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Are UUs and Institutions Incompatible?

This Sunday has been designated as “Association Sunday,” a day for us to honor the institutions of Unitarian Universalism and to acknowledge their importance. Well, Unitarian Universalists are notorious for being distrustful of institutions -- especially of governments at all levels, but also of religious bodies and many other organizations as well. We do not tend to be “joiners.” And I know many people who have been active in UU congregations for years, but who have never taken the step of signing the membership book. And we come by our resistance honestly. Our forbears came to America to escape from the monarchies of Europe and from oppressive church hierarchies that were allied with those monarchies. They believed in the rights of the individual as against both church and state.

In the early 19th Century, as the Unitarian movement was in its infancy, Ralph Waldo Emerson resigned from his ministry to pursue his personal experience of the transcendent. And of course his thinking influenced both Unitarians and Universalists, both of whom have emphasized the importance of individual religious experience. Fierce individualists tend to be drawn to Unitarian Universalism. On top of that is our emphasis on the autonomy of each congregation – what we call “congregational polity.” The Unitarian movement, which arose out of the Congregational churches of early New England, wanted no part of religious hierarchies -- of bishops and dioceses and so forth telling them what to do. The most important aspect of congregational polity has always been the freedom of each congregation to “call” its own minister. Indeed, today, after the service, we will hold a congregational meeting to discuss – to elicit your views on -- whether the Congregation feels ready to begin its own process of calling a minister.

In recent times, our denomination adopted a statement of its principles, which it is careful to emphasize is not a “creed.” The very first of our adopted principles is our recognition of “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” So many strands of our history are woven together to emphasize the importance of the individual. And yet, however reluctantly, we also have our UU institutions. At various times in our history, leaders saw advantages in organizing our many congregations into larger associations for some purposes. And in many ways we are more effective when we are organized together with other congregations. Certainly, we are better able to make our voices heard in the world around us when we are joined together with other UU congregations. But still, there have always been heated arguments over the pros and cons of various forms of organization.

Today, we are organized into a national organization called the Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA, which has its headquarters in Boston. We are affiliated with other UU associations in various parts of the world, from Canada to India. We gather together every year, in June, at an event called General Assembly, which is held in a different city every year. And at these gatherings, we argue over policy, we pass resolutions, we share ideas about congregational life, and we learn from each other. In keeping with our early tradition, we retain a rather loose affiliation, without a denominational hierarchy. Each congregation is essentially self-governing. And our

UUA bylaws specifically provide for freedom of individual belief and for each congregation's right to govern itself. In terms of ministry, the association has a process for evaluating prospective ministers and for deciding who is qualified to be a UU minister, but the decision whom to call as minister is entirely up to each congregation.

Many groups organized for specific purposes find it useful to affiliate with the UUA so that they have a national forum and a national voice, through the association. For example, the UU Ministry for Earth is an organization of UUs engaged with environmental concerns, and through their affiliation with the UUA, they have established a "green sanctuary" program for individual congregations.

This national network – the UUA – is then divided into some 20 districts. This congregation is a member of the Pacific Central District, which covers Northern California, Northern Nevada, and Hawaii. It includes 38 UU congregations. Like the national association, the district is essentially a network of congregations. It does not stand in a hierarchical position towards the congregations – i.e., it has no bishops or other officers dictating policy and procedures to the congregations. The district's function is to provide support to the congregations, in the form of education and training, resources, and collaboration among congregations. For example, each summer, the District sponsors a week-long training program for congregational leaders, known as Leadership School. It is an excellent program and attending it is a great learning experience. The district holds two gatherings each year – one in the fall and one in the spring. The fall gathering, known as Leadership Day, will be held this year in Palo Alto on November 10th, and I encourage you to attend to learn more about other congregations in our district. Of particular interest to members here might be the workshop on access to affordable health care that will be offered that day by our UU Legislative Ministry, about which I will say more in a minute. The district's spring event is known as "District Assembly" and it's held over a three-day weekend in April. This is an even better opportunity to learn more about our district and its congregations.

For the rest of my time this morning, though, I want to tell you about a UU institution that is much closer to the concerns that many of us have -- Concerns about how this great state of California is governed. There is often the feeling among us that UUs don't do enough to make our voices heard in the public arena. Well, the California UU Legislative Ministry was organized to address that need. As its name implies, the Legislative Ministry was organized to provide a voice for UU values on legislative matters in Sacramento, but it is much more than that. As I mentioned earlier, UUs are often averse to collaboration, but one of the purposes of UULM is to create networks of engaged UUs around the state working on key issues. To this end, UULM creates and sponsors educational campaigns and organizing activities with a view to creating a powerful and visible moral voice for UU values.

UULM is actually composed of two organizations. The Legislative Ministry - California is a tax-exempt organization that provides education and information, fosters civic engagement of UU members and UU congregations, and works to develop social justice leadership. It also works through worship and the arts to provide the celebratory underpinnings for UU social justice work. The UULM Action Network is the political arm of UULM – it coordinates political advocacy at the state capitol, issues on-line alerts, and advocates for specific legislation consistent with UU values. Because of its political advocacy, the Action Network is not a tax-exempt organization.

UULM has an office in Sacramento and a small staff. The executive director is Rev. Lindi Ramsden, who is a dynamite political organizer as well as being a gifted minister. Lindi served as minister of our San Jose congregation for some 18 years, during which she organized a powerful labor-faith coalition that has been an influential progressive voice in the Santa Clara valley. UULM recently hired an assistant director who will specialize in public relations, and it also has a part-time ministerial intern, and part-time office staffing.

I brought with me today a number of brochures for UULM. They're on the table outside with the signup clipboards. I encourage you to take one home with you, and I encourage you to look at UULM's website for more information about their activities. And then, I encourage you think about what and how important this work is for our presence in California, and to think about what volunteer and financial support you might give to this important work. I intend to ask our Board of Trustees, as well, to consider formally affiliating this Fellowship with UULM as a statement of our support for their important work.

Full disclosure here --- I serve on the boards of both UULM and the Action Network, and I have worked closely with UULM on several issues. Just this past Wednesday, in fact, I appeared in my ministerial garb and spoke in support of a vigil to urge Gov. Schwarzenegger to rescind his veto of AB 8, which would have been a major step toward providing access to affordable health care for all Californians. Two years ago, I wrote several sessions for a UULM training manual on issues relating to water in California. That manual is finally being completed and should be available to congregations soon. Also on behalf of UULM, I appeared in Sacramento to lobby on behalf of three bills to implement AB 32, which was the major legislation passed a couple of years ago that commits the state to efforts to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions. One of the bills I lobbied for will soon be law; one was vetoed by the governor; and one never made it out of committee. Probably about par for the course.

Presently, UULM has teams working on several important public issues. We have played a leading role in advocating for marriage equality for all couples. This is an issue on which we stand on our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person. We have been way ahead of other denominations in advocating equal rights for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people, and we have been ordaining gay people and performing same-sex unions for many years. On this issue, UULM has had a very influential voice in Sacramento, and we are well-known to the governor and to individual legislators. (This may have something to do with the fact that two years ago, in February, UULM delivered several thousand valentine cards to the governor advocating marriage equality! Apparently the arrival of several cartons of valentines caused quite a stir in the Governor's office.) As Part of this effort, UULM has organized a state-wide network of advocacy teams that can be called into action to provide information and training to congregations to enable them to speak up for marriage equality.

This past year, UULM has also become a major player in the effort to enact legislation to provide access to affordable health care to all Californians. For several months, prospects were looking favorable for enactment of some sort of legislation. But the governor vetoed the bill that the legislature passed, and it is unclear whether major health care reform will get enacted this year. This is sad, because the momentum was there for a while.

And finally, there is now a team organizing itself to work on issues relating to global warming and water. I am a member of that team, and I mentioned some of the work I have been doing in that capacity. Recently, a group of us met in Los Angeles to set short-term and long-term goals for this team. I am excited about the possibility of getting UUs from around the state involved in education, activism, and legislative advocacy on these issues. During the current special session of the legislature, competing bond measures are being proposed to deal with issues around the safety and stability of the Delta, transportation of water to Southern California, and -- possibly -- constructing more dams for storing water. These are issues of momentous importance to all Californians, and we are studying the proposals and monitoring future directions in this area.

Well, I hope you share my strongly-held belief that our legislative ministry is doing very important work. We may be distrustful of institutions, but making our voices heard in the state, the country, the world, is something we just can't do on our own. There are times when we need to join together, to collaborate, to make alliances, if we are going to be heard. This is one small piece of our larger institution that I really want us to support. We are small in numbers, but we can be influential if we make our voices heard.

So on this Association Sunday, I urge us all to think about our role in our larger movement. I urge us to give our support to the California Legislative Ministry and the important work it is doing. And I urge us - - each one of us -- to think of ways we can work together to raise our voices in support of our UU values. May it be so! Blessed be! And Amen!