

Unitarian Universalists across the nation are at risk of losing our defining principles, and the historical sources from which they came.

Changes to Article II of our bylaws would expunge our identity as a faith that guarantees freedom of belief and honors every member's search for truth.

What we are in danger of losing is the evolution of the Principles and Purposes that were adopted in 1961, when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged into the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The only major revisions to the Principles occurred in 1985, when the language was updated to remove gender bias, and the 7th Principle was adopted to honor the interdependent web of all existence.

Some congregations have chosen to add an 8th Principle to emphasize their anti-racist, anti-oppression, multicultural ambitions.

Also at this time the 2nd Principle was expanded into our list of Sources. These Sources articulate the historical texts from which we draw inspiration and guidance.

So, for many decades, with very few alterations, these Principles and Sources have articulated our living traditions. Through them, generations of UUs have found meaning and truth. They are not dogmatic; members are not accountable to any orthodoxy or religious hierarchy; we believe in freedom of conscience.

What Is Happening

The Unitarian Universalist Association, located in Boston, is the central organization for UU's. Their role is to support the congregations around the country. Every year in June, a General Assembly is held to conduct the business of the Association, to select leaders, and to analyze the theological underpinnings contained in our bylaws. Delegates from congregations around the country attend and vote on measures before the Assembly that year.

The UUA bylaws dictate that Article II, containing our Principles and Purposes, be reviewed every 15 years. It makes sense to review and update as necessary. For this most recent review, a Study Commission was appointed by the UUA leadership.

In October, 2022, this Commission revealed in their preliminary draft that more than revision was taking place. Instead, the very core of our identity is being gutted and replaced with something substantially different.

It is not a revision; it is a complete rewrite. Even the format has been altered.

The most alarming feature of this proposal is its complete elimination of our Principles and the Sources which tie our faith to historical, but living traditions.

The Principles are to be replaced with Values and Covenant statements, represented by this flower graphic with the word love and a chalice at the center, surrounded by six core value words. The Study Commission states that the Principles do not explicitly name our core values, and that “Seven single-word values (each with a short sentence of explication) are easier to remember and use.”

That is simply not true. The Principles contain fewer words, making the Values more difficult to remember. Single-word Values with explications are inherently no easier to remember than the original Principles.

If the Study Commission believes that our current Principles do not explicitly name our core values, did they have to eliminate both the Principles and Sources in order to raise up these Values? Could they not have added a section rather than tearing down something that really matters to Unitarian Universalists?

Covenants and Accountability

The frequent use of covenants throughout the rewrite is troubling. The dictionary defines covenants as promises, or commitments. In religious settings, covenants are indistinguishable from religious dogma or creed.

It is difficult to see how freedom of conscience or freedom of belief are compatible with these covenants, even if we happen to agree with the actual content of the covenant.

Equally inconsistent with our liberal faith is the dictate that we are to be held accountable to one another for doing the work of “living our shared values through spiritual discipline of love” This statement is ambiguous, yet it obligates us, and can be interpreted as doctrine.

How it could be applied in our congregations is cause for great concern. These tools of covenant and accountability become weapons of control and enforcement that can even be used against ministers who express uncomfortable truths; in fact, this has already happened. One expects clergy to be removed for sexual or financial misconduct, not engaging in honest dialogue and search for truth.

Some of the proposed Covenants are a complete overreach, even as aspirations. The Justice value commands us to “covenant to dismantle all forms of racism and systemic oppression.” The stated purpose of UU is to transform the world through liberating love. While every Unitarian Universalist embraces antiracism and works towards a better world, it is dangerous to make specific promises so far beyond our reach, especially when we are held accountable to those promises.

And, who gets to decide who is failing to live according to one of these seven Values? By what criteria? Who gets to determine the consequences of being out of covenant? This will pit members against each other, dividing us against ourselves.

If this sounds authoritarian, it should!

Freedom of Belief

In 1568, for the first time in the world, tolerance and freedom of conscience were proclaimed at the Edict of Torda under the influence of Ferenc David, founder of the Unitarian Church in Transylvania. Some historians consider this the first legal guarantee of religious freedom in Christian Europe.

Freedom of Belief has been a point of pride to UUs over the centuries. In the current Article II, individual freedom of belief cannot be infringed upon. In the proposed rewrite, it is gone! In its place is “congregational freedom,” which is undefined. And, it states only that individual right of conscience is central to UU heritage. It is not protected.

The Article II rewrite is throwing away the bedrock of our faith, along with 500 years of accomplishment.

Love

The Article II Commission placed high importance on love, placing it at the center of the Values, endowing it with the power to guide us and hold us together, and refers to it as a spiritual discipline. It also asks us to “choose love in action as the path forward,” turning us away from a religion focused on spiritual development into a social justice organization.

Finally, our stated purpose is to transform the world through Liberating Love. Just what Liberating Love means is not clear. But what a tall order for love to fulfill!

Arguably every faith organization embraces love in some manner, but not as a foundational concept. In the Article II rewrite, love is used in abstract and overreaching contexts, and even uses it to transform our very purpose away from a faith-based organization. This misuse of language is confusing, and not worthy of our longstanding, liberal faith.

Process

The radical changes proposed by the Study Commission are more sweeping than any changes made since the merger of Unitarians and Universalists. Changes this consequential require extensive analysis, discussion and time.

Imagine the shock UUs experienced when they first learned of these changes as recently as October of 2022. And that they were first voted in June of 2023. That's eight months! It took seven years for the 1985 changes to come about. This timeline is completely unreasonable and cannot possibly result in the best outcomes for our future.

UUA is not acting in good faith. At General Assembly 2023 there were no sessions to discuss the serious pros and cons of the proposal. Possible amendments were selected by UUA and discussion was limited to one-and-a-half minute speeches.

The UUA used its bully pulpit to stifle honest dissent and manipulate the conversation, so only one side was adequately presented.

Many congregations have received little or no information about this major rewrite of our bylaws. UU members were not included as stakeholders when the process was moving forward.

It is impossible not to surmise that UUA is afraid that the real majority of UUs across the nation would be against these changes if they knew and thoroughly understood them. Why else the rush? Why else the lack of transparency?

Dissent

There is already a large contingent of UUs across the country who are against adopting this radical proposal. At the 2023 General Assembly, outgoing president Susan Frederick-Gray, in her final report, made several very troubling remarks that indicated her disdain for Unitarian Universalism and her intolerance of differing views. She stated that quote "...in times of change and uncertainty, there is always a risk that fear and anxiety will dominate and lead us to cling more tightly to what has been, to a status quo that has never served the cause of human need nor the values of justice and equity"

Apparently Rev. Dr. Gray does not remember that the status quo, with its current Principles and Sources, has served our faith well in the historical role it has played in the cause of human need, justice and equity.

She went on to characterize dissenters as quote "...[clinging] to some fabricated imagination of a mythical past."

Is 500 years of history a "fabricated imagination of mythical past?"

Rev. Dr. Grey's comments caused harm, and revealed how UUA leadership is not amenable to discussion on this topic. This was her opportunity to bring us all together, not to insult a huge segment of our erstwhile Beloved Community.

Dissenters are not racist and they are not trying to "...[obstruct] their congregations and the UUA from living into [their] values and commitments." The "fabricated imagination of a

mythical past” that they are accused of is simply their desire to preserve the best parts of our tradition.

Guilt-Based Anti-Racism

Unitarian Universalism is no longer a haven for free thinkers and intellectuals. UUA leaders have instituted extreme, illiberal measures to deal with their perception of rampant racism within Unitarian Universalism. In its 2020 document *Widening the Circle of Concern*, UUA committed to dismantling racism and white supremacy culture within our institutions.

Unitarian Universalists have long been intentionally welcoming to people who have been marginalized by mainstream society. UUs have given their lives in the cause of civil rights. We have a long history of breaking down barriers, yet we are now expected to engage in an anti-racist strategy that is based on a dubious interpretation of Critical Race Theory.

This program can be described as Blame and Shame: all white people are racists; UUs participate in a culture of white supremacy; all power accrues to white people.

Calling all white people racists reduces the term to meaninglessness, and totally shuts down much needed dialogue. UUA is judging members by the color of their skin and calling out people it considers to be lacking. This is not the way to advance positive race relations. Nowhere does evidence exist that this strategy will work towards dismantling racism, but it is succeeding in dividing us against ourselves.

If It Ain't Broke, Don't Fix It!

As Unitarian Universalism moves into the future, we must be open to change, but the very radical changes currently being proposed do not substantially address the ethical, moral or spiritual crises articulated by the Study Commission. The language in the current Principles is elegant and timeless, and the sources root us in enduring intellectual and spiritual traditions.

The Study Commission failed to address why it was necessary to eliminate the bedrock of our faith, and it failed to articulate just how the Values and Covenants will be better able to guide us in Beloved Community.

The Article II proposal requires two votes. The first one took place at General Assembly in June, 2023, and it passed. In order for these changes to become final, they must pass at the 2024 General Assembly by a 2/3 majority of delegate votes.

Article III is the next bylaw to be under consideration, and along with it the possibility of a significant loss of congregational autonomy, as UUA increases its control.

Unitarian Universalism is at Risk of Losing its Soul

Transcript

It is up to UUs who care enough about the future of this venerable religion, and who want to preserve its essence as a liberal, tolerant, progressive faith to make their voices heard.

In June of 2024, we are threatened with losing what many made many of us Unitarian Universalists in the first place. It is too much to lose.

New concerns will no doubt surface when taking a closer look at this proposed change to the UU bylaws. More information is available on the [Savethe7Principles.org](https://www.savethe7principles.org) website, where you can find pro and con articles, in-depth commentary, print resources, more videos and information on joining the nationwide resistance.

UUs, let's keep the faith!