

Recommendation of UUA Board Task Force on Re-Imagining Covenant

Summary Recommendation: The Task Force recommends that the UUA Moderator call for a General Conference of Unitarian Universalists as soon as possible and no later than the fall of 2018, for the purposes of exploring what the UUA is called to be and to do in today's world. We further recommend that the Unitarian Universalist Association schedule general conferences on a regular basis, perhaps in biennial rotation with General Assembly business sessions. Prior to merger in 1961, both the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America separated the business meetings from ecclesiastical gatherings that fostered deeper discernment of the underlying theology and philosophies of the respective movements. These conferences were unfortunately abandoned at the time of consolidation. The Task Force believes it is time to bring them back. Further, the Task Force believes that the organization DNA of the UUA be re-assessed given the racist, sexist, and class biases that formed and which are reinforced by our structure, precluding the full realization of covenantal relationships.

Definition of a "General Conference":

Both the Unitarians and the Universalists, like almost all denominations, have historically had two wings, the administrative and ecclesiastical bodies. Traditionally, administrative wings are responsible for providing services to the congregations and to the larger world on behalf of the congregations such as the congregations cannot practicably assume themselves. The ecclesiastical body is an intentional community of delegates who come together for the mutual strengthening of the congregations, the creation of relationships of mutual aid and accountability, and theological discernment. The ecclesiastical body is responsible for discerning the religious movement's ultimate and broad purpose. Ultimately, the ecclesiastical body asks and discerns answers to the question: "what is the purpose of Unitarian Universalism in these times?"

A General Conference is an ecclesiastical meeting of delegates from congregations. These general conferences should be smaller than our current General Assembly, so that meaningful discussions can be held. We might, for example, limit congregations and covenanted communities to two delegates. Every effort should be made to make these conferences affordable, so that attendees are not limited to older people of means. Further, so that these conferences can build for the future of our movement, we should actively engage youth, young adults, UUs of color, and other historically under-represented groups. The conferences should engage in one or two large questions in depth over the course of several days. It should be without activities that not directly advance the focused conversation.

Historical Background in Greater Detail:

In American Unitarianism, the ecclesiastical function was fulfilled by rather informal "Autumn Conventions" until the American Unitarian Association President Henry Bellows created the National Conference of Churches in 1865, to operate separately from the AUA itself. In 1911, the National Conference was renamed the General Conference. In 1923, the AUA, under the leadership of President Samuel Eliot, proposed subsuming the functions of the General Conference into the AUA. This was achieved in 1925, and biannual autumn meetings were established to fulfill what had been the General Conference functions (the business meetings of the AUA were held annually and separately). However,

even the committee recommending the changes warned that the functions of the General Conference would need to be maintained in the new structure so that the congregations' collective discernment of broad vision not be lost under administrative control. The editor of the Christian Register at the time wrote: "It was and is the Conference, from which the principle of creative thought and action of the free church has emanated....it has ever been the guardian of our religious liberty...the forum of unrestrained practical discussion and doctrinal disputation, and best of all, It may be, the quickening heart and will from which has largely come the missionary activity and financial resources that have builded our name...." When the Commission on Appraisal makes its "Unitarians Face a New Age" report in 1936, it is concerned that Unitarianism was losing its effectiveness and sense of mission precisely because the AUA administration had not adequately valued and attended to the functions of the conference, and that the AUA had not managed to earn high "regard and affection" enjoyed by the Conference. The Commission on Appraisal recommended that the importance of the biennial conference meetings "be enhanced in every possible way," and that a new officer, the Moderator, be established as the safeguard of this function.

The Universalists had the opposite experience of the Unitarians. Where the Unitarians were unique among American denominations in having a strong administrative body that came to dominate the ecclesiastical, the Universalists were more typical in that they first enjoyed a robust councils, conferences, and conventions, that later sought to take on bureaucratic functions. The Universalist system by the early twentieth century was comprised of vigorous state conventions, and a weak national general convention. Administrative tasks were handled almost entirely by volunteer committees, with the eventual addition of paid superintendents. A large step towards the development of an administrative body occurred in 1919, when the general superintendent as well as the heads of the Sunday school society and various auxiliary organizations too up headquartering together in Boston, and established for the first time, a Universalist mailing address. Gradually the General Superintendent came to be known as the chief administrative officer of the denomination (as opposed to the volunteer President of the General Convention), and in 1938 the General Convention took on the name of The Universalist Church of America to represent the combined ecclesiastical and administrative functions of the body.

With the consolidation of Unitarianism and Universalism in 1961, neither the functions of the Unitarian General Conference nor the Universalist Convention were carried over into the Unitarian Universalist Association; historians believe that a mistake and an oversight. However, there is no provision for the ecclesiastical structure to support the Board in that function. Ironically, the preparation for consolidation was done through the Unitarian conferences and Universalist conventions. It is quite possible that consolidation would have never been possible without these platforms for discussion and discernment. The Universalist pattern of polity, with its emphasis on the exclusively administrative role of the chief executive officer, is somewhat reflected in the UUA bylaws in the provisions that ascribe the ultimate vision power to the Board of Trustees.

We also strongly urge the systemic reexamination of the roles and responsibilities enshrined in our current bylaws as we know this organization to have been derived from explicitly racist, sexist, and classist principles. The standard non-profit organization structure, first evolved in the early 19th

century, was itself a copy of the business corporation, and specifically, a small New England business corporation that saw virtue in consolidating power to a limited number of patrons. The 1825 establishment of the AUA was very much a part of this milieu (see *The Transformation of Charity in Postrevolutionary New England* by Conrad Edick Wright), and while there have been many changes since that time some core patterns of distributing power remain the same. Indeed, in many ways the UUA maintains much of the structure given it by Samuel Atkins Eliot (American Unitarian Association President, 1900-1927; some even call the UUA the “House that Sam built”). Eliot did work to deliberately match the AUA organization with that of business models, especially in terms of disempowering the Board, along the lines of successful “banks, insurance companies, and mills.” Of course, in doing so, he was also bringing the AUA even more in line with how wealthy New England families were accustomed to running New England charities. Eliot brought this same lens to his work as a Bureau of Indian Affairs Commissioner, where his stump speech was “From the Scalping Knife to the Can Opener,” a statement about how only assimilation to white culture would save Native Americans from their own “barbarism.”

Rationale for the Task Force’s Recommendation:

The Task Force was charged changing the culture of the UUA from one of a member services administration to one of mutual covenanting. After over a year and a half of deep discussions, we have realized that this culture of covenant was precisely what was created by the conferences and conventions of our past, as they were designed for the mutual strengthening of the congregations, the creation of relationships of mutual aid and accountability, and theological discernment. We moreover realized that there is no reason to eliminate the administrative culture but rather supplement it. The Task Force was aided in its understanding by realizing that it was impossible to design an experience of covenant/conference within in a General Assembly. The nature of business meetings, governed by *Robert’s Rules of Order*, is fundamentally adversarial rather than covenantal. Further, the General Assembly business agenda, workshop schedule, and competing distractions do not allow the time for a deep, immersed discernment on purpose and mission. And most of all the lesson of history has been that subsuming the conference structure to the administrative is in the very least ineffectual and perhaps even not possible.

Further, we cannot help but think that if we had continued holding General Conferences, we could have addressed concerns raised during the Black Empowerment Controversy in a manner that fostered deep listening and healing, and transformed individuals, our congregations, and our Association. The Business Sessions of General Assembly, on the other hand, could not help but foster either/or thinking, allowing little opportunity for creative problem-solving. Similarly, General Conferences could have addressed issues of sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, and ageism in transformative ways.

More Specific and Forthcoming Recommendations:

The Task Force recommends that we take time at the 2017 General Assembly during general sessions to educate regarding our larger recommendation, but not attempt to create any experiences that would be reflective of the new culture (we now believe this is impossible). We do, however, encourage and

support the UUA Board in conducting Business Sessions of General Assembly 2017 to allow for meaningful and constructive conversation of the issues of white supremacy in UUA structures and culture. This recommendation addresses both what is and is not on the agenda, and how discussions are conducted and moderated.

We acknowledge that as a group of white UUs, members of the Task Force are not in a position to see how our recommendation may represent a white culture response to the question of re-imagining covenant. We believe it is important for us to seek feedback from BLUU, DRUUMM, UUs of Color, our GLBT communities, our communities of differing abilities, young adults, youth, and those of low income. We understand that traditional and historical practices of the Unitarians, the Universalists, or the UUA will necessarily reflect the dominant white, male, straight, middle/upper class, and ableist who created and maintained these institutions. We will begin, but not likely complete, this work by General Assembly 2017.

The Task Force will bring to the 2018 General Assembly recommended bylaw changes that would require member congregations and covenanting communities to renew their connection to the UUA biennially, with a vote of intention to join, and a statement of how they understand their community to be fulfilling Unitarian Universalist purpose.

After the initial General Conference, the Task Force plans to recommend bylaw changes to a future General Assembly that would reincorporate conference functions into the overall structure of the UUA. This would likely necessitate a reexamination and redefinition of the roles of president, moderator, and trustee. Part of ongoing General Conference provisions would be a process (we like the practices of the American Baptist Church's "Mission Table" process) whereby local congregations and identity groups could engage in conversations that would feed into the General Conference.

Respectfully Submitted,

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