

The Challenge of Incarnation

“There are seasons in human affairs,” wrote William Ellery Channing, “when new depths seem to be broken up in the soul, when new wants are unfolded in multitudes, and a new and undefined good is thirsted for.”¹

We believe that such a season is upon us. The challenge lies in satisfying the thirst of the “multitudes” in each of our individual congregations. A thirst for what? *Sanctuary*—what Laura Cerwinske describes as a “place of order and tranquility, a retreat from the disharmony of the world”?² Unquestionably. Community? Undeniably.

Dr. Martin Luther King spoke of creating the “Beloved Community,” putting God’s word into action, creating, if you will, the commonwealth of God on earth. And Zen Master Hsin Tao tells us that “a genuine *Pure Land* (paradise) has never existed in some far-off place, but resides right now in the cultivation of every being’s heart.”

How we cultivate our own hearts, *in safe spaces, and in community with one another*, is at the center of the theologies informing the Unitarian Universalist theology of membership. These include a dimension of growth and outreach that embraces perspectives broader than our own personal ones. Harry Nelson Wieman calls it “creative interchange,” Mary Hunt speaks of “embodiment,” and liberation theologians write of critical reflection on the lived experience.

The crucial relationship between our environment and its inhabitants is central to incarnation, the transformation of the idea, the word, the belief, into action. This is the essence of our UU Principles and Purposes. Rather than em-

phasizing an afterlife, we stress that our work is here on earth. Loren Mead refers to this as a “this-worldly” theological orientation.

Although recognizing that the independence of individuals within our congregations—and the independence of congregations within the UUA—is basic, we nevertheless have words that help us to articulate the shared theological foundation of our faith. And the foremost statements of our common ground are the Principles of the UUA, as stated in the bylaws (Article II, Section C.2.1).

These Principles are not “deemed to infringe upon individual freedom of belief[,] which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages[,] or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant or bond of union used by any society unless such is used as a creedal test” (Article II, Section C.2.4).

Over the centuries, Unitarian and Universalist congregations have established language (either in the form of covenantal statements, mission statements, or statements of purpose) that has been intended to provide a common core for the diversity of belief in the free church.³

The edict of Toleration of 1568, in which King John Sigismund of Transylvania granted freedom of religion to specific Christian traditions, was radical for its own time. Statements adopted by UU congregations have continually changed, as the understanding of what “freedom of belief” means has changed, and as congregations have grown beyond the Christian roots of both the Unitarian and Universalist movements. The evolution of language evident in mission statements and statements of principle reflects the changing vision of the ideal life in the local congregation. Our Principles express gratitude for religious pluralism and the inspiration to deepen our understanding and expand that vision.

The Ideal of Pluralism vs. the Reality of UU Congregations

The UU composer Ysaye Maria Barnwell, of the *a capella* group Sweet Honey in the Rock, challenges us in song to face some of our deepest fears and to heed some of our deepest yearnings:

Would you harbor me?
Would I harbor you?
Would you harbor a Christian, a Muslim, a Jew, a heretic, convict or spy?
Would you harbor a runaway woman or child, a poet, a prophet, a king?

Would you harbor an exile or a refugee, a person living with AIDS?
Would you harbor a Tubman, a Garrett, a Truth, a fugitive or a slave?
Would you harbor a Haitian, Korean, or Czech, a lesbian or a gay?⁴

Our Unitarian Universalist faith asserts that we do harbor one another; our Principles assume that we do. *Would you harbor me?* We choose whom we

harbor. *Would I harbor you?* We are poised, as a religious collective, to be accountable in our answering.

In conversations on the topic of membership that have taken place all around our continent, some UUs held that the important issues are those related to recruitment and retention of a membership base that corresponds to populations most nearly matching the demographic characteristics of the present membership. New members are welcome as long as they “fit in,” but the movement should not shift from its traditional demographic base in order to attract and include those of different backgrounds.

In one such conversation, the participants (all white) were asked to state their vision of their congregations’ futures. One woman stated that she had a vision of multiracial, multicultural congregations. Another woman looked startled and then made a gesture indicating that she thought such a vision was unrealistic or inappropriate.

While many UUs may overtly or covertly feel the same way, others believe that for our movement to fully develop its potential, we must broaden our base and include diverse populations of Beloved Community. As time has passed, our understanding of religious pluralism has expanded. In recent years, the Sources of our living tradition have been amended to reflect that expanded understanding. For the purposes of this discussion, the Commission is including all dimensions of life experience that find expression in our free faith: gender, race and culture, class, theology, political belief, sexual orientation. We have indeed changed the words!

Incarnation, however, calls us to put the words into action. While what we say reflects a vision of pluralism, our congregations are made up of human beings. And as human beings, no matter how deeply we share the vision of our movement, at times we are going to fall short of the mark. What *is* the reality in our congregational lives?

Incarnational growth is not about recruiting; it is about transforming perspective and awareness. “Membership,” writes Renee-Noelle Felice, “is not something conferred upon one person by an already extant group of ‘others,’ but a covenant among individuals to become something new.” But when the “covenant” is broken—or ignored—hearts become bruised.⁵ One UU told the Commission,

It is extremely frustrating when one encounters opposition both personally and institutionally from UUs who constantly state (in subtle and not so subtle ways!) that there is no place for a more expressive, passionate style of worship. By this I mean more than just a change in music. At times, I want to revel in applause, dance, and “holy” shouts of affirmation during a service. The cultural aspects of those who come from a Euro-Mediterranean background (in my case, Italian American), for which this expression is vitally important, are many times ignored in favor of the more

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well-known and stereotyped Anglo-European approach of dispassionate detachment. Why can't we honor both as opposed to either/or?

The Commission received input from hundreds of Unitarian Universalists from all over North America in response to questions about the meaning of membership. While much of the discussion focused on aspects of growth identified by Mead (numeric, maturational, and organic), there was also considerable discussion of how we manifest incarnational growth, the ways in which we “walk the talk” of our vision.

Ultimately, it is in the congregations that our vision comes to life—or does not—as we have heard in some cases. No matter what is stated in the UUA's Principles and Purposes and in our bylaws, our congregations are at liberty (with very little limitation) to define the nature of religious life and expression. Though many people are attracted to us because of our public expressions of religious tolerance, opposition to oppression, and inclusion of diverse populations, what they find in practice does not always match the Principles we espouse.

The Commission's conversations with people who self-define as Unitarian Universalist but feel “left out” of their local congregations, lead to the inescapable conclusion that exclusion is indeed a problem. Ironically, congregations that espouse respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all beings nevertheless engage in behaviors that exclude some others who identify with that same Principle.

One respondent said,

I cannot tell you how appalled I was when, as a visitor to a Unitarian Universalist church, one of the very few persons of color in the congregation was introduced to me as “our token Black.” During the coffee hour I felt compelled to ask him how he felt about that comment. He replied, “Yes, yes. It cuts to the very core of my being. But this is where I worship. This is my spiritual home. I am no spring chicken. I am too old to start over.”

The Commission received many such reports. For example,

- suggestions that an African American visitor to a UU congregation might feel more comfortable in the church down the street
- opposition to incorporation of neo-pagan and earth-centered rituals
- repeated ignoring of visitors week after week, leading to feelings of invisibility
- criticism and disapproval of sermons or worship services presenting theologies other than those shared by the preponderance of members, whether they are Christian or Humanist or have some other perspective

- reluctance on the part of ministers to preach from their personal theological orientations because of negative judgment on the part of congregants
- financial policies that imply an assumption of middle- or upper-class status
- overt expressions of racial, cultural, or gender prejudice
- suggestions that if one is a Christian (or Humanist or Pagan, etc.) he/she doesn't belong in *this* congregation
- resistance to incorporating different cultural or language experiences into worship services
- assumptions that people of different classes, cultural groups, or ethnic backgrounds would not be attracted by the UU Principles

While many of our congregations have made notable progress in including gay men and lesbians into the mainstream of congregational life, inclusion of bisexual and transgender persons is another matter. One individual, a self-described “out” transgender person who met with the Commission, put it like this: “We claim to be open, believe in universal salvation, yet we cringe when transgender people come into our congregations. When I sing that ‘I am singing for my life’ I mean it. It’s not safe to be transgender in this society.”

Our conversations made it clear that numerous people who identify with Unitarian Universalist principles and values do not find strong support or welcome in their local congregations. It is now apparent to the Commission that many who resonate to UU theology or beliefs do not identify their congregations as their primary connections with the movement.

One person with whom the Commission talked spoke for many: “It’s hard for me to sit in our congregations. I feel so completely invisible, calling myself a member is problematic. I cannot be fully who I am in a congregation.”

Many with whom the Commission met spoke of the emotional sacrifice caused by maintaining their congregational connections. “Being a member of a congregation means nothing to me unless there is liberation,” said another person. And yet another: “Until we achieve what the resolution [on Racial and Cultural Diversity] calls for, we will continue to give lip service to our desire to transform the world, and we will remain a mostly white, Euro-centric, monolingual, monocultural, middle-class religious movement [from] which many people of color will continue to feel culturally alienated.” And someone else said, “I continue to be UU because religiously I cannot be anything else. I cannot do it, but there is a piece that is missing. When I need deep spiritual feeding, I go to the Spanish-speaking Catholic church.”

These are voices of people who are committed to our vision. They serve as the voices of our congregations. They are telling stories that need to be heard. If we will but listen, their voices will help us all live deeper, more authentic, more creative lives.

The Need for Foundational, Not Cosmetic, Change

Poet Caroline Kandler writes,

Here, I have some change.
I have some quarters.
Hey, I don't want your change.
What I want is change—
real change. . . .
We want the changes that make room for us.⁶

If membership means a deepening of our commitment to the tending to our neighbors, in the sanctuaries of our own communities, then we must engage in the difficult conversations about whether and how our congregations promote *incarnational* growth.

Clearly, explicit as well as implicit barriers to membership exist. But each of us, as an individual, has boundaries that can be extended. So, too, do our churches. Those of us whose profiles do not match those of the majority of church members are not looking for small adjustments or concessions. We are looking for foundational changes in the culture of our institutions, changes that will allow us to be present with one another in new, healthy, and holy ways.

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Diversity and *inclusion* are issues critical to who we are. By *diversity*, we mean that there are many voices to be heard—voices informed by racial, social, psychological, physical, cultural, and religious experiences. Creating the space for required listening can produce a new awareness, stimulate a new reaction, and give rise to a new sense of community based on its commitment to its shared vision. But it can also give rise to the uncomfortable recognition that *inclusion* means we have to share the deep and vulnerable parts of ourselves with others who are not quite like us; whose gender or race, physical characteristics, religious beliefs, or gender preferences make us squirm.

“One of the truths of our time,” writes Mary Caroline Richards, “is this hunger deep in people all over the planet for coming into relationship with each other.”⁷ That is what brings us to the table—that yearning for community, the great desire to find others of like mind, the pursuit of spiritual deepening. And in the first flush of excitement at having found kindred spirits, it might seem as if there is only one kind of person at the table. Yet all too soon we realize that in the words of a popular hymn—sung most often when we celebrate the diversity espoused in our Principles and Purposes—there are, in reality, all kinds of people around the table. But when asked to dig deeper, this affirmation of difference quickly dissipates as our individual characteristics not only become evident, but threaten to separate us. The religious instruction (or lack thereof) that we received as children, the languages in which our par-

ents and grandparents spoke to us, our choices of life partners, our racial makeup, and our varying physical and mental abilities all combine to make us very different from one another. Thus, the challenge that lies before us is to find a way for all of us—some of us omnivores, some vegetarians, and even a few vegans—to stay at the table and be nourished.

The Hard Work Required to Make Change Happen

In Genesis 11:1-9, we read that “the whole world had one language and the same words.”

Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. And they said to one another, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth.

Could this story have served, on some unconscious level, down through the ages, to support the concept of homogeneity? The people all spoke the same language and thus would become so powerful they could actually penetrate heaven. Therefore, having one language and one religion would make an empire impenetrable and allow its practitioners to get as close to heaven on earth as God would allow.

Of course, Unitarian Universalists advocate the principle that great truths lie in all religions. And most of us probably believe that paradise does not lie above the clouds. In fact, it is part of our unofficial credo that if we use our resources to surmount barriers rather than to erect them, we will achieve heaven on earth. We hold what Toni Morrison calls a “complicated, demanding . . . view of heaven as life; not heaven as past life.”⁸

The complicated, demanding part, of course, is that in order to break down barriers, or to resist building them, we have to do the messy, difficult, and occasionally heart-wrenching work of acknowledging the worthiness of all beings, not just the ones who “speak the same language” we do.

Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed concedes that change is difficult, not just for those who feel marginalized, but also for those who are not quite ready to put the old table out with the trash. Yet he offers compelling reasons to move through the fear and resistance:

To move forward as a denomination, we need first to ask ourselves why. I think there is only one authentic answer. For yourself. For yourself because you will feel more comfortable in a multicultural, multiracial congregation. For yourself because being part of an inclusive movement is more consonant with the self-image you hold of yourself as a religious liberal. For yourself so that the piece of you [that] feels guilty or angry about what “we aren’t” can stop feeling guilty and let go of the anger. For yourself because you want the whole world to know about liberal religion. For yourself because you want a style of worship that strikes deeper spiritual [chords]. For yourself, not because you should, but because you yearn to be different. Not for them but for yourself—ourselves.⁹

Echoing Morrison-Reed, one person told the Commission, “The goal should not be to ‘recruit’ people, but rather for our congregations to understand the Latino culture and perhaps help community organizations. Why? . . . we do this for ourselves.”

The Commission maintains that our theology of membership requires us to address the issues raised by the UUs who so candidly and courageously “spoke truth to power.” It requires us to reduce and eliminate the barriers that threaten our ability to truly live our faith in the world.

Of course, we must be wary of letting the desire for a “politically correct” membership cloud our vision and lead us to invite newcomers in only to abandon them. The act of signing a membership book does not guarantee the elusive yet equitable sense of “ownership”—of belonging—that comes when a person truly feels welcomed into membership because of the gifts he/she brings, not because that individual’s presence means increased numbers on the congregation’s roster or one more substantial contribution to the coffers, or because her/his skin color or physical disability will salve the congregation’s guilt over the homogeneous character of its membership.

As it stands today, in more congregations than not, if we welcome a person who is a minority of one (or two)—whether gay or disabled or more theocentric than the rest of us, for example—and he/she becomes an established member of the community, we cannot help but think that that person has “hung in there” with “all the rest of us” (different) congregants. If that person leaves, we can tell ourselves that she/he didn’t really fit in. She/he will probably be more comfortable with her/his “own kind.” Thus, we exonerate ourselves from the hard work of creating and re-creating community as each new individual broadens and strengthens our circle.

We would avoid some pitfalls if, instead of talking about growth and membership and outreach, we talk about creating sanctuary. If we work as hard—or harder—at creating safe and worshipful places as we do at creating diverse congregations, we will most likely find that, paradoxically, transforming the awareness of the congregation will result in changing its demographics. As one African American UU put it, “If you do [anti-racism work] and you don’t attract persons of color, you’re probably not really doing the work. Any effort to transform our movement will succeed or fail on the local level.”

Accountability

A number of years ago, a young gay man was considering whether or not to join a congregation that had not yet affirmed same-sex marriage. After some time, he did apply for membership. “I realized,” he said, “that I could wait for ‘them’ to do what I wanted them to do, or I could join, and help ‘us’ to move forward.” In taking this step, he was holding both himself *and* the congregation accountable.

As persons of faith we should be deeply concerned with the spiritual well-being of our congregations. That concern *could* give rise to a stronger sense of community, one that might even precipitate an enhanced, vibrant relationship with those outside the walls of our own congregations. But for that to happen, we will have to fearlessly examine our attitude toward those excluded from power *within* our ranks. And for *that* to happen, we first have to recognize and confront the fact that such exclusion does exist.

True appreciation of diversity can only be achieved if we stay engaged. We must admit to ourselves and to one another that the issue of individual vs. institutional accountability in policy and structure can trigger as much discomfort, distress, and dissension as age, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and political views. Paying attention to our own feelings of dis-ease can help us avoid falling into such pitfalls as lack of respect for difference, ignorance, and inertia.

But let us be clear: We not only need to establish institutional mechanisms that hold the dominant culture accountable but each of us needs to stand up to those who would make us “less than” others. For instance, when a member of one congregation left her congregation, never to return, it was whispered about that a congregation officer had told the congregant in private conversation that there was no place there for the woman’s vocal concern about gun violence; that to raise this issue was not appropriate.

If, indeed, the woman left because of the reputed conversation, then the official’s words were the “operative trigger” of the departure. However, the congregant must also take some responsibility for allowing herself to be excluded from the life of the congregation. *When we let the power structure win with-*

out a fight, we are collaborating in the system. But no matter how much of a stand those of us who dwell on the margins of congregational life take, the active participation of those in power is necessary to bring about the kinds of institutional changes required.

Some years ago, a white woman, concerned for and passionately dedicated to helping abused women, was invited by another member of her denomination to attend a weekend conference linking sexism and racism. With all the goodwill in the world, the woman replied, “Racism isn’t my issue,” meaning that, while she supported efforts for racial justice, she didn’t see it as her own personal ministry.

Not so, would argue a priest of African American descent, who has devoted his life to social justice work. Applauding the decision of a white acquaintance to attend a UU anti-racist workshop, he spoke at some length about the responsibility of members of the “dominant culture” to alter that culture; to build a table large enough, accessible enough, and sturdy enough to seat *all* of us.

History abounds with myriad—often horrific—stories of what can happen when members of the dominant culture dig in their heels and refuse to seat “outsiders” at their table.

A poignant example can be found in our own history. In the late 1800s Rev. Jenkin Lloyd Jones, as general secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, opened the door to Unitarian women by inviting Rev. Mary Augusta Safford to co-found a church in Hamilton, Illinois. She became the “mother” of the Iowa Sisterhood, a group of approximately twenty women ministers who literally changed the face of Unitarianism. The Sisterhood founded fifteen churches, designing some of the buildings themselves. They preached and ministered, ran the Sunday schools, and established self-improvement groups. Universalists, too, at that time, had begun opening their pulpits to women. By 1890 there were seventy ordained female Unitarian and Universalist ministers.

Enter Rev. Samuel Eliot, president of the American Unitarian Association from 1900 to 1927. Almost immediately upon taking office, Eliot not only closed the door to women but he *locked* it! Rather than encouraging more women to assume pulpits, he began the promotion of a “manlier ministry.” Adding insult to injury, Eliot invited leading Boston laymen and “prominent ministers’ wives and alliance officers” to wait on tables at luncheons arranged “for the men” at the annual meetings, and started an (unsuccessful) school to train women to be parish assistants. Because of this attitude as well as other cultural/economic factors, by the time of the merger of the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association in 1961, there were very few women in the ministry.

Cynthia Grant Tucker tells us, “Frustrated by the laity’s failure to take their sermons to heart, and weary of being anathematized by an institution that wanted them out, the clergywomen reluctantly shifted their ministry to the secular fields of settlement work, municipal housekeeping, suffrage, and world

peace.”¹⁰ The moral of this tale is that no matter how assertive members of a particular group might be, their solitary efforts will not take them very far.

Programs created by the UUA and by individual congregations suggest that, perhaps for the first time in our history, there could be a paradigm shift. Rather than “letting” marginalized or minority people sit at “our” table, we are recognizing the need for *all members* of the congregation to work together to redesign the table.

Looking to the Past for Strength and Inspiration

One of the many gifts of Unitarian Universalism is that our different ways of thinking inform who we are. But this sometimes seems to be more bane than blessing. Like those long ago Israelites building a tower to heaven, we are discouraged by our inability to understand one another.

It is all too easy to forget that ours is a long walk to freedom. But consider the convictions of some of our standard bearers: Michael Servetus, Olympia Brown, John Murray, Julia Ward Howe, James Reeb, Whitney Young (to name a very few). All these were “heretics” who felt led to leave the main highway and strike off on their own on roads fraught with danger and even death. Yet they did not return to the safety of the straight and narrow once it became clear that they were on perilous paths.

Our path, too, often seems treacherous. On a journey fueled only by our faith and tenacity, we find that looking back over our shoulders at the past can sometimes help us to face the road ahead. As Harry Scholefield and Paul Sawyer remind us, “Discovering the depth and strength of these roots of ours is a nourishing experience that gives us the inspiration and stamina we need to meet today’s great challenges.”¹¹ Whether we give it voice or not, diversity is present. What matters is that we take concrete steps to acknowledge and celebrate that presence. As members of a choir strive to have their individual voices blend, so together we strive to be in harmony with one another. We may not always hit the right notes, and we sometimes have trouble hearing one another’s voices, but the potential for making a truly joyful noise keeps many from looking elsewhere for a spiritual home.

Looking to the Future with Faith and Hope

To help ourselves lift up the themes around which we will weave our harmonies and variations, we create mission statements. Mission statements give voice to our visions, and embody the spirit of our congregational life. Yet in creating mission statements, we must ask ourselves what diversity will do for us. How will it help us build and sustain community?

Remarking on the focus on diversity for diversity's sake, Bruce Bush, a member of another liberal religious tradition, has written that, " 'diversity' is a red herring. The search for it is not ultimately freeing but condescending and patronizing... [and] seeks to impose our own progressive values on what should be a free society... What does it matter whether there are actually many 'diverse' individuals among us?"¹²

We believe that diversity matters a great deal. When all, or most, of us have more or less the same perspective on matters, we can only do so much to change our small portions of the world for the better. The greater the variety of perspectives, the more likely we are to come up with creative solutions to congregational and societal ills.

The process of creating our mission statements affords us a tremendous opportunity to examine who we are and what is of worth to us. If we make honoring diversity the bedrock of our statements, we will collectively widen our boundaries and create the safe spaces from which we can welcome those who could bring us the very points of view we might sorely need. For those who dare to venture off the beaten path, into the unknown, the reward is worth the risk: community and *sanctuary*, "a place to be creative, to seek meaning in life, to do the work of transformation that, at times, calls for descent into pain and chaos... a safe place to dance with the devil, to embrace lurking shadows on hallowed ground."¹³

Notes

1. William Ellery Channing as quoted in Carole Kammen and Jodi Gold, *Call to Connection: Bringing Sacred Tribal Values Into Modern Life* (Salt Lake City, UT: Commune-a-Key Publishing, 1998), 27.
2. Laura Cerwinske, *In a Spiritual Style: The Home as Sanctuary* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 22.
3. The importance of articulating that core is explored in depth in Walter P. Herz, ed., *Redeeming Time* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998).
4. Ysaye M. Barnwell, "Would You Harbor Me?" (Washington, DC: Barnwell Notes Publishing, 1994).
5. Renee-Noelle Felice, "'Marrying' the Meeting," *Friends Journal* (April 1995): 17.
6. Caroline Kandler, "Changes."
7. Mary Caroline Richards, as quoted in Kammen and Gold, op. cit.
8. Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 1993.
9. Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994), 210.
10. Cynthia Grant Tucker, *Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880-1930* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 6.

11. Harry Scholefield and Paul Sawyer, "Our Roots" in *The Unitarian Universalist Pocket Guide*, 3rd ed., edited by John A. Buehrens (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999), 71.
12. Bruce Bush, "The Fine Line of Diversity," *Friends Journal* (October 1996): 18.
13. Cerwinske, op. cit., 22.

