

If you have been reading UU World magazine, or following our denomination (the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA) on social media, or subscribing to certain newsletters of the UUA, then you know that there is a big decision coming soon.

If you don't, or if you're a new visitor here, you are about to learn a lot about Unitarian Universalism! And about what sets us apart from other denominations.

The big decision has to do with the statement of our principles.

You can find the statement of principles in your gray hymnals. It's on the page before page 1. (After the preface, but before the first hymn.) Let's read them together. We can take turns. (North, south, if reading aloud or reading this small print isn't your thing today, don't sweat it). I'll start and then I'll tell you when to join me.

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 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 all existence of which we are a part.

(We have also adopted an 8th principle, and I'll say more about that in a moment.)ⁱ This statement goes on to list many sources we draw from. Direct experience. Prophetic people. World religions. Jewish and Christian teachings. Humanism. Earth centered traditions. And then it concludes:

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to **deepen** our understanding and **expand** our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

We are free congregations, joined in this covenant. That means there is no top-down hierarchy. The denomination does not oversee this church. The denomination is made of the churches, free churches like this one, who organized themselves to create a denomination.

This statement of principles reflects that. It is a statement about what we have in common that has led us to this covenant.

It's a deeply meaningful statement. The principles are what people tend to think of when they think of UU. Unless you looked into it, you might never guess that they are actually an excerpt

from our bylaws. That's right. The Bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Article 2, section C-2.1.ⁱⁱ They were adopted at our denomination's annual general assembly in 1985.

Legally, the bylaws of any nonprofit organization have to include a section on principles and purposes. It's part of how the UUA shows regulators that it complies with the regulations for organizations that don't pay taxes on income. There's a link in your order of service to the bylaws in their entirety.

This statement of our principles isn't perfect. People have often critiqued it for not being very poetic and for being hard to memorize. (Without looking back at them, try to call them all to mind right now. Go! Can you do it?)

They aren't poetic because *they are bylaws*. And no one writes bylaws expecting other people to try and memorize them!

At the same time, they aren't worded like some dry tax document either. They are worded as a covenant. That touches something in us.

Our faith doesn't have one central scripture or even a defined canon (or set of scriptures) and it has no creed. So, these principles, which form a concise statement of our values, has taken on unexpected symbolic power. It has become something like a profession of faith. Even though every single person doesn't have to believe the same thing, and we have diverse theologies and atheisms among us, our principles are something we can point to and say: here's what unites our congregations with each other. Here's what we are about.

So unlike the rest of the bylaws, which are 33 pages long, Article 2 Section C-2.1 (the principles) is in our hymnals. The UUA has webpages and pamphlets devoted to them. Kids memorize them. They are printed on wallet cards, magnets, and more.

When our architect suggested a design for this sanctuary that included the number seven-seven windows, seven beams across the ceiling, I said, "Dude"—or actually—"Doug, that number is not fixed. The statement of principles can change." We kept the design because it's aesthetically pleasing, not because of the number seven. And, in fact, we have already joined hundreds of other congregations in adopting an 8th principle here at First U- one committing to dismantling racism and other oppressions.

The movement to add an 8th principle is only one of several big conversations about updating our principles. Another issue with them is that because they are presented as a list in a certain order, they get referred to in a numbered way. "The first principle." "The seventh principle." This has the impact of making them seem ranked. People have asked, shouldn't number 7 come before number 1? Has an over emphasis on the individual gotten in the way of interdependence, relationships, and the collective good? And why is number one only about humans. What about the inherent worth and dignity of a rainforest? What about a coral reef's right to exist? And why don't the principles mention the word love, when it has historically been at the center of our tradition, and UUs report loving and love as a high value more often than people of other religions and no religion do?ⁱⁱⁱ

Over the years, amendments have been proposed, some only narrowly failing to pass. One amendment did pass, changing the second principle from speaking of “women and men” to the more inclusive non-gendered word, “people.”

UUs have also raised issues with the way we speak of our sources. They seem to center Christianity more than other world religions, and more than UUs do in practice. Although this tradition has its roots in Christianity, only a small minority of UUs identify as Christians today. Most draw more inspiration from other things. Many UUs have Buddhist practices. So people have asked, “Why not specify that?” The statement that one of our sources is “wisdom from the world’s religions,” without further elaboration, has also led to some cherry picking- taking religious stories and ideas out of their original contexts and cultures, and applying them for our own purposes in UU settings. Since this language was adopted in 1985, we have learned better. We know now that how we learn and share from other traditions matters. That cultural appropriation is harmful.

The UUA bylaws mandate that Article II go through a revision process every fifteen years. So in 2020, the UUA Board of Trustees formed a commission to take the work on. They charged the commission to consider the centrality of love, the 8th principle, the desire for more poetic language, and other proposed amendments and critiques.

The commission got to work. There has been a thorough, participatory process involving thousands of UUs, and for those of you who are leaning forward right now and not falling asleep, you can read all about that process in the commission’s report on the UUA website. I’ll also link to it in the text version of this sermon that will be posted on our website. For the rest of you, perk back up, because here’s what they are proposing and UUs are going to vote on it in three months. If you want to read along, there’s a link in your order of service.^{iv}

Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant

As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our Association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:

Interdependence

We honor the interdependent web of all existence. With reverence for the great web of life and with humility, we acknowledge our place in it.

We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation. We will create and nurture sustainable relationships of care and respect, mutuality and justice. We will work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

Pluralism

We celebrate that we are all sacred beings, diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice

We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregations, our Association, and society at large.

Transformation

We adapt to the changing world.

We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity

We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity

We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

So six values- Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity, and Equity—with Love at the center. So, we've still got the number seven here, which is interesting, but look at the graphic. With love at the center, and the other values surrounding it, it indicates that love is highest, and the others flow from it without being ranked. Instead of simply naming principles it includes action words and promises. Interdependence: we honor, we covenant. Pluralism: we celebrate, we covenant. Justice: we work, we covenant. Transformation: we adapt, we covenant. Generosity: we cultivate, we covenant. Equity: we declare, we covenant.

Then, instead of listing “sources,” it names “inspirations.” That section reads:

Direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder are primary sources of Unitarian Universalist inspiration. These experiences open our hearts, renew our spirits, and transform our lives. We draw upon, and are inspired by, sacred, secular, and scientific understandings that help us make meaning and live into our values. These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times. We respect the histories, contexts, and cultures in which these sources were created and are currently practiced. Grateful for the experiences that move us, aware of the religious ancestries

we inherit, and enlivened by the diversity which enriches our faith, we are called to ever deepen and expand our wisdom.

This new, proposed statement expands and updates the values in our current principles. It gives them fuller expression. It incorporates the goals of the 8th principle. In fact, Paula Cole Jones, one of the leaders of the 8th principle movement, is on the Article II commission that drafted this proposed change. And it addresses one of the main criticisms of the 8th principle, which is that while the other seven principles are stated as ideas (worth and dignity, interdependence) the 8th principle is an action: “**journeying** toward spiritual wholeness by **working** to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably **dismantle** racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.” In this new wording, all values are accompanied by actions and promises.

Finally, the section on sources, called inspirations, expresses our respect for the contexts and cultures of diverse sources—not just our attraction to certain ideas.

The proposal that we update and transform our principles has generated some controversy, as you might expect. One argument against it is that people are already attached to the current principles. They are baked into so much—not just magnets and pamphlets but classes for kids and, well, our hearts. Another argument is: what about tradition? What’s wrong with having something that lasts? To that I say, there’s nothing wrong with things that last. But there’s a difference keeping something because it still works, and keeping something because we are used to it. It’s the difference between tradition and *traditionalism*.

I like the way religious scholar Jaroslav Pelikan put it. He said:

Tradition is the living faith of the dead; traditionalism is the dead faith of the living. Tradition lives in conversation with the past, while remembering where we are and when we are and that it is we who have to decide. Traditionalism supposes that nothing should ever be done for the first time...^v

Personally, I welcome and support this change. I think it reflects the way we UUs have changed in the last forty years. It reflects the fact that this is a living faith, grounded in tradition, but not traditionalism. Connected with the big questions facing humankind at this moment, forward looking, and courageous.

At our General Assembly this year, which is all virtual, I plan to vote in favor of this new, proposed Article II. How would you vote? Do you agree with me? Do you have a different opinion? If so, that’s absolutely fine. Our nonhierarchical, free congregations include many perspectives, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. Would you? It’s a beautiful thing, being together in diversity.

Whichever way the vote goes, here’s what I know: we UU’s know what our values are, how to live our faith in action, and that the covenant that binds us is a holy one.

ⁱ <https://uuabq.org/the-8th-principle/>

ⁱⁱ The bylaws: https://www.uua.org/files/2023-05/uua_bylaws_05222023.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ The Charge to the Commission references a study by Robert Miller demonstrating this second point. You can find the charge in the commission’s report at <https://www.uua.org/files/2023-02/article-II-study-report-2021-23.pdf>

^{iv} Here you go: https://www.uua.org/files/2023-10/a2_final_line_num_10312023.pdf

^v <https://harpers.org/2008/12/pelikan-on-tradition-and-traditionalism/>