

A Principled Faith
January 11, 2004
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The questions:

- What are your deepest yearnings?
- How would anyone know what you value?
- What is your personal ministry?
- What would be missing from your life if it had no Unitarianism?
- What can we as U*U's do for Canada and the world?
- What binds Canadian U*U's together and makes us unique?

What would you think if I told you that you and I can have an influence on Unitarianism in Canada for the next several years? Unitarians in Canada have an opportunity, right now, to get involved in the process of naming who and what we are as a movement. U*U's all over Canada can contribute to constructing a statement of principles that describes us in the early part of the 21st century -- a statement which could become our rallying point much the way the present statement of purposes and principles has become over the last 18 years.

Big responsibility. Big opportunity.

Have you ever tried to describe Unitarianism to a curious friend? Not easy, is it. And yet, how we describe ourselves can influence how we understand ourselves, and how we understand ourselves can influence how we act and what we experience. Naming something you believe can be powerful.

The present statement of principles, purposes and sources was adopted by the continental UUA in 1985. It was devised in a process that involved as many UU's as could be persuaded to participate, from congregations all across the continent. It was drafted, presented, revised, re-drafted, presented again, refined, and finally adopted by a vote of the General Assembly, representatives from all 1100 or so congregations.

That statement has become for many people almost like a creed. On purpose, we don't have a creed. But if we did have one, it might be this covenant that says what each congregation agrees to, as a member of the Association of congregations. *"We covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations; A free and responsible search for truth and meaning; The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part."*

It's a beautiful covenant! It includes poetry, theology, politics and inspiration. While it started in the legal necessity of having a statement of *purpose* for the organization, it evolved into a work of art.

But it is not the first and only such statement ever devised. There have been several before it, since the beginnings of both the Unitarian and Universalist movements, in fact. Its most recent predecessor was crafted in 1960 just as the two denominations were about to merge. The one before that referred to "The Fatherhood of god, the Brotherhood of Man, the Leadership of Jesus, Salvation through Character, and the Progress of Mankind Onward and Upward Forever." You can see that it is no longer current! Even the 1960 covenant was sexist, it made reference to the Judeo-Christian heritage but not other religious influences, it did not include concern for the natural environment, and in short, it no longer spoke to the diversity of the contemporary UU world of North America. And yet, when it was adopted, it was perfectly appropriate for its time and place.

We are a creedless religion. We do not have a once-and-for-all book of truths that give us the answers to life's questions. We rely on many sources for our inspiration. The present statement lists some of those sources: *"The living tradition we share draw from many sources: Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder ...; Words and deeds of prophetic women and men ...; Wisdom from the world's religions ...; Jewish and Christian teachings ...; Humanist teachings ...; and Earth-centred traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life."*

Those sources allow for what I call "ongoing revelation" – a process of continually revising our beliefs and understandings of "life, the universe and everything" as we gain new insights. It's a process of evolution. I like to think that Charles Darwin would approve of this evolutionary process: survival of the fittest beliefs and values. It's part of our genius as a movement.

Just as you as an individual may have been Unitarian for 25 years and not believe everything you believed when you first joined the church, Unitarianism itself is also evolving. We might ask ourselves about our current statement questions like these: Is there too much emphasis on the individual? Is there enough acknowledgement of the place of community? Should there be more reference to the transcendent, the divine, that which some call God? Is it compatible with a Canadian sensibility?

It is timely for us to re-visit our statement of principles. As of May, 2002 (at the CUC Annual Meeting held in Kelowna) Canadian congregations are now members of the Canadian Unitarian Council, separate from the UUA. As a separate organization, one of its goals is better to serve our congregations by increased "Canadian content" – that which is uniquely Canadian about our faith community. But what is unique about us? We must re-examine what it is that we can say about ourselves, now, here, in 2004.

Maybe we will decide that the old statement of purposes is still as fresh and relevant and appropriate as it was in 1985, when we were part of the UUA. If so, we will

adopt it with fresh eyes. Maybe we will decide to tinker with it in just minor ways. Or maybe we will come up with a whole new statement.

It's up to you. And You. And Me.

So how are we going about this?

There is a task force to work on the project, and that task force has created a workshop outline which has been given to all congregations. It is built around the six questions you heard, the six that are on the cover of your order of service. In Kelowna, our workshop will be held on February 1st. That is a Sunday three weeks from now. You are all invited! The workshop starts with the morning service, and continues into the afternoon with a refreshment break at the usual time (11:30).

But come not just to do your duty, but because it will be fun,. Yes, it's your chance to influence history, to influence the course of Unitarianism in Canada. But the questions can also be invigorating to consider for yourself, for your own personal use – to refine your own thoughts as you interact with others. These are intriguing questions!

I want to give you some of my own thinking around these questions, and my preliminary answers. You, of course, will have your own answers.

Question 1: **“What is your deepest yearning?”**

This first question is intended to start you thinking about what is most important to you in your life, what you long for, what you most wish would happen. What is your deepest prayer?

When I start thinking about this, my first layer of responses includes things like – better eyesight, more sleep, and for my children to be safe, healthy and contented. As I look a little deeper, I respond that I want the opportunity to love, to be loved, to be accepted as I am, to be contented and fulfilled. Digging a little deeper yet – I say that I really yearn to feel free to express my innermost self, to know inner peace, to know that I am making a difference for good in the world, – to love myself and love everyone else and ultimately - to know God

Religion is in part a way of responding to our deepest longings. Some of those yearnings I mentioned are clearly spiritual in nature. Others are spiritual in a less direct way.

Yearning, praying, for a world in which all people could learn to live in peace together is a more concrete sort of expression than longing to “know God.” And it is also a spiritual or religious quest, in that it is about our connectedness as a human race, about love shared, about each of us being in relationship with the sacred in one another.

If I am yearning to know God, that is obviously a spiritual quest. I want to be at one with the divine in the universe. I want to *feel* that I am in the presence of the sacred. I want the *experience* of Godness. I want to know that the boundaries of *my* being mesh with the boundaries of *all* Being, and that All is One.

Is this a general human longing? Is it an experience that some people have more often than others? Is it accessible to all of us? Is there something I, we, can do to make it happen more often? Is it something a we can affect in the ways we worship together, or the ways we *are* together?

What are the things that you would put in the category of “yearnings” for yourself? I invite you to consider for yourself how you would answer question one.

Question 2: **How would someone know what your values are?**

This question and the next, “what is your personal ministry,” are intended to evoke thoughts about how we *express our deepest values*, how we act on them in daily life.

How would anyone know that I value fairness, or justice, or environmental preservation? I don’t always wear a badge on my sleeve. Am I acting according to what I say I believe? If I’m saying one thing and doing another, does that mean I’m a hypocrite? Does it mean I’m not paying attention to myself and how I’m acting? Does it mean that what I say is not actually what I value? Some people say you can tell what a person values by looking at where they spend their money. I would add to that – by looking at where / how they spend their time, which can seem to be even more precious than money.

For me, it’s important to act as I believe, and I like to pay attention to my actions. I’m also aware that it is pretty well impossible to do this perfectly! So – self-forgiveness is important.

But the question is – how would anyone else know that, say, justice for all is a value of mine? By the way I treat people around me? By where I make charitable donations? By my public stance on gay rights? I am sure that there is much more I could do to act on this value in my life, that would make it clearer. It’s not that I need the world to know that I’m a justice-seeking person. *It’s that if there is no evidence, or very little, then maybe I don’t value justice as much as I like to think.* Maybe I’m fooling myself. Or maybe I need to try a little harder.

And there is a parallel question here for U*U congregations ... how would anyone know we are a Welcoming Congregation, for example? Is there evidence in the way we act? But that’s for a later response.

Question 3: What is your personal ministry? What is it that you do to serve? What action in your life is of service to others, or to a cause, and also feeds you – because it is your passion?

Maybe you have not thought of what you do as a ministry. The term “ministry” is not part of everyone’s comfortable vocabulary. One way I define it is “spirituality in action.” A way of serving others that comes out of your deepest values or beliefs.

My main personal ministry is probably around what I do for this congregation and its people, both paid and “voluntary”. But in the past I have cared for an elderly relative, for example (without naming it as a ministry at the time.)

Some of you have personal ministries that I know of – such as working as volunteers with “Inn from the Cold” or the Drop-In Centre; or such as creating beauty for our worship services in the form of Ikebana flower arrangements, or such as caring for someone who cannot live independently.

What other ministries do you have?

Question 4: What would be missing from your life if there was no U*Uism in it?

Questions 4 & 5 are specifically about what it means to each of us to be associated with Unitarianism, and what it does or could mean for the rest of the world.

If there were no U*Uism in my life, I would miss terribly the support that I feel in being part of a community. I would miss terribly having a place to call my spiritual home. I would miss terribly the relief of knowing that there are others who feel as I do about spiritual exploration, about justice, about the sanctity of individual experience, and about the possibility of being open to truth and inspiration in a myriad of ways and places, not just one. These are things that keep me alive, keep me in touch with myself, keep me looking for my God, and keep me stimulated.

You are here by choice. What would you be missing if this were not an option for you?

Question 5: What can U*U’s do for Canada and the World?

Now we’re getting into a pretty challenging area. Beyond personal, reaching out. Just how influential can we be? Just how can we serve? Just how can we make a mark? Or are we lots of talk with very little effect? Do we actually have anything to offer Canada or are we just a club for people who are like us? And if we’re just a club for people like us, is that a bad thing, or is it ok? If that’s what we are, then we should probably stop pretending otherwise.

I think we have something to offer to the world. I believe that our aspiration to value diversity is our strongest and most vital characteristic. This includes theological diversity, as well as a long list of other characteristics, many of which you hear each Sunday in our words of welcome. Paradoxically, U*U's value the individual, and at the same time support forms of community and institutions that allow this individuality to flourish. There is always a tension between individual rights and the greater good of the group / society / community / world. At the moment, I think the world is too much dominated by the hegemony of individual rights at the expense of the commons. But Unitarians are in a position thoughtfully to consider both, and to see that the individual cannot ultimately survive without the common good.

We have more to offer to Canada and to the world. But that would be my first answer. What would be yours?

Question 6: What are the shared values and loyalties that bind us together as U*U's in Canada, and make us unique?

This is the real question that Canadian U*U's need to answer to help us articulate who we are and what we stand for. It's a pretty huge question. We've led up to it by thinking about our own personal values and how those are expressed, and what U*U's can offer to others in Canada and the world. It's my hope that the first 5 questions generate enough deliberation that there is a basis on which to build responses to this last question.

What do we share – as U*U's, as Canadians, as Canadian U*U's? What binds us together, what is unique about us – as a religious group, living in Canada, in the early part of the 21st century? What do we value in common, how do we act in common? It isn't a shared belief in God or the afterlife, or a commonly held spiritual practice. It might be some of our rituals, like lighting the chalice, and singing or reading from the hymn book. But it's more than that.

I know I can go into a Unitarian church and feel as though I can be true to what I believe, knowing that the person next to me might believe something else but that they'll accept me. I know that I can attend a Unitarian service in Halifax or Montreal or Saskatoon and feel somewhat at home, even though I might not know anybody and even though their practices are somehow different from ours. How is that possible?

Yes, it's the basic premise that each person is both responsible for her or his own faith stance, and open to others' perspectives.

But behind that, what is it we share? Not everybody would be comfortable in a UU church. Some people's beliefs would not fit, here. It is *not* a place where "you can believe anything you want." That leads me to think that there must be some things that we do all affirm. What are they? And would this list show any differences from the statement we already have?

My very preliminary list would include that:

- We affirm individual worth.
- We affirm the interdependent web of life.
- We promote spiritual searching and growth.
- We encourage social action towards creating justice for all.
- We value community.

It is my hope that when my list and your lists and lists from others across Canada are put together, something clear will emerge.

Canadian U*U's need to be able to say who we are and what we stand for. It is part of what keeps us together, part of what helps us to continue to live lives of integrity. Being able to articulate it means spending time contemplating the big questions.

I hope you will participate in the workshop on February 1st. Bring your ideas, make your answers count, enjoy a few hours of stimulating conversation with others, and give your own spirituality a shot in the arm.

And influence history!

Let us go forward as Unitarians together. Amen.