

## Report of the UUA Task Force on Covenanting to the UUA Board

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Rev. Susan Ritchie, Convener  
Kathy Burek  
Rev. David Miller  
Elizabeth Mount  
Rev. Tandi Rogers  
David Ruffin  
Rev. Tom Schade

In October of last year, Moderator Jim Key charged the Task Force on Covenanting with imagining a future for our association in which congregations were not merely members of an organization, but related to the whole dynamically and organically: through covenants, that could be renewed periodically.

He also asked us to imagine the equivalent on the level of the local congregation, where rather than signing the relatively static membership book, people were related to the whole through a living, covenantal process.

In consultation with Moderator Key, we have seen the task force process consists of three phases: a “think tank” phase for imagining the possibilities; a phase for expanding the dialog by identifying stakeholders that need to be consulted or brought actively into the conversation; and finally a phase for developing specific recommendations to the board for bylaw and/or other institutional changes, along with pilot implementations.

We feel that we are nearing completion of the think tank part of our task.

This fascinating charge has caused us to rethink in a fundamental way what our association is, and what it might be.

According to our bylaws, Section C.2.2, “The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The **primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations**, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and, (finally), to implement its principles”. The first sentence of this section provides a very general mission. The first part of the second sentence describes a membership-service organization. The UUA is, of course, comprised of its member congregations.

We should not be surprised that an association that services the very entities that comprises it would develop tendencies to be focus on internal structures, bylaws, and parliamentary method. Nor should we be surprised that in such an atomistic model reifies the independence rather than interdependence of the congregations.

Noting this quickly leads to concerns not just of efficiency, but of justice.

Successful agents in this environment are likely to be experts in certain kind of very nuanced internal and long term conversations. Activists, persons in love with movements but not membership

organizations, and all non-congregational entities are frustrated if not actively repelled. Non congregational UU identity organizations will find it easy to claim independence over accountability in times of trouble; in times of aspiration they will become confused by the extraordinary effort necessary to gain institutional toe hold at the cost of doing their work in the world.

One of the earliest conversations that we had as a task force was wondering what would happen if we just replaced covenant with membership as the means of entering into the associational box. This did not satisfy us. We notice that a lot of implementations of covenant become static because they imagine covenant as the glue between members or member equivalents; missing is the theological connection with transforming power.

But what if we thought about the purpose of the association differently?

In the past, when we have spoken of transforming governance, we have often spoken of the problem of representation, as in, congregations are not well or fully represented by delegates at General Assembly. We often invoke, even if implicitly, a model roughly equivalent to American federal democracy to understand what it is we believed we wanted from representation, and why. Congregations require representation as certain kind of singular, inviolable ontological entities; the will of these entities must have a means of articulating their concerns and interests inside of the governance structure that purports to act in their interests.

But what if congregations are not important because they are contained entities, but because they are one of many ways of manifesting and incarnating a Unitarian Universalist mission in the world? What if they don't need representation so much as they already represent various expressions of mission?

We have gestured in this direction with

"Renewing the Covenant – Ends 1.1 and 1.2 state: Congregations and communities are covenanted, accountable, healthy, and mission driven. And, Congregations and communities are better able to achieve their missions and to spread awareness of Unitarian Universalist ideals and principles through their participation in covenanted networks of Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.

But of course, if this is what we want congregations to be, we need the associational structure to support this desire.

We've had conversations in the past about which of our governance entities is responsible for the articulation of our mission. Our bylaws give this responsibility to the board, and yet our Presidents are usually elected on platforms with visions for the association that are necessarily related to mission. Meanwhile, we also leave it to the board to articulate the "ends" of the association, the President to interpret them, and the staff to operationalize them.

And yet all UU organizations, congregations, regions, cooperative housing units, seminaries, identity based groups, —any gathering of two or more in the name—are already all of these things. We all own mission; we are all owned by mission; we all attempt to operationalize the mission in different ways.

What, then, if our association is actually an alliance of mission partners, all related to each other by mutual and renewing covenants: radically interdependent, mutually accountable, flexible and dynamic.

But how to initiate such a large, adaptive transformation?

One small but significant step could begin with General Assembly in 2016.

The Transforming Governance team of the board has for several years now tried to model a more engaging and generative GA process by hosting conversations where delegates have been asked large questions about their idea, preferences, and inspirations regarding our governance system. This year the team has asked our Task Force on Covenanting to perhaps help supply some content and questions to this process, with the idea that we might solicit delegate feedback precisely on this question of how a transition from membership to covenant might work.

But what if we modeled a commitment to turn away from internal questions about governance, and instead brought mission to the fore in these conversations? We could begin with asking for a response to one of our larger ends statements.

In our research as a task force, we have been much inspired by the real world example of the American Baptist Church, USA, and especially how they have restructured their general assembly equivalent, their Biennial Summit. They made a commitment to do the minimal amount of institutional business in order to devote energy instead in the “Mission Summit.”

Here is how their own documents describe the Mission Summit:

*The Mission Summit is the place and the time when American Baptists with diverse backgrounds, contexts and characteristics sit together, reflecting and discussing what this people of God can do in Christ’s name in our world. The goal of the Mission Summit is to discern and articulate broad priorities for American Baptists for the upcoming biennium and beyond.*

The Mission Summit consists of many dozens of smaller conversations, each conversation led by a trained facilitator. The conversations are grouped by three main categories—Leadership, Witness, and the Future. The conversations all begin with a question about what new shape mission requires in changing cultural circumstances. Just two examples from the 2013 conversations include:

“Can we discover new and innovative forms of church that are effective in light of today’s multi-cultural and post-Christian realities?”

“Raising Up, Training, and Mobilizing Lay Leadership needs a new look. How can all God’s people, each of whom has been given spiritual gifts, discover their giftedness and engage in active ministry in their communities?”

The facilitators of the conversations report on them to a group known as the Mission Table. “The Mission Table,” which consists of representatives from the churches but also all mission partners (including seminaries, related organizations, etc..) is charged with collecting and refining the results of the Mission Summit, so that all mission partners can take the mission charge home to refine their own work. The Board and the Staff then, are also charged with looking to implement the mission as refined by the Mission Table.

And so, a very accessible first step would be to construct GA conversations along this model.

In terms of further steps, we might take, we can imagine at GA—but also through as many other vehicles as possible—inviting congregations and any potential mission partners-- to enter into a multi-party covenants with each other, with General Assembly, with the Board, with the President and Staff.

We can imagine this covenant would include each entity's statement of how they are living their understanding of their UU mission, and how they pledge to both support the larger movement's missional commitments, both by affirming the mission but by also participating as possible in as many opportunities for mutual clarifying and expanding the understanding mission. All parties could suggest changes to the covenant, and it would be understood that some mission partners might enter into the covenant for limited periods.

In science language, this would look like measuring the velocity (the enactment of missional work, behavior) of the particles (congregations and communities), whereas we have previously been measuring the position periodically (congregation with a mailing address and membership).

The Mission Summit might be the paradigm for these covenant creating conversations, but they could should take place everywhere-in regions, clusters, congregations, identity groups, and related organizations.

Initially these covenants could simply run alongside the existing relationships as spelled out in the bylaws, but obviously, we are also imagining a redefinition of the purpose of the association, and we can easily see recommending that eventually, the covenanting relationship replace membership.

A next step could be to look into how to develop a parallel process for congregations, whereby rather than recruit members, they invite persons to affirm and rearticulate their mission through the vehicle of covenanting and recovenanting on a regular basis.

The Task Force considers it an honor to participate in these engage and important questions; thank you for this opportunity; we are eager for continued conversation.