

Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community

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Open Letter to the Board of Trustees of the UUA In Response to the Report of the *Fifth Principle Task Force*

We appreciate your attention to improving the democratic process within the UUA and your call for responses to the report of the *Fifth Principle Task Force*. It is our hope that these comments will be the beginning of a fruitful dialogue.

While the report makes some good points and recommendations, we are disturbed that it fails to “think outside the box”. The “box” here may be described by one word - “congregations”. Just ask yourself, “How will Unitarian-Universalism thrive in the 21st century?” A clear answer is that we need to broaden Unitarian-Universalism from its associational focus on congregations into a strong movement - an entity that spends far more resources in engaging the larger society, a movement in continual renewal, a movement that seeks out the leading edge of the spirit to give guidance through the societal storms to come. The likely alternative is an increasingly inward looking and shrinking association, instead of a dynamic, outward looking movement.

Yet the focus of the *Task Force* is on congregations, not this broader movement. Congregations are foundational and the Board’s initiation of UU University at GA has been most welcome, as is the Task Force recommendation of paying a limited number of more engaged congregational delegates. Yet a successful movement must consist of a variety of organizations, networks, and endeavors that far transcend individual congregations. Already we are missing out on a huge potential. Just consider the fact that there are less than 160,000 members of UU congregations but 3 to 4 times as many identify themselves as UUs in surveys. Local congregations are simply not a good fit for many of these people. Yet in a globalized internet era there are other ways to organize their passions into building a movement to fulfill the third purpose of the UUA - to “extend and strengthen Unitarian-Universalist institutions and implement its principles”.

We just need to think outside the “box” of congregations as the be-all and end-all. That is, the formulation of the UUA as an “Association of Congregations” is a limitation that we need to transcend to be successful. The fact that affiliates (some of the key players in the “movement”) came to play a prominent role in GA programming should have been a strong hint that something was wrong with a narrow focus on congregations. After all, congregations are local entities and their boards are focused, appropriately, on strengthening their institutions and responding to their local social context, not building an extended movement. And often neighboring congregations and district staff and workshops are better able to help these congregations with congregational development. Also, few congregations have the size or resources to form groups to effectively address interests such as Buddhism or tax equity. Congregations have relied on affiliates to help members collaborate successfully. No wonder it is often the movement builders who want to go to GA, to be inspired and to inspire others on themes that far transcend their own congregations.

Recommendations:

To strengthen the UU movement, we recommend that the “program GA” be restored to its former variety and depth and held annually, while a much smaller and shorter “congregational GA” with “paid delegates” be held every other year in conjunction with a program GA. In all years the potential number of delegates could be the same as now, but the new category of paid delegate would come with more rights and responsibilities (to be developed) with a focus on educating and involving up-and-coming congregational leaders. A key point is that “democracy” needs to be considered in much broader terms, including forms of representation for key players in the movement as a whole, not just paid delegates focused on the institutional needs of their congregations.

To build the movement among non-churched UUs, we recommend collaborative programming both within and outside UU venues on a variety of issues, typically of a justice or faith nature, with a variety of non-UU national or regional organizations which bring more resources and leadership to bear on those issues. Such programming might involve assisting the participation of appropriate affiliates in certain actions or conferences,

where active UUs could network with inactive or potential UUs. We also recommend some form of membership or affiliation for individual UUs who are not active in congregations but might want to join and support the movement due to our spiritual leadership on issues they care about.

Addendum on the UUA Bylaw on Affiliates

We note that currently the Board is operating in violation of the intent of the UUA Bylaw on affiliates (C-3.8).

Current Bylaw: “Independent Affiliate Organizations

The Board of Trustees may admit to affiliated status those independently constituted and operated organizations whose purposes and intentions it finds to be in sympathy with the principles of the Association, and it may terminate such status upon finding that the organization no longer meets the foregoing qualifications or is not in compliance with the rules relating to such organizations. The status granted is that of independent affiliate. The Board of Trustees shall adopt rules governing the requirements for admission to and retention of affiliated status. ...”

This Bylaw implies that an organization with “purposes and intentions” in agreement with the UUA principles should normally be granted affiliate status if certain reasonable rules are met. The recent, seemingly arbitrary, termination of all affiliates should have been replaced by debate and voting on this Bylaw by the General Assembly according to the procedures for C Bylaws specified in Article XV. In addition, the authority of the Board to make rule changes under section 14.2 requires that such changes be “not inconsistent with these Bylaws”. Yet rule 3.8.1(j), which requires a statement on “engagement with member congregations” and “coordination or collaboration of effort and resources”, is totally out of character with the technical requirements of all the other rules. In addition it has been applied in an extreme way that is inconsistent with the intent of the Bylaw, which, again, implies that “purposes and intentions” are the primary non-technical requirements. In other words, 3.8.1(j) should have had a corresponding Bylaw change and there should have been a full General Assembly debate as to its interpretation, reasonableness, and wisdom. In addition, in our judgment many of the affiliates, such as UUEC (see addendum below), would have satisfied rule 3.8.1(j) if interpreted reasonably.

We hope that this failure to follow democratic process is not repeated for Actions of Immediate Witness or Responsive Resolutions. When issues with a bylaw appear that affect UU culture, as they often do after a period of time, **we strongly recommend the creation of a broad-based process** to address those specific issues, to be followed by final debate and appropriate action by the General Assembly. A broad-based process should oversee by a stakeholder task force and seek to involve all interested congregations, related organizations, and individuals.

In this case the UUA would greatly benefit from finding ways to nurture many of the related organizations and to support their efforts to broaden the movement, effectively restoring affiliate status. In other words, don’t “throw the baby out with the bathwater”. Instead we suggest a Bylaw revision along the following lines to address some of the issues that have been raised, to clarify expectations on all sides, and to emphasize the policy governance role of the Board.

Suggested Bylaw Revision: “Affiliate Organizations

The Board of Trustees may admit to affiliated status independently constituted and operated organizations which demonstrate that their purposes, intentions, and activities fulfill the principles of the Association and which engage in endeavors to inspire, inform, assist, or collaborate with member congregations or other UU organizations or networks on a multi-district scale. The Board may put on probation or terminate such status upon finding that the organization no longer meets the foregoing qualifications or is not in compliance with the rules relating to affiliates. The Board shall adopt policies governing how the Association may assist or collaborate with affiliates and policies on the rules and expectations relating to affiliates. ...”

Note that policies for assistance, rules, and expectations need not direct the staff toward rigid “one size fits all” practices. They should be somewhat flexible, depending on resources and on the nature of the affiliates involved. Many of the current “related organizations” would probably once again become affiliates, but the flexibility could be used to organize them in a manageable way. However if UUA staff think that some affiliates would benefit from collaboration, the staff should seek funding for a coordinator. It is simply not realistic to expect over-extended volunteers to do this.

Addendum on UUJEC

For over twenty years, UUs for a Just Economic Community has worked for economic justice by advocating for systemic change, inspiring many at GA and involving many congregations in a number of campaigns, most recently related to David Korten's "The Great Turning – From Empire to Earth Community" and his "Agenda for a New Economy – from Phantom Wealth to Real Wealth". UUJEC and UUSC collaborated over many years to lead trips to Mexico for UUs and others to see at first hand injustices associated with economic globalization. We collaborated with non-UU groups on a successful big-box store campaign which involved dozens of UU congregations. We have done so by maintaining an informative website and newsletter, supplying study packets for congregations, offering workshops and renowned speakers for districts and General Assembly, and supporting UU and youth participation in actions like the WTO protests in Seattle and the FTAA protests in Miami. We have organized and held many national social justice conferences and have collaborated with other UU affiliates by attending theirs, such as Urban Church, Washington Office, UUSC, and Urban Ministries.

When UU funding was available to supplement our membership income, we staffed an office to supply information and support for UU activists in congregations, as economic justice has not been a focus of UUA social justice departments despite many resolutions, AIWs, and a Statement of Conscience on Economic Globalization passed by the General Assembly. At this past GA, the study / action issue of economic justice came in a close second to immigration. UUJEC believes that thoughtful, compassionate, and informed Unitarian Universalists are best situated among faith communities to be leaders of the grassroots movement toward the kind of economic change so many UUs know is basic to developing a world that is more equitable, peaceful, and healthful, grounded on sustainable ecosystems and renewable resources.

From the Board of Trustees of UUJEC

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