

## **Congregational Polity & the Myth of Congregational Autonomy**

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The first thing I was ever asked to do in a UU congregation was coordinate coffee hour. This is ironic because I don't actually drink coffee and to this day I have no idea how to make it. And thus began the perfect introduction to religious life - being asked to do something we're not at all sure we want to do and have no clue how. That preaches, doesn't it?

I showed such promise in my not-knowing that the second thing I was asked to do was serve on the ministerial search committee for my congregation's assistant minister. At our initial meeting, the senior minister explained that in Unitarian Universalism congregations choose their own ministers, and that this combination of responsibility and authority is congregational polity. Congregational what?, I asked. Polity, she said. And I thought, oh dear - that definitely sounds more complicated than making coffee.

Polity is one of those hard-core geeky religious words we think we should know the definition of but most of us only carry around an echo of meaning, a reaction, or some vague historical association. So let's get this out of the way. Polity is a doctrine of church, specifically the way churches are connected to one another. Every denomination has a polity. In fact, polity is the only thing that distinguishes a lot of Protestant denominations from one another. Which is why many denominations - like the Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists - are named for theirs.

Polity is the beliefs, doctrines, and structure that hold local churches together with whatever denominational chain exists of authority and doctrinal accountability. But it's also about so much more. To understand what polity is we have to understand what values it manifests.

There are all sorts of religious practices that can be done alone, but religion by definition takes place at the intersection of self, community, and the Sacred. There's some disagreement about the origins of the word religion, but all of them relate to how and why people are connected to each other. [*Religare* Latin for "to bind" *Relegere*, Greek for "to heed" *Rak*, Teutonic for "to have a care for"]. Spirituality can be practiced alone but by definition religion can't. And as soon as people come together in groups they have to work out how they will be together.

People become part of communities, which in turn become religious communities when they share answers to fundamental questions about self, community, and Spirit. Questions like:

- Who am I?
- Who are we? What makes us Us?
- What is the nature of God?

- What does God want from us?
- Are humans essentially good or fundamentally sinful?

Polity enstructures a community's assumptions about how the world, God, and people work. It is the way people choose to organize themselves around their collective purpose. It is the architecture that supports shared religious life. Polity both reflects and creates that purpose.

Unitarian Universalists, our cousins the United Church of Christ, and several other smaller denominations are congregational in our polity, which means that congregations are both independent and connected to one another through covenant. In Wikipedia, congregational polity is defined as a collection of "self-governed voluntary institutions", which I suppose is at least vaguely accurate, but then the article calls this form of polity "a type of religious anarchism." You gotta love Wikipedia.

And here we have exposed a major challenge of defining congregational polity - that it is so often understood only as compared to other people's polity. Dominant religious culture in the West tends to be more hierarchical, more authority-driven, more top-down than Unitarian Universalism is. This reflects core theological assumptions about human nature, revelation, authority, and about who and what God is.

Polity with priests and bishops at the center make sense in sacramental traditions, where intermediaries are required to extend the gifts of God to the people of God, and where adherents are called to participate in specific sacraments as both a practice and requirement of faith. Traditions believing that scripture is the infallible, literal word of God will by necessity have strict rules about who can be admitted to fellowship, and will concentrate power and authority in the hands of people who adhere to and correctly interpret that Word. Traditions believing that humans are stained by original sin or that humans must be saved by a personal relationship with the Savior will have polity that is organized at least partly around naming and correcting sinful behavior.

So when our friends at Wikipedia define congregational polity as "self-governed voluntary institutions" they are defining it in opposition to dominant religious culture, in which churches are governed by priestly authority and denominational hierarchies, and people participate because the safety of their souls depend on it. So while the Wikipedia definition might describe a little piece of congregational polity, it misses the larger story.

Unitarian Universalist congregations are in fact "self-governed." Each congregation names its own conditions for membership, calls and ordains ministers, and controls its own budget. But we are also explicitly and formally united in mutual covenant with other congregations. We intentionally come together to learn together, support one another, and to accomplish together what we cannot accomplish alone. Our congregations may be self-governed but there is literally no such thing as a Unitarian Universalist congregation which is not connected

by covenant to the community of Unitarian Universalist congregations. To be an officially recognized congregation in our tradition is to join the Association of congregations.

Our congregations are voluntary associations in that members and friends participate according to their conscience – no one is compelled by creedal requirement, eschatological fear, or priestly mandate to join a Unitarian Universalist congregation. But we are nonetheless *called* to engage in religious community. Whether by individual conscience, justice-seeking community, or by God, Unitarian Universalism teaches that we are called to create beloved community *in community*. Our theologies may differ about what or who is calling us, but we are united in a belief that we are part of an interdependent web of existence. This call, wherever it comes from and however it manifests in our individual lives, is that which compels us to come together. There is no such thing as a Unitarian Universalist by themselves. Our faith is practiced in covenanted community.

It's a bold thing to claim that people can't really be Unitarian Universalist by themselves. Let me draw a parallel. In our tradition, congregations ordain ministers but only the Association can admit ministers into fellowship. A minister who is ordained but not fellowshipped may call themselves the minister of that specific church, but they may not call themselves a Unitarian Universalist minister. The individual church claims that minister but the larger movement does not. In exactly the same way, a person can claim Unitarian Universalist beliefs. But if they are not a part of a covenanted community they have not been claimed back. Our faith is practiced in covenanted community. Individual beliefs may constitute spirituality but they are not religious. They are not Unitarian Universalist.

Participation in our congregations and communities is "voluntary" in the sense that it is not strictly required by external authority. But are we not responsible to the call to manifest the interdependent web by co-creating beloved community? Does our faith not require us to help increase the sum of love and justice in the world? Our faith puts claims on us. Moral, ethical, and for some of us theological duty claims and compels us. We can ignore those claims, but they endure anyway. Because we claim and are claimed by our faith, participation in Unitarian Universalist community is much richer than the notion of "voluntary participation" conveys.

Somewhere along the line, our collective understanding of congregational polity became like that Wikipedia definition. Sort of right, but almost exclusively defined in contrast to dominant religious culture, and failing to express vital dimensions of meaning that are absolutely core to who we are as Unitarian Universalists. Somewhere along the line, congregational polity became conflated with the autonomy of individual congregations. The rich dimensionality of mutual covenant and interdependence has been sheared off, leaving only the barest bones of isolated self-governance and independence. Congregational polity is a bird grounded with a broken wing.

So, in some ways, is our faith. There is an exact parallel between the way we understand congregations' relationships to one another and individual UU's relationships to their

congregations and communities. In just the same way, the independence of individual UUs is often privileged over interdependent community in our congregations. Exploring the conscience and individual journeys of individual people is perceived as the penultimate purpose of many UU communities. Our people therefore tend to organize themselves around individual conscience, individual discernment, and direct democracy rather than mutually covenanted collective conscience, collective discernment, and collective action.

Covenant - mutual covenant - is the missing link in our understanding of congregational polity. Congregational polity is not the autonomy of individual congregations but the covenanted communion of autonomous churches. This is, in the words of the great Conrad Wright, a significantly different thing.<sup>ii</sup> Let me repeat that. Congregational polity is not the autonomy of individual congregations but the communion of autonomous churches - a significantly different thing.

Believing that congregational polity is primarily concerned with supporting and protecting individual voices and congregations is nothing less than heresy. Yes, I just called it heresy. And not in the cute renegade sort of way. I mean in the literal way - like apostasy - the renunciation or abandonment of a religious principle. Equating congregational polity with autonomy undermines our interconnectedness, erodes our covenant, and endangers our communities. It is flat-out ahistorical, not to mention wrong.

Here's why we should care: this pervasive misinterpretation of congregational polity, with its emphasis on individual conscience and direct democracy, is a major cause of decline and source of ill health in Unitarian Universalist congregations. It drives healthy people away, weakens connections among our churches and beyond, and perpetuates mind-boggling degrees of suspicion about leaders in general and our Unitarian Universalist Association in particular.

There are few things more damaging to our congregations than a systemic belief that individual voices rather than collective purpose belong at the center of congregational life. And yet this amnesiacal interpretation of our tradition pervades many of our communities. Perhaps you will recognize some of these manifestations. Endless rethinking of decisions that well-informed leaders have already made. Over-empowerment and even protection of bullying voices. Hubristic belief in congregational specialness. Refusal to consider wisdom from the larger community of congregations. Undervaluation of associational connection. These are the sins inspired by our collective tolerance for this heresy. Countless faithful people have left our faith after being turned off, demoralized, or even victimized by these behaviors. Countless more have visited our congregations and never come back. The only people who want to join communities that deify individual voices are people who want to be deified.

There is another way. Every one of our flourishing congregations and communities knows this way.

My favorite congregation, which I can't name because, well, as Regional Lead I'm not supposed to have favorites, is so wise. Good lord they are smart and soulful. Everything their church does and is is about making Love manifest in this time and place.<sup>iii</sup> They know in their bones that *how* they are says everything about *who* they are.

Somehow they've learned that people of all ages need help to live faithful, growthful lives, and that it is the congregation's collective job to be that help.<sup>iv</sup> In their written materials they address this whole spiritual-but-not-religious thing head-on just in case any newcomers are confused. "[One person" alone, they say, "is incapable of being a church"].<sup>v</sup> Right there, front and center in their founding document. I love it! They know that they are united in covenant with each other so that they can help each other increase the sum of Love in the world.<sup>vi</sup>

This community doesn't do "membership". They do "covenant," and that covenant is so strong that each covenant partner accepts responsibility for reaching out in Love to those who wander from the covenant by word or deed. They do this not because they want to punish each other but because they believe no one should ever "be cut off from the privileges of the covenant."<sup>vii</sup>

Their organizing document says explicitly that while officers and ministers can be helpful they are not absolutely necessary for the congregation to be healthy.<sup>viii</sup> Admittedly, there is a long section in there too speculating about possible roles for ministers, deacons, pastoral visitors, teachers, treasurers and all that. These people are not anarchists after all, no matter what Wikipedia says. They like a good committee as well as the next.<sup>ix</sup>

They have a lovely process for being with each other in times of conflict, encouraging people to talk first directly to the person they're having trouble with, and if that doesn't work ask another person to help them reconcile. If the conflict becomes intractable, this community recognizes that someone might need to leave, since the peace and well being of the whole is more important than that of any single individual.<sup>x</sup> But they also promise one another that they won't just leave - they promise not to remove themselves from fellowship on a whim. They specifically say that being mad at another member is not reason enough to leave. They liken people leaving to pulling pieces of timber from a building or limbs from a whole person. Because folks join the community by entering into covenant, folks can only leave by being released from that covenant.<sup>xi</sup>

They intentionally and explicitly avoid using the term "independent" to describe their relationship to other congregations.<sup>xii</sup> They celebrate that each church is distinct, with special gifts and challenges, and that while churches certainly don't have control over each other they are nonetheless all connected.

And here's my favorite part. This congregation lays out in delicious detail the ways they will show up for their neighboring congregations. They promise to look out for their neighbors'

welfare, and consult with them when they ask for help. They promise to tell hard truths if they see folks acting in ways that are unhealthy. They promise to worship and celebrate together, to share resources, and to work together to expand their faith in the world.<sup>xiii</sup>

This, my friends, is a community that understands congregational polity, where independence and covenant alchemize into precious religious life.

Where is this congregation? It is here, in each of us, in our DNA as Unitarians, Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, for the congregations whose story I just told came together in Cambridge in 1648. These are our ancestors, yours and mine, the authors of the "congregational way". Theirs is not a story of independence, not even remotely. The faithful people who gathered in Cambridge that sweltering summer knew absolutely that they needed one another if they were to serve God. Just a few years before they had escaped persecution and oppression of religious and secular authorities, coming to the new world to create a new way.

The Cambridge Platform was not a declaration of independence. It was a declaration of covenant.

But somehow over the last several hundred years the vital practices of mutual covenant weakened, both within and among our congregations. Our ancestors navigated the American Revolution, the creation of civil democracy, and the separation of church and state, not to mention profound theological shifts. Over this time, growing diversity and emphasis on individual rights and conscience - the hallmarks of liberalism - emerged to challenge collective accountabilities. I believe these essential elements of liberalism actually eroded covenant's place at the center of our polity.

Our ancestors were religious radicals, no mistake about it. But they were not, as many believe, theological radicals. Their theology was virtually indistinguishable from the churches they left behind in Europe. They were radical because of their polity, which was based according to historian Perry Miller on "The pioneer formulation of the principle that a corporate body is created by the consent of its constituent members."<sup>xiv</sup> This was a new idea in 1648, that members of a community could freely gather according to their will and mutual consent and together exercise a stake in the collective mission of the body. That said, scholars are quick to warn us that this notion is quite different from democracy by any modern definition. Indeed our ancestors would be horrified to learn that their commitment to living by the consent of constituent members would one day lead to erode covenant, and that independence would overtake mutual reliance.

They put covenant at the center because they believed, in the words of scholar Alice Blair Wesley, that "*The* task of the free church could be summed - in their terms - as loving God and loving one another so well that in their own study and discussion, dispute and conference, prayer, consultation and more discussion in the free church, the members might learn

together the divine will of the loving God... [as it] relates to justice, peace, and reasonable laws. And, if so, the members would be called, compelled, bound to proclaim it and try to bring it to bear in their whole society."<sup>xv</sup> "For any who might suppose our 17<sup>th</sup> century free-church ancestors talked mostly about original sin, predestination, and hellfire, I am glad to be able to tell you, not one of those topics is even mentioned"<sup>xvi</sup> in the records of the founding churches. Our ancestors organized themselves around loving one another in service of God. That is the beating heart of congregational polity.

Diversity naturally emerges in polities when there is minimal hierarchy and standardization in systems, and that is certainly true in our case. So I want to talk about congregational polity as expressed in and among our congregations as being variously located along a continuum with independence on one end and interdependence on the other. Let's look at some examples.

We would all agree that congregational polity locates the freedom to determine who can join and how squarely within each congregation. But this freedom can be exercised in ways that emphasize either independence or interdependence. In most of our congregations, joining the community happens when people "sign the book" - an individual act of an individual person in a single moment in time. Although a person's sense of connection may well continue to deepen once they sign the book, the act of explicit commitment is over the moment their pen leaves the page. "Joining" happens only once. Even though they add their name to a long list of other names, there is no reaching back - nothing mutual happens in that moment. On our continuum, this approach to membership falls way down toward independence.

In a few of our congregations, people become part of the community when they formally enter and are welcomed into mutual covenant with the rest of the community. The covenant calls both the individual and the larger community to specific purpose, with specific practices, and the covenant is regularly renewed and reinterpreted. This practice of membership falls on the interdependent end of the continuum.

Joining and covenanting are different in the way a wedding is different from a marriage. Both are strictly consistent with congregational polity, but there is no question that a mutual covenanting practice lives more fully into the beautiful potential of beloved community.

Just as religion thrives at the intersection of self, community, and Spirit, so too does covenant. Covenant is multidimensional, working horizontally from person to person but also from that community to individuals and around to the Sacred however we define it. The covenant I have been talking about this morning is not just between people. It is also among communities - which are always greater than the sum of their parts - and with the greater Love that surpasses all our understanding. Covenant is both the call and the answer to living a life within all of these dimensions.

I want to explore this idea of covenant a bit further, because in many of our congregations the meaning of “covenant” has been compressed into the means by which we convey expectations and exercise a degree of control over individual behavior. Behavioral covenants are the only way most of our congregations experience covenant, and there’s no mistaking the function – to manage unhealthy individual behavior. We have inadvertently taught our people that covenants are about getting other people to stop behaving badly.

We come by this honestly! The Cambridge Platform itself is full of stipulations governing individual behavior. This is my favorite: [attendees at church meetings may not “*oppose or contradict the judgment...of the elders without sufficient and weighty cause, because such practices are manifestly contrary unto order and government, and inlets of disturbance, and tend to confusion*”]<sup>xvii</sup> So true!

Anyone who has ever tried to live in religious community knows how important it is to have clear expectations about how we will try to be with one another. For our Puritan ancestors, though, the motivation for governing individual behavior wasn’t just copacetic community life but deep awareness that people who practice loving each other are best able to love God. Absent the Cambridge Platform’s abiding focus on faithful relationship to holiness and grace, the potential depth and breadth of our modern covenants are hobbled to roam the realm of interpersonal relationships.

Meanwhile, other congregations and communities use covenant as a way to express their deepest aspirations and values. These covenants are engaged liturgically so that the worshipping community regularly remembers the greater good to which they are collectively called. The covenants are revisited and reinterpreted, and every time new folks become covenant partners the entire community re-commits to their collective purpose and practices.

I encourage you to consider where on this continuum the core practices and of your congregation or community fall. If you’re willing, challenge yourself to consider what values are being served by practices that land on the independent side of the scale, and consider what beautiful things might emerge if your congregation’s practices were more firmly rooted in interdependence.

As Unitarians and Universalists and Unitarian Universalists, we have allowed our beliefs to change over the long years according to conscience and science and revelation. We have managed to stay together even as the core Christian story receded as one among many wisdom stories. Our people have integrated the rationalism of science, the intuition of transcendentalism, and the ethics of humanism. Together, we have worked theological miracles. We have managed to stay connected as communities of faith through radical changes to our collective beliefs. Covenant – the collective commitment to and practices of religious community – is how we have stayed together.

And yet we are a people of competing commitments. The freedom of belief which has helped us remain flexible in light of new revelation and experience also weakens our binding ties. We value interconnection but are cautious about asking much of each other. As individuals and groups we want to belong but are reluctant to be claimed. This tension between freedom and connection is also our birthright.

Our collective anxiety about this tension and the resulting deification of individual conscience have squashed the rich dimensionality of covenant until it has become synonymous with a vague sense of commitment to a vague set of principles. We have abstractified covenant into spiritual cohabitation, the big tent under which we eat at separate tables. Covenant lives on as a vestigial metaphor for interconnection in our movement, but that is all. The call to covenant might be a theological imperative, but our collective covenant isn't worth the paper it isn't written on, for *there is no such covenant*.

As congregations we "covenant to affirm and promote" the Principles. This way of practicing covenant puts tepid mutual agreement at our collective center. This is not covenanting. It is parallel play.

It is no wonder that independence is all that remains of our beloved congregational polity. The call to covenant is there at the heart of our faith, an echo from our collective past. We sense that interconnection, we preach it, and we rely on it. But covenant is more than impulse and echo. It must be activated intentionally for the full power of liberal religion - and congregational polity - to be revealed.

Our people successfully navigated the profound theological shifts of the last three hundred years. If Unitarian Universalism is to survive even the next century, we must change again - this time by countering forces of individual isolation and institutional dissolution. We must revitalize that which connects us as individuals and religious communities. We must reanimate mutual covenant as the beating heart of our polity.

In the "congregational way", autonomy and interconnection cohabit comfortably. Some would place autonomy and interconnection on opposite ends of a spectrum, with tension so taut that pulling a bit in one direction threatens to pull the other of its pedestal. But the two are connected by a web not a rope, and our ancestors knew this. The religious leaders who came together in Cambridge in 1648 arrived there *voluntarily*. They *chose* to come together to create a covenanted community of autonomous churches.

Which is why we desperately need a movement-wide process for reengaging Unitarian Universalism's collective covenant. Without continual reaffirmation, the sense of volitional association erodes. Suspicion enters the space where faithful connection should be.

Covenant is not coercive, which is why the tendency to assign duplicitous motives to the pull toward interconnection in our system is blasphemous. Our covenant makes demands, and

these cannot be ignored no matter how loud the voices resisting the accountabilities envisioned in our polity. The problem is that we aren't clear about the demands our covenant places on us, so it's no wonder so many of us feel at least vaguely resistant. How can we say yes to something - much less do it - if we don't know what we're being asked to do?

The authors of our congregational way were extremely specific about the web of connection they wanted to weave. In the Cambridge Platform churches promise to take care of one another, consult one another ("admonishing" when necessary), welcome members from other churches, share ministers, and provide "relief and succor" in times of need. New congregations promise to offer the "right hand of fellowship" to existing ones, and large congregations pledge to propagate new ones.

We would be hard-pressed to construct a more relevant list today. These promises are remarkably similar to the ones modern-day Unitarian Universalist congregations make via their Associational connection. This is why the prevalence of often-vituperative claims impugning the motives of our UUA is so ironic. Because the covenant our congregations have entered into is not with "the UUA" as an institution, but with *each other*. Our Association only exists because congregations intentionally decided that they need a way to enact collective religious vision beyond the unit of individual congregations.

Which is why congregations who fail to contribute generously to our UUA are out covenant. The moral problem with this is not that the institution of our UUA suffers, but that those who do not share resources have turned away from the community of congregations with whom they have covenanted. This failure means that the next time a sister congregation needs help they are less likely to receive it. Our UUA is often the only way congregations reach out to one another, and to starve it is to starve our associational interconnection.

Our associational polity is a living tradition; a pathway for mutually covenanted religious life. Activated by covenant, our polity is more than the simple fact of our connection as individuals, groups of practicing UUs, and congregations. It's also the *commitment* to connect, the *means* to connect, the *content* of the connection, and *how we maintain* the connection.

Our polity will be revived when we actually help our people enter and re-enter into covenant with each other and with the larger community of congregations. We might stop "signing the book" as a mark of membership in our communities and begin a continual process of discernment that begins and ends with the community and individuals re-committing to one another. We might refocus General Assembly's "Service of the Living Tradition" away from celebrating ministers and toward a ritual recommitment to covenant among Unitarian Universalist people and communities.

The wise elders who gathered in Cambridge three hundred and sixty years ago heralded a long practice of coming together to explore our interconnectedness, and while the ways our people have connected over the years have varied greatly the fact of our coming together has

not. And yet the way we meet has become one of the idols we have placed at the center of our shared religious life.

Democracy without covenant is governance manifesting the hubris of individual opinion. As a practice democracy emphasizes the wrong things - namely debate and polarization by design in which some win and some lose. When did voting overtake covenanting as the means to our associational end? If we are to live into the full potential of our interdependence we must put covenant back at our center. Our congregations might move away from debate- and voting-centered Annual Meetings toward collective discernment about purpose and empowerment of Unitarian Universalist ministries in the wider world. Correcting misinterpretation and healing congregational systems from past damage are reasons enough to reinvigorate our collective reengagement with congregational polity. But these aren't even the best reasons.

The stakes could not be higher. Our polity makes us ready for the emerging spiritual-but-not-religious world, providing handholds to move confidently into the future. It connects us to our ancestors and gives us practiced means to stay connected to one another even as those connections take new form. Our polity helps us tell our story and transmit our tradition. It is a guy-wire for exciting new models of ministry. And it is the connective tissue that will bind diverse Unitarian Universalist ministries, congregations, covenantal communities and *people* into the 22<sup>nd</sup> century.

Unitarian Universalist ministries living in the "beyond" of Congregations and Beyond seem to know this. Because they are emerging and new, these ministries don't have such strong institutional DNA. The most vital of these beyonders are trying to create new kinds of communities where membership in the traditional institutional sense is irrelevant. But people within these worshipping communities want to feel and be connected, and their leaders are asking how. Many are answering with covenant. Not just internal covenants among participants, but many sincerely want to be in covenant with the larger UU community. The clearest, most prophetic voices in our movement right now are from beyond communities asking to be in actual mutual covenant.

Leaders in emergent Unitarian Universalist beyond-congregation ministries are lowering the walls of existing churches and exploring new ways of bringing Unitarian Universalist ministry to our communities. There is no road map for the future they are creating. And yet these leaders are deeply concerned with how to stay in relationship with other Unitarian Universalist communities of faith. They know that community without commitment is no community at all, and so they wonder about what to ask of participants in their ministries, what level of commitment to require, and how to engage in mutual covenanting. The answers to these questions cannot be told. They must be discovered.

The "congregational way" can help all of us discover the way forward - even in the wide world beyond congregations. Unitarian Universalist polity is essential to who we are precisely because our theology is so broad. Without some kind of vital, clear center around which we

convene ourselves, we will not hold. The ways we choose to connect with one another IS our center. If Unitarian Universalism is going to survive in the coming time - much less thrive - our center must hold.

If we are indeed Unitarian Universalist, and not Generic Religious People or even worse Generic Spiritual people, then by definition we claim and are claimed by a specific tradition. Ours is not some generic story of democracy, poetic self reliance, or liberal religion. As Unitarian Universalists we live in a particular stream of history with particular songs, sacred texts, theologies, liturgical practices, justice commitments, ancestors, and yes - polity. In a creedless faith that has grown away from the trunk of our original theological trees, this tradition is absolutely essential. Polity is how our little ragtag band of heretics and liberals communicates across time to tell us who we are and why. It is, in the words of UU scholar Conrad Wright, "part of the consensus that holds the denomination together."<sup>xviii</sup>

There are those who say that identity - especially identity that is mediated by institutions - will cease to matter in the coming age. That's not how I read the future. *Defining oneself* by one's institutional or personal identities - now that may be dying among some of our younger generation, especially the ones who can afford to untether themselves from their communities of origin. But the longing for connection, even those connections transmitted via institutions - that will never pass away.

Most people don't make "Facebook user" an aspect of their identity. But they absolutely rely on Facebook to nurture and energize the connections that make them who they are. Unitarian Universalist communities connected in covenant via our associational polity can be just like that - providing the architecture for networked connection no matter how individual people define themselves.

To be a Unitarian Universalist person or congregation is to claim and be claimed by covenant. There is no such thing as a disconnected UU - to eschew associational connection is to repudiate our polity. Echoing the words of Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, we do not make the covenant, the covenant makes *us*. Our ancestors knew this in their bones. It's time we remembered. The future of our faith is at stake.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See "[The Etymology of Religion](#)" for a marvelous treatment of the origins of the word "religion".

<sup>ii</sup> Conrad Wright, [Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice](#) (Boston: Skinner House), 1997, p. 12.

<sup>iii</sup> [The Cambridge Platform](#), 1648, (I.1)

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid, (I.4.)

<sup>v</sup> Ibid, (IV.5.IV)

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, (II.6)

<sup>vii</sup> Ibid, (IV.6)

<sup>viii</sup> Ibid, (VI)

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid, (VII)

<sup>x</sup> Ibid, (X.5.II)

<sup>xi</sup> Ibid, (XIII)

<sup>xii</sup> Ibid, (II.5)

<sup>xiii</sup> Ibid, (XV)

<sup>xiv</sup> citation from James F. Cooper, *Tenacious in Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 82.

<sup>xv</sup> Alice Blair Wesley, "Love is the Doctrine of This Church" from *Our Covenant: The 2000-01 Minns Lectures* (Meadville Lombard Press, 2002), p. 20.

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>xvii</sup> Cambridge Platform, (X.8)

<sup>xviii</sup> Conrad Wright, [Congregational Polity: A Historical Survey of Unitarian and Universalist Practice](#) (Boston: Skinner House), 1997, p. 1.