

What Holds Us Together
Arlington Street Church
March 15, 2009

Over the last six months, while most of us have been engaged in the presidential election and inauguration or the first 100 days, or in the global or our own economic freefall, a quiet but fervent grassroots democratic process has been underway in our larger denomination. Our Principles and Purposes – for many of us the talking points of our wordless creed – have been the subject of a denomination-wide revision effort.

The revision process actually began in 2006, but the proposed revisions themselves did not appear until late this past summer. When the revisions were put in print and opened to comment, a quiet uproar commenced. And with that quiet uproar something quite amazing happened. The Commission charged with revising the Principles actually listened to and heard the voices in that uproar and ultimately retracted many of its proposed changes to our seven Principles.

Even after more than two years of seeking input from individuals, congregations, districts, theological schools and clergy, the Commission on Appraisal had decided to mostly reshape the appearance of the seven Principles while leaving much of their original wording largely intact. The Commission did this by choosing to append brief explanatory paragraphs following each Principle.

The Commission did, however, substantially alter provisions about our sources and our historic commitment to anti-oppression work. The Commission published its proposed revisions in late summer and sought comments through various electronic media.

And comments they received. Even though the comment period covered only about two months – and at the height of our national presidential election – the Commission received well over 1700 electronic submissions, consisting of more than 450 pages of written commentary on the proposed revisions.

The comment period closed around mid-October and by December – just two months later - the Commission had scrapped many of the revisions that they had so painstakingly generated after that two-year national grassroots effort.

The comments covered a broad range of objections to the revisions yet generally reflected a sense that the proposed revisions were not up to an acceptable standard for revising what many see as the touchstone of our liberal religious tradition - the words that actually speak to our wordless creed.

You have to admit that it's pretty ironic that words would be so important to a religious movement that so proudly proclaims a wordless creed. From both of their inceptions, Unitarianism and Universalism have proudly resisted any broad creedal statements or creedal tests for membership in

either denomination. Nevertheless, as you might imagine, many words and statements – like our own Affirmation and Covenant – have been proposed and adopted and revised and resisted throughout the two-hundred year histories of those denominations.

When our two distinct denominations – Unitarianism and Universalism – came together in consolidation in 1961, it was clear that there would never be a creed that bound them or the members of a consolidated Unitarian Universalism. So an agreed upon statement of Principles that each denomination had to agree to, without amendment, was the glue that would hold the two distinct denominations into one new one.

Indeed, the whole consolidation deal was practically scrapped around some of the Unitarian's objections to phrases in the proposed Principles, like "love to God and love to man" and "our Judeo-Christian heritage."¹ Consolidation was saved only by a 3:00am compromise agreement that moved those two challenged statements from ones referring to our shared religious principle to ones referring to our shared religious sources.

Thus the 1961 consolidation resulted in a statement of seven principles and list of five, later amended to six, sources from which we draw our faith. Much of what our Principles say today reflect the core beliefs contained in

¹ *Shared Values*, Warren Ross, UUWorld, November/December 2000.

those 1961 Principles. Yet this was accomplished through painstaking and lengthy effort.

Our denominational bylaws call for those Principles and Sources to be reviewed every 15 years but, understandably, no one was eager to do that in 1976. So that reexamination did not take place until the early 1980s and only at the behest of the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation.

That is the story that we will focus on this morning. For the struggle to revise the 1961 Principles into the ones that were adopted in 1985 was a struggle for justice, a struggle to name, recognize and eliminate the injustice and oppression that were woven into the fabric of our newly-consolidated Unitarian Universalist faith, our society and the world at large.

Like so much that our liberal religious faith has to be proud of, our current Seven Principles, the ones that were created and approved in the 1980s, were the result of the work of the women of Unitarian Universalism. More specifically, to work done by the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation and empowered by the Women and Religion Resolution that was unanimously passed by the 1977 General Assembly.

That Resolution, based on the 1961 consolidated principles themselves, declared it a purpose of Unitarian Universalism "to affirm, defend, and promote the supreme worth and dignity of every human personality and the use of the

democratic method in human relationships.”² It went on to declare, “Some models of human relationships arising from religious myths, historical materials, and other teachings still create and perpetuate attitudes that cause women everywhere to be overlooked and undervalued.” Further, that “children, youth and adults internalize and act on these cultural models, thereby tending to limit their sense of self-worth and dignity.”³

The Resolution “call(ed) upon all Unitarian Universalists to examine carefully their own religious beliefs and the extent to which these beliefs influence sex-role stereotypes in their own families” and “to put traditional assumptions and language in perspective and avoid sexist language in the future.”⁴ As women examined the 1961 Principles, many felt that not only did the Principles not affirm women but that they did not even “indicate a respect for the wholeness of life and for the earth.”⁵

This justice-oriented lens was the one that then guided the Women’s Federation examination of our 1961 Principles. Theirs became a process by which they sought to recast traditionally held values and principles into language and imagery that divested those words and images of a couple of millennia worth of deeply embedded patriarchy, without eroding the core religious values embedded in those patriarchal symbols.

² Women and Religion 1977 Business Resolution of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Shared Values*, Warren Ross, UU World, November/December 2000.

As the Unitarian Universalist Association President of the time, Eugene Pickett, said of the women's effort, "You are changing the situation of women within our denomination and, in so doing, you are opening up for all of us new ways of understanding and perceiving women and, we hope, men as well."⁶ Even so, their first effort, in 1981, met with great resistance from more traditional elements within the denomination – from both women and men - so the women decided to form a joint committee to study the issues with those who were most resisting the revisions.

Within three years this group had produced the Principles and Purposes that we are familiar with today – the ones that we read responsively earlier in our service today – the responses to which are the more simple language of our children's principles. We'll hear more about them a little in the service.

The women who brought about the process that resulted in our current Principles did it by working collaboratively with those who were most resistant to, or fearful of, their proposed revisions. Then they took that product that was crafted in that consensus-like process, and sought input from individuals, congregations, clergy, and theological schools – all walks of contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

⁶ *Ibid.*

Following that input, they achieved Principles and Purposes, including the sources of our faith, written by those who would then come to covenant to affirm and promote – to live - those Principles. That is a pretty remarkable democratic and inclusive process. And in that process of rooting out oppression, these Unitarian Universalist women – and the men who eventually came to work *with* them - crafted a set of Principles and Purposes with wording that now is likely to go on substantially unchanged almost a generation later.

And that is so remarkable given that this past generation has been one that has produced some pretty radical oppression-busting of its own. From moving women into ministry in great numbers, to building the Central American Sanctuary movement, to inviting in people of color, and gays and lesbians and their families, to people with AIDS, Spanish-speaking people, and even those locked-in the criminal justice system, and on to transgender people, those living with mental illness and to other forms of sexual minorities – all of whom we now seek to welcome in our midst -whether that is here at church or out in our larger communities.

It is staggering to think that even though we now recognize oppression and injustice against all of these types of people, we still do not feel a necessity to significantly alter the words of our Principles that were crafted nearly twenty-five years ago – long before many of us were barely cognizant of these folks’ existence, let alone their rights and plights within our midst.

Even in creating culturally and theologically welcoming space for all of these other types of people, our 25-year-old Principles continue to comprise the most accurate statement of the religious values that bind us together – that form our covenant with each other and the more than one-thousand Unitarian Universalist congregations and societies throughout the United States.

And so now, as of March 2009, the Principles remain largely intact – in their 1985 form. It is amazing that a religious movement that prides itself in its perennial “free and responsible for truth and meaning” and the premise that “revelation is not sealed” has chosen to not substantially alter the Principles [and Purposes] that we adopted nearly a quarter of a century ago.

Indeed many have objected to the fourth principle’s call for a “free and responsible search for truth and meaning” insisting that it constantly imperils the existence of any Principles, as the free and responsible search would likely result in ever-shifting truths and meanings. Yet what these past six months have taught us, is that the free and responsible search for truth and meaning can affirm even long-standing principles when those principles actually comport with the core religious values that undergird them.

This most certainly does not mean that we have found our way and all that we do in the name of our living faith accomplishes the values that are the foundation of that faith. We have much to learn, much to improve, much to

do. But that is precisely what a living faith celebrates – that we always have more to learn about a justice-centered life; that we always have more to improve to bring about justice-centered communities, both within our own four walls and in society at large.

When the 1985 Principles came up for their 15 year bylaw review in 2000, that review was also postponed. The UU World commented

No one at the moment is suggesting any drastic revisions. And yet the commitment to a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” as the Fourth Principle puts it, carries the seeds of its own obsolescence. Just consider: well into the 20th century, our Unitarian predecessors used to proclaim and teach their children that we believe in “The Fatherhood of God, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever.” We would today have difficulty saying those words without embarrassment and lots of “sic-ness.” Yet the people who did say them were just as intelligent, in tune with their times, and committed to reason and free thinking as we are. In 2020, (when everyone will presumably have perfect vision), our current Principles and Purposes may also be perceived to have inadequacies that demand radical rewriting. And therein lies our genius. It’s a process that is rightly called renewal or regeneration. And that is what has

not changed and, let us hope, will remain unchanged
20 or even 100 years from now.”⁷

This episode with our Principles has underscored how they truly capture the core religious values that bind together this faith tradition of diverse believers and non-believers. If our Principles and Purposes can always be so true to our core religious values, then these 15 year bylaw checks should not cause much dissension and disruption. Should our Principles ever waver in that trueness though, our core values tell us that we must dissent and disrupt until we make sure that our Principles remain grounded in our core religious values.

That is how the Unitarian Universalist Association’s Principles and Purposes were shaped and how they have continued to shape Unitarian Universalism.

May it be so.

Amen.

⁷ *Shared Values.*