

# Shared values

How the UUA's Principles and Purposes were shaped and how they've shaped Unitarian Universalism.

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*This article was first published in 2000 to mark the fifteenth anniversary of the adoption of the Unitarian Universalist Association's current statement of Principles and Purposes [1].*

There are few issues concerning Unitarian Universalism on which UUs can agree with one another. Are we a denomination—that is, a single religious entity—or merely an association of independent congregations? Is the congregations' independence, what we call congregational polity, a sacrosanct principle, or must it yield to our commitment to racial justice? Do we call the places where we gather for worship churches or meeting halls—indeed, do we worship? Those are all perennial subjects for debate. But few questions cause us as much discomfort as what to say when asked what UUs believe. After all, we don't all believe the same thing. But even as we vehemently reject any creed, we seem to be forever searching for some verbal formula about which all (or at least most) of us can say: "Yes, that's what I (more or less) believe."

The importance of our being able to express a set of shared core beliefs was well described by the Rev. Eugene Pickett when he assumed the UUA presidency in 1979. Referring to the problems facing the denomination—his predecessor had just died after less than two years in office—Pickett said, "The deeper malaise lies in our confusion as to what word we have to spread. The old watchwords of liberalism—freedom, reason, tolerance—worthy though they may be, are simply not catching the imagination of the contemporary world. They describe a process for approaching the religious depths, but they testify to no intimate acquaintance with the depths themselves. If we are ever to speak to a new age, we must supplement our seeking with some profound religious finds."

The original statement [2] of the purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association, adopted in 1960 as the Universalist Church of America and the American Unitarian Association were consolidating, no longer served the need. The statement's precise wording had been a matter of such heated debate that it nearly derailed the merger at the concurrent but separate preparatory sessions of the two denominations the year before. The contention revolved around whether to include such phrases as "love to God and love to man" and a reference to "our Judeo-Christian heritage." A compromise version, including a critical change from "our" heritage to "the" heritage, was finally hammered out in an all-day, all-night parliamentary negotiation and debate.

Thus it's a source of some amazement that the Principles and Purposes that replaced the original wording in 1984 not only were adopted nearly unanimously, but they have lasted virtually unchanged for 15 years. To a truly astonishing extent the Principles and Purposes have been woven into the fabric of our denominational life.

## A ubiquitous appearance

Here are just a few examples: the Principles and Purposes are featured in the front of our hymnbook—in fact, according to the hymnbook's introduction, the commission that assembled the book took them as "the touchstones of our decision to proclaim our diversity." They have

been widely reprinted in local congregations' orders of service, posted on church walls, even recited in unison. At the First Unitarian Congregation of Waterloo, Ontario, for example, the Principles are the focus of the annual new members' recognition ceremony, and as the Rev. Anne Treadwell reports, the "responsibilities of membership can be summed up as a thoughtful commitment to the Principles, and . . . making such a commitment can change lives." On a more mundane level, the annual report of the UU Funding Program, after stating that the program's basic purpose is "promoting Unitarian Universalist Principles through grantmaking," groups the programs it supports by the Principles they reflect.

Perhaps most important, the Principles and Purposes have guided the development of a denominational religious education program that both expresses and nurtures a UU sense of identity, with curricula ranging from *Around the Church, Around the Year*, for the youngest kids, to one called *Being a UU Parent*.

One final example: to assure that Beacon Press, our denominational publishing house, carried out its mission as a public voice for Unitarian Universalist ideals, Wendy Strothman, while director of the press, started requiring that her editors include with every editorial proposal a statement explaining how the proposed volume would support one or more of the UUA Principles and Purposes—a policy still maintained by Helene Atwan, her successor.

All this agreement, it hardly needs adding, does cause some unhappiness among those who, while acknowledging that the Principles are not a creed in the dictionary sense, still see a common statement of belief that comes uncomfortably close to creedalism. Yet the process of reformulating our Principles proved amazingly amicable, with maximum participation and dialogue, total transparency, and repeated General Assembly consideration.

## Women were the catalysts

Much of the credit for starting on the long and meandering path that led to adoption of the reformulated Principles must go to UU women. Over many years, women (though not women alone) had been growing unhappy with the blatantly sexist language of the original bylaws, including a reference to "the dignity of man." The 1970s—years when the US women's movement was gathering momentum—saw repeated "manhunts" to find and remove the most offensive terminology. Excised, for instance, were references to the moderator and president—indeed to every officer and to all ministers—as "he," though mentions of "brotherhood" and "fellowship" survived well into the 1980s.

Granted, two other emerging understandings also helped make the existing Principles seem inadequate—first, that traditions other than the Judeo-Christian are important to our heritage; second, that our relation to the environment is one of our primary religious concerns. But the main impetus for change did come from the UU Women's Federation (UUWF). Natalie Gulbrandsen, who later served as UUA moderator, joined the UUWF board in 1971 and became the group's president in 1978. As someone who had stayed up until 2 a.m. listening to "a lot of contentious speeches" when the original Principles were hammered out in 1960, Gulbrandsen says she had some idea how heated General Assembly debates could become. She wasn't sure what to expect, therefore, when in 1977 the UUWF and its supporters put forward a Women and Religion resolution.\* As it turned out, things went relatively well. While some delegates couldn't accept that they or their association was patriarchal, "we explained it," Gulbrandsen recalls, and

the resolution passed—unanimously. Among its provisions, the resolution called on leaders at all levels of the UUA to "make every effort to: (a) put traditional assumptions and language in perspective, and (b) avoid sexist assumptions and language in the future."

It helped that the UUWF members had done their homework, completing a survey of the number of women in the UU ministry (mighty few) and positions of power (not nearly half). Says Gulbrandsen, "We had all the facts and figures and convinced people that they didn't want that kind of reputation."

Two years later, a UU continental conference on women and religion was held in Loveland, Ohio. One workshop was called "The UUA Principles: Do They Affirm Us As Women?" The response from workshop participants was a resounding "No!" according to the Rev. Edward A. Frost, who edited a book of essays by UU ministers called *With Purpose and Principle*, including a chapter by Frost himself that discusses the women's role. Frost says the delegates felt the original UUA Principles not only failed to affirm them as women, "but they [failed] to indicate a respect for the wholeness of life and for the earth."

But even in her own church the need to revise the Principles and Purposes was not universally accepted, Gulbrandsen remembers. She had to explain why references to "mankind" made women feel left out. "They said, 'Mankind' doesn't leave you out," she recalls. "I replied that we are human beings but not men, and that there are many other terms you could use—humankind, human beings—that include women." Nor did disagreement come only from men. "When we took the Women and Religion resolution to [the International Association for Religious Freedom], the English women were furious. Why would we want to do such a thing? they wanted to know. But we felt that a wave was coming in our direction and eventually we would prevail," Gulbrandsen says.

## The coming wave

Given the attachment to the existing, sexist language of so many men and not a few women, it was highly perceptive of UUA President Pickett to sense the coming of this wave. As he once told a UU women's gathering, "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." (His welcoming the change was particularly surprising since, he had to admit, he had been thrown off balance when one of his daughters told him she was considering the Unitarian Universalist ministry.)

In 1981, a nonsexist revision of the Principles and Purposes drafted by various women's groups was presented to the General Assembly. It caused great uneasiness, especially among UU Christians, who saw it as tantamount to writing them out of the UUA. A group of ministers circulated a letter expressing concern about the lack of any reference to UUism's Christian roots. It added that "the impending debate on whether or not to amend [the Principles] so as to eliminate the word 'God' has every prospect of becoming the kind of contest in which, regardless of who wins, our Association will lose. . . . We believe that it is time to recognize and empower that pluralism which we are." The ministers called for open dialogue and the appointment of a committee to study the situation.

Denise Davidoff, who had succeeded Gulbrandsen as UUWF president and was later to succeed her as moderator, made a bold decision. Even though it caused a rift among the women

delegates, she broke with those who favored immediate adoption of the proposed draft. Persuaded that a vote that year would be needlessly divisive and in any case would probably lose, Davidoff endorsed the proposal that a committee be set up to study the issue and report back to the GA in a subsequent year. This concession not only avoided confrontation but led to the formulation of a far more eloquent and inclusive statement, one that fulfilled the wish voiced by the Rev. George "Kim" Beach (a signer of the ministers' protest letter) for a "strong" statement of Principles "with religious integrity, intellectual coherence, and literary quality."

The motion to study the issue passed, the committee was set up, and it launched what Davidoff has described as "an enormously well-done, grass-roots process." The Rev. Walter Royal Jones Jr., a parish minister now retired, who headed the special committee for most of its existence, recalls that they sent out questionnaires asking congregations and individual UUs for suggestions about what the new statement of Principles might say. While some respondents expressed skepticism, considering the process a waste of time, the committee also received many contributions of great merit which, in turn, it circulated for further comment.

With all the resulting data, the seven committee members met to start what Jones describes as "the good old process" of posting big sheets of paper all over the meeting room walls. "We really wanted to assure everyone that no point of view was going to be left out," says Jones. "We wanted to say to everyone, You belong." Davidoff says this careful search for consensus explains why the draft the committee eventually produced was adopted with relatively few changes and virtually no animosity.

## A healing solution

But it took time. The committee had decided to come up with a proposal that acknowledged UU diversity and to do it on the basis of a continent-wide consultation with as many congregations and individual members as possible. They submitted their first report at the Brunswick, Maine, GA in 1982. "We met on the Bowdoin College campus," Davidoff recalls, "and broke into small groups to discuss the proposal. John Cummins [the first committee chair, who resigned almost immediately] had previously asked the UU Women's Federation to recruit 100 discussion leaders, and I remember a beautiful day, sitting on the lawn to discuss the language."

Jones recalls that one committee member, the Rev. Harry Hoehler, came up with a solution to the problem that had created controversy both at the 1960 meetings and again in 1981: whether to refer to the deity and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hoehler suggested dividing the statement into two parts: first, the Seven Principles, followed by references to five "living traditions we share." (A sixth tradition, earth-centered religions, was added to the statement in 1995.) No one objected to language about the "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love" when it appeared as part of an uncontroversial summary of historical influences on UUism.

After further revisions based on the 1982 discussions, the committee circulated a draft to all congregations that was debated in 1983, and after some additional changes submitted its final draft to the General Assembly in 1984, where it was adopted by a wide margin. The final wording, Jones has said, "suddenly seemed to fall into place" at the committee's final sessions, "where we literally rearranged almost everything we had done." At the 1985 GA, it came up for a second vote, as is required for bylaw changes, and passed with only one dissenting vote. Edward

Frost has described the GA's response to passage as "loud applause, sighs of relief, tears, and a few shrugs of 'wait and see.'"

## Reflections from the chair

Writing in *First Days Record*, a monthly publication by and for UU clergy [that has since ceased publication], Walter Royal Jones observes that while most of the wording of the current Principles and Purposes was new, most of the concepts appeared in one form or another in the 1961 statement—that is, except for Principle number seven. "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," Jones explains, had not been anticipated, yet "its inclusion was overwhelmingly mandated in the responses received from churches and fellowships, and its current happy wording emerged from the floor of the General Assembly, where it was instantly recognized as just the right language."

Another change Jones considers significant is the switch from "the free and disciplined search for truth" in the 1961 statement to "free and responsible search for truth and meaning," suggesting that the search takes place in community. He also considers notable the adjective "inherent," in place of "supreme," to qualify the worth of every person, since it recognizes that people's inner potential can be "hidden or rejected, even betrayed." Jones reflects that "apart from Quakers and their time-honored preference for consensus, it is unlikely that the history of religion provides any comparable example of such intentional and committed use of inclusive, non-hierarchical processes to produce a guiding statement."

## Fifteen years on

Though the Principles and Purposes have served us well since 1985, Jones is not suggesting that his committee produced a statement for the ages. After 15 years, he says, "We should not be surprised at some restiveness. On the one hand, some are uneasy with what they see as a kind of creeping credalism in the way we use [the Principles]. On the other, there is a perception of incompleteness, with important, arguably necessary empowering assumptions about cosmic reality and our particular place in it that 'P and P' leave unsaid." Still others, he says, are dissatisfied with what they see as excessive emphasis on the individual, so that "the creative nature of community and interdependence are only tardily and inadequately acknowledged."

Nonetheless, 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." Quite apart from the fact that we tend not to use so many capital letters, 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, as in tune with their times, and as committed to reason and free thinking as we are. In 2020 (when everyone presumably will 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.

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**Editor's note 5.1.06:** As originally published in 2000, this article incorrectly named the 1977 Women and Religion Resolution the "Women in Religion" resolution. All instances of this error have been corrected in this edition of the article. In a letter published in the July/August 2001 issue, the Rev. Dr. Shirley Ann Ranck offered this background about the resolution:

Lucile Longview initiated the Women and Religion Resolution, gathered support for it, and presented it at the 1977 General Assembly, where it was passed unanimously. UUA President Paul Carnes then appointed a Continental Women and Religion Committee to implement the resolution. That committee organized the Women and Religion conference at Grailville in Loveland, Ohio, where Longview offered the workshop, "The UUA Principles—Do They Affirm Us as Women?" The first tentative wording of a new Principles and Purposes document was drawn up at the Women and Religion Convocation on Feminist Theology in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1980, beginning the process that would eventually involve the entire denomination.

Lucile Schuck Longview also wrote, adding:

Passage of the UUA Women and Religion resolution in 1977 laid the foundation for revision of the UU Principles. I conceived of and wrote the resolution and sent it to 15 associates around the continent, soliciting feedback. They encouraged me to proceed, and offered suggestions. At First Parish in Lexington, Massachusetts, six other laywomen, one layman, and I sent personal letters to members of churches, with copies of the petition to place the resolution on the agenda of the 1977 General Assembly. We received more than twice the requisite 250 signatures. The Joseph Priestley District submitted the resolution directly, with some text revisions. Both versions were placed on the GA Final Agenda. We lobbied friends, GA delegates, and presidential candidates to support the District's version, which passed unanimously.

Ross writes, "In 1977 the UUWF and its supporters put forward the Women in [*sic*] Religion resolution." The reverse was true: the UU Women's Federation supported the resolution written, revised, and submitted by individual UUs working together.

Return to the corrected paragraph.

## From the archives

- Reexamination of UUA Principles announced [3]
- General Assembly narrowly rejects new Principles and Purposes [4]

## Links

- [1] <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/the-uuas-principles-purposes-1985>  
[2] <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/the-uuas-original-principles-1961>  
[3] <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/reexamination-uua-principles-announced>  
[4] <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/ga-rejects-new-principles-purposes>

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