

## Covenants Old and New

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When I was serving my congregation in Leominster, I belonged to an interfaith clergy group that met once a month. Over coffee and doughnuts, I introduced myself to a Catholic priest, and told him I was a Unitarian Universalist minister. “Ah, Unitarians!” he replied. “The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Beacon Hill!”

This harkens back to an original statement by James Freeman Clarke, a Unitarian minister of the late 1800s. In his *Five Points of the New Theology*, he suggests this formula: “the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, the leadership of Jesus, salvation by character; and the progress of mankind, onward and upward forever”.

This statement was adopted by many Unitarian churches. It was progressive for its day. But it seems backward to us now, with its male-oriented language and its exclusive focus on Christianity. And the final point, “onward and upwards forever”, seems hopelessly optimistic, and tainted with a vision of Manifest Destiny.

We Unitarian Universalists have a history of trying to articulate core principles. We try to state what we share in common; to demonstrate that there’s a “there” there.

A good statement can serve as an elevator speech, to explain ourselves to other people. It can serve us as a touchstone, to explain ourselves to ourselves. It reminds us where we’ve come from, and just as important, it can shape what we shall become.

When the Unitarians and Universalists merged in 1960, they created a new set of bylaws. Article II of these bylaws included six principles. They contained many of the ideas that are familiar to us today. But they were shot through with male-oriented language. And they were very much oriented toward Christianity. So, the 6<sup>th</sup> Principle calls us “To encourage cooperation with *men* of good will in every land”. And the 2<sup>nd</sup> Principle calls us

*To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;*

Over time, the 1960 statement grew more and more out of sync with our living tradition. There was a growing recognition of faith traditions besides the Judeo-Christian one. There was a growing concern with ecology and the environmental crisis. And Unitarian Universalist women, especially, were critical of the male-oriented language.

The UU Women's Federation led a great push for gender equality, providing greater support for women in leadership positions, and eliminating sexist language from our hymnals, and our bylaws. This included a complete revision of Article II, as I've just described it, including the six principles.

The committee assigned to this task soon came up against the issue of Christianity. They resolved it by distinguishing seven core principles, which could be completely free of God-talk, and five "sources" of inspiration, which could identify specific faith traditions. People could more readily accept Jewish and Christian teachings as one of several historical influences, not necessarily the center of our faith anymore.

In 1984, the new Article II was adopted almost unanimously. It has lasted virtually unchanged since then, except when a sixth source of inspiration, the earth-centered traditions, was added in 1995.

When I first found Unitarian Universalism in the 1980s, the Seven Principles were still new. They helped me understand what drew me to this faith. They gave me seven entry-points to explore my spirituality, and to launch my own "free and responsible search for truth and meaning". When people asked me "what do you folks believe", the Principles and Sources helped me to frame my answer. And they fit nicely on a folded business card.

The First Principle, especially, has had a profound influence on me. It helps me to recognize what's sacred within each one of us. The inherent worth and dignity of each person is never far from my awareness when I confront tyranny, systemic oppression and inhuman cruelty in the world.

Although the First Principle is oriented towards individuals, the Seventh Principle seems to balance it out, affirming our interdependence with one another and the natural world. It teaches me that I am not separate from others, and all I depend on to live, as they depend upon me.

What have the Seven Principles meant to you, in your spiritual journey? Let's sit with this question for a moment, before we continue...

The Principles and Sources are now 37 years old. Over time, they have become entwined with every aspect of our religious life. They guide a congregation's mission, worship and programming. They form the basis for many curricula in religious education, such as the *Tapestry of Faith*. They provide an introduction to our faith for newcomers.

Over the years, there has been some criticism. Some people think the Principles are becoming a creed, in the way they are used. Although they don't articulate beliefs directly, they do so indirectly. As a whole, they seem to favor individualism over interdependence. Does the Seventh principle really give full voice to the creative nature of community? Some people think we could do better.

In recent years our Association has renewed its commitment to uproot racism in our institutions and in society. An Eighth Principle has been proposed, making an explicit commitment to work against racism and to work for Beloved Community. It was first drafted in 2013, and has been adopted by many congregations. It says that as member congregations, we will

*[Journey] toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse and multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.*

Some people have objected that we don't need to say this because it is implied by the other seven principles. Or they hear the word "accountability" and it seems to mean coercion. I know people in our congregation who disagree on these points.

In 2020, the UUA's Board of Trustees convened a Study Commission to review Article II. They charged the Commission to address all the issues I've described. It includes three lay leaders, the Rev. Cheryl M. Walker; and Dr. Paula Cole Jones, the person who first proposed the Eighth Principle and worked for its adoption. The study process has included a year of panel discussions, feedback sessions and surveys of congregations.

At this point, we come into the picture. This past November, I held a forum after church to review a current draft of Article II, and sent people's comments to the Study Commission. I followed this up with a Zoom meeting for people who could not attend the forum. They sent their comments to the Study Commission directly. They sent them just in time to be incorporated into a new draft, which was finally released in mid-January.

I'd like to share my thoughts about this current draft. There are some things I like about it, some things I don't like about it, and some interesting questions raised.

Like our church covenant, the proposed Article II takes Love as its starting point. Which raises the question: do we have a common understanding of what love means, in our church or our Association? Is it the radical, unconditional Love which is implied by our existing First Principle?

The proposed Article II describes accountability as an aspect of love. It uses the language of covenant, saying we are accountable to one another for living out our shared values. This falls squarely in the tradition of congregational polity: we are free to do things our own way, and we hold one another to living out our shared values.

The proposed Article II identifies six shared values grounded in Love: they are Interdependence, Pluralism, Justice, Transformation, Generosity and Equity. The descriptions of these values contain most of the ideas from the Seven Principles, maybe more. Compared to our Seven Principles, they use a lot more words. Will we be able to remember and communicate them in the same way? Perhaps we will learn to do so in new ways, to address new challenges.

The shared values do have a memorable structure. Each value is presented as one word, followed by a brief description, followed by the words "we covenant", and then, our intended actions.

I consider this to be an advantage of the proposed Article II: it is more truly a statement of covenant than the one we have now. The old Article II declares itself to be a covenant, but the only thing it asks of us is to "affirm and promote" certain concepts. The proposed Article II says what we mean to do about them.

I don't have time to go into each shared value. I'd like to consider the three that concern me most: Pluralism, Justice and Equity.

The shared value, Pluralism, is a word I often use to describe our faith, and I'm glad to see it named here. We recognize and affirm a diversity of culture, experience and theology. We embrace our differences and seek to learn from one another.

I'm also glad to say that the shared value, Justice, incorporates much of the proposed Eighth Principle. It specifically calls out racism, but it includes all forms of oppression. It names what we are working against, as well as what we are working for: to create Beloved Community, not only within our Association but in the larger world.

I'm not glad to say that the shared value, Equity, waters down our First Principle. It says each person has a right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. But I believe the existing First Principle is a stronger statement: a radical statement about the value of a human being. I believe that each person *has* inherent worth and dignity to *begin* with, and all our basic rights follow from this, including the right to flourish.

The proposed Article II has a section titled Inspirations which takes the place of our Six Sources. It makes a general statement about “the sacred and secular understandings that help us to live into our values”. But it no longer names them. We lose any specific reference to direct experience of mystery and wonder, prophetic people, the world's religions, Jewish and Christian teachings, reason and science, and Earth-centered traditions. I think I would miss these.

The proposed Article II represents a strong shift from individualism towards interdependence, which is essential to building a Beloved Community. For years, people have asked: what would it be like if the Seventh Principle came first? Perhaps we will find out.

I invite you to engage the proposed Article II, beginning with a discussion this morning, right after the service, in the Moore Room. It will go to General Assembly for a first vote this spring, and I will be one of your delegates. So, I look forward to hearing what you have to say.

Perhaps we can understand all these changes in light of our own experience – your experience – of changing your covenant, which took place a few years ago.

For over thirty years you espoused a covenant which begins: *Love is the doctrine of this church. The quest of truth is its sacrament, and service is its prayer.* For all the beauty of its language, this covenant became less acceptable over the years. Some of the words no longer rang true, for all of our members: words like “doctrine” and “sacrament” and “God” and “the Divine”.

So you went through a process of discernment and dialogue over many months, and created something new. Some of you were satisfied, some dissatisfied, but you continued to walk together in a spirit of Covenant.

The new covenant retains much of the spirit of the old one, but it puts some things into sharper focus, such as social justice. It begins with the same word as the old covenant, the word Love, which is still at the root of all our commitments.

Something like this is happening now in our Association. The old words no longer speak to everyone as they once did 37. What does it mean to redefine our core principles, in a tradition committed to freedom of belief?

I leave you with these words by our own Dan McKanan, speaking at last year's General Assembly about Article II, in the context of freedom. He says,

*One way to think about article two is as a toolkit for freedom. When we identify specific ideals that we hope to embody, or specific sources from which we have learned, we do not limit our freedom but provide it with room to grow. ... I think the current language of Article Two has been a good toolkit. I personally have become more free as a result. But many of us can think of ways it could become even better. As we grapple with the revision process, I hope we will continually ask, in what ways will this new language challenge our consciences? In what ways will it draw us more deeply into community? An article two that does both these things will truly make us free.*

So may it be.