

# The Welcoming Congregation Program as a Successful Model for Engaging Unitarian Universalists on Behalf of Social Justice

A Theological Analysis by Michelle Walsh

**471**

Love is the doctrine of this church,  
The quest of truth is its  
sacrament,  
And service is its prayer.

To dwell together in peace,  
To seek knowledge in freedom,  
To serve human need,  
To the end that all souls shall  
grow into harmony with  
the Divine –

Thus do we covenant with each  
other and with God.

- Arranged by L. Griswold Williams

**584**

We are caught in an inescapable  
network of mutuality, tied in a  
single garment of destiny.

*Injustice anywhere is a threat to  
justice everywhere.*

There are some things in our social  
system to which all of us ought to  
be maladjusted.

*Hatred and bitterness can never  
cure the disease of fear, only love  
can do that.*

We must evolve for all human  
conflict a method which rejects  
revenge, aggression, and retaliation.

- Martin Luther King, Jr.

**473**

Love is the spirit of this church,  
and service its law.  
This is our great covenant:  
To dwell together in peace,  
To seek the truth in love,  
And to help one another.

- James Vila Blake

**Readings are selected from the  
Unitarian Universalist hymnal:  
Singing The Living Tradition.**

*The foundation for such a method  
is love.*

Before it is too late, we must narrow  
the gaping chasm between our  
proclamations of peace and our lowly  
deeds which precipitate and perpetuate war.

*One day we must come to see  
that peace is not merely a distant  
goal that we seek but a means by  
which we arrive at that goal.*

We must pursue peaceful ends  
through peaceful means.

*We shall hew out of the mountain  
of despair, a stone of hope.*

**Thesis Question:** How does the Welcoming Congregation model motivate Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations to engage in social justice and hold them accountable in a manner consistent with their covenanted principles and purposes?

## Introduction

The Welcoming Congregation program of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) is a widely acknowledged successful means of engaging UU congregations on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender concerns and allows for a public proclamation by the congregation of action and accountability to their UU principles and purposes (see Attachment #1). Of the approximately 1,050 UU congregations nationally, 412 (as of 3/10/04) are officially recognized as Welcoming Congregations, with more in process – a significant number for a denomination based in congregational polity (see Attachment #2). This paper will explore historical, sociological, and theological reasons for this success, including movement at congregational request toward creation of a similar model on behalf of racial justice concerns. Some key historical, theological, and sociological developments in Unitarian Universalism as a denomination will be considered first. Then specifics of the Welcoming Congregation model history, content, and proposed application to anti-racism justice work in the Unitarian Universalist denomination will be examined. Finally, a theological analysis will be conducted of the success of this model in fulfilling the missiology of the Unitarian Universalist denomination today, with particular attention to the ideas of covenant, hospitality, beloved community, small group ministry, social



justice, and public ministry on behalf of UU principles and purposes. A conclusion will summarize these findings, potential pitfalls in new applications of the model, and areas for future investigation, particularly in light of direct challenges posed to Unitarian Universalists by sociologist and Episcopalian Robert Bellah in his 1998 UUA General Assembly address, as well as the current demographic limitations and level of overall privilege of UU congregations (attached picture taken from <http://users.adelphia.net/~groganfam/uucf/welcoming.html>, 11/12/04).

### **A Few Key Historical, Theological, and Sociological Developments**

Unitarian Universalism is only slightly older than 40 years as a merged denomination, and this history is important to bear in mind in its current development and concerns. [The international history and developments of Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism will be outside the scope of this particular paper (see Attachments #3 and #4 for further information).] While deeply influenced by the respective historical religious traditions and sociological forms and structures of Unitarianism and Universalism, the merged denomination is in fact a new American denomination, formed in the crucible of the civil rights movements and Vietnam War of the 1960's and 1970's. Unitarian Universalism is only beginning to come of age today in its identity formation and missiology as a merged denomination. Many ministers and other leaders aged 50-70 in the denomination today were deeply influenced by the larger American cultural and political events of the 1960's and 70's. These included specific and often painful intra-denominational conflicts in struggles to unite the denominations theologically, survive early threatened financial disaster, and integrate challenges posed by the call for

empowerment by successive diverse marginalized interest groups, including the impact of the 1969 walkout over racial justice issues at the Boston national General Assembly in the group historical memories of many. Opinions and feelings still run high at times and can continue to motivate the formation or avoidance of public UU dialogue in sensitive areas, such as anti-racism work in particular.

Historically, Unitarianism and Universalism developed separately in the United States as Protestant denominations grounded in liberal reactions to New England Calvinist traditions, particularly in the formation of covenantal theology (see Holifield, pp. 34-42; Miller, pp. 56-98, and Harvey, pp. 60-62), and in the development of congregational polity (see Richardson, pp. 211-217). The contemporary use of covenantal theology by Unitarian Universalists will be explored in more depth in the analysis section of this paper, but it should be noted that its original use was grounded in biblical theology and referred to a first “covenant of works” by God with Adam, which Adam fails to uphold resulting in the ‘fall of man,’ and then to a second “covenant of



grace” by God through Jesus, whose perfect obedience in death results in the forgiveness of humankind and the granting of eternal life and salvation by God (attached picture is William Blake, “God Judging Adam,” 1795, Tate Gallery, London).

As New England Protestantism developed, theologians and preachers worked the idea of “dual covenants” in different ways to affirm both ideas as the context demanded it. “The ambiguities of covenantal thought allowed it to preserve conflicting religious

values.” (Holifield, p. 40) Congregational polity was founded in the idea of the covenant and a belief that the saints elected by grace would naturally want to engage in God’s work, that they needed no external motivation in this liberal utopian vision. “The covenant upon which a Congregational church was founded was viewed by the theologians in the same light as the political compact. It was held to be a miniature edition of the divine covenant. The saints come together and formally agree to carry out in ecclesiastical life the obligations to which they stand individually bound by their covenant with God. The duties and requirements are those determined in the covenant of grace. The church compact is the agreement of the people in a body to constitute an institution which will facilitate the achievement of these ends.” (Miller, p. 91) It also had broad applicability to the development of many New England social institutions beyond the church, including legal and political institutions. “Every social relationship grounded in mutual free consent presupposed a covenant, whether implicit or explicit.” (Holifield, p. 41)

A breath of liberalism was inherent as well in the *relational* character of the covenant – in the idea that God might be reaching for, treasuring, and seeking to forgive finite fallible human beings, that God was desirous of right and renewed relation and not simply punishment. “As soon as the theologians of this school had explained what a covenant



involved, they realized that they had come upon an invaluable opportunity to present the hitherto stern Deity in a new light. The very fact that God allows Himself to become

committed to His creature must be in itself an indication of His essential disposition.

Hence, if God condescends to treat with fallen man as with an equal, God must be a

kindly and solicitous being.” (Miller, p. 64). (Attached picture from

<http://www.wherepeacefulwaters.com/readings/GOD'S-3.jpg>, 11/12/04).



Taking this liberal line of thinking even farther, theologians began to conceive of a progressive kindly compassionate God acting in history on behalf of God’s poor finite creatures so that revelation was gradual and at a pace that God’s more limited creatures might be ready to receive it. Revelation was not sealed but was progressive in nature and open to the use of all of the new tools of the Enlightenment to understand God’s purpose and plan.

“The effect of this theory was to introduce an element of historical relativism into the absolute dogmatism of original Calvinism. God is seen deliberately refraining from putting His decisions fully into effect until man can cope with them and profit by them.

He is not so much a mail-clad seigneur as a skillful teacher, and He contrives on every hand that men may be brought to truth, *not by compulsion, but by conviction* [emphasis added].

For these reasons theologians of this complexion were eagerly disposed to prize knowledge, logic, metaphysics, and history. They were prepared to go as far as their age

could go in the study of Biblical history and commentary, for truth to them resided in the history as well as in the doctrine.” (Miller, p. 69). (Attached picture taken from

[http://www.daily-word-of-life.com/prayer\\_bible.htm](http://www.daily-word-of-life.com/prayer_bible.htm), 11/12/04).

These three aspects of developing American Protestant theological history – God’s attitude as compassionate and reaching toward humankind, an impulse to do God’s work as the natural outcome of experiencing God’s grace and compassion, and congregational polity as the means for experiencing a utopian kingdom of God on earth – are embedded in modified forms in contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Universalism would take the emphasis on God’s benevolent nature to its furthest extreme in promoting universal salvation, while Unitarianism would stress the Enlightenment principles of human reason, freedom, and tolerance and a sense of onward and upward social progress through the path of education and the church (see Howe and Wright). Theologically, however, taken to its logical extreme, this type of liberalism would be inadequate to deal with the problem of evil and suffering in the magnitude encountered in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Where was the benevolent God acting progressively in history through gradual revelation to rational and competent human beings in such things as the Holocaust and other blood baths of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?

Sociologically, as one of the most democratic forms of religious organization, Unitarian Universalism has been impacted greatly by the contemporary problems of secularization, pluralization, plausibility, and legitimation (see Berger). “The key characteristic of all pluralistic situations, whatever the details of their historical background, is that the religious ex-monopolies can no longer take for granted the allegiance of their client populations. Allegiance is voluntary and thus, by definition, less than certain. As a result, the religious tradition, which previously could be authoritatively imposed, now has to be marketed. It must be ‘sold’ to a clientele that is no longer constrained to ‘buy.’ The pluralistic situation is, above all, a market situation. In it, the

religious institutions become marketing agencies and the religious traditions become consumer commodities...Now the religious groups must organize themselves in such a way as to woo a population of consumers, in competition with other groups having the same purpose. All at once, the question of 'results' becomes important." (Berger, p. 138-139)

Additionally, sociologist Robert Bellah has pointed out that Americans lack a deep spiritual language of community to counterbalance these market tendencies. In his classic 1985 study entitled Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life, Bellah writes: "If there are vast numbers of a selfish, narcissistic 'me generation' in America, we did not find them, but we certainly did find that the language of individualism, the primary American language of self-understanding, limits the ways in which people think." (Bellah, p. 290) It is not that Americans are heartless cynics who do not value community or care about the suffering of others. They are sociologically trapped by a culture that does not know how to talk about community because it is culturally and historically rooted in a false idea of "ontological individualism," an idea derived from its Protestant tradition of dissent. (Bellah, UUA General Assembly 1998) This point will be revisited in the theological analysis and conclusion of this paper as it impacts particularly on Unitarian Universalists today according to Bellah.

Adherence to a body of principles through the means of congregational polity in a consumer driven democratic economy holds the paradoxical promise of great depth or utter superficiality in practice. Unitarian Universalist members can choose to create or follow programs offering depth of practice in understanding and implementing their principles – or not. They can choose to implement programs designed by their national

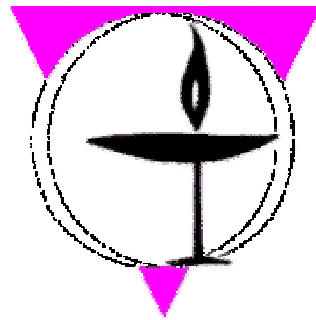


service association, the Unitarian Universalist Association, and dialogue with that body – or try to chart their own individualistic path and reject denominational politics and development. “Congregational polity has been an important defining aspect of the Unitarian message, that a religious community may organize democratically to conduct and nurture its life, that it can stand independent of any external structures of authority...a democratic congregation can be a remarkable spiritual discipline for its members in and of itself. However, both in times of prosperity and in times of adversity, this same self-reliance has not well honed the art of collaboration with other independent congregations...In addition...there has been an acceleration away from an organic concept of the churches as a body charged with the well-being of society to an emphasis upon the church (singular) as a community of individuals each of whom is charged to develop an independent journey of religious orientation and social involvement. This is a radical form of congregational polity. While such an understanding accentuates the importance of the individual responsibility for spiritual growth it has been difficult to stimulate sustained mutual sharing and encouragement in that growth. It has been equally difficult to enlist corporate action of the whole body of the church – each church – in society, let alone action by groups of congregations working together.” (Richardson, p. 216)

Contemporary Unitarian Universalism is facing these historical, theological, and sociological legacies in the motivation and engagement of its congregations on behalf of public ministry – ministry beyond the walls of the congregation on behalf of UU principles and social justice. According to a 1997 survey, Unitarian Universalist congregations are predominantly white, middle-class and suburban, though highly

diverse theologically today (see Stites). Older UU's tend to identify with humanism while younger UU's identify with more spiritual theologies, and ministers are often more theistic than the lay people they serve according to this survey. According to a 2000 study in which over 50% of all UU congregations responded (see Cowtan), 96% of Unitarian Universalist congregations report less than 40% of their current membership consists of lifelong UU's. This has led to one contemporary UU theologian, Thandeka, to refer to UU's as the 'church of replenishing strangers' (see Thandeka, General Assembly 2003). This creates a particularly strong challenge for the process of covenantal renewal on a denominational basis.

Unitarian Universalist theologians, ministers, and leadership, including at the national level of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), have wrestled with these issues and questions in a variety of ways. The Welcoming Congregation program on behalf of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender concerns has been one program that has made a significant inroad into the congregations, so much so that congregations are asking the UUA to develop a similar model in application to anti-racism work. This paper will now look at the Welcoming Congregation model in more depth and then analyze the success of this model in light of contemporary uses of covenantal theology and renewal at the denomination level, through the "Fulfilling The Promise" and "Our Common Call" strategic focus between 1996-2000, and on the congregational level, through the programs of small group ministry and efforts to recapture a theologically unifying



language of reverence using the ideas of hospitality and beloved community. (Attached picture taken from <http://uuc.org/welcomingcongregation.html>, 11/12/04).

### **The Welcoming Congregation: History, Model, and Proposed New Applications**

Prefatory Note: There is no consolidated study or history as yet of Unitarian Universalist work on homophobia, and the development of the Welcoming Congregation model in particular, unlike documentation that exists and is being created on UU anti-racism efforts. (It is interesting to note in this that more resources have been spent on examining areas in social justice work that have failed or been problematic than on areas that have been successful and might yield suggestions for future developments.) This section of the paper is thus indebted to and relies heavily on an interview on 3/2/04 with Rev. Keith Kron, the current director of the UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Concerns (OBGLTC) as well as email conversations with his assistant Simona Munson; on material available on the UUA website ([www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org)); on email conversations with Rev. John Buehrens, former UUA president; and on the Welcoming Congregation handbooks and a recent historical summary of the development of the Unitarian Universalist Association by Warren Ross. It was also recommended that Rev. Jay Deacon, a former director of OBGLTC be contacted for further history, but he did not respond despite several attempts to reach him.

A history of significant events in UU support of bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender issues from 1967-2001 may be found on the UU website and is attached (see Attachment #5). Rev. Kron highlighted particular events, starting with a UU Committee on Goals survey in 1967 that showed a significant level of prejudice and discomfort with

homosexuality among UU congregants (though he also states that as early 1965 some UU's had gathered in Dallas, TX to discuss concerns). In June 1969, amidst a turbulent era of civil rights agitation, the Stonewall Riots, a milestone in the gay liberation movement, occurred. A month later, at the Boston UUA General Assembly, a large number of delegates walked out in protest over racial justice concerns, creating anxiety about a split in the newly formed merged denomination (though Rev. Buehrens believes the fear was always greater than the potential reality). In September 1969, Rev. James Stoll became the first UU minister to publicly declare himself to be a homosexual, and he never served again according to Rev. Kron.



(Attached picture taken from <http://www.anora.org/ursophile/Stonewall.html>, 11/12/04).

Then in 1970, from the floor of the General Assembly, the first resolution to end discrimination against homosexuals and bisexuals, and a call to develop sex education programs promoting a healthy attitude toward all forms of sexuality, was successfully made. Rev. Kron believes that delegates were fearful of another walkout and more division in the denomination if they did not take active accommodating steps. In 1971, the “About Your Sexuality” curriculum was introduced to UU religious education leaders, and in June 1973, despite opposition from the UUA, the General Assembly called for the creation of an Office of Gay Affairs – though it took until 1974 and another General Assembly vote to fund the office and until 1975 for a leader to be appointed. It

is interesting to note that leadership of all of these radically new initiatives occurred from the floor of the General Assembly and congregational demand rather than the UUA.

In 1985, a crucial weekend meeting occurred of BGLT UU's in Houston, TX, according to Rev. Kron. It was the first Interweave Convocation of 150 people discussing homophobia in Unitarian Universalism, and this organization would continue to operate as an accountability organization for UU work in this area through to the present. In 1986, this group invited then UUA president William Schultz to speak in San Diego, CA and the "Common Vision Planning Committee" was initiated. Rev. Kron also notes that the UUA may have heard that the United Church of Christ was mobilizing on gay rights as well and the UUA "wanted to be first" (thus the factor of competition and novelty is interesting to note as well). In 1988, focus groups were formed in congregations to lead conversations in this area and an ad was run in the UU World magazine with a survey. Again the responses indicated a much wider range of negative perceptions than expected.

In the fall of 1988, a group of 20 national UU leaders from different groups, still predominantly BGLT rather than heterosexual allies, met for a weekend retreat at the Arlington Street UU church in Boston to discuss next steps. Rev. Kron was among those 20 and remembers that the greatest debate occurred over the naming of the new action program. First, options to name it "welcoming," vs. "affirming," vs. "reconciliation" were debated, with Rev. Kron remembering that "welcoming" was the preferred language because it somehow seemed more "positive" to the participants. [Note that other denominations have done work in this area and have used the other two words in their religious language with more Christian connotations. See the website for Reconciling

Ministries Network in particular, [www.rmnetwork.org](http://www.rmnetwork.org).] The second debate centered on the use of the word “congregation” vs. “church.” Again, the former was opted for, and Rev. Kron recalls this as a legacy of participants who came from the fellowship movement of the 1950’s in Unitarianism – generally lay-led and anti-minister. [In the agenda for the weekend meeting, the program was initially called “Welcoming Church.”] Action steps and the beginning of a Welcoming Congregation program model were discussed based on programs and focus groups that had been developed at the First Church of San Diego and the Unitarian Universalist Church of Lexington, KY.

The Common Vision Report was created and submitted to the 1989 General Assembly and a resolution was passed to create the Welcoming Congregation program through the then known as Office of Lesbian and Gay Concerns. [A copy of this original Common Vision Report has been unable to be located at present, though the resolution is Attachment #6. The resolution is filled with references to UU Principles and Purposes as a specific accountability tactic.] Two lesbian women with training in diversity and multiculturalism were hired to write the Welcoming Congregation manual, and in 1990



the first edition was published. In 1991, the First Parish in Brewster, MA became the first congregation to be officially certified as a Welcoming Congregation. [This particular congregation has been at the forefront of an unusual number of movements within the UUA, including anti-racism work and small group ministry. (see Kujawa-Holbrook, pp. 152-176 and Hill, p. 43)] By 1996, 57 congregations were certified, approximately 10 per year,

and then exponential growth began until today there are 412 congregations certified as of 3/10/04 (see again Attachment #2), growing at a rate of 40-50 per year according to Rev. Kron. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.fpbuu.org>, 11/12/04).

The Welcoming Congregation program is one of commitment by a congregation to uprooting homophobia institutionally and to meeting in small group format until the program has been thoroughly integrated into the life of the congregation. It consists of a series of workshops and steps outlined in a handbook for members of a congregation, who first assess and educate themselves on a range of attitudes about sexual orientation and the history and myths of homophobia, but who also then take action steps toward assessing the use of inclusive language in worship, in congregational by-laws, in religious education, etc. In the process, this entails the sharing of thoughts, feelings, and experiences – the telling of personal stories – in a small group format (consistent with small group ministry or covenant groups). A final step is the creation of institutional mechanisms in the congregation for ongoing intentional inclusivity and outreach, such as a Welcoming Congregation Committee. Rev. Kron says that: “The success of Welcoming Congregation is in getting people together and talking about things they haven’t talked together about before.” Once a congregation documents to the UUA Office of Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Concerns that they have completed the required action steps, they receive a certification and a poster proclaiming that they are officially a “Welcoming Congregation.” [See Attachments #7 thru #10, particularly Attachment #9 on specific current action steps required, organized by areas of education, congregational life, and community outreach.]

In 1996, Rev. Kron became the director of the Office of Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Concerns, and one of his first actions was to change the name of the department to encompass Transgender concerns. He also noted that the Welcoming Congregation program manual required a major revision [which was completed in 1999] to encompass bisexual and transgender concerns, as well as the interlocking nature of oppressions such as racism and homophobia (including class, age, religion, ability, etc.), and to address issues raised by the radical right. A significant concern to Rev. Kron was that the program as it first existed tended to treat gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender congregants as tools for the education of heterosexual congregants, rather than embodying an attitude that “all are teachers, and all are learners.” OBGLT congregants taking the course “should have the same opportunity for personal depth work as heterosexual participants.” He modified questions throughout the manual to be more open-ended. For example, program participants take an attitude questionnaire at the start, and an example of one of the many questions changed between the two editions is instead of simply rating on a scale from 1 to 5 a single response to: “Would you be uncomfortable learning that your best friend was a gay, lesbian, or bisexual person?” – in the second edition this becomes a question with a rating from 1 to 5 for each of the categories: “Would you be uncomfortable learning that your best friend was a....gay man? lesbian? bisexual person? transgender person? heterosexual person?” In another example, a workshop originally entitled “How Homophobia Hurts Heterosexuals” is changed in the second edition to “How Homophobia Hurts Us All.”

Also significantly, Rev. Kron chose to add opening and closing spiritual elements grounded in UU chalice lighting, hymns and readings to each of the 15 workshops.



Workshops from the first edition read as though they could have been easily transplanted to any secular setting for diversity training, rather than being conducted in a religious congregation with a conscious connection to UU Principles and Purposes and Living Tradition. This connection is most explicitly made in a new workshop entitled “Religion and Homosexuality” in the second edition.

Finally, Rev. Kron, a former elementary school teacher, edited the manual to reach a diversity of learning styles in the workshops and to reflect 8 years of experience in implementing the program, with notes on modifications for size of congregation, geographical location, and common questions that are raised. [Half of the currently certified Welcoming Congregations became so after the release of the second edition in 1999, but Rev. Kron is uncertain if this is coincidence or if the rapid growth was related to enthusiasm for the revised curriculum.] In the early years, Rev. Kron states that anecdotal data showed that congregations were afraid that they were going to become primarily a gay church and risk losing funders. By 1996-1997, most congregations had stopped being public about fears of pledge withdrawal or loss of members in this process. The priority of questions raised these days are: (1) Aren't we already welcoming as UU's?; (2) Why are we only welcoming gay folks in particular?; and (3) Isn't this an example of the UUA trying to tell us what to do? Rev. Kron states that the tactic in dealing with these concerns, other than how they are addressed in the handbook, is to stress the completely voluntary nature of the program and that the UUA and his office are available as resources if and when the congregation is interested in doing this program.

However, again in a very interesting and highly significant move toward accountability and public information access, when Rev. Kron became director in 1996,

he immediately moved to capitalize on the availability of the UUA website to publicize which congregations had become Welcoming Congregations and the actual percentages by district across the country (again see Attachment #2). Some congregations complained that this was “embarrassing,” while others were “fascinated” by this availability of statistics and use of a website. It appeared to act as a catalyst for more congregations to seek out this program, both from not wanting to be left out of a growing initiative (a positive use of UU competitiveness) and as a genuine opportunity to more publicly proclaim their faith in action. Rev. Kron states that if at least one congregation in an area of the country completes the program, another is likely to do so, though progress has still been slow primarily in the Southern states. Rev. Kron’s office has also found that at least four people are needed as a core team to start the process, and there should be either more than 4 or paradoxically zero GLBT congregants. Additionally, the support and participation of the minister can be extremely helpful, but the opposition or nonsupport of the minister is a critical barrier. Given the fundamental importance of the minister’s involvement in or attitude toward anti-oppression work, Rev. Kron’s office and the UUA have been supporting the implementation of the “Beyond Categorical Thinking” program (see Attachment #11) for congregations, when they are in a search process for a new minister. This program is designed to broaden their consciousness and enhance opportunities for diversity and greater inclusivity in their search for and decision on a minister to be called.

There is not a recertification process for the Welcoming Congregation program so there is not an accountability mechanism through the UUA for measuring the success of institutional mechanisms within the congregation in sustaining the program. However,

Rev. Kron states that congregations must do the revised version of the program if they want a poster with the word “transgender” added, and there is a new “Welcoming Congregation II: Living the Welcoming Congregation” curriculum coming out this year. Congregations will be able to use this program to deepen their process around these issues (and presumably this data may also become available on the UUA website). Workshops on the Welcoming Congregation program continue to be offered annually at General Assembly, and there is occasional newspaper publicity around it, particularly now in Massachusetts regarding the issue of gay marriage (see Attachments #12 thru #21). In fact, as seen in these multiple attachments, the UUA website is being used as an effective vehicle for the public proclamation of faith in action by UU’s.

Over 2001-2003, four Common Ground meetings were held with UU congregations representing San Francisco, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Dallas, TX regarding the anti-racism work of the Journey Toward Wholeness committee of the UUA. In these meetings, interest was expressed by the congregations for the UUA to develop a Welcoming Congregation model applied to anti-racism work. Renewed commitment to anti-racism work within Unitarian Universalism began in the 1990’s, springing again out of General Assembly resolutions and then being applied top down from the board of the UUA to various UU institutions (see Attachment #22). A variety of tactics and strategies have been explored, including the use of the Lutheran organization Crossroads Ministry to develop a UU anti-



racism training program, with the end goal being the transformation of the UUA into an anti-oppressive, anti-racist, multicultural faith community. To examine these initiatives in detail is outside the scope of this particular paper, but it is interesting to note that the Welcoming Congregation model has now generated interest by the congregations themselves for application in this work (see Attachment #23). At the time of the interview with Rev. Kron, another weekend retreat with 20 people representing key constituent communities in the building of this new Anti-Racist Multicultural Welcoming Congregation project had just occurred. Rev. Kron reports that, in discussion, participants expressed a desire for this new project model to deepen congregants' experience of what it means to be "hospitable" and to have diversity awareness. He stressed that congregations have grasped that the idea of "Welcoming Congregation" is related to basic hospitality and the welcoming of newcomers. The reasons and potential for this will be explored next in the theological analysis and conclusion. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.ucsbdailynews.com/opinion/2004/6909.html>, 11/12/04, copyright Toby Keller/Daily Nexus).

### **Theological Analysis of the Welcoming Congregation Model**

The idea of "covenant," both on a denominational level, through strategic evaluation and renewal of Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes, and on a congregational level, through congregational polity and small group ministry, has been a theological premise underlying first order beliefs and spiritual practices about the purpose and function (the missiology) of the UU church and where the mechanisms of accountability should reside. The Welcoming Congregation model has been a successful

contemporary example of the implementation a UU covenant on both of these levels – it engages congregations on accountability to larger UU principles and purposes and resolutions on a denominational level, and it engages individual members in personal in-depth spiritual commitment to one another – so much so that members from the ground of UU congregations want the model applied to other areas of social justice work.

Practical mechanisms for engaging commitment and accountability on the denominational level have included: (1) the conscious use of UU principles and purposes by members on the ground floor of the democratic body of the General Assembly for accountability in moving the commitment of the denomination forward on anti-oppression work; (2) the specific small group organizing efforts by a few dedicated individuals, deliberately representing key stakeholders and allies in the process, to analyze either their strategic impact point for change or the method and materials of engagement, whether advocating for change in the denomination at General Assembly or in a specific congregation or institution (parallels exist in the black empowerment and women’s movement in the UUA); (3) the creative use of an extensive UUA website to enhance public visibility and accountability on the proclamation of faith in doing anti-oppression work (this has been an even greater public step toward communal recognition, particularly on a district or regional level, than the individualized certification of a particular congregation); (4) the conscious interweaving of Unitarian Universalist worship practices and liturgy into the content of the second edition of the Welcoming Congregation handbook to enhance the explicit knowledge of Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes as they are illustrated in action or deed; (5) the deliberate consideration and outlining of very concrete action steps toward dismantling homophobia

in an institutional context while stressing the voluntary and self-paced nature of the program; and now (6) the release of a follow-up curriculum, “Living The Welcoming Congregation,” to encourage renewal of the covenanting process and commitment to a deeper level of engagement with UU principles and purposes.

Practical mechanisms for engaging individual members of the congregation in small group ministry/covenant group format have included: (1) again, the conscious connection to a spiritual ground in specific UU worship practices (liturgy such as the Singing The Living Tradition hymnal); (2) the intimate face-to-face design of the workshops and opportunity to tell one’s story, thoughts, feelings, experiences in depth; (3) the redesign of the program workshops and questionnaires to enhance the participation and equal treatment of each member of the group and to minimize assumptions; and (4) the creative use of exercises to maximize connecting with different individual learning styles and to encourage affective engagement beyond simply intellectual understanding so that motivation and commitment deepens in the process.

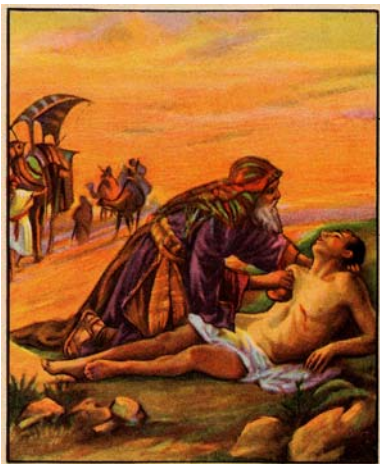
As discussed previously, covenantal theology was developed in the American Protestant tradition as a means of holding two very different ideas of covenant in tension – a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, both of which depended on a theistic idea of a God who dispensed stern punishment or compassionate grace. Contemporary Unitarian Universalism has no theological agreement on the nature of God (or even if there is a God) nor on the form of ultimate reality – this aspect of a member’s theological belief system falls within the range of the utterly personal concern for contemporary Unitarian Universalists. Unitarian Universalists are comfortable living in mystery regarding the ultimate source as long as agreement can be reached on how to act toward

one another and live in community – the question becomes how large a community the individual Unitarian Universalist member feels a sense of connection to and motivated to participate in, and how the denomination as a whole engages the individual and her or his congregation. Thus, public Unitarian Universalist theological dialogue, and the contemporary use of “covenant,” become grounded in beliefs of ethical action and organization, often on an unspoken or inadequately articulated ground of second order beliefs about human nature – what motivates, engages, and sustains human beings in religious life? It is this Unitarian Universalist belief system that Robert Bellah challenged at a 1998 General Assembly in his analysis of a statistical survey that was part of the “Fulfilling the Promise” four year evaluation and strategic planning process of the UUA.

From 1996-2000, the UUA undertook an evaluation and renewal process with its member congregations, under the leadership of then president, Rev. John Buehrens. As previously discussed, a 1997 survey (see Stites) had shown that while UU’s were theologically diverse, there was substantial agreement with and use of the principles and purposes as a means of recognizing their common bond and the values that they wanted to impart to their children. In particular, well over half desired the denomination and their particular congregation to be more visible and outspoken on issues of social justice. Also, of note was the response to the question: “What is missing for you in your UU experience?” Two of the five choices received 30% each: “More racial and cultural diversity and diversity of perspectives” and “Greater intensity of celebration, joy and spirituality.” Out the entirety of this process (see Fulfilling the Promise Final Report, June 2001), came a mandate for “The Common Call of Our Faith at the Opening of the

21<sup>st</sup> Century” (see Attachment #24) challenging Unitarian Universalists “to go further than our forebears imagined. Out of a sense of religious calling common among us, we offer the world our declaration of interdependence and challenge ourselves to deepen our religious practice.”

While continuing to affirm the first UU principle of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person,” attention is turning more consciously by theologians, ministers, and leaders to language that reflects the seventh Unitarian Universalist principle: “Respect for the interdependent web of existence of which we are a part” – a principle that was added in 1985 during a denominational recovenancing process to create more inclusive language for the principles, a process originally stimulated by the women’s movement within the UUA (see Ross, though Rev. Buehrens points out that the recovenancing process is a normal and cyclical one regardless in the UUA). The extensive use of the language of “hospitality” on a congregational level and “beloved community” on a denominational level is part of this search for new language.



“Hospitality” has a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition as a spiritual practice (see Bass, pp. 29-42). It is grounded in stories in both the Hebrew Scriptures (e.g. Abraham and Sarah caring for 3 strangers, one of whom turns out to be God) and the New Testament (e.g. the parables of the Good Samaritan and of Martha and Mary). It is a tradition that also has potential for liberation and social justice in the radical challenge of what does it mean to love one’s neighbor by specific behavioral covenant (see Rendle)? How open dare one



be? What are the risks to change in identity, particularly in identification with privilege and protection? Kujawa-Holbrook (pp. 177-185) points out, in her list of characteristics of congregations that successfully engage in building multiracial communities, that the highest priority must go to building healthy relationships of mutuality and respect. An attitude of “hospitality” is a key component, as Rev. Kron also indicated, that member congregations have realized in the Welcoming Congregation movement. Related to the idea that hospitality entails “love,” it is interesting to note that the reading found on the front cover of this paper, “Love Is The Doctrine of This Church,” is in wide use as a standard UU affirmation and congregational covenant, including by the First Parish In Brewster (Kujawa-Holbrook, p. 158), a congregation that has led many movements in the UUA. (Attached picture taken from <http://www.thebiblerevival.com/clipart46.htm>, 11/12/04).

On a public level, “the beloved community” is an inter-faith renewal movement reconnecting to the theological legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. (see King’s reading on “A Network of Mutuality” on the front cover of this paper). The former UUA president, Rev. John Buehrens, has played a leading role in the creation of the Progressive Religious Partnership (PRP) to speak out with a liberal religious prophetic voice and take action on issues of oppression (see Attachment #25). One action included a “Religious Declaration on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing” (see Attachment #26) in 2000. There is a conscious liberation theology framework to this particular movement, both within the denomination and on an inter-denominational basis, and it encompasses both the human community and the ecological community in relation to the planet. In King’s words: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” The liberation of the privileged



(their fullest, deepest, most transformative experience of the beloved community, or God’s kingdom on earth) is tied to the liberation of the oppressed. Individual personal identity formation is compromised and limited by the continued existence of oppression in any form by any individual or community. (Attached picture of Martin Luther King, Jr.

taken from <http://humanrelations.intrasun.tcnj.edu>, 11/12/04).

Tom Owen-Towle in his book, Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation, has made conscious use of this language in congregational development and has linked it to the use of small group ministry and covenant groups. The language of love and right relations is woven throughout the small group ministry literature (see Hill), and UU theologian Thandeka speaks of “right relationship” as the fundamental step and “sacramental act” of small group ministry (Hill, p. 96). “Beloved community” references are also found throughout UU literature seeking to give conscious theological justification to commitment on behalf of social justice, such as in Rev. Richard Gilbert’s book, The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice (see in particular his chapter on covenants, pp. 87-105). And in a recent documentation of a three day dialogue on racism and theology convened by the UUA but inclusive of representatives outside the denomination, such as James Cone, liberation theology and the theology and practices of Martin Luther King, Jr. were prominent themes (see Bowens-Wheatley).

Ultimately, however, it is the reference point that is of profound importance for theological coherence and how that reference point integrates into all levels of spiritual

practice. If a shared idea of God or the transcendent ultimate reality is not the reference point for Unitarian Universalists today, then a shared and pragmatically accurate belief system about human nature must be, per Robert Bellah's cogent 1998 critique. How does one judge the success of "hospitality" or "beloved community" without a reference point to the human experience? As Bellah reviewed the UU survey results and UU principles and purposes, he was struck by how much Unitarian Universalists continue to prioritize the individual first and society second and that, in this, UU's are within the mainstream of an American tradition that lacks a deeply spiritual public language of community. While recent developments in the Fulfilling The Promise movement were heartening to Bellah, his bottom line fear was that our prophetic voice would continue to be weak while we stayed firmly within our original traditions. A radical renewal and transformation might be necessary, Bellah challenged, which would entail placing our seventh principle in the position of our first so that our ontological nature as dependent social human beings, and not independent individuals, would become our theological reality. This revised belief system about human nature (harkening back specifically to the UU theologian James Luther Adams, per Bellah, and his ideas of covenant and human nature) would then become our new reference point for our principles and purposes and integrate our worship practices, liturgy, and social justice programs.

### **Conclusions**

It is possible that the next great movement in the renewal of Unitarian Universalist principles and purposes will be one of a more conscious articulation of a unified belief about human nature and the dynamic tension between independence and

dependence or interdependence. It is not surprising that one UU theologian, Thandeka, is putting her efforts into a three volume systemic theology based on ideas of human nature, making a conscious effort to integrate contemporary psychological and anthropological research and theories into her works – nor that she has been the most vocal advocate for small group ministry as the sacramental act in Unitarian Universalism in its potential for representing right relations and a stance of anti-oppression. If our identity as human beings forms in a context of intersubjectivity (see Jordan and Lewis), and our spiritual experiential depth, both intellectually and affectively, is rooted in sharing with and learning from one another, then small groups as a training ground for public encounter and action is necessary. The success of the Welcoming Congregation model appears to be one example of the truth of this vision for UU’s, both in its capacity to connect individual members deeply to one another and to our larger principles and purposes.

Shocking as it may seem to our historical legacy, perhaps Bellah is right that our next renewal of principles and purposes should place “the interdependent web of existence” as our starting ground of being, with all other principles as derivative – because we are dependent and thus interdependent, the inherent worth and dignity of each individual must be prized; because we are limited and finite, we must treasure our diversity and the creative possibilities inherent in it; because we are finite and dependent, we must create safe space in which to encounter “the other,” and it is through participation in that encounter, through the relationship that is more than the sum of its parts, that the potentials of liberation, justice, and transcendence may be actualized. This may entail risk and the crossing of boundaries of identity and privilege for middle class white suburban Unitarian Universalists, who will need concrete action steps and a

theological language and source of deep communal support to motivate and sustain them through the pain and fear that may accompany loss and change until a new ground is found. The Welcoming Congregation model is one success example that can be learned from and built upon and into which language of hospitality, beloved community, and liberation theology could be consciously woven through UU liturgy (as well as possibly the language of process relational theology, per Kowalski's recent article in the UU World magazine).

**List of Attachments (many are available through [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org))**

1. UUA Principles and Purposes
2. Welcoming Congregation Statistics, etc.
3. UUA Pamphlet We Are Unitarian Universalists
4. UUA Pamphlet Our UU Faith
5. History of UU Involvement in and Support of BGLT Issues
6. Proposals of the Common Vision Planning Committee
7. Welcoming Congregation Pamphlet
8. Developing a Diverse Congregation
9. Welcoming Congregation Action Steps
10. Measuring Your Progress
11. Beyond Categorical Thinking
12. Boston Globe Ad on Civil Marriage is a Civil Right
13. Vermont Gives Final Approval to Same-Sex Unions
14. Religious Leaders Call for Support of Civil Marriage for Gays and Lesbians
15. Statement from Rev. William G. Sinkford, President of the UUA 6/26/03
16. Statement from Rev. William G. Sinkford, President of the UUA 11/18/03
17. Clergy Gather at UUA in Support of Freedom to Marry
18. Religious Coalition for Freedom to Marry Meets at UUA Headquarters
19. Black Supporters of Gays Ignored

20. UUA President Opposes Call for Federal Constitutional Amendment
21. Putting a Human Face on Same Sex Marriage
22. The Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee
23. Anti-Racist Multicultural (ARMC) Welcoming Congregation Project
24. The Common Call of Our Faith at the Opening of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century
25. Remembering Dr. King: Reclaiming the Beloved Community
26. Religious Declaration on Sexuality Morality, Justice, and Healing

### **Bibliography**

- Bass, Dorothy C., ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Beach, George Kimmich, ed. *The Essential James Luther Adams: Selected Essays and Addresses*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998.
- Bellah, Robert N., Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton. *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985.
- Bellah, Robert N. "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective." UUA General Assembly, Rochester, NY, 6/27/98. (available on [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org))
- Berger, Peter L. *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Random House, 1967.
- Bowens-Wheatley, Marjorie and Nancy Palmer Jones, eds. *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003.
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.
- Cowtan, Charlotte. "Faith Communities Today: UU Survey Results Analyzed By Congregation Size." January, 2002. (available on [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org))
- Gilbert, Richard S. *The Prophetic Imperative: Social Gospel in Theory and Practice*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2000.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988.
- Harvey, Van A. *A Handbook of Theological Terms*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1964.
- Hill, Robert L. *The Complete Guide to Small Group Ministry: Saving The World Ten At*

- A Time*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003.
- Holifield, E. Brooks. *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Howe, Charles A. *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993.
- Jordan, Judith V., Alexandra G. Kaplan, Jean Baker Miller, Irene P. Stiver, and Janet L. Surrey. *Women's Growth In Connection: Writings From The Stone Center*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1991.
- Kowalski, Gary. "The Ultimate Canvas: Seeing God As Process." *UU World*. July/August 2003.
- Kujawa-Holbrook, Sheryl A. *A House of Prayer For All Peoples: Congregations Building Multiracial Community*. An Alban Institute Publication: 2002.
- Lewis, Thomas M.D., Fari Amini, M.D., and Richard Lannon, M.D. *A General Theory of Love*. New York: Random House, 2000.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand Into The Wilderness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956.
- Owen-Towle, Tom. *Growing a Beloved Community: Twelve Hallmarks of a Healthy Congregation*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002.
- Rendle, Gilbert R. *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations: A Handbook for Honoring Differences*. An Alban Institute Publication: 1999.
- Richardson, Peter Tufts. *The Boston Religion: Unitarianism in its Capital City*. Rockland, ME: Red Barn Publishing, 2003.
- Ross, Warren R. *The Premise and the Promise: The Story of the Unitarian Universalist Association*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2001.
- Stites, Tom. "New Survey of UU's Shows Theological Differences, Common Values." *UU World*. May/June, 1998. (available on [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org))
- Thandeka. *Learning To Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2000.
- Thandeka. "A Reason To Live: Universal Salvation Today." Unitarian Universalist Association 42<sup>nd</sup> General Assembly. Boston, MA. 6/27/03.
- Thandeka. "Schleiermacher's *Dialektik*: The Discovery of the Self that Kant Lost."

- Harvard Theological Review* 85:4 (1992) 433-52.
- Unitarian Universalist Association. "Fulfilling The Promise Committee Final Report." June 2001. (available on [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org))
- Unitarian Universalist Association. *Singing The Living Tradition*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Unitarian Universalist Association. *The Welcoming Congregation Handbook: Resources for Affirming Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, and/or Transgender People*. First (1990) and Second (1999) Editions.
- Wright, Conrad. *A Stream of Light: A Short History of American Unitarianism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1989.