

Plenary II

Planning Committee

President's Report

Thank you. As president of the Association, it is my responsibility to report to you on the state of our religious association. And it is my pleasure to report that our Association is healthy and strong. Our growth in numbers has continued (for the 20th year), but more important is growth in our sense of mission. In congregation after congregation, and within the leadership of the Association that serves your congregations and the staff that you pay, we are beginning to claim our Good News and know, in deeper and deeper ways, that we have an important ministry to live out in this hurting world.

This has been a momentous year for all of us. First, there was the media attention focusing on my election - and I will say more about that in a moment. But then, all too soon, came the tragic and horrifying events of September 11th. In the dark hours and days that followed the terrorist attacks on the United States, Unitarian Universalism was a beacon of hope and comfort not only to members of our congregations but to others as well. We, as a faith community, were challenged to respond to the horror of those events, and I am very proud of the way Unitarian Universalists rose to that challenge. I am more convinced than ever that the message of hope and love that is the essence of Unitarian Universalism can be a blessing to our hurting world.

When I spoke to you all after the election last year in Cleveland, I told you that I was committed to raising the visibility of Unitarian Universalism in the public square, committed to making Unitarian Universalist public witness a priority of my presidency. .

Well, we have made significant advances in this area, and I've brought some examples of our public witness coverage to show to you today.
(video clip from "Higher Ground")

And that remains my prime commitment today. But while celebrate our successes in this area, we must also realize that there is more, much more, to be done.

That said, I must tell you that I never expected the deluge of media attention that greeted my election. In the hours following the election, I was interviewed by the **New York Times**, and the **Boston Globe** (the Globe article ran on the front-page of that newspaper). I did interviews with two wire-services, Associated Press, and the Religion News Service for articles that were sent out all over the U.S. and Canada. Reports of the election ran on CNN and Fox-News.

Soon after I returned to Boston, I was interviewed by reporters for two online news services, **Africana.com** and **DiversityInc.com**. More and more, people are turning to the Internet for news, and we understand the necessity of providing information on our public witness to those media outlets as well as the more traditional outlets.

As I have traveled across the continent this past year visiting our congregations, I have made it a point to make myself available to do public witness. The UUA staff works with local

congregations to arrange for interviews. This is an a short excerpt from a long piece that ran on Milwaukee TV shortly after my visit there:
(*video clip from "Black Nouveau"*)

For months following the election, the media were fixated on the story of the UUA, a historically white denomination, electing a black man to be its president. "Black Pastor, White Flock" was the angle that all the stories used. Now, we know that this is the way that the media work, and our task was to use the coverage we were getting as an opening to get the media to pay attention to the many more significant issues that Unitarian Universalism is concerned with. And I am happy to report that we have begun to have some success in this effort as well.

For instance, the article about Unitarian Universalism entitled "["Come All Ye Faithful"](#)" which appeared in **Boston Magazine** last December includes these words about Unitarian Universalism: "...its message is suddenly becoming more appealing to a multicultural America searching for answers in a newly divided world. As hard-line Protestant ministers such as Jerry Falwell use the terrorist attacks to push divisive agendas - blaming gays, lesbians, and the American civil Liberties Union - the Unitarian Universalists have taken precisely the opposite approach, preaching tolerance and inclusion.....And while increasingly conservative mainstream denominations have hemorrhaged members over the past two decades, UUism has grown steadily for each of the past 19 years." Less about me, more about us.

A large part of our public witness work this past year has been envisioning new ways that we can partner with our congregations in the important justice-making work that they are involved in. This renewed support for congregational justice-making work can be seen in the efforts at First Unitarian in Cincinnati (my home congregation), and their work with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. In Tulsa, OK, our congregations have worked as members of an interfaith coalition, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry, to begin the long, hard work of restorative justice on the issue of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

And in the Greater Boston area, the UUA and several area UU churches, most notably United First Parish in Quincy, MA, are part of the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization's (GBIO) work to create affordable housing. During my presidency, the Association will remain committed to supporting our congregations in their justice-making work.)

I am convening a major consultation next December, including the Affiliate organizations that carry so much of the water for us in the justice area, to clarify and improve our support for your congregational work.

We are now being asked to speak to issues of broad significance in our society. Reparations is one such issue. Another is the issue of mandatory reporting by clergy of sexual abuse of children. On this, and other issues, Unitarian Universalism is in the public conversation more today, I believe, than at any time since the Vietnam War.

Consider this article (screen shows image of article, "Religions ponder stem cell issue") from the **New York Times**. The Times reporter, Gustav Niebuhr, called us to get information on the Association's position on stem cell research. When he learned that we did not have an official

position on this issue, he could just have left us out of the article. But he didn't. Instead, he wrote: "But among Unitarian Universalists, power is vested at the grass roots, and official statements come from an annual assembly. The assembly was in June, before attention focused on whether human embryos should be used in scientific research, and did not take up the subject." So the New York Times now knows not only to call us on issues like this, but it also does justice to our form of governance as it relates to an issue of moral significance.

I issued a personal statement on the issue of stem cell research, and just recently I was quoted in a Religion News Service article on the issue of human cloning. More and more, the voice of Unitarian Universalism is being heard in the public arena.

These stories are important to our public witness not only at the time they appear but also because of the ripple effect that they have. Other journalists read these stories and are motivated to call our offices to get information on particular issues such our support for same-sex unions or comprehensive sexuality education. Or they call to get background information on UUism as they prepare to do a piece on the local UU congregation. This is another way that our public witness reaches out through our congregations to the wider world.

No account of our public witness work would be complete without recognition of the tremendous work done by UU ministers, congregations, and the UUA staff in the days and weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11th. I was immediately clear about the pressing need for pastoral outreach, so the very next day, September 12th, I issued the first pastoral letter of my presidency. The response to this letter was so overwhelmingly positive that I was convinced that this form of pastoral ministry must become an important part of my leadership, and it has. I've written to you about the war in Afghanistan, about the conflict in the Middle East, and about safety in congregations. It has now reached a point where the media is picking up on these pastoral letters and writing about them. This is another form of our public witness.

And I must mention the exceptional work of our ministers during this time of grief and healing. I know the long hours put in by our professional religious leadership during that time after September 11th. The ministers in New York and the Washington, DC, area played particularly significant roles at this time. This is public witness at its finest and most compelling.

And, finally, two more examples of how Unitarian Universalism is playing a larger role in the public arena. On March 14, I was one of a dozen religious leaders who were invited to meet with the U.S. Senators on the Democratic Steering Committee. At this meeting at the Capitol, I had an opportunity to tell these political leaders of the Unitarian Universalist support for domestic programs to support the most vulnerable in our society: the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized.

I have in fact, spent a significant amount of time in Washington meeting with our allies in the justice-making community. I have also participated in a number of press conferences in Washington, including this one in April on the steps of the Capitol in support of a religious call for affordable housing. (*Video clip: Bill Sinkford speaking in support of affordable housing*).

As many of you know, I have spent a good deal of time this past year visiting our congregations across the continent. The number of congregations with which I've visited is approaching 70, since last June. I have attended ordinations and installations and building dedications, and it is a joy to me to be invited into the places that are your church homes and to meet with you and to speak with you.

There is one trip, however, which for me was a transformative experience. This past February, I traveled to India to meet, first, with the Unitarians in the Khasi Hills and then with our Holdeen India Fund partners.

Stewardship at the Association is healthy, even through this year of uncertainty when most non-profit and religious groups have struggled to maintain services. We will finish this fiscal year in the Black, thanks to a prudent approach to spending. Annual Program Fund contributions will meet our budgeted goals.

And our Capital Campaign, the Campaign for Unitarian Universalism has reached \$28.5 million in commitments, toward our goal of \$32 million. As pleased as I am with that success, fewer than 200 of us have pledged 90% of that amount. And almost all of those are deferred gifts and bequests, which will come to the Association over many years. Our task in the next two years is to broaden participation, asking for cash gifts now that can support our immediate needs. We are looking ahead to Youth/Young Adult Sunday, which we hope will bring in \$2 million in cash gifts next fall.

Over the past year, we have addressed many significant issues in the life of our Association. We have examined the way we relate to our professional religious leadership and made changes in this area. We have tried to envision and implement new approaches to our justice-making work. And we have focused on a renewed emphasis on service to our congregations. In everything that we do, we have kept foremost in our minds that it is our responsibility to serve you.

And while the core of this report to you is to summarize our work over the past year, I want to briefly mention some of the projects on the horizon. We are committed to doing everything possible to foster the growth of Unitarian Universalism and Unitarian Universalist congregations. To this end, we have created a task force on New Congregation Formation that is empowered to explore ways in which the UUA can encourage more congregational growth. This task force has recommended the creation of ten multi-staff new congregations during each of the next five years. This is a very ambitious goal, but it is only part of our efforts in this area.

We are also exploring the possibility of a marketing campaign in selected geographic regions to bring the good news of Unitarian Universalism to a wider audience. We have engaged a marketing firm to do preliminary research on this, and I'd like to share with you two of the designs that firm has submitted to be placed on billboards in the selected area. (*screen shows images of two possible billboards*). This is another way we are exploring to nurture our congregations and foster their growth.

So as you can see, I have had a busy year. But I want to tell you that of all the facets of my work as president of the Association - the committee meetings, the congregational visits, the public

witness work - nothing has brought me as much joy and fed my soul as much as my work with our youth and young adults. They are our future, and they are a blessing to us.

So I would like to close my report to you with a short video I made recently at the request of the youth group at First Unitarian in Dallas, TX. They asked me if I would share with them my thoughts on what "peace" means to me, in these troubled and troubling times.

(video clip, asking a question about whether Bill knows a song about peace and Bill singing "I've Got Peace Like a River.")

Thank you. It is a privilege to serve as your President. My spirit is buoyant. Our possibilities are so real. And my prayer life is filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve this faith.