

Unitarian Universalist Community Church

How Do We Stay Relevant?

Worship Leaders: *Rev. Claire Curole, Michaela Loisel, Rev. Helen Zidowecki*

August 27, 2023

Ingathering: From *Earth and Spirit Songbook*, Jim Scott, UU composer Karen Allen, Pianist
Welcome Nan Bell, Worship Associate
Inviting the Silence Nan Bell
Prelude Karen Allen
Candles of Life & Remembrance Nan Bell

Chalice Lighting (in Unison) Nan Bell

Purpose is our reason for being – it gives life to our values and principles.

Values tell us what’s good – they’re the things we strive for, desire and seek to protect.

Principles tell us what’s right – outlining how we may or may not achieve our values.

From “Why purpose, values, principles matter” by The Ethics Centre 13 AUG 2019,

<https://ethics.org.au/purpose-matters/>,

Opening Words “Our Reason for Being” (Proposed UUA Purposes, 2023) *Michaela Loisel*

The Unitarian Universalist Association will devote its resources to and use its organizational powers for religious, educational, and humanitarian purposes. Its primary purposes are to assist congregations in their vital ministries, support and train leaders both lay and professional, to foster lifelong faith formation and spiritual development, to heal historic injustices, to support and encourage the creation of new Unitarian Universalist communities, and to advance our Unitarian Universalist values in the world.

The highest purpose of the Unitarian Universalist Association is to actively engage its members in the transformation of the world through liberating Love.

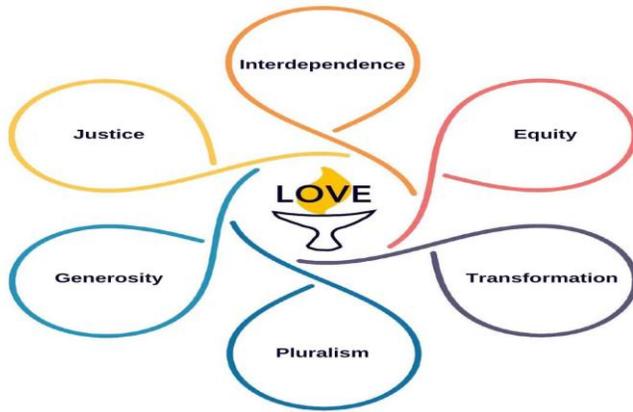
Opening Hymn #145 “As Tranquil Streams” *Karen Allen*

Reflection “A Congregation of Congregations: Introduction to General Assembly”
(Included at end.) *Rev. Claire Curole*

Offering #402 “From You I Receive” *Nan Bell*
From you I receive, to you I give.
Together we share and from this we live.

Reflection “Changing Toward the Future” (Included at end) *Rev. Helen Zidowecki*

Responsive Reading: Values and Principles Together *Rev. Helen Zidowecki*
Claire and Michaela, please join Helen at the podium.



Please take *the two Responsive Reading: Values and Principles inserts* from your order of service, one with the graphic of the Values, and the other is the Responsive Reading for a Value. Review this content from the inserts. Use Love as sample.

RESPONSIVE READING: Values and Principles Together

Please join in the Responsive Reading with the Value named on *this insert in your* order of service. Other people will have different Values on their cards.

RESPONSIVE READING VALUE
LOVE *Rev. Helen Zidowecki*

The Introduction will be read, then the three of us will take turns being Readers for Values. When the Value named matches the Value on your insert, please join in the Response. After all the Values have been read, please join in Unison.

Introduction: As Unitarian Universalists, we covenant, congregation-to-congregation and through our association, to support and assist one another in our ministries. We draw from our heritages of freedom, reason, hope, and courage, building on the foundation of love.

Reader: *Love* is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values.
Response: We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love.

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After all the Values have been read, please join in Unison.
Unison at end: The expression of Covenant, based on Values, moves us toward the Beloved Community.

INTERDEPENDENCE

Rev. Claire Curole

Reader: We honor the interdependent web of all existence.

Response: We covenant to cherish Earth and all beings by creating and nurturing relationships of care and respect. With humility and reverence, we acknowledge our place in the great web of life, and we work to repair harm and damaged relationships.

PLURALISM

Michaela Loisel

Reader: We celebrate that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology.

Response: We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

JUSTICE

Rev. Helen Zidowecki

Reader: We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive.

Response: We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression.

We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions.

TRANSFORMATION

Rev. Claire Curole

Reader: We adapt to the changing world.

Response: We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically.

Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

GENEROSITY

Michaela Loisel

Reader: We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope.

Response: We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources.

Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

EQUITY

Rev. Claire Curole

Reader: We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness.

Response: We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

Unison at end:

Rev. Helen Zidowecki

The expression of Covenant, based on Values, moves us toward the Beloved Community.

Hymn #318 “We Would Be One”

Karen Allen

Reflection: “Who Do We Want to Be?” (Included at end)

Michaela Loisel

Closing Hymn #1020 “Title of Hymn” “Woyaya”

Karen Allen

Closing Words: “An Association of Congregations”

Michaela Loisel

Our purposes, values and principles rely on inspiration, inclusion and freedom of belief as we work toward Beloved Community.

Inspiration comes from direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder that open our hearts, renew our spirits and transform our lives. We draw upon, and are inspired by sacred, secular, and scientific understandings that help us make meaning and live into our values.

Beloved Community happens when people of diversities come together in an interdependent relationship of love, mutual respect, and care that seeks to realize justice within the community and in the broader world.

We commit to being an association of congregations that empowers and enhances everyone’s participation, especially those with historically marginalized identities.

Congregational freedom and the individual’s right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage. From Revised Article II: Inspirations, Inclusion, Freedom of Belief.

Extinguish the Chalice

Nan Bell

Benediction

Rev. Claire Curole

Postlude “The Fire of Commitment,” Jason Shelton, words by Jason Shelton & Mary Katherine Morn

Karen Allen

Announcements

Nan Bell

REFLECTIONS

REFLECTION: A CONGREGATION OF CONGREGATIONS: INTRODUCTION TO GENERAL ASSEMBLY *REV. CLAIRE CUROLE*

I thought that hymn 145 "As Tranquil Streams" was written for consolidation, but was actually written a generation earlier (1930s?) for the red hymnal "Hymns of the Spirit" - collaboration between the Universalist Church of America (USA) and the (American Unitarian Association) AUA. In 1961, at the joint assembly where they were voting to consolidate, this hymn was sung when it was becoming clear that they had the votes to go forward with the union resulting in our UUA.)

So what is general assembly? How does this work?

Has anyone been to one in person? Served as a delegate (on-site or on-line)? What I have to say will probably not be new for you, but may be new for others.

Bust the idea that the UUA is "Them over There." Just as our congregation is made of individual members, the UUA is made of member congregations, a "congregation of congregations" if you like. And just as our local congregation has a business meeting once a year - ours was in early June - so the root of General Assembly is the annual gathering for doing the business of this congregation-of-congregations. Just like a local congregation, the UUA has elected leaders - President, Board of Trustees, Nominating Committee, etc - and paid staff to do the things you need to pay a professional for; but certain business of the organization needs to be voted on by membership. For this, a congregation sends delegates. Certain number of delegate seats based on the congregation's membership. Helen, Michaela and Claire are up here today because we served as delegates for our congregation at this year's assembly, Helen and Michaela online, Claire on site.

Over time, the general assembly - G. A. - has evolved to be more than just business meetings. Delegates - and indeed anyone interested and able to attend - gather for workshops and worship services, interest and advocacy groups (UUCF, EqUUaL) and identity caucuses (TrUUST); exhibitors and vendors with information, causes, products and services. For some regular participants, it became part church business and part vacation.

But this business of doing our business in-person in a convention center every year is not without cost; not only the money it costs for such a production, and the environmental impact of long distance travel, but also the recognition that doing our business this way meant that the people voting on our business decisions were disproportionately the folks who had the privilege of time off, money and ability to travel for that purpose. (Who has been excluded? youth and young adults, working class, disabilities, BIPOC, GQTNC) For quite a few years there's been effort to bring more and more of GA participation online, increasing equity of participation; the COVID pandemic forced us to get it figured out.

Next year's general assembly, 2024, will be held entirely online; in 2025 there will be an in-person assembly in Baltimore, MD, and what happens after that has not been finalized yet. The good part about next GA being online is that this will maximize opportunity for participation by all our congregations, large and small, the well-connected and the geographically isolated.

This is important because at the most recent GA, this past June, we held the first of two votes on some exciting changes to the UUA bylaws that have been in process for the last couple of years,

and next year the association will vote on whether to finalize those changes. Rev Helen is going to tell you more about the Article II revisions. My hope is that this coming spring we will fill all our online delegate slots with folks who are interested in strengthening our UUA Connections and the work of our wider movement.

REFLECTION “CHANGING TOWARD THE FUTURE” REV. HELEN ZIDOWECKI

“Change is part of who we are as Unitarian Universalists. When we say one of our core values is learning and valuing direct experience, that means that we have to be open to change. It's impossible to learn and grow but not to change.” *Reimagining Article II*, p.8

Let's consider changes in the last 40 years: the current UUA Article II bylaws were passed in 1986. I joined All Souls Church, historically Unitarian, in Sept. 1980. By then Unitarian Christianity held that Jesus was human, not God. And Universalists asserted that “salvation” was available to everyone. The inclusion of the Principles in the UUA Bylaws in the 1986 moved us from a more traditional belief structure to an ethical focus. Now we are expanding the Principles and have turned the focus to Values as we define our Purposes. While the Principles are not specifically listed in the Article II Proposed Revision of 2023, they are included throughout the proposal.

We always have espoused to be a caring community. Caring about whom or what? Over the years we have expanded our use of music and input from diverse traditions, acknowledged indigenous peoples, have focused on resources essential for specific groups, like Black Lives Matter. And groups that have been in UUism for generations were becoming more visible participants. As in the larger society, there have been tensions along the way, regarding employment, leadership opportunities, and just plain treatment of each other. It is hard moving to a more diverse place with integrity. We actually changed our process at GA several years ago from one Moderator to Co-Moderators, and even had three Co-Presidents with diversity representation to get us through a difficult time a few years ago.

There are Care Teams at GA that are available to address issues as they occur. These used to be Youth & Young Adult Leadership, Accessibility & inclusion, and Chaplains, to which have now been added Systemic Justice Team, Safety Team, Conflict & Covenant Team, Incidents. These are reminders of things that need to be addressed as we work toward Beloved Community daily. These teams deal with issues large and small. The situations shared with the assembly show subtleties and complexities that are inherent in trying to be in community.

Two examples of how we interact come to mind from GA 2023.

One, In front of the entire assembly, a leader of a Care Team mentioned a staffing decision with which she did not agree. The administration remained quiet at the moment and responded at the end of that session that discussion of the incident was not appropriate in this setting. The team leader later reported to the assembly that her behavior had been inappropriate.

Second, there was a demonstration of about 10 minutes in front of the stage following presentation of the issue for a vote. The Moderator quietly waited, then brought the attention back to the business without reprimand or judgment. Issues that arise during GA are noted—transparency. We have had walk-outs and contentious times, and I watch the way we treat each other in public as how we may be *learning* to be together. Last year I was encouraged by respect and dignity that I felt. This year was also encouraging as we seem to be working with a sense of community.

This brings me to the comment that the Eighth Principle, that we adopted at our UUCC Annual Meeting in June, was needed because we can practice the Principles without ever mentioning racism or diversity. We need something to back-up and ground the principles.

One of my early mentors focused on values as the grounding for faith. I went searching for a church that matched my values and found this community. So now, almost 40 years after the principles were adopted, we are changing the focus from principles or actions to values, or the *reasons behind our actions*. These values are grounding for moving forward in this day and age of diversity and chaos.

We are not the same Association that we were in the 1980s; we are not the same Association that we will be in the future—near or distant. How and who we will be in this world will depend on who we are and how we move forward now.

The Responsive Reading this morning focuses on values that have been included in the proposed revisions of Article II. The responses to the values include principles, some of the ones we know. Join me in the Responsive Reading.

REFLECTION: WHAT DO WE WANT TO BE? *MICHAELA LOISEL*

A few years ago, on an especially cold Christmas eve, a bunch of Unitarian Universalists stood on a set of church steps on 35th street in Manhattan, holding candles, singing traditional carols, joined by residents of the neighborhood and passers by heading home from work.

Imagine that.

This was the Community Church of Manhattan, whose members led a workshop, “Disrupting Church: Creating what is Next” that I attended in June as part of the UUA’s General Assembly. I was particularly interested in the session because I’ve been doing a lot of thinking lately about what’s next for the Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta.

The backstory to the Manhattan Church’s Christmas Eve service is that the congregation had been through a period of great transition, with declining membership over the past 10 years, like many churches of many faiths these days.

The Rev. Peggy Clark explained that the congregation had once owned five buildings in Manhattan, but in light of drastically declining numbers of youth and children as well as adult members, they came to the conclusion they would sell those buildings. In their place, they would rent a now vacant Episcopal church building.

But for this particular Christmas Eve, they found themselves without a location to hold a beloved traditional service. Someone came up with the idea of holding it outside on the steps of one of their former buildings. They purchased hand warmers and candles, and rather audaciously, held a service outside on a bustling Manhattan street corner. To me, that sounds magical.

And, that’s what I call thinking outside the church box.

What does thinking outside the church box mean for us?

It makes me ask questions like “Where does church happen? Does it happen only on Sundays?”

We witness it every Saturday morning when we serve breakfast to 25-30 people who are unhoused in our fellowship hall, working with members of St. Michael's Parish and the Synagogue. Would you call this ministry? I do.

We witnessed it at the early Sunday morning showers for our unhoused neighbors at the Kennebec Valley Y. Someone connected to this community organized this and invited us in. Imagine the simple comfort of a hot shower, coffee, muffins and fellowship – would you call that ministry? I do.

I attended other workshops, all virtual at the GA, all of which, of course, made me think of all of you and what we do here.

UUA leaders told us that what healthy congregations have in common is that they tend to their communities. I thought about that, and came up with many ways we are already **tending to our community**.

We are tending to our community through **Covenanting**. In June our new congregational covenant was unveiled and this church year, we will work out together just what that means. Together, we'll figure out when we are abiding by it and when are we falling out of covenant, and importantly, when that happens, how do we bring ourselves back into covenant. We also tend to community through our monthly after service Sharing Cafes. (to return in October)

Our new Covenant reads, in part:

Because we value our relationships with each other, we promise to:

Get to know one another, create opportunities to gather, work and play together, and build trust in our relationships.

We do that here: in our Small Group Ministries, Seasoned Souls, Yoga class, sewing group, book group, Writing to Wake the Soul group, monthly luncheon, the work crews - I could go on but ... I know you get the idea... ***what more might we do?***

My time at GA unearthed many questions and ideas I hope we will explore together over the coming year. Among my questions about our beloved UUCC:

How inviting are we? Who is welcome here? How do they know they are welcome?

What if church was a really cool place to be?

Are we intentionally bringing joy in?

How do we find ways to treasure the unique gifts of each member and friend?

One thing I've learned through my participation in this congregation is that when you are an active member you get back so much more than what you put in. For me, it has brought a stronger sense of spirituality, a greater love of this community, immense pride in what we are doing for our unhoused population, excitement when visitors show up, check us out decide to stay once they realize there is something here for them.

We are stronger when each of us is reaching our true potential and letting that light shine both here at UUCC and also out in the community and world... What are your particular gifts? your individual talents, strengths and interests? I really hope, if you haven't yet, that you will share them with us. We need one another if we are to thrive and be the community we want to be. And, as I heard at GA **"Becoming the people our world needs"**.