

## Two Paths for the UUA Introduction

This is the first paper I published in the national UUA context, while I was in seminary. It was published in the UU Voice in 1998 or 1999.

## Two Paths for the UUA?

Tom Schade

Sometimes it appears that there are more divisions within the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations than there are people to uphold all the positions possible. The report from the Commission on Appraisal tells us that everyone is in the minority now, at least a theological minority. There are debates on whether we are a new world religion, or a new approach to being religious, or the most radical Protestants on the very edge of the Christian world. Beneath the surface of a rapidly eroding liberal political consensus are restive bodies of political/economic conservatives and neo-socialists urging a just economic society. We have begun to discuss the most difficult issue of social theory in US history: the relationship between race and class and its strategic implications. (This issue has shown itself capable of splitting united political organizations: what it will do to a church movement that lacks a common theology can only be imagined.) The humanist-theist debate, rather than being settled, regularly reappears in new and even more virulent forms, as people now trade charges of being abused and marginalized. There are precious few these days who do not feel that the Unitarian Universalist movement no longer speaks for them, or who does not feel that their rightful place in the movement is under threat.

The Commission on Appraisal has called us to undertake a re-covenanting process in which individuals and congregations would re-commit to what binds us together. Against the backdrop of rising disunity, unease and incipient factionalism, it is a brave call. It is especially brave because it seems to be an open-ended call, not offering a specific vision of the UUA around which to unite, but calling for dialogue and reflection, so that what we unify around emerges out of the process.

It is possible, however, to discern in the current situation, two competing visions of how the UUA should be.

- One path strengthens and preserves ourselves as a religious organization, rooted in the local worshipping congregation. It leads to a UUA of Faith.
- The other path is the slow transformation into a quasi-civic organization dedicated to interfaith tolerance, anti-racism and progressive politics. It leads to a secular UUA.

In many ways, these two visions share a basic assumptions. . Both assume that Unitarian Universalists will continue to be active in social and political causes that reflect our values. Both assume that we will continue to conduct worship on a regular basis. Both assume that the Unitarian Universalist movement will continue to be a theologically diverse religious movement. Where they differ is that how they organize that diversity: which parts of the organization are united on what principles, which parts are expected to be diverse. Therefore, one could say that they are competing organizational visions.

The following chart outlines the differences between these two paths. Are the differences exaggerated for contrast? Of course. Could one say "Both/And" or "Neither/Nor" to these choices. Most assuredly. But doesn't it make some things more clear?

	<i>The UUA of Faith</i>	<i>The Secular UUA</i>
<i>Basic Purpose</i>	To create and unite liberal religious congregations: worshipping communities of people bound by covenants of mutual respect and care and that embody spiritual freedom so that the people may hear and heed the call of God, however they may define it.	To create a social movement to advance a progressive agenda, most importantly, religious tolerance for those outside of the Christian majority, and most recently, anti-racism.
<i>At the Continental Level</i>	The continental level serves to support and encourage the congregations. It focuses primarily on providing resources for evangelism and growth. Its general direction is strongly influenced by the largest and most successful churches within the association. The path for the future is a "best practice" of a successful congregation. The person with the greatest influence is the minister of a healthy and growing church.	Congregations are united around the social and political stances that are concrete expressions of the 7 Principles. <b>The continental level is the center of the social and political life of Unitarian Universalism.</b> The general direction of the continental level is determined by its own political process: an interplay between staff and activists who participate at the continental level. The path for the future is set by a General Assembly resolution. The person with the greatest influence is a charismatic staff member.
<i>At the congregational Level</i>	<b>The center of the religious life of Unitarian Universalism is the congregation.</b> Congregations are communities united around a commonly held local worship tradition. They also engage in mutual support and encourage individuals to engage in social and political activities according to the dictates of their conscience.  <i>The local congregation is united in worship but politically diverse.</i>  Theological diversity is limited by the worship tradition of the local congregation. More diversity exists between congregations.	Congregations are the local chapters of the continental organization. Congregations are communities of mutual support engaging in local social and political activities which express the 7 principles. The 7 principles and the political and social stances that follow from them are the basis of unity of the local congregation.  <i>The local congregation is politically united but theologically diverse.</i>  Each congregation is home to the full range of theological diversity within the Association. Congregations are very similar.

	<i>The UUA of Faith</i>	<i>The Secular UUA</i>
<i>Worship</i>	<p>Worship and spiritual development are the central function of the congregation. Worship expresses the community's collective relationship to the ultimate concerns of life. The most important program that the local congregation offers to its community is a clear, distinct and satisfying form of worship.</p>	<p>Worship is primarily community building and inspirational. It provides emotional experiences which strengthen members' loyalties to the UUA and inspires them to engage in the activities to promote the 7 principles. Worship must not become divisive within the local congregation since that would weaken its ability to take social and political action. Worship, therefore, celebrates the theological diversity of the congregation by being syncretistic and representational.</p>
<i>The role of the Ministers</i>	<p>Ministers are the religious leaders of congregations, mediating between the current needs of the congregation and the spiritual traditions of that congregation. Ministers provide the religious vision for the churches they lead. They are theologians, teachers, worship leaders and pastors.</p> <p>Shared and lay ministry is an extension of and not a replacement of the ordained clergy. The purpose of shared and lay ministry is individual spiritual development within the context of the congregation.</p>	<p>Ministers are ritualists who create rituals and liturgies that express community concerns while respecting the theological diversity within the congregation. They are pastors, facilitators and worship leaders.</p> <p>Ministers are less important in congregations as shared ministry and lay ministry reduce the special role of the ordained clergy. The purpose of shared and lay ministry is reduce the hierarchical power of the ordained clergy. Shared ministry equals shared pulpit.</p>
<i>At the level of the Individual</i>	<p>Individuals develop within the religious and spiritual tradition of their congregation. <i>The individual is the center of the social and political actions of the church.</i></p>	<p>Individuals engage in personal religious practices reflecting their individual spiritual paths and preferences. <i>The individual is the center of the religious life of Unitarian Universalism.</i></p>

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<i>What is to be done?</i>	<p><i>Focus on the authority of the local congregation. Increase its power relative to the individual and increase its power relative to the continental.</i></p> <p>Increase the capacity of the local congregation and minister to develop an authentic worshipping community.</p> <p>Allow ministers and congregations to set boundaries around their worship.</p> <p>Increase lateral relationships between congregations.</p> <p>Encourage evangelism and new church growth through the efforts of existing churches and through special focus new starts.</p> <p>Resist the tendency to increase continental authority and staffing as the solution to every shortcoming in Unitarian Universalism.</p>	<p><i>Centralize -- increase the power of the congregation relative to the individual -- increase the power of continental relative to the congregation.</i></p> <p>Increase the capacity of local congregations to take corporate political and social action together through a critique of the individualism that allows small groups of members to stop congregational action.</p> <p>Increase the capability of the continental organization to take corporate action together by critiquing outmoded forms of congregational polity as being expressions of excessive individualism.</p> <p>Produce religious resources for individual home-based spiritual practices.</p> <p>Develop mechanisms to reward or sanction congregations according to how they unite with our political and social goals.</p> <p>Isolate those individuals who are unwilling to move local congregations into being anti-racist organizations.</p>
<i>The Bottom Line</i>	Unitarian Universalism is a religious movement based on spiritual freedom.	Unitarian Universalism is a secular movement upholding religious freedom.