



Neighborhood Unitarian  
Universalist Church

## What's Happening in Minneapolis?

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I would like to call your attention to a sentence on the back of your order of service. Right above our list of Seven Principles is the Preamble to our Principles and Purposes. It reads, "As a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association, we covenant to affirm and promote:" and it goes on to list the Principles. The Principles are spoken of in some form, directly or indirectly, every Sunday from just about every UU pulpit. Yet, the Preamble, equally as important, is often left alone.

Due to our history, as Unitarians who were the liberal wing of the Congregational Churches of New England and as Universalists, many who were former Baptists, we have a culture of skepticism surrounding central denominational authority or power. We prefer to emphasize that we are a free church, under no higher clerical authority, which can choose its own ministers and make its own decisions by democratic process. While this structure is true of Neighborhood Church and of all UU Churches, this congregation is a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, or UUA, for short.

The Preamble goes on to state that, as a member congregation we have entered into a covenant with the other member congregations of the Association. We have, in essence, agreed, covenanted, to affirm and promote a rough outline of the doctrine of Unitarian Universalism. The skeleton of Unitarian Universalist doctrine is our Principles and Purposes. "Doctrine" can sometimes be mistaken for "creed." While we are a non-creedal faith, that is, there is no faith-statement or belief system that one must profess to become a member of a Unitarian Universalist church; we are a doctrinal faith. In other words, in order to be in connection with the Unitarian Universalist Association, we have covenanted to share a doctrine, or set of beliefs, teachings, and ways of being with one another, with the other member congregations. We have agreed that our congregations' (and our own personal) actions be guided by and informed by the standards set forth in the Principles.

These Principles did not come to us engraved onto ancient stone tablets. In truth, they were adopted in 1985, fairly recently in our UU history. And, they are not at all set in stone, but rather are a living, breathing document, subject to- and most likely destined to- revision. They were drafted, debated, and voted on democratically (almost unanimously!) by delegates from UU congregations such as this one at the 1985 annual General Assembly of Congregations.

As we speak, over 3,000 members of UU congregations mostly hailing from the U.S. & Canada are at their fifth day of this year's General Assembly in Minneapolis, Minnesota. They have just wrapped up a Sunday morning worship service so spectacular it would put most typical mega-church Sundays to shame, are attending one of the last plenary sessions, or having lunch with old and new friends who share a common faith identity, before they will attend this evening's closing ceremony.

Not only is our General Assembly, or GA, the place where our doctrine is crafted and re-crafted, it is also a place where we gather with other UU's to live out our Principles. GA is different from any other convention (a comic book convention, video or board game convention, mystery novel, or emerging technologies conventions). It is different in that, as a religious body, our gathering has theological grounding. As I mentioned before, among our central values is the individual congregation's right to autonomy, to form religious communities that are self-determining, democratic, and egalitarian in governance. This governance structure is called congregational polity. So, why is participation in the larger Association important? Furthermore, what is the theological imperative to this participation?

We do take pride in the independence of our local congregations, and congregational polity does give us the right to, as a congregation, do as we choose. But, within congregational polity and when considering our covenanted

Principles, total congregation autonomy is fantasy. Congregational polity presupposes that free congregations that have covenanted with one another in common purpose and principle will share a commitment to and community with one another, while helping to sustain that Beloved Community.

We covenant, as member congregations, to journey together in support as a spiritual expression of our vision of Beloved Community. We come together as an Association at the district level, at our UUA's national offices in Boston, and most visibly, at our annual General Assemblies to practice the vision of our congregations, the vision stated beautifully in our Principles: the vision of a world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all, the vision of human relations governed by justice, equity, and compassion, and we practice the vision of a community in which everyone is recognized as possessing inherent worth and dignity and is responded to with acceptance and encouragement. And, we come together in our Association out of respect for our interdependence.

In 1997, the ninth Commission on Appraisal, commissioned by the UUA, submitted a report on congregational polity entitled, "Interdependence." In the introduction to the study, the Commission explains a bit about why they chose such a title as "Interdependence" for their report, There is inherent tension between the concepts of community and autonomy, similar to the often-expressed tension between responsibility and freedom. However, community and autonomy do not exclude one another but enhance one another, for the essential function of the congregation is to link the individual to a religious community. It is to mediate between the individual and the "church universal." It is to link the local congregation with other congregations and indeed with peoples of faith universally.

We did not begin the practice of a General Assembly of Unitarian Universalist congregations until after the merger of the Unitarian and Universalist churches in 1961. The theological roots of our congregational polity were planted in 1648 in the document, drafted by Massachusetts Congregational churches, known as the Cambridge Platform, which stated that "there is no greater church than a congregation", no higher authority than the autonomous church in which members have the right to determine their own leaders and standards of membership. It also notes that congregations have a responsibility to each other in the areas of: care, recommendation, participation, relief, consultation, and admonition.

Today, we have retained from the Cambridge Platform that no power beyond a congregation is recognized (we do not have Bishops, synods, or any other higher authority), we may- on the congregational level, choose and ordain our own clergy, elect our own officers of the church and assign them their duty and direction and replace them when necessary. We have veered from this original document in that: we have struck the language of "the Lordship of Christ", our leaders are our democratically elected delegates, not regarded as models of Christ on earth (sorry, any Board members present!), and we do not recognize some and not others as "elected" by God for salvation. Also, the Platform held that congregations were bound together "because all are united unto Christ", whereas now we are bound by our covenanted Principles.

The American Unitarian Association was formed in 1825 after a rough twenty-five years of division between Conservative and Liberal Congregationalists. In 1825, the AUA, as it was called, mainly existed to publish & distribute pamphlets and Unitarian religious tracts. The early Unitarians were not great at organizing inter-congregational meetings. After the Civil War, a National Conference of Unitarian Churches was held, with over 200 congregations represented. The National Conference reaffirmed that churches were responsible for one another's welfare. The name of the National Conference was changed to the General Conference in 1911 to recognize the involvement of Canadian Unitarian churches. And, in 1925, the Association and the Conference merged under the name of the Association. The annual Conference increasingly became the venue for the denomination's policy decisions and business.

Seventeen Universalists gathered denominationally (from 8 Universalist societies) in Philadelphia in 1790 and drafted the articles of faith and denominational structure known as the Philadelphia Platform. The polity set forth in the Platform held similarities to both Congregationalism and Presbyterianism, calling for annual meetings to hear reports from each Universalist society, to "send forth ministers and propagate the gospel," and to "advise and recommend" actions to churches. By 1794, the New England Convention of Universalists had also adopted the Philadelphia Platform, merging to form the General Convention of Universalists. The Universalists were better about denominational meetings than the Unitarians, and so, recognizing the increasing multiplicity of belief and practice among the societies, they drafted the Winchester Profession in 1803 in Winchester, New Hampshire.

The Profession formed regional associations of congregations for mutual support and, one of the most significant lasting legacies of the Winchester Profession is the "liberty clause", which states that no congregation may have a creedal test for membership. The Universalists were almost too keen to form inter-congregational meetings. They held the big annual General Convention, State Conventions, local associations, and of course, met each Sunday at the congregational level. While the Unitarian congregations ordained their clergy, most Universalist clergy were credentialed and ordained through state conventions. This practice continued until the 1961 merger that created the Unitarian Universalist Association, although the Universalist General Convention's name was changed in the 1930's to the Universalist Church of America, or UCA.

The Universalists brought to our movement a deep awareness of the value of coming together beyond the local congregation, as UCA Superintendant Robert Cummins stated, A local parish is The Universalist Church finding expression and taking form in a given locality. It is not an independent body; nor is it merely a part or segment of the Church as a whole. It is the whole of the Universalist Church coming to focus within a particular group of Universalists at a particular place.

So, what happens at our General Assemblies? After all, the title of this sermon is "What's Happening In Minneapolis?" Today, General Assemblies are a mix of worship, lectures, panel discussions, workshops, social witness events, performances, social and recreational events, youth and young adult caucus events, day camp activities for the kids, and meetings of associate and affiliated groups, such as Interweave, our denomination's GLBT and Straight Alliance, and DRUUMM, our People of Color organization. According to our UUA Bylaws, the General Assembly is primarily a business meeting. During Plenary sessions, delegates from each attending congregation debate and vote on proposed amendments to the Bylaws & Rules, one UUA Statement of Conscience per year, Study/Action Issues for Social Justice, business resolutions, General Assembly Actions of Immediate Witness, and any other matter of business. Attending a plenary as a delegate or simply as a General Assembly participant offers a glimpse into the diversity of viewpoints that comprise our movement.

This year is an exciting General Assembly and I encourage you all to check out the online coverage at [uua.org](http://uua.org). Among the highlights this year has been the participation in a marriage equality rally as part of the Twin Cities Pride celebrations, helping to give a facelift to an impoverished neighborhood, beautiful worship services (I watched some on streaming video), governance changes to the UUA Board, and a statement of conscience regarding peace-making. Also, after long, and often emotional debate, the delegates to the Assembly have overwhelmingly voted to hold the 2012 General Assembly as originally scheduled in Phoenix, Arizona but with a focus almost entirely on public witness rather than business and on-the-ground education on fair and humane immigration reform in partnership with local community organizations. The General Assembly has also chosen the subject of immigration as this year's Study/Action Issue.

Since we're here today, we obviously didn't make it out to the General Assembly this year, but I urge you to try to make the pilgrimage at some point. At the opening worship on Wednesday evening, several UU's of various ages and backgrounds gave short introductions and concluded by exclaiming, "I am the UUA!" I would add, "so are all of us!" The Association is not just the staff, the bureaucracy that sits up on Beacon Hill in Boston. The UUA is an Association of Congregations and congregations are made up of individuals. Not only will you practice interdependence and make real our vision of Beloved Community, but by attending, it's also just a hell of a lot of fun!