

Moderator's Report to the General Assembly

Imagine "A healthy Unitarian Universalist community that is alive with transforming power, moving our communities and the world toward more love, justice, and peace..."¹

These words are the preamble of our Association's Shared Vision, or Global Ends. They can be found in full on page 84 of your program book and on the UUA website.

I opened my report to you last year with that same phrase, and I have shared them with every congregation and community I have visited over the past year-- 26 visits across 13 states.

Imagine "a healthy Unitarian Universalist community that is alive with transforming power, moving our communities and the world toward more love, justice, and peace..."

Those words still animate my work for this liberal faith and inform my report to you on how your governance structure is responding to that vision.

I have been reading *turning point, essays on a new Unitarian Universalism* edited by Fred Muir, the senior minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Annapolis. I strongly recommend it to anyone who cares for this faith and wants it to remain a prophetic voice in the public square.

Muir challenges us to acknowledge and correct our Trinity of Errors. He writes, "Fundamental to our survival is a paradigm shift, a frame bending that goes deep in the history, (and) character... of Unitarian Universalism... because it goes to the essence of how we understand our ourselves and, in turn, relate to the world at large, which means how we relate to our demographic context"; the shift in religious views, the rise of the "nones", and growth of the "spiritual but not religious".

Muir continues, "Fundamental to our future is recognizing our way of faith, from its leadership to its Sunday service to justice-making partnerships, has been supported and nurtured by a *trinity of errors*, leading not only to ineffectiveness but also to an inability to share our

¹ UUA Global Ends, <http://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/manual/ends>

liberating message. This is to say, while Unitarian Universalism's gospel is good news, it is losing its vitality and relevance."

He defines this trinity of errors this way:

- "We are being held back and stymied by persistent, pervasive, and disruptive commitment to individualism that misguides our ability to engage the changing times.
- We cling to a Unitarian Universalist exceptionalism that is often insulting to others and undermines our good news.
- We refuse to acknowledge and treat our allergy to authority and power, though all the symptoms compromise a healthy future."²

Muir offers a Trinity of Promises as an antidote to our Trinity of Errors: generosity, pluralism, and imagination.

I want to report on those promises that the Moderator and UUA Board of Trustees are pursuing in my report to you: generosity, pluralism, and imagination.

First, generosity: It is no secret that costs are up and congregational fair share giving to our Association is down. The Board of Trustees charged Larry Ladd, Financial Advisor, to form a task force, collaborate with the Stewardship and Development staff and others, and then bring to the board recommendations to imagine an APF approach that was not based on membership but a percentage of income. The Southern Region has been testing such an approach, and we have learned much from their pilot. The board will host a workshop, "Generosity, Covenant, and Annual Program" on Thursday, 1:15pm – 2:30pm in the Convention Center Union Station Ballroom A.

The Second of Muir's trinity of promises is pluralism: This General Assembly is a great example of our understanding of the power of pluralism. Consider our theme, "Heart Land: Where Faiths Connect." President Morales has made multi-faith pluralism central to his presidency, working with partners in our justice and anti-oppression work as well as with progressive faith movements, many of whose leaders will be with us at General Assembly. He wrote in the summer edition of UUWorld: "Unitarian Universalism has long been a 'multi-faith faith.' As such, I believe we have a unique opportunity to

² *turning point, essays on a new Unitarian Universalism; Fredric Muir, editor – Skinner House Books ISBN 978-1-55896-766-3*

bring faiths together and to lead a multi-faith movement." I agree with him.

But we need to focus on pluralism in our congregations as well, specifically in how we practice our fifth principle, "the right of conscious and the use of the democratic process..." We have been urging congregations to send delegates to GA and consider underwriting their expense for many years. However, typically less than 50 percent of our congregations bother to send delegates and fewer still offer financial support to attend. Our most recent data suggest 28 percent receive some financial support but it is not typically substantive. As a result, our delegate body tends to be older, whiter, and privileged who have the time and money to pay their own way. This apathy towards participating in the democratic process close out an opportunity for congregations to consider youth, young adults, people of color, and the economically fragile.

Last year your board of trustees approved establishing a scholarship fund to attract an appropriately diverse body of delegates. The Saturday collection in Saturday's General Session last year along with gifts from the board and senior staff matched by the Davidoff Fund raised approximately \$28,000 to support the participation of delegates at this General Assembly. I am delighted that we were able to award 87 scholarships to support delegates, but was disappointed that we didn't hear from more congregations.

The third part of Muir's trinity of promises is imagination. I must confess this third part of the trinity is the one that most animates me.

I have shared with many of you, in various settings, my personal story of having been diagnosed with Stage-IV, non-small, cell lung cancer in 1999. The morbidity rates were grim; five percent of those so diagnosed might live for one year, only one percent might live for five years. I quickly imagined that I could be one of the one percent.

Several times a day, during my ten months of chemotherapy, I imagined little Pac Men consuming those rapidly multiplying cancer cells. I envisioned the toxic brew of my carboplatin infusions melting away the diseased cells. Further, I imagined myself surrounded by Liz, my children, my grandson, friends, and my new Unitarian Universalist community. I would gather them in my visioning at a beach on Pangkor Laut, an island on the west coast of Malaysia where Liz and I had been privileged to holiday when we lived and worked in Asia.

Imagining the healing provided by good science and amplified by the unconditional love of family and friends was powerful. Every day for many years I imagined my health restored. I return to Pangkor Laut in my imagination as I have a need.

Friends, it was imagination that guided me to be among this one percent. And I have lived to see my family grow from one grandson in 1999 to six grandchildren in 2016.

I believe in the power of imagination, visioning, and wishing to move Unitarian Universalism to a place of more love, justice, and peace.

You do too apparently! We have congregations moving into actualizing the Beloved Community as a result of the Mosaic Makers initiative, with many congregations and communities having tough conversations on race stemming from the Beloved Conversations curriculum.

Moreover, district leaders are imagining other ways of shaping governance. Three districts in the Mid-west consolidated into one region two years ago, and eight districts in the South and Central Northeast have dissolved and deferred governance to the UUA. The four districts in New England have entered into an agreement to dissolve district governance structures over time. All of this “right-sizing” of governance structures is freeing hundreds of folks for other ministries that are bending the arc of the moral universe towards justice.

The board is in an imagining mode as well. At my request, the board established a task force to reflect on how we might focus on covenant over membership. I asked the delegates last year, to “imagine, rather than signing the book, people entered and were welcomed into covenant that would be renewed periodically. Imagine if congregations and communities entered and were welcomed into mutual covenant with the larger association that would be renewed periodically.

You will have a chance at this General Assembly to share with that task force what that might look like. The chair of the Renewing the Covenant task force, Rev. Dr. Susan Ritchie, and her team have been considering what a network of UU networked communities might look like and how that network could energize our faith. We will host a workshop titled “Forum on Renewing Covenant” on Thursday, June 23 at 3:00 pm in the Convention Center Union Station Ballroom A and will

engage the full body Friday's General Session III in a discernment process that hears your stories.

The board is imagining through its Committee working group how we might further streamline governance structures. We now have 13 committees of the board and 6 committees authorized and elected by the delegates. Do we need all of them all the time? Are they all a good investment of our governance costs? Are they the right size? Should they be elected or appointed? Do they advance our Ends? Do they have a sunshine clause that requires re-authorizing from time to time? Can we imagine the Goldilocks "just right" committee structure for a religious movement of under 200,000 members? The board will bring some suggestions to you at the New Orleans General Assembly in 2017.

I can imagine a different way for delegates to discern positions on bylaws, business resolutions, and actions of immediate witness that allow time to learn together before any up or down votes are taken. We will model some ways of doing that discernment at this GA. We will have a moderated discussion on one of our Business Resolutions that have inflamed passions on both sides of the issue (Business Resolution for the Divestment from Corporations Complicit in Violation of Human Rights.) You will an opportunity to hear a panel discussion in the General Session II on Friday morning on the complexity of the resolution and the competing values it asks us to consider. The mini-assembly to consider the language of the resolution is Friday afternoon and the debate and vote is scheduled for General Session III on Saturday morning.

You and the congregations you represent are the UUA, not the board or staff. Participation in the democratic process is how you direct us to act on your behalf between general assemblies. That is our covenant; that is our polity. But too few congregations participate and fewer still offer any financial support for delegates to attend that would ensure wide and diverse participation in our democratic process. We must find ways for broader participation in the business of our association. I speak to this issue everywhere I go, but you must do so as well as leaders of this liberal faith.

I close with this reflection, again from Fred Muir:
"Living as twenty-first-century Unitarian Universalists means restoring a faith that is religious **and** spiritual, covenantal **and** experiential, progressive **and** evangelical. From the trinity of promises, Beloved

Community will be shaped and the future of our faith can deepen and grow again.”³

³ ibid