

# What were they thinking?!

## The Rationale behind the First Draft of the New CUC Statement of Principles

A Personal Commentary by Calvin B. Drake

In January 2005, the CUC Statement of Principles Task Force circulated a first draft of a proposed successor to the current Statement of Principles.

*What's wrong with the current statement?* This was the first and most common reaction the Task Force received. The question has within it an underlying assumption that "someone" has decided there is some deficiency within the current statement. Or maybe people have simply gotten tired of it over the years? Nothing could be further from the truth!

At the Annual Conference of the CUC in Kelowna in 2002, it was decided to adopt the UUA's Statement of Principles (with Canadianized spelling, of course) as an interim statement for Canada. During the discussion and subsequent vote, CUC President Mark Morrison-Reed emphasized the interim nature of the decision and indicated that the Board would be initiating a process to verify whether the statement truly reflected the values of the Canadian movement. This was the mandate given to the Statement of Principles Task Force – not necessarily to re-write the statement, but to ensure that whatever was going to be the on-going Statement of Principles, it should reflect our current values and aspirations.

The Task Force's first job was to develop a plan to engage the Canadian movement in the process. Last winter many Canadian congregations conducted workshops at which participants were asked to articulate their deepest yearnings, values and aspirations. The Task Force then performed a very interesting impartial analysis. It constructed a "matrix" that mapped the feedback received from the workshops directly to the wording of the current statement. The conclusion wasn't that the current statement was "wrong". Indeed, it verified that the current Statement of Principles still reflects the values of Canadian U\*Us. However, it appeared that the current statement is perhaps incomplete and does not give voice to as many of our shared aspirations and values as it might. [If you have not done so already, I encourage you to review the feedback from the workshops and the subsequent analysis on the Task Force website – [www.cuc.ca/statement](http://www.cuc.ca/statement).]

What's more, the current Statement of Principles may not present a sufficiently clear and distinctive identity to someone exploring our movement for the first time. For these reasons, the Task Force recommended that the current Statement of Principles be revisited.

The prospect of changing the current statement was – and still is - daunting. The current Statement of Principles has been part of our movement for many years. For many of us there is a personal attachment to the current Principles. For some, it was only from discovering "The Seven Principles" that we realized for the first time that we were Unitarians! I can assure you that, in creating the first draft, the Task Force worked strenuously to maintain its objectivity on behalf of the Canadian membership, and took its responsibility most seriously.

This past December the Task Force met in Vancouver with the challenge of creating the first draft. We felt it necessary to issue the initial draft as soon as possible to verify that we had the right *content* – that we were *saying the right things*. As you review this first draft, please focus on the *content* rather than

*style*. We'll deal with *style* in the next draft. At present the Task Force is still wrestling with the challenge of making the language of the final statement poetic and inspirational, while at the same time keeping it uncomplicated and accessible.

Speaking of your response to this first draft, we are asking people to let the wording "sit" with them for a while before responding. We'd appreciate responses based on your considered reflection – not just first impressions! We've suggested to your congregation's President that your congregation holds a workshop to discuss the text. Then, when you're good and ready, we're asking for individual (rather than congregational) responses to be sent via the on-line form on our website, [www.cuc.ca/statement](http://www.cuc.ca/statement). It's important that you use the on-line form rather than, say, regular e-mail. The on-line form allows us to determine *quantitatively* the extent to which each section of the text "resonates with" or "irritates" you. It also allows you to give *qualitative* feedback and suggestions.

In the spring, the feedback from the congregational workshops will be tabulated and analyzed. A summary and recommendations will be presented at the Annual Conference and Meeting in Hamilton. We'll also be holding a workshop for those who want to get into more of the details. During the summer and fall we will enhance the wording based on the feedback received, and present a second draft to member congregations for review. After another round of feedback, the current plan is to table the revised statement for adoption at the CUC Annual Conference and Meeting in Saint John in 2006.

Enough about the process! What about the text itself? What drove us to choose the wording we did for the first draft? Let's walk through the text section-by-section...

*The Congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council covenant to proclaim and promote the shared values and aspirations of their members as represented herein.*

Believe it or not, this opening statement was probably the one over which we, as a Task Force, agonized the most! The challenge was that the draft statement we had developed reflected the values and aspirations of *individual* Unitarians, yet it is being presented to *congregations* to vote upon (at the 2006 ACM) and to enter into a covenant to proclaim and promote its sentiments.

**STATEMENT OF SHARED VALUES & ASPIRATIONS**

Why a "Statement of Shared Values and Aspirations" rather than sticking with "Statement of Principles"? We simply felt that the new title was more accurate. We are not developing a creed or prescribing articles of faith. Furthermore we recognized that our coming together in our congregations - for mutual support in spiritual growth and to work together for a better world - was not based on a purely intellectual agreement on "religious principles". There is a connection between us beyond intellect – rooted in our deepest motivations and yearnings.

In fact, the very act of *coming together through shared values and aspirations* in itself conveys our Unitarian philosophy – demonstrating how people with diverse views and opinions can unite in action.

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**Affirming the power of religious community, we come together in our congregations to:**

- **Celebrate the unity and interdependence of all existence within which we are called to be true to our own conscience and experience;**

The workshops reinforced the value that we place on community. It was important that the opening statement set the context: "Hey, we're a religious community!"

It is in this first statement that we are articulating our primary differentiating theological characteristics. It belongs up-front to make it clear where we are on the liberal religious spectrum. Perhaps it doesn't seem such a big deal at first... At first blush this statement is reminiscent of the current Seventh Principle ("*Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*").

As we recite the Seventh Principle, the emphasis is on *respect*. The danger is that in saying it you actually skip over the last part – the mind-blowing part. "You mean that you see the whole of existence as one interdependent web?!"

This is the "good news" of Unitarianism and, I would argue (and frequently do!), that this is the basis of our 21st century theology.

- **Engage in our individual search for truth and meaning as part of a spiritual mosaic;**

Here we endorse the individual quest for truth & meaning and place it in the broader context. We are each as a tile in a mosaic: each complete within ourselves, coming together to create the "greater whole" - rich in shape and colour.

- **Love and be loved, to support each other in our spiritual growth and to bring peace into our lives and the world.**

The phrase "To love and to be loved" resonated from the congregational workshops. These words fulfill our dual need to engage in giving as well as receiving. This is the basis of the "mutual trust and safety" that people feel within our congregations.

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**Giving life to our shared values, we strive to make a positive change in the world by:**

Values have to be more than simply articulated – they have to be put into action. You told us that one of your innermost yearnings was for your lives to have purpose – that you wanted to make a positive change within the world.

- **Honouring the inherent worth and dignity of every person;**

This was one aspect of the former principles that was repeatedly echoed in the workshops. Some felt that the "honour" of respecting the inherent worth and dignity should be extended beyond humans. Should it include other animals? All living things? The whole of existence?

- **Acting with compassion, generosity and integrity in all relations;**

"Peace, liberty and justice for all" is the phrase in the current statement. Despite its laudable aspirations, sadly the vocabulary of "Peace, liberty and justice for all" has been hijacked by religious and political conservatives. We needed to find words that spoke more directly to the values themselves. In some way, this helps to make the new statement "more Canadian".

- **Ensuring that all people have a voice and a role in matters that affect them;**

So too, for many people, the word "democracy" has been co-opted to mean the imposition of the will of the majority on the few and the use of political and economic power to control and manipulate an increasingly powerless populace.

Our aspirations for "real democracy" (as explored, for example, in the current CUC study group) envisage consultation and collaboration.

- **Fostering a fair, diverse and sustainable global community.**

"Fairness" was preferred over "just" – to avoid images of sword-waving enforcers of "freedom and justice"! "Diverse and sustainable" were carefully chosen words – recognizing the ecological imperative of taking responsibility for our actions and for our planet - in addition to the more readily-recognized economic and social considerations.

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**From our historical roots within Protestant Christianity, we have drawn on the Unitarian challenge to Church doctrine and the Universalist belief in unconditional divine love.**

As we rationalized the Sources to give equal recognition to faith traditions (see below), we recognized the need to explicitly acknowledge our history.

How do we say enough to honour our heritage without leaving the reader with the impression that we are still a Protestant Christian denomination?

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**Today, we find insight and inspiration from many and varied sources:**

It was observed that one obvious area where we demonstrate our distinctiveness and our transition into a distinct religious/philosophical tradition is our ability to draw from many and varied sources of inspiration.

Whereas, with the current statement, the Sources are often omitted when people quote the Principles, we believed that they needed to be embedded firmly within the body of the new statement.

- **Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder that moves us to renew our spirit and connect with the forces which create and uphold life;**

We found it difficult to improve on the wording surrounding "Direct Experience" found in the current statement.

- **Wisdom from the world's humanist and spiritual traditions which guides us with reason and teaches us to live in harmony with our neighbours and the rhythms of nature;**

We are challenged to reflect the current composition of our congregations and position ourselves as the "builders of common ground" among people of differing faiths and viewpoints in Canada and around the world. In response, we must move beyond identifying the Christian or any other tradition as being in any way superior to - or distinct from - other traditions as a *valid and current* source of inspiration. [Note the emphasis on *current*.]

Furthermore, when you read the present statement, it presents the historical progression in which the sources of inspiration were embraced: first the Judeo-Christian tradition, then other "world religions", then Humanism and then, most recently, earth-based spirituality. As a statement of *current* sources of inspiration this chronological presentation diminishes our ability to say simply and clearly that we value and honour all of these traditions equally.

- **Prophetic words and deeds that challenge us to confront injustice and cruelty with conviction and the transforming power of love;**

The current statement calls on us to "confront powers and structures of evil with justice". The new version redirects the target of our actions away from "powers and structures" to humanly propagated "injustice and cruelty".

- **The legacy of those who have served and will serve this, our living tradition.**

In addition to the historical legacy of our forbearers, in more recent times and in the current time, in every congregation across this land, the future of our movement is built upon the new legacies that we each create with our hearts and hands.

As you review this First Draft of a proposed new Statement of Principles, naturally we want to know if and how it resonates with you. But the Statement of Principles Task Force also asks you to do something else. Think to the others in the Canadian movement. Think to those people looking to find us for the first time. And think to the world that calls us to act. Please help make this a truly *shared* Statement of Values and Aspirations that can inspire us to transform people's lives and heal this fractured world.

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