

"ASSOCIATION SUNDAY"

Rev. Don Rollins
October 21, 2007

INTRODUCTION

The Unitarian Universalist Board of Trustees; The Commission on Social Witness; The Pacific Northwest District; The General Assembly Planning Committee; The Annual Program Fund; The Committee on Socially Responsible Investing.

Question: What do you think of when I say the words Unitarian Universalist Association? Straight up, now, what's the first thing that comes to mind? (*Invite responses*)

For all the nooks and crannies of the UUA that I know at least something about, when that question is asked my mind still flashes back to a co-ed softball league circa spring, 1986. I'm chasing down a high fly ball in left-center. I lay out as the ball descends a few feet beyond my standing reach, somehow snaring the ball before it touches the green Central Ohio grass. It was the third out of the fifth inning. I had bailed out our best pitcher from a bases-loaded jam, evoking banshee war whoops from my otherwise suburban-bound, weekend-warrior, BMW-driving teammates.

Collecting myself, then jogging toward the dugout, I heard an opposing player ask her third base coach, "Who *are* these people?" Came the reply, "I don't know. Their shirts say "Uno's", I think...you know, the pizza chain. I'm pretty sure that's their sponsor".

In reality, the team was made up of some members and staff of First Unitarian Universalist Church, Columbus, Ohio. Our T-shirts read: "FUUCO". It was neither the first nor the last time someone was left scratching a puzzled head over the religious denomination that is alternately confused with the Moonies, New Agers, store-fronters and Unity Church. Fact is, Unitarian Universalism has a public relations problem second only to Jesus himself! So, who *are* these people?

The Accessibilities Committee; The Fund for Unitarian Universalist Social Responsibility; The Panel on Theological Education; The Ministerial Fellowship Committee; The Religious Education Credentialing Committee.

Last Sunday, October 14, thousands of Unitarian Universalists, in hundreds of UU congregations joined in a fundraising effort called "Association Sunday". But the goal was not to raise money for operating expenses, rather, it was to establish a fund for *national* marketing and growth outreach projects. It was the first of four annual Association Sundays devoted to four themes:

- Growth in spirit
- Growth in diversity
- Growth in witness
- Growth in leadership

So if the big shindig was *last* Sunday, how's come we're just getting around to it? I could make a series of jokes, beginning with, "Because we're so far back in the sticks that we don't get Saturday night 'til Sunday morning!", but I'm going to spare you those for now. (The honest truth is that the second Sunday of each month is scheduled as a lay-led service, and I wanted to lead this service myself; I'm one of those ministers who actually *enjoy* talking about the UUA.) And so it is that we're holding our Association Sunday today.

The Unitarian Universalist-United Nations Office; The Office of International Relations; The Prairie Star District; The Holdeen India Program; The Washington Office for Advocacy; The Office of Ethics and Safety in Congregational Life.

It's one thing to hear folks outside our ranks try to figure out the who, what and when of the UUA, but it's flat-out distressing to recognize how few *within* our congregations understand it. And while shaking you loose from some of your money is the primary goal of Association Sunday, education finishes a close second. We may not be raising money for the general fund, but neither are we calling this "Growth Sunday" or "Evangelism Sunday"; there's an Association behind *Association* Sunday. So, who *is* the Association?

CONGREGATIONAL POLITY & INDIVIDUAL AUTHORITY

The day you began adding "Unitarian Universalist" to the various ways you describe yourself – when you joined a UU congregation – you did not cast your lot with a *denomination*, per say; you became part of *an association of congregations*. What the heck's the difference, you may ask? With filmmaker Ken Burns still fresh on my mind, let me put it this way: During the Civil War (or as many a Southerner still calls it, the *War Between the States*) the North was committed to retaining the *Union*. Think strong, *centralized* power that supersedes that of a single region or locality. And what was the name for the style of government old Jeff Davis took charge of? Right, *Confederacy*. Think strong, *localized* power that supersedes that of the central or national body. Centralized. Localized.

Now, some religious traditions are closer to a union; theology, governance, membership and such are determined by a central hierarchy, body or council. Although I'm simplifying things a bit, think the Roman Catholic Church. Think the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods. Think the Church of Latter Day Saints (Mormons).

And then there are those traditions that, with varying degree, vest power in the local congregation. (Recall that the Unitarian side of our blended family has deep roots in New England Congregationalism.) Theology is determined locally, not once- or twice-removed. Governance may be tweaked or even overhauled without getting the pre-approval of any muckety-mucks. Even the threshold for full membership is determined by the congregational members themselves.

So, homely though my Civil War simile may be, some religious traditions are organized so as to resemble the Union, others, the Confederacy.

PRINCIPLES & PURPOSES

The Office of Growth Services; The Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian & Transgender Concerns; The Office of Racial and Ethnic Concerns; The Curriculum and Resource Development Office; The Youth Office/Young Religious Unitarian Universalists; The Office of Church Staff Finances.

Congregational polity then, by its very nature, means that the relationship among our churches and fellowships is one of *association*; we recognize similar rituals (The Flower Communion, lighting a chalice), share similar resources (our hymnbook, religious education curricula) and are served by ministers and field staff credentialed by, and accountable to, the UUA.

It's not unusual for a Unitarian Universalist to cite the Seven Principles and Six Sources when asked what makes a UU a UU, but not so fast. Be sure to read the Preamble: *We, the member congregations* of the Unitarian Universalist Association covenant to affirm and promote... The covenant – the *association* – is between member congregations, not *members*. This is important stuff, folks! Useful and evocative as the Principles may be, they are not binding. They were not intended to be used as criteria for who is and is not a UU. Not when they were drafted, not now.

I beg your pardon if I've belabored the point about congregational and, by proxy, *personal* freedom, but there can be no true religious freedom if you and I have to get the theological version of the Good Housekeeping Seal to run our lives and our congregation. Bottom line: free religious denominations require free congregations, and free congregations require free individuals. The Principles and Purposes provide association between congregations, not de facto manifesto for membership within congregations.

"NOW IS THE TIME"

The Clara Barton District; The Nominating Committee; The Social Justice Internship Program; The Office of Young Adult and Campus Ministry; The Office of Congregational Fundraising Services; The Office of Lay Leadership Development.

Enough about congregational polity for now, but keep in mind that it's that style of governance that puts the Association in the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Let's turn to the strategy of mounting the first *national* campaign for UUism since the 1960s, titled simply, "Now is the Time". This drive for growth did not come from "Boston" (where our headquarters were begun in the early 1800s and remain to this day). After conducting a process to find out what our local churches and fellowships need from the UUA, the answer is clear: "Help us grow!" And the "Now is the Time" program is our national leadership's response.

As you may know, the UUA ran earlier this month a major ad in *Time Magazine*. If the goal of \$20 million in cash and \$30 million in planned giving is met by 2010, we can expect more national exposure. Sound grandiose? Well, not so much. The United Church of Christ used a similar process to develop and implement television, radio and internet advertising. So did the United Methodists. And the Mormons are still running national mass media blitzes that make me flat-out jealous! The "Now is the Time" idea is good, folks. But it's just an idea unless you and I reach deep, today, next year and two more times after that. The marketing consultants have done their work, now it's our turn.

The Office of Professional Development; The Office of General Assembly and Conference Services; The Ohio-Meadville District; The Periodicals Office; The UUA Bookstore; Beacon Press.

In the interest of full disclosure, sometimes the UUA mystifies me with its priorities. We've spent the better part of four decades working on our internal racism, sexism and homophobia (with more work to be done). Meanwhile we've remained amazingly puzzled as to why working class folks aren't taken by our music or intellect or latent superiority complex. Go figure.

And I've been known to get more than a little riled when I think about our Sixth Principle – the one about a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all – when so few of us seem to be bothered by the fact that our headquarters, for all its history and symbolism, sits on some of the most expensive real estate in North America. Is there a more blatant indictment of classism than that?

Now that I'm ranting about the quarrel side of my lover's quarrel with the UUA, permit just one more tirade. I understand UUism to be but one among several expressions of liberal religion. (Recall that I've often said that Unitarian

Universalism is my “pew”, but liberal religion is my “church”.) So, I’m heartened every time I hear liberal Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and non-aligned freethinkers stand up for freedom, community and activism as authentic religious values. (Our internal myth about being the only face of liberal religion offends others and lays bare our ignorance and arrogance. It’s embarrassing when speakers at UU gatherings talk as though we have the market on religious liberalism, exposing both our ignorance and our arrogance. Not only are we in an embryonic stage of thinking about class and religion, we’ve also a great deal to learn about religious liberalism as a movement of which we are just one part.)

But, for all my whining, I’ve been a UU since 1985 and have no plans to jump ship. I figure it this way: I’m a highly imperfect human being connected to other highly imperfect human beings, and, together, we make up this highly imperfect but oh-so-precious Association. By my lights, our denominational leaders have it right when they urge us to go national with our name and message. Thus I’m absolutely shameless in asking you to help get the *Now is the Time* campaign off the drawing board and onto our televisions, radios, periodicals and computers. All of the offices and programs I quoted in this sermon are funded by the UUA’s general funds, but it’s up to rank-and-file folks like us to launch this new program. Now *is* the time.

WHERE WE WANT TO GO

Author, Sam Keen, used to tell about his regular conversations with his mentor, the writer, teacher and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman. During one such session (and after much philosophizing and single malt Scotch) the topic turned to what it means to be a man. Specifically, what it means to be a *happy* man. I’m paraphrasing, but as he looked over the rim of his glasses, the older man said something like this: “A man just needs to decide two things in order to be happy, Sam: where he wants to go, and who shall go with him.” After a pause, Thurman added, “And woe to any man who gets those decisions out of order.”

Nora friends, the various offices and programs I’ve listed in this sermon are funded by the Association’s regular budget. At least for now; overall, our Annual Program Fund dollars and other funding sources cover their costs. But Bill Sinkford, our president, as well as UUA staff and volunteers, have decided where they want our movement to go. This morning you and I have the opportunity to go with them – to join the thousands of our sister and brother UUs who celebrated their Association Sunday a week ago. I say again, now *is* the time!

Would the ushers please come forward to receive our offering on behalf of Association Sunday?