from genuine appreciation of something very different and move into the realm of cultural misappropriation or tokenism?

These are among the questions our report examines, and we hope you will examine them with us.

Sixth speaker: Rev. Earl Holt

Some will remember a religious education curriculum authored by the Rev. David Johnson entitled, "The Disagreements that Unite Us." Among other things, this phrase describes the

theological history of American Unitarianism. Almost immediately upon their formal organization in 1825 the Unitarians found themselves divided theologically between the liberal Christianity of Channing and the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Parker. Though it is undoubtedly true that over time Transcendentalist sentiments largely prevailed, there are a fair number of us today whose religious beliefs remain closer to those of Channing than of Emerson. And much the same result has come from the other theological controversies that have followed in the ensuing years. Generally speaking, given a theological either/or, the Unitarians have chosen both/and. We have agreed both to disagree and to stay together. Or, in a quatrain familiar to several generations of both Universalists and Unitarians by Edwin Markham:

He drew a circle that shut me out
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win,
We made a circle that drew him in.

Historically, the Universalists dealt with the conundrum of unity in diversity differently. They upheld a single theological doctrine as paramount -- universal salvation -- at the same time allowing for the widest diversity in regard to all other beliefs. So, individual freedom of conscience, freedom of belief, was the common ground on which the two bodies united at the time of denominational consolidation, in 1961, a merger which largely avoided theological issues. But freedom alone is a centrifugal force; religious community longs for a common unity.

And if that unity cannot be found in common doctrine, it can begin at least with a common commitment to an ordinary but important discipline, the discipline of conversation. Simply put, in community we agree not only to disagree but to speak with those with whom we disagree, and to stay together. The discipline of conversation is the discipline of encounter, not out of counterfeit politeness to seek to escape or evade addressing our differences of religious belief, which may be profound -- the issues that matter most to us both personally and as communities of faith -- but to be, as church, the place where we can safely share them with one another, in conversation disciplined by a common commitment that our differences need not -- and must not -- divide us. To find unity in our diversity.

Seventh speaker: Rev. Dr. Tom Owen-Towle

We, the Commission on Appraisal, have produced several recommendations: some are intended for the Association as a whole, some for congregations or other bodies within our Association, and some for individual Unitarian Universalists.

I start with one that focuses upon theology. We commissioners recommend that our Association as a whole mobilize a denomination-wide effort, building upon the findings of our report, to develop and articulate a deeper understanding of who Unitarian Universalists are as a religious people.

At a minimum, we recommend that at least one General Assembly in the near future be devoted to a theme such as "Theology and the Unitarian Universalist Mission", or alternatively, that an intentional focus on theology become a regular feature of GA programming. We urge the UUA

Board of Trustees and administration to consider giving highest priority to this proposed process and endeavor.

Eighth speaker: Rev. Orlanda Brugnola

The challenge of our theological diversity and our acknowledgement of that challenge places our planning of worship in a new context. The custom of reaching for culturally diverse worship elements that somehow speak to a theme in hopes of a cohesive, non-offensive and fulfilling worship experience is not the answer to our challenge.

To avoid cultural appropriation and shallowness, the Commission suggests, not the revival of a worship arts clearinghouse, but rather, a collection of materials that demonstrate so-called 'best practices' in creating "worship that is theologically inclusive, appealing across differences of generation, personality, learning style..." and temperament.

We believe that "...the Unitarian Universalist Association...the Canadian Unitarian Council and the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists [have] adequate resources to develop and administer such a collection."

Ninth speaker: Janice Marie Johnson

We challenge our youth and young adults to step outside of themselves and try new ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Somehow we fail to invite them to conform to our ways of thinking, feeling, and being. Our work affirms that the stakes are high for them and for us.

During their late adolescent years we lose a higher percentage of youth than most any other religious collective. They serve, they engage, they grow and then they leave. Why?

It starts, perhaps, in our churches, where our young children live separate yet supposedly equal lives. It continues when our children grow up and dare to right the wrongs of their lives. We applaud them and their actions, yet we fail to nurture their souls. How can we let each other know that each of us is not only needed, but also loved and respected?

The Commission recommends engagement in a process by which youth and young adults can continue to further develop their religious understanding and practice.

Finally, the Commission recognizes and recommends that youth, young adults, and adults grow together, collaboratively, in true partnership.

The stakes are high – for all of us.

Tenth speaker: Mark Hamilton

We recommend that individual UUs and congregations acknowledge and deal with theological diversity rather than avoiding it. Many adult UUs have told us that discussing theology and beliefs is not a frequent part of their congregational life, mostly in an attempt to avoid conflict

and disagreement. A number of youth agreed with this assessment, adding that they felt that many adults do not like to talk about what they believe because they don't know what they believe, and are afraid of looking foolish.

Sweeping UU theological diversity under the rug by refusing to talk about it in community is not a healthy approach to the issue. Tolerance requires conversation, not avoidance. Talking about beliefs, learning from one another, and stimulating everyone's thinking through open and honest sharing of views should be encouraged in UU congregational life.

With a topic such as this, it is not surprising that there has been considerable difference of opinion -- even within the Commission, even about how to begin framing the question. One thing on which we are all in full agreement, however, is that this issue is vitally important for the health of our denomination. We have sometimes felt like we were breaking a taboo by raising the question. However, the tremendous response we have received over the course of doing this study suggests that this taboo is one that people are glad to see broken. It is like the story of the elephant in the living room: Everyone knows it is very large and very present, but there is an unspoken agreement to pretend it isn't there and to act as if nothing is wrong. The elephant for Unitarian Universalists is our lack of articulation about who we are and what we have in common, and we believe the time is ripe to stop pretending it doesn't exist and actively confront it.

We do not see this report as the end of a process; rather, we hope it will be a beginning. We have raised the issue, and asked many questions, and advanced some tentative conclusions. Now it is time for us all to engage in the challenging process of searching for answers.

It is up to you; it is up to us all.