

**President's Report
Rev. William G. Sinkford
General Assembly 2008
Fort Lauderdale, FL June 26, 2008**

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Thank you.

Hello, my friends. It is good to see you again. I am delighted that we are all together here at our General Assembly, our Gathering of Congregations. For many of us, traveling to General Assembly each year is like embarking on a pilgrimage, and like pilgrims of the past, we are likely to encounter obstacles on the journey to our destination. This year we were faced with a troubling economy, the ever-increasing hassles with air travel, the heat of south Florida in June, and – let's admit this right away – real concerns about this site within a Homeland Security perimeter. But despite all those challenges, we made it! We have overcome the obstacles, and we are here together, once again. And that, my friends, is cause for joy and celebration.

My spiritual life always begins with gratitude. I want to take this opportunity to give thanks to one person who truly makes my ministry as President of the Association possible. My wife, Maria, not only tries to keep me sane, she keeps me happy. And she loves the church and this faith. Maria, thank you for all that you do.

This is my seventh and penultimate report to the General Assembly. Each year I am faced with difficult decisions about what, out of all the important events and issues of the past year and our ambitious plans and vision for the future, to include in my report to you. This year I'd like to start by sharing the vision that guides my work and that of the entire UUA staff. Our staff mission statement articulates three important goals:

- Support the health and vitality of Unitarian Universalist congregations as they do their ministry.
- Open the doors of Unitarian Universalism to people who yearn for liberal religious community.
- Become a credible voice for liberal religious values in the world.

Our first goal is to support the health and vitality of Unitarian Universalist congregations as they do their ministry. We do this by providing services, creating resources, and by learning from – and replicating -- your successes. Let me share just a few highlights of our accomplishments in this area.

For the first time ever, we have a religious education curriculum that is available FREE, online, and easily-customized to the needs of individual congregations. “Tapestry of Faith” is a ground-breaking initiative that’s receiving rave reviews.

Ted Scheu, a published children’s author from Vermont, said, “Creating Home is the best UU curriculum I’ve ever seen.” And Karen Lewis, from Dallas, TX, wrote, “Tapestry of Faith is our prayers answered.”

Ministry is at the center of our religious lives. The new Diversity in Ministry program is very important to me, and I believe it’s important to many of you as well. We have the potential blessing of more than fifty newly-fellowshipped ministers of color and seminarians of color, but we need to maximize opportunities for them to have successful parish settlements. Frankly, our track record in supporting ministers of color and welcoming their leadership is abysmal. Through the Diversity in Ministry Program, we’re intentionally working closely with congregations to prepare them to accept ministry from these very talented ministers of color, and to help congregations deal openly and pro-actively with issues of race, rather than allowing these issues to remain under the table, where they often undermine ministry.

The Diversity of Ministry team expects to be facilitating the placement of ministers of color in at least three congregations next year, and a fourth congregation is also hoping to call a minister of color. As we strive to live out our commitment to become an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, and multi-cultural faith, there are few goals that are more important than this one. A gratifying number of congregations have already expressed interest. If you think your congregation should be on the list, visit the Identity Based Ministries booth in the display area and learn more about this transformational possibility.

It’s been a challenging year for us as we work to discern a new path for our Youth Ministry. We have learned that our existing structures have

done some things very well, especially offering youth leadership training at the national level, and providing a safe and supportive haven for youth leaders of color. But we've all come to realize that our support for youth at the congregational level has been woefully inadequate. We know that the development of UU identity for our youth is critical to the long-term success of our movement, so the question we need to answer is how best to cultivate this identity? How do we best nurture the spirits of our young people? How do we ensure that they have deep, strong roots even as we help them grow wings?

The two-year Consultation on Youth Ministry, which culminated in the Youth Ministry Summit last July, was deeply inclusive, the most extensive process ever undertaken by our Association. Over 5,000 Unitarian Universalists engaged in the Consultation process, including participants in more than 120 congregational and district conversations and over 1500 respondents to youth and youth advisor surveys.

The Youth Summit concluded that real and lasting change is needed: a shift in Association support to the congregational level, visionary leadership to create truly multi-generational congregational communities, youth ministries rooted in spirituality and faith development, and effective nurture and support for our BGLTQ and youth of color. Now we have the challenge of moving toward that vision. We know that we need youth ministry to serve all UU youth and not just the relatively small numbers it currently serves. The vision is clear, but the road to implementation has been bumpy this year. You'll be hearing a lot more about Youth Ministry in the next few days, but for now, please let me assure you that my commitment -- like that of the UUA staff and board -- my commitment to a truly comprehensive youth ministry could not be stronger. *We will* get there, together.

We already have many wonderfully healthy and vital congregations, and I'm convinced that the best way to understand success is to listen to the voices of experience. So last November the UUA's Growth Team convened a special consultation in Louisville, Kentucky, and invited twelve ministers from high-growth churches of all sizes to share their insights.

It was a remarkable gathering. The first question put to the twelve ministers was, "What is the saving message of your congregation?" The Saving Message -- not language we typically use. It was fascinating to hear

the responses. These twelve successful, growth-oriented ministers said virtually the same thing: “The saving message of my congregation is that we nurture the human spirit, and from that place of nurture, we are called to help heal the wounds of the world.” Nurture the spirit; help heal the world.

I’m convinced that this truly is the saving message of Unitarian Universalism, and not just because it happens to be almost identical to the tagline for our national advertising campaign. This is what we’re called to do, and I believe that if twelve ministers from widely diverse theological backgrounds can find common ground in this mission, so can we all. We need to shift our attention away from debates that have been, frankly, so unproductive -- conversations about whose theological perspective is correct, and whether there’s room for more than one belief system in our congregations. You see, those conversations haven’t led anywhere. But if we shift our focus to what we are called to do, then we have an opportunity to engage in a truly inclusive and inspiring conversation.

The insights from these twelve visionary ministers at the Louisville consultation are available for everyone to learn from on a DVD, “Listening to Experience.” Thousands of these DVDs have already been circulated, and more copies are available at the UUA Bookstore here at General Assembly.

Vital and healthy congregations are absolutely necessary if we’re to meet our second goal -- to open the doors of Unitarian Universalism to people who yearn for liberal religious community.

Last year we launched our first national marketing campaign since the nineteen-fifties. I hope all of you have seen our ads in *Time* magazine. These ads are intentionally edgy. “Is God keeping you from going to church?” “When in doubt, pray. When in prayer, doubt.”

Two goals of this campaign were to raise awareness of Unitarian Universalism and to energize UUs, so that each of us might become an evangelist for Unitarian Universalism. I think we’ve done pretty well. The overwhelming reaction I’ve heard from UUs is thankfulness – “Thank goodness we’re finally willing to make ourselves more visible and available to those yearning for a liberal religious home.” And seekers are finding a warm welcome in our congregations.

One new UU wrote:

“Thanks for putting the ad in Time magazine. I would have never discovered the UUA any other way...my eyes have been opened to new people and new opportunities that I would have never imagined... Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.”

The advertising business loves numbers, so we have precise metrics measuring our success. A Time readership survey revealed that among all the ads in the magazine, ours has been the third most remembered. And a surprising number of Time readers report having conversations with others about our ads.

We’re also using new media to reach folks. Let me ask, how many of you use the Google search engine?

We tested advertising on Google last fall, and our success was dramatic. Over a six-week period, we placed UU ads on the Google search results page, and we generated just under 10,000 new visitors to our website. This advertising is so effective and the cost is so low that we are continuing this program into next year.

Here’s what a UU from Missouri told us:

“I was reading an online article on California's ruling on same-sex marriage and saw the UUA ad. I am thrilled the UUA is advertising on Google's content network regarding issues like this! I know so many people who have stumbled upon Unitarian Universalism only to discover they have always been Unitarian Universalists!”

And there are indeed folks out there discovering they’ve “always been Unitarian Universalists.” I recently received an email from one of them. He writes:

“On the Google search page, I noticed the ad for the Unitarian Universalist web site. What I found there gave me hope that I was on the right track so I checked for churches in my area which lead me to All Souls

in Kansas City. Thank you for helping me find a church community that shares my values and allows me to grow in my personal beliefs!”

We are currently raising money to continue our national visibility efforts. And we are thinking hard about the most effective way to extend these efforts. One thing, though, is already certain: we are no longer content to remain invisible.

Whenever we get out the newsprint and track our goals, right at the top of the list, each and every time, is Growth. We’ve had some success in recent years, and some congregations and districts are doing tremendous work. But we’re still only growing as a national movement at 1% or less per year, according to the congregational certification numbers. We know we can do better. We know we must do better. There are too many people “out there” who yearn for what we find every week in our congregations.

We’ve had some real successes. In the six years since the first regional marketing campaign in the Kansas City area, our seven congregations in that area have increased their adult membership by over 50%.

Our districts are currently nurturing sixty emerging congregations around the country, and six new member congregations were recognized here on this stage last night.

Successful initiatives for growth are almost always local, so we channeled \$333,000 from Association Sunday contributions to our districts to support these efforts. The funds are going toward congregational collaboration, church mentoring programs, and creative outreach efforts, such as the purchase of UU hymnals for the Great Lakes Naval Station.

The Association is also supporting more and more innovative growth initiatives that are emerging from our congregations. Let me give you just a few examples.

First Unitarian in San Diego is opening a second or “satellite” campus near the border with Mexico, where the population is primarily Latina and Latino. This is a community that has been underserved by us, a population that has not heard the good news of Unitarian Universalism.

First Unitarian Church of Albuquerque has an inspiring Branch Ministry program. The congregation is reaching out to small groups of Unitarian Universalists scattered throughout New Mexico and integrating them into the congregation with all the rights and responsibilities of full membership. New digital communication tools are playing an important role in connecting these new groups. The folks in Albuquerque are developing a powerful and effective model for outreach that can be replicated elsewhere.

Here's another example of creative outreach: The First Unitarian Church of Rochester hosts a radio program called "Life Now," a wonderful show based on the Unitarian Universalist conviction that religion is about living well in this life, rather than preparing for the next. Co-minister Kaaren Anderson and a team of reporters generate lively and inspiring content. This successful broadcast is available as a podcast, so any of you can subscribe and listen to the radio show wherever you are.

If I had more time, I could share many other exciting growth initiatives. Some of these experiments will succeed, some will be adapted until they're successful, and some will fail – that's the nature of experimentation. But I'm confident that we're learning valuable lessons from all of our experiments.

The third goal in our three-part mission is to become a credible voice for liberal religious values in the world.

When I took office seven years ago, I made a commitment to increase our public witness efforts, and during this time we've had some real success.

Last month the California Supreme Court made Marriage Equality a reality in the largest state in the Union. What joyful news! Unitarian Universalists played an important role in this victory, and special thanks go to two people -- Rev. Lindi Ramsden, Executive Director of the UU Legislative Ministry of California, which worked so hard for this day. And Eric Isaacson, UU attorney from San Diego who drafted the religious leaders interfaith Amicus brief which was so influential in the court's opinion.

Our work for Marriage Equality in California is not over. There will be a referendum on the ballot this November to enshrine discrimination in

the state's constitution. Stop by the Interweave booth in the display area to learn how you can support the Legislative Ministry in the struggle for justice and equality.

New hope is dawning in states that are offering partial protections, like New York and Oregon, so while the path to full equality is long, I am heartened by these strides toward justice. And I hope you are, too.

As part of our public witness work, I continue to visit Washington, D.C. but I confess that it's disappointing when our calls for justice fall on deaf ears.

I wish I could report that, after five long years, Iraq has become a peaceful nation, that our troops are headed home, that our prayers have been answered. You know that I cannot. But I can tell you that this year we were more determined than ever – and more effective -- in voicing our opposition to that occupation. In early September I sent a letter to Congress urging them to look at our nation's moral balance sheet to learn the True Cost of War. More than 13,000 of you signed our Petition for Peace, and in October, John Thomas, President and General Minister of the United Church of Christ, and I delivered your petitions to the Senate and House leaders on both sides of the aisle. And in March I joined religious leaders from the Olive Branch Interfaith Peace Partnership to speak truth to power in the halls of Congress.

Although our Association has passed several resolutions calling for a speedy and just end to this war, I want to be very clear about something: We Unitarian Universalists support our brave troops, the women and men who serve our country and put themselves in harm's way. We owe a special debt to our UUs in uniform and especially to our UU military chaplains.

The first letter I received from my son after he entered Army basic training seven years ago, asked me a question I could not answer. "Dad, why isn't there a UU chaplain on this base? I need a minister, Dad."

Then, there were only two UU ministers serving as chaplains in the entire US military. Today, I am proud to say that we have thirteen ministers either serving, or preparing to serve, our sons and daughters, and others, in uniform. These pastors are answering the call to minister to young adults and older adults who struggle to serve with integrity and courage. Six of our UU

chaplains are with us today, and I ask that you express your thanks and appreciation now.

For several years now, I've recognized World AIDS Day each December with a special ritual. I travel to Washington D.C. and I find the largest stage with the loudest microphone and I tell our government to get serious about effective prevention. This year I met with the Office of the Global AIDS Coordinator and led a rally in front of the White House, opposing our government's international policy of funding only abstinence-until-marriage prevention programs. I reminded the Bush administration that "just say no" didn't work that well in the Garden of Eden, and it isn't stopping the spread of HIV today.

We are fighting some tough battles, and our public witness work grows in ways you might not yet know about. How many of you watched the Compassion Forum this past April, when Senators Clinton and Obama answered tough questions about faith and public policy? The questions were asked by a diverse group of religious leaders, including Beacon Press author Eboo Patel.

You might not know about other UU connections to the event. The group that organized the forum was Faith in Public Life. The UUA is a founding member of this new organization, and our own Meg Riley, director of Advocacy and Witness, is chair of their board.

Meg has been carrying the water for us in the interfaith world for more than 15 years. Her patience...and impatience...are finally paying off.

Just last week, the UU Congregation at Shelter Rock Manhasset, NY, gave Faith in Public Life a \$50,000 grant for a project titled, "Mapping Faith: Raising the Visibility of UU Activism." This funding will create a strong UU presence in an online directory of congregations and organizations that are involved with progressive activism. Already 3,000 organizations in every state are on this map. 500,000 people go to FPL's website each month, and reporters save it in their 'favorites' for easy access when they want to do a story. Getting UUs squarely on this map will enable us to be more visible, easily found by journalists, by interfaith partners, by policy makers, by researchers, and by each other.

Please stop by the Advocacy and Witness booth to learn how you can put yourself onto this faith map, or log onto Faith in Public Life's website, FaithInPublicLife.org.

More and more, we Unitarian Universalists are at the center of discourse in the public square, shaping the conversation about religion and public life in America.

And our work extends beyond our nation's borders. Every year the leaders of the big eight industrial nations meet to consider pressing matters, and that summit meeting has recently expanded to include a gathering of religious leaders as well. This summer in Japan, I'll be one of 100 world religious leaders working to craft a platform to present to the G8 countries. I will be one of only two denomination heads from the United States in that group, and will have the opportunity to offer a speech to these gathered leaders about a key aspect of Unitarian Universalist faith: "Interdependence." I am honored by this unique opportunity, and I recognize that it reflects the high regard in which Unitarian Universalism is held internationally.

Here at home we continue our efforts to understand what race and racism mean in our history and in our lives today. Over the past year, we have sponsored research and developed web resources to help congregations understand our shared history, and there is a workshop at this GA about how those resources can best be put to use. It's essential for us to learn and to tell the truth about that history, both in our congregations and in society because the consequences of racial oppression are not just in the past, they're with us here today in Ft. Lauderdale.

As I mentioned before, one of the challenges we faced in the lead-up to this General Assembly were real and significant concerns about the site. This convention center lies within a Homeland Security perimeter. Some of you, perhaps most of you, have been asked to show identification to enter this site, and that means that this site is not accessible to someone who doesn't have documentation.

Now, there's a long story about how the site was chosen five years ago, about how we were promised that the security perimeter would have been moved by now. But in the world of Homeland Security, plans change, and that promised move has been pushed back to 2011. We've tried to

respond to this disappointment by maximizing our capacity to think about, talk about and act on the issue of immigration and our undocumented neighbors. I am hosting a GA forum on this issue tomorrow afternoon that will include local partners from here in South Florida, and I hope that as many of you as possible will join us for that important conversation.

The Gospel question, “who is my neighbor?” is not a theoretical question for us. As part of our Association’s commitment to those on the margins of our society, I continue to be active in witness for immigrant workers and their families. I hope you share my pride that the UUA is a founding member of, and the first denomination to join, the New Sanctuary Movement. And this year’s General Assembly public witness event, “Valuing All Families,” will be the most inclusive and best-organized ever. I invite you all to join us tomorrow evening at this rally for immigrant and BGLT families when we tell our legislators that laws on immigration, employment, adoption, and marriage must *support* families and communities, not tear them apart.

More and more of our congregations are asking, “Who is my neighbor?” and choosing to be allies in this important cause. Several of our congregations have voted to become New Sanctuary members, and we’ll see more join in the coming months.

Yes, it has been quite a busy year. We’ve made strides in our three mission areas that we can all take great pride in. *All* of us, because this is *our* work. Many of the initiatives I’ve described were supported by your generous contributions to the *Now is the Time* Comprehensive Campaign, so let me tell you a bit about this successful campaign. This is the largest fund raising effort ever attempted by our Association, with a \$50 million goal, including \$20 million in cash, to support urgent current priorities. Last year, I announced the public launch of this campaign with 50% of the goal already raised. The good news this year is that, thanks to your exceptional generosity, we have raised more than \$39,700,000 to date including \$16,600,00 of that cash goal.

All of our previous capital campaigns met their financial goals, but they were conducted quietly and relied on a small number of very generous major donors. I was committed to doing this campaign differently. I wanted

every UU to have the opportunity to support our faith, so we imagined Association Sunday. There is no reason that we should be the only major denomination that does not give its congregations the opportunity to support major new initiatives each year. Association Sunday 2007 was a tremendous success. 619 congregations representing almost 130,000 UUs contributed \$1.4 million dollars! Your contributions to Association Sunday 2007 are already supporting many of the initiatives I just described.

How many of you are from congregations that participated? Thank you so much for your support.

I hope you all will visit the Stewardship and Development Booth in the hall near the main entrance to the Convention Center, outside halls B and C, so that we can thank you personally.

Association Sunday is not a one-time event. I believe that it should become “the way we do things around here,” so we are actively planning Association Sunday 2008. Funds raised this year will support lay theological education and excellence in ministry, two goals that touch the very heart of our faith.

I’ve had some time in the last weeks for reflection on my ministry and our ministry together, and I would like to offer some observations about the different conversations I’m involved in and the real changes I see as I have travel among our congregations.

You know that I care a great deal about language. The words we use to describe reality can also lead to changes, subtle and significant, in that reality. And our language is shifting.

More and more, I hear people talk about our Association of ***Congregations***, not the top-down, Boston-based UUA. It’s not universal, but it is prevalent. And UU leaders are beginning to “get it” that General Assembly is a “Gathering of ***Congregations***.” There has been a discernable and healthy shift in how we describe ourselves.

“Youth Ministry.” No one used that language seven years ago, not even me.

“Faith Development” is now quite broadly claimed as the goal of our education programs, both for young people and for adults.

“Excellence in Ministry” is language that you will be hearing often. It calls us to acknowledge the many things we do well, but also to name ways that we could minister so more effectively. The UU Ministers Association, the Ministerial Fellowship Committee, the Panel on Theological Education, our seminaries, the UUA Board are all parties in this conversation. And it is a profoundly hopeful conversation.

“Vision, Mission, Covenant and Ministry” are on the lips of a lot of our leaders.

Some of our ministers and lay leaders who have used these words for years have felt that they were ministering at arm’s length from a denomination that was uncomfortable with this language. Now, these values are being embraced and supported by our larger faith community. This change gladdens my heart.

I’m so pleased that our advertising tag line “Nurture Your Spirit. Help Heal Our World” has been welcomed so widely in our community. More than 85 congregations have purchased banners that proclaim that message and display it proudly in public.

More and more of us are comfortable talking about “the language of reverence.” There is less argument whether, for example, humanism or a more spiritual practice should inform our being together in community. And, in more and more of our congregations, worship is more centered and centering, more celebratory and profound, than I observed just a few years ago. The decibel level of the conversation which tries to mandate a small theological center for our faith has been much reduced.

Music, and our musical vocabulary, has broadened. Though we struggle with what it means to appropriate, or misappropriate, music from other cultures, the reality is that in many of our congregations there are more rhythms and harmonies and even languages sung than ever before.

Indeed, over all, I believe the tone and tenor of our collective conversation is better because we are talking about things that matter to our faith community and to the hurting world in which we live and minister.

Yes, our hurting world. Foreign wars, distressing economic forecasts, an escalating health care crisis, bigotry and prejudice against those on the margins of our society. It would be easy to give in to depression and despair. I know that people are anxious, even those, like most of us, who are financially comfortable. That anxiety will manifest itself in your congregations. Please, make a place for it. Talk about it openly. People need church most when times are difficult and uncertain.

But don't give the anxiety too much power. At the heart of our theology is a deep and abiding belief in the power of human possibility. That is what humanism stands for, and regardless of your personal theology or spiritual practice, we are a profoundly humanistic religious people. We know that "ours are the only hands on earth" and that we can shape our destiny. Remember, we are pilgrims on a journey, but we do not travel alone. We have our Unitarian Universalist faith and our faith in one another.

Ours is a theology of hope. "Give them not hell, but hope and courage," wrote John Murray, our Universalist forebear. We will need both hope and courage in the coming months. We need not despair. Our spirits *can* be nurtured. We *can* help heal our world. Fear need not win the day. Love *can* prevail. Love *will* prevail. May we make it so.

Thank you.

