



LIBERAL BEACON

ISSUE 3

Welcome to our June 2023 edition of Liberal Beacon, our monthly publication of the North American Unitarian Association (NAUA). The purpose of this publication is to keep members informed about NAUA, to present articles of interest concerning liberal issues and concerns, and to provide a space for feedback.

This month's issue begins with **AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE KNOTTS: FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST UNITED NATIONS OFFICE**. Bruce discusses how he became involved and spent his entire career in international diplomacy and affairs, how he and his husband Isaac became Unitarian Universalists, and candidly discusses his concerns about what he considers a decline in some of the Unitarian Universalist Association's international efforts and programs.

NAUA may just be getting started but I am extremely excited about all the support we have received, and our rapidly growing number of individual and organizational members. I'm inspired by all we've been able to accomplish so far to establish the tolerant and supportive kind of community that our liberal religion is known for.

Todd F. Eklof – Editor

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AN INTERVIEW WITH BRUCE KNOTTS

Former Director of the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office

By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

By way of introduction, Bruce, please tell us a bit about how you got interested in devoting your life and career to international work and diplomacy.

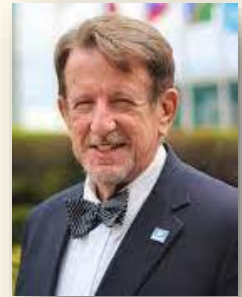
There was this old guy that lived next door to me as a kid and he gave me his stamp collection. The stamps were from all over the world, and I started collecting more stamps and looking at the Atlas to see where all these countries were and getting really interested in that. Later, when I was a student at Pepperdine University, they had a Year-in-Europe program, and I went and spent a year in Heidelberg that was life-changing for me.

Life-changing enough that after you graduated from Pepperdine you decided to join the Peace Corps, is that correct?

I went off and I became a Peace Corps volunteer in Ethiopia. And Haile Selassie was the Emperor at that time. So, it was a really interesting period. I actually got to see him a couple of times. I was in Ethiopia for three years and was in two different places. I was in a rural town with no electricity and no running water, and I was in awe of its beautiful culture. It was very different from where and how I was brought up.

So, I developed a real Peace Corps attitude, and I later became a U.S. Foreign Service officer and was posted in countries all over the world. A lot of Foreign Service officers spend most of their time inside the embassy or consulate, but I was the kind of guy that was always outside the embassy and constantly getting to know people

and meeting people. I didn't want to sit at a desk. I wanted to actually get to know the culture and know the people that were surrounding me. I wanted to get to know their religion, and their food, and their music, and their dance—everything!



Bruce Knotts was Director of UU-UNO from 2008 until his retirement in 2022.

Any specific person or persons you found particularly memorable?

I once heard Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, who is a very famous Pakistani singer. He actually won an Academy Award for the music he wrote for the movie *Dead Man Walking*. He was singing in Urdu, so I didn't really understand what he was saying. But there was a Pakistani translating and he summed it up as, "The lovin'gest love that you don't know anything about." So, I took that as a challenge and I started reading every book I could find about Islam, mostly about Sufi Islam, because that's the tradition Khan came out of, and it was fascinating. It was a wonderful experience. One thing that I think Foreign Service officers do very well—it's certainly what I was trained to do—is to learn. And wherever I go, I try to learn something new. I'm always interested in new cultures and new ideas.

Today I teach a NYU course on refugees and migration, which is something I also did in the Foreign Service. But I learn an awful lot from my students. Most of my students have themselves been refugees or migrants, or their parents or relatives have been. And so, I start the class by saying we're all going to learn a lot from each other, and that's the way things go. So that's pretty core. The thing with me is that I want to be a learner. I want to learn about other people and soak all of that up.

Is that core value what eventually led you to become a Unitarian Universalist?

I felt that this religion that I found was going to be a very welcoming religion to somebody who wanted to learn a lot and experience differences. And, certainly, when I joined All Souls Church in Washington, DC, it seemed to be that way. I mean, we never knew what kind of music we were going to have on Sunday. Sometimes it might be Spanish, sometimes it might be Urdu, sometimes it might be Western classical. It was really wonderful that they had so much diversity in the programming, in the congregation and also in their music. And that kind of became my template for UU church, although I later found out that was rather unusual in UU churches.

I talked with Manish Mishra, a minister at Ann Arbor, MI, who, while guest speaking at All Souls, happened to mention during his sermon that he was gay, and that he had been a Foreign Service officer and left the Foreign Service to become a minister. And I ran up to him and I said I'm having a horrible time at the State Department. I'm really depressed and I'm not happy there at all. And he said you should quit and become a minister. "Just like that," I said. "You're just going to say it just like that?"

He said, "Yeah."

Well, it's not exactly what I did, but it wasn't long after that that I saw a job posting on idealist.org for the position of Executive Director of the Unitarian Universalist Office at the United Nations (UU-UNO). And I came home and I told

my husband, Isaac, and the only part of that whole thing that he heard was that it was in New York City. "Oh Bruce," he said. "You have to apply. New York City. We've got to go there!" And so, I applied and had several interviews. Eventually one of the board members said, "You know Bruce is perfect for this job. Too bad he's not a UU." And the Chair of the Board said, "But he is a UU." They said, "Oh. Well. Done deal."

Something tells me that was the easy part.

Then the board said, "Okay, now you've got to go out and raise money because, you know, we have no money." We were in terrible shape, and I think I scared them to death. I said, "I can't raise any money until we do something. And when we do something, we'll raise money on that." That's not what they wanted to hear.

I know you were in the position for many years, so something must have worked out, right?

As it happened, the UN was about ready to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the signing of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and they were going to have a conference in Paris. And I started pushing to have a workshop on LGBT rights, and nobody had ever done anything on LGBT rights at these conferences before. And I kept pushing it and pushing it and pushing it. Eventually other people started supporting me. There was a Swedish diplomat who said, "We want to have a resolution at the UN General Assembly to end discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity." I said okay and that I wanted to support that.

We wound up having the resolution actually happen December of that first year. There were 66 countries that voted in favor of it, while something like 56 countries voted against it. It really started momentum at the United Nations to guarantee rights for LGBT people, and that led to a Veatch grant and also a grant from the Arcus Foundation. And with those two grants, both of them, about \$100,000 each, we were in really good shape. That's how I started.

Wow, that's a powerful story. I'm curious to hear more about the Unitarian Universalism piece. You went to All Souls in DC and joined, but what precipitated that? What was your religious background and what led you to UUism?

I was brought up in the Church of Christ and I went to Pepperdine University, actually to become a Church of Christ minister. That's Church of Christ, not the *United* Church of Christ. It's a very fundamentalist Church and not at all gay friendly. Pepperdine, even now, is still struggling with LGBT issues. They've made some progress, but not much given that it's 2023.

And so, the entire senior ministerial team of this church was LGBT, including a black woman. And so, we basically saw ourselves in the pulpit. We saw us.

So, I gave up on that and kind of went on an exploration. I checked out the Catholics. I checked out the Muslims. I was really interested in all kinds of different religions. And I basically decided nobody wanted me. Nobody really was very interested in LGBT.

But I had a friend, Stephen McDonald, who was head of Dignity in Washington, DC, which is the gay Catholic organization. He said, "Bruce, you're a very spiritual person and you really should be going to a church."

I said, "I don't. None of those churches want me and I don't want to go to a gay church. I've been to gay churches and that's just not what I want."

So, we kept arguing about it until I finally wrote a list of conditions as to what kind of church I would go to. The purpose of which was to shut him up, not to find a church. I said, "If Hell, fire, and brimstone is on the list, you know I'm out," and insisted it would have to be a church that's going to accept me and Isaac as a gay couple and also as an interracial couple.

I've forgotten the rest of the list, but it was pretty long. But he didn't miss a beat. He said, "All Souls Church, 16th and Harvard, Washington, DC. You've got to go there."

So, I went home, and I told Isaac, "We're going to go to church on Sunday."

"I don't want to go to church," he said. "I've been scarred by the church."

"I don't want to go by myself, you have to go with me." And he just was not happy at all. Sunday morning came and he had his arms crossed. He did not want to go to church. And I said, "I don't care. You're coming to church." Pretty much put him in the car, drove up to the church, pulled him out of the car, basically pushed him in the door, sat him down in the pew, and he was just fit to be tied.

Rob Hardies was the minister there, a gay man who was married with adopted kids. Louise Green was the social justice minister, a lesbian woman married with kids. The associate minister was Shana Lynngood, an African American woman, and she was also a lesbian and they had kids. And so, the entire senior ministerial team of this church was LGBT, including a black woman. And so, we basically saw ourselves in the pulpit. We saw us.

And the church itself was diverse. There were people from Asia, Hispanics, black people, white people, straight people. So, we very quickly decided to join the church and we took the new member class. Shana Lynngood was the minister that did that with us, and I remember asking her, "Can I still call myself a Christian as a Unitarian Universalist?"

She said, "If you're following the teachings of Jesus, yes, you can call yourself a Christian." And I kind of left it there. It was a very welcoming church. One of the things that they did was put your photograph on this wall of new members, and our photograph was of both of us, of both Isaac and me. I really felt that our relationship was affirmed and that meant a lot to us. So, I felt

very at home. We were really dedicated to the church and to the work that it was doing and felt very at home there.

When we moved to New York, we joined All Souls Church here. I always love to quote Frank Church, and his son Forrest Church was still alive and still preaching at All Souls. So, we got a chance to get to know him and see him. He was always telling us that he didn't have long to live. I told him, "I had cancer and beat it and I hope that happens for you."

He said, "Bruce, it's very nice of you to say that." But I think he knew that what he had was not going to be beaten. But it was wonderful to get to know him and to hear him speak. We're still members of All Souls here in New York and still feel very much at home there.

That's a really heartwarming account, Bruce. Beautiful! Now let's get back to your work at the International Office. It's called the UU-UNO, the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, but there are a lot of UU organizations that aren't necessarily run by the UU Association. What was the relationship between the UUA and the United Nations Office?

It said in our [UU-UNO] bylaws that the UUA should have a seat on our Board of Directors and that the CUC, the Canadian Unitarian Council, should also have a seat. So, I got Eric Cherry, who was the head of the UUA's International Office, and Vyda Ng from the Canadian Unitarian Council, to join the board. They were on our Board of Directors and that really enhanced our work a great deal. Eric was definitely an internationalist and so was Vyda. One of the things Eric said at one point that just thrilled me was, "Why don't you think of representing Unitarian Universalists globally?"

"Wonderful," I said.

And that got me in touch with the ICUU, the International Council of Unitarian Universalists, and I got to know their Director and went to their

meetings, and they said, "We would love to have you represent all of us at the United Nations." Eric's problem with that was, he said, "I don't know that you have the capacity to give the same kind of service to people in India, or in Africa, or in the Philippines as you're able to give to the Canadians and to the Americans."

And I said, "Well, that's probably true, but I still would like to try."

We never made it formal, but it was kind of a constant goal that was out there. And the representatives from all these different countries, from the Khasi Hills in India, from Transylvania, and Romania, and Hungary, they were thrilled. The people in Paris. I mean, they all said yes, "We want to have a representative at the United Nations. There are issues we care about that we want raised at the United Nations." So, I was very close to the ICUU.

I was also close to the Partner Church Council. Not as involved as I was with ICUU, but I was aware that churches all over the United States and Canada had Partner Churches overseas and that seemed to be a really good program. It benefited both the churches on the North American continent and also other countries. They learned from each other the way it was. To me it was a great program. And I certainly monitored what was happening there.

There's also a Holding India program that primarily helps Dalit women [*Dalit women, from India's lowest caste, are considered among the most oppressed and abused group in the world*] and helps them to ask for their own rights, to actually be champions to get their own rights. And that's been a program in India for 40 years.

There was a time when the Ministers in Burundi were being imprisoned because they were asking for Freedom of the Press. They were being persecuted because of that. We stepped in to try to help them and now I think they're preaching in Canada. We all worked together, Cherry and me and many, many others worked to get those

ministers out of Burundi, get them safe to some other place.

So, I was very much in touch with all of the international programming. And, certainly, the leaders of both the UUA and the CUC and their Boards of Directors loved the international aspect. They loved that we had an office at the United Nations. They loved that we were connected to UUs worldwide and they needed us. We would meet at the General Assemblies, and they would always announce all the ministers we had from other countries.

But when you started, as you've mentioned, the UU-United Nations Office wasn't funded. It was part of your job to fundraise. Again, there are many UU organizations that aren't funded by the UUA and are independent of it, including all of its autonomous member congregations. Is it the same with the UU-UNO? Has it always been independent of the UUA?

Actually, it was started in 1962. By 1970, the UUA stopped funding it and Reverend Homer Jack—I have actually seen some of the letters that he wrote—was furious that the UUA, in 1970, rejected internationalism. [*Homer Jack (1916 – 1993) was a Unitarian Minister best known for founding the United Nations Non-Governmental Committee on Disarmament in the early 1970s and for his activism for racial equality.*] That's when he worked with Reverend Walter Donald Kring, who was the Minister of All Souls Church in New York, to make the UU-UNO into this independent 501(c)(3) charity.

So that was in 1970 and you didn't become Executive Director of the UU-UNO until 2008. By then it had long been independent of UUA support, and you knew going in you'd have to do the fundraising yourself.

Well, the one piece that needs to be included here is that in 2008, of course, there was this big stock market crash. We were actually fine in 2008 and 2009, but 2010 was really bad financially. We just weren't getting the money we needed, and we

were in serious financial trouble. And UUA President Peter Morales and his Administration reached out to me and said, "What do you think of a merger?"

I said yes because I thought a merger with the UUA was the answer to our financial problems. So, we went into very deep discussions. The UU-UNO Board of Directors and the UUA Board of Trustees had lots of meetings, and both parties had lawyers, and we came up with a merger agreement.

But there were members of my Board that said, "How do you know the UUA won't abandon us at some point? Like they did in 1970?"

I said they would never do that. I mean, Eric Cherry and Peter Morales! I mean, I just didn't see any possibility that they might neglect us. And some of these Board Members have come back to me now and said, "We warned you." And, to me, that's the biggest mistake I've ever made in my life. There were Board members who said, "You know, the UUA at some point might interfere with your efforts." And that, in my opinion, is what happened. As long as Peter Morales was the UUA President and Eric Cherry was still head of the International Office, we were in good shape. But with them gone, everything started to just fall apart.

So you're talking about more than just financial problems at this point?

For example, we've had this project in Ghana where we've helped AIDS orphans since 2005—in place since before I started in 2008. It's been a wonderful program. We're working with the Queen Mothers Association of the Maya, Kobo people. But after Cherry left the position in 2018, the International Office got rid of the program. That really distressed me because I knew these children and knew their only chance for an education was through the help that we were giving them. And this was all money that came from individual donors. None of this was funded by the UUA. And I just didn't understand why. Why would we not want to help these kids? And

we had a relationship with the Queen Mothers. These were women that were running this program. It was actually part of women's empowerment. We made these women more powerful in their society. So, there were a lot of benefits out of this program, and to abolish it? I fought hard to save it but wasn't getting anywhere and finally had to back off and let the program just end.

Then they started reducing the number of interns I had, and the seminar we did started changing, and eventually it just got to the point where I asked the UUA moderator in an email, that I copied the new International Office Director and the UUA Executive Vice President on, saying, "Let's undo the merger. If the UUA really doesn't want to support our international work, let's undo the merger and go back to where we were." At that point, they suggested it was time for me to retire. So, it really wasn't a voluntary retirement, it was just a way to get rid of me and to close the office. In the midst of all this they also got rid of the physical office that we had at the Church Center of the United Nations, where we'd been for decades. So, we didn't have an office. We didn't have the program in Ghana. We had fewer interns. The seminar started changing its characteristics.

What, in your opinion, was the reason for these decisions, these changes? Knowing Unitarian Universalism's historic interests in being part of just these sorts of causes, what do you think was going on?

From my perspective, the UUA is almost exclusively focused on the situation in the United States. It's very much focused on Black Lives Matter, which I support. But there are other black

The fact that we're not judging people or feeling that because they're not of our faith, they're going to go to hell, makes us very good conveners and able to cooperate with others.

people in this world, and they're not all in the United States. Some of them are in Africa, and we were working with them. I started the UN Decade of People of African Descent. We had Harry Belafonte there, Alicia Garza from Black Lives Matter, we had the family of Tamir Rice. I launched the Decade of People of African Descent, which was a UN program meant to help people of African descent around the world. So, we were doing things for black people at the UN that were significant and important, and that didn't seem to be appreciated by the UUA. My feelings were that everything we had done was just cast aside.

Was this gradual or was there a particular point when you first noticed things going south, so to speak?

The communications I received from my supervisor kept getting worse and worse, and the UUA wanted a mediator to come and basically figure out what the problems were. Basically, it came down to their telling me that I didn't understand the UUA was a domestic organization. Well, I've been with the UUA for eleven years and, of course, worked side by side with them for some five years before that. And it was never a domestic organization. It had a lot of international obligations.

The UUA, together with Risshō Kōsei Kai, which is a Japanese Buddhist organization, and the Union for Reform Judaism founded Religions for Peace. Now that's the biggest international interfaith organization working on peace issues. That's part of what we were doing. We were doing that kind of international work we've been doing since the beginning.

When it had its first General Assembly in 1961, they passed a resolution saying that the UUA was committed to engaging with the United Nations. That was at the very beginning. So, we have a long history of documenting our international engagement and all of a sudden, I'm told that the UUA is just a domestic organization? That's when it seemed to me the UUA wasn't as

committed as it had been to supporting the work I'd done for the past eleven years.

All of this must be incredibly difficult from your perspective, given all you put into establishing and supporting many of the programs you've discussed. Do you have any hope or ideas about how to revive some of them?

I would love to see NAUA have its own office at the United Nations. Years ago, I encouraged the International Convocation of UU Women to get United Nations status. They have and have been gracious enough to allow me to be their representative at the UN. So, I now have a UN grounds-pass and have access to the United Nations representing the IWC, which is their abbreviated title.

There are a couple of ways to get status with the UN. One is through the Department of Global Communications, which tends to be an easier process. And the other is through the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations. The UU-UNO had both statuses. NAUA can do the same. It's a long process but organizations do this all the time, and they get status. And once you have status at the UN, then you are issued a certain number of UN passes that give you access to the United Nations, to the climate conferences, to any UN conferences that happen anywhere. And it's not just to attend, but also to participate and be speakers and to be engaged with the UN.

I'd like us to begin wrapping up by asking about the importance of religious liberals being involved in international work to begin with. Why us? Why should we be?

I've always said that Unitarianism is a great faith in an interfaith group. It actually makes us a very good convener of other faith traditions because everybody in the room knows that we're not sitting there condemning them to hell because they're not of our faith. So, it allows us to work on climate issues, on racism, on social justice. You know, and work with Presbyterians and Methodists and Catholics and Jews and Muslims,

the Sikhs and the Hindus and everybody else. The fact that we're not judging people or feeling that because they're not of our faith, they're going to go to hell, makes us very good conveners and able to cooperate with others.

And when you have a lot of faith traditions calling for peace, or nuclear disarmament, or doing something about climate change, or ending racism, or misogyny, or whatever it is, that's powerful. If you can get Unitarians and Catholics and Jews and Muslims and Hindus and everybody to come together on these issues, people have to listen. And I love that kind of work and I do a lot of it. And I think NAUA should be doing that, too.

[NAUA reached out to the UUA inviting a response to some of Bruce's concerns but have not received a reply.]

"A CHARITABLE TEMPER"

Our Liberal Religion's History of Remaining Friends Even When We Disagree

**By
Kevin McCulloch**

Last month I alluded to my objections to the "anti-oppression" thinking that has overtaken Unitarian Universalism. At heart, my objections are intellectual: I think that anti-oppression is grounded in mistaken ideas about what human beings are and what makes us tick. But it's nothing new for me to disagree with my fellow Unitarian Universalists. I've long sat in pews with individuals who hold ideas about religion, society, and politics that I do not share. The problem with this current anti-oppression moment is not that we hold different ideas about them, but that these differences are destroying relationships.

A UU friend recently came to me in grief. An old UU friend of his, one with whom he had shared an intense bond years earlier, had become a committed convert to anti-oppression. When my friend admitted to her that he was skeptical of the anti-oppression approach, this friend declared that she would no longer associate with him. My friend was stunned: he had imagined that he and this other person would be friends for the rest of their lives. But just like that, the relationship was over.

If you search the internet, you'll find that UU blogs and social media posts are full of stories like this. A few years ago, at my previous church, I spoke up in a meeting and attempted to explain why, as sympathetic as I am to the aims of anti-oppression, I don't agree with the approach. I spoke as carefully and respectfully as I could, but the following Sunday another congregant refused to acknowledge me or shake my hand during the

My friend was stunned: he had imagined that he and the other person would be friends for the rest of their lives. But just like that, the relationship was over.

portion of our worship service where we pause to greet our neighbors. This may seem a small affair, but I had never before experienced such a blatant effort by another UU to discipline my thinking by shunning me in public. It stung.

It's this shift in behavior, not my objection to a set of ideas, that has convinced me that the anti-oppression crusade is not merely an error but a threat to our fundamental identity as Unitarian Universalists. As it happens, that fundamental identity, which is rooted in tolerance, emerged from a similar social dynamic that took root in the congregational churches on the Unitarian side of our inheritance in the early 19th century. The churches of the Standing Order in New England had, for a century, observed a custom of pulpit exchanges by which ministers would share

preaching and pastoral duties with neighboring churches. At a time when many ministerial settlements were lifetime appointments, this was a practical arrangement: it took pressure off ministers by giving them an opportunity to reuse their sermons and gave congregants a break from hearing the same voice from the pulpit week after week. It also performed a regulatory function. In a congregational tradition, with no higher authority to enforce theological discipline, church unity relied on this collegiality.

This collegiality broke down in the early 19th century as an intellectual rift took shape. The ministry was united in its belief that the social purpose of religion was virtue: after all, their churches were an established arm of the Massachusetts government, charged with the promotion of good behavior. But they had different opinions on how to approach that aim through their preaching. On one side were the orthodox, who held fast to the idea that the core Christian message must be grounded in traditional theological concepts like the triune nature of God. On the other side were the liberals, who thought that stirring up controversy over such abstract topics hindered the effort to promote good Christian character. Although the liberal camp eventually acquired the theologically specific name "Unitarians," they were not theological reformers out to correct the metaphysical underpinnings of Christian thought so much as they were rational skeptics of the traditional metaphysical approach. As such, they did not generally preach against the Trinity and related ideas. They simply dropped these topics from their sermons.

This shift in emphasis was discreet, but the orthodox noticed. They began to suspect that the liberals had abandoned their commitment to authentic Christianity. Since the congregational setting offered no recourse to authority—no bishop, no ecclesiastical court—to adjudicate this charge, the orthodox turned to the one disciplinary tool available to them: social pressure. They began to refuse pulpit exchanges with the liberals. More than theological

disagreement, it was this break from long-established custom, and the hurt feelings that it engendered, that made the painful schism between orthodox and liberal Congregationalists inevitable.

The heart of the problem was that neither side could accept the other side's framing of the issue. The liberals didn't deny the theological differences that had opened up between themselves and the orthodox, but they felt that these differences were small and, ultimately, unimportant, since both sides shared a common ideal of good Christian behavior. The orthodox, on the other hand, didn't believe that one could live a proper Christian life without fidelity to orthodox doctrine. Abandoning it struck against the heart of what it meant to be Christian, so they interpreted the liberal aversion to preaching these doctrines not as a well-intentioned effort to maintain Christian fellowship but as a hypocritical effort to conceal their anti-Christian intentions. The liberals, in turn, were livid at being accused of concealment and hypocrisy. By impugning their motives, the orthodox took things too far. They made it *personal*.

It's hard not to see echoes of this dynamic in our controversies today. Most of the anti-oppression skeptics I know are bewildered by the acrimony of the other side, given our shared progressive vision and commitment to justice-oriented goals. We readily acknowledge our disagreements with the anti-oppression perspective, but in the grand scheme of things we think these differences are minor. But from the anti-oppression perspective, such equivocation is unacceptable: now that privilege has been exposed as a conspiracy, any privileged person who does not denounce the conspiracy and confess their complicity is, by definition, still a conspirator. What anti-oppression skeptics see as good faith disagreement, anti-oppression proponents see as a rearguard effort among the oppressors to maintain the conspiracy and secure their unfair advantage. They see it as hypocrisy and concealment, the very charges that the orthodox

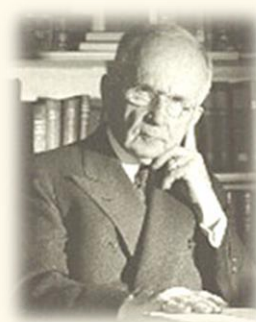
leveled against the liberals two hundred years ago.

The Unitarian and Universalist traditions have always had an intellectual bent, but it is a mistake to understand our religion as the sum of its ideas. Our religion is the sum of its relationships, and the relational rift opening among us will be hard to repair. It is hard to see how we can remain together when we see each other as bigots on one side and zealots on the other. As late as 1815, William Ellery Channing held out hope that the conflict between orthodox and liberal might still "terminate in what is infinitely more desirable than doctrinal concord, in the diffusion of a mild, candid, and charitable temper." His hope did not come to pass. May it be different this time.

A VOICE FROM THE PAST

An Excerpt from *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America*

By
Earl Morse Wilber



[Upon researching some biographical info about this month's "Voice from the Past," we found this succinct description on the UUA's website:

"Earl Morse Wilbur (April 26, 1866-January 8, 1956), a Unitarian minister and scholar, was an organizer, dean, and president of the Pacific Unitarian School for the Ministry (now Starr King School for the Ministry). His magisterial two-volume study, A History of Unitarianism, was the first comprehensive account of Unitarianism in both Europe and America. His characterization of religious liberalism as 'freedom, reason, and tolerance' has become commonly accepted within Unitarian Universalism."

Although the passage of the Trinity Act of 1813 was held by the Unitarians as an important step toward complete religious liberty, yet they realized that other ground was still to be gained. When Lord Liverpool said to Mr. Smith, who had introduced the bill, that he hoped the Unitarians would now be satisfied, the reply was, “No, my Lord, we shall not be satisfied, while one disqualifying statute in matters of religion remains on the books.” For there still remained several conditions that had long irritated and humiliated not only Unitarians but more or less all Dissenters. Thus marriage (save in the case of Quakers and Jews) might be performed only in a consecrated building and by clergymen of the established Church and with its rights, which were emphatically trinitarian; burial of the dead in parish cemeteries might take place only with the office read by a clergyman; births, marriages and deaths might legally be recorded only in parish registers; rates for the support of the Church must be paid by Dissenters no less than by churchmen. And now questions were beginning to be raised as to the right of the Unitarians to hold property or administer funds that had originally been under the control of orthodox believers. Cases of religious persecution had arisen that called for joint resistance, which Dissenters in general had been loath to offer when Unitarians were concerned. Unitarians therefore felt the need of some association to safeguard their interest; and in response to general request a meeting was held in London, January 13th, 1819, at which, after full discussion, the *Unitarian Association for Protecting the Civil Rights of Unitarians* was formed. It gave its first attention to the proposed reform of the marriage law; But more than sixteen years of toil and repeated disappointment ensued before the desired reform was achieved in 1836, and that through the efforts of Unitarians alone, unaided by other Dissenters.

THE PARADOX OF RAISING LITTLE LIBERALS

What Might it Mean when Our Kids Grow Up and Leave Our Congregations

By
Lynn Jinishian

It is “budgeting season” in my home church and once again I hear the murmurings begin bubbling up from my fellow congregants:

“Children are our future!” “We need a bigger investment in Religious Education for the children.” “How do we recruit more families with young children?” “If we don’t prioritize advertising to young families, this church is good as dead.”

There is no doubt that at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Spokane we *adore* our children (and yours). Just last year, our kids held a bake sale to raise funds for a new play structure on our grounds—and clearly ignoring all conventional wisdom about instilling the value of delayed gratification—Poof! A few dozen cookies and brownies later, a donation jar was generously filled, an order was placed, an old play structure removed, and a new one installed.



Lynn and Robert Jinishian celebrate after finishing completion of a new play structure at the UU Church of Spokane. [Click on the image to watch a quick video of their work from beginning to end.](#)

But are these playful, climbing, swinging, sliding children going to grow into the adults who attend each Sunday and contribute to keeping the lights on and the heating/cooling system functioning? Will they stick around to “create community, find meaning, work for justice” and fix the sprinklers? Probably not. This is the conundrum of Unitarian Universalism—a *freely chosen* faith. This is the paradox of raising Little Liberals.

On Mother’s Day this year, following a beautiful, moving intergenerational service and a tribute to Fred M. Rogers (of *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood*), I had a few moments to visit with three of my women friends from church. All four of us raised our children as UUs and all of those young adults are now in their 20s and 30s. A couple still live in town, but most are spread out everywhere. None of them stayed to maintain our membership roles at UUUCS. None of them are members of UU churches anywhere.

Did we fail as parents to raise children committed to church? Should we be doing something differently for the children with us today to keep them around tomorrow? *Should* we be recruiting more families? And if we do...will *those* children grow up to remain members?

Perhaps I’m just trying to rationalize my parenting skills, but I’d like to suggest another measure of our success in raising Little Liberals. Lori McKenna’s beautiful song “Humble & Kind” has a line in it where she sings “Go to church cause your mama says to...” which, in typical UU fashion, we’d have to change to “Consider church to build connection and find meaning” or something that both fits the rhythm of the song and is more aligned with our values. Church is certainly one option, but next time I meet up with my mom friends, Betsy, Susan, and Peggy, maybe we can ask ourselves these questions instead: Are our children out there caring for themselves? Animals? The planet? Helping a neighbor or friend now and then? Are they making decisions? Changing their minds? Changing course? Are they making mistakes and growing from them, however slowly or

painfully? Are they taking an occasional risk? Are they loving, and losing, and loving again? If the answer is “yes” to any or all of these questions, I call that a “win!”—not only for us as parents, but for our children *and* for the world we sent them out to. (You’re welcome, World!) If you recall, we did read the following words to them at their graduating youth service from Dr. Suess’s “Oh the Places You’ll Go!”

“...You’ll look up and down streets, Look them over with care.

About some you will say, I don’t choose to go there.

With your head full of brains and your shoes full of feet,

You’re too smart to go down any not-so-good street.

And you may not find any

You want to go down,

In that case, of course,

You’ll head *straight out of town....*”

Ummm ... We actually encouraged them to go and grow ... and celebrated with them when they did! What did we expect??

Which brings us back to the question about budgeting for RE advertising and recruiting more families. I suggest no more handwringing about this issue. Perhaps a better use of our resources would be investing in the kids who are already here—either with their consistently attending member parents, or as occasional warmly welcomed visitors. That \$20.00 cookie and \$100.00 brownie you generously purchased when the kids put out their donation jar is helping to produce more Little Liberals. Perhaps we should be asking ourselves, “Who are these little ones amongst us today? Who are they becoming? Where are they going? And how can we help them get there?”

Funny that the answer is very likely “Straight out of town....” And that is the measure of UU success.

NAUA MEMBER PROFILE

Featuring Mike Long

By
Candace Schmidt

Our featured NAUA member this month is Mike Long, who hails from Charlotte, North Carolina, and loves being a member on our NAUA Provisional Board. For Mike, “NAUA is a return to sanity.” He likes the simplicity of its defining mission, namely, freedom, reason, and tolerance, and how those ideals rest squarely upon our first principle of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Columbia, South Carolina was home to Mike during his childhood before he left to attend college at Washington and Lee University in

He describes growing up with five sisters as delightful, especially since they “Spoiled me rotten!”

Virginia. He describes growing up with five sisters as delightful, especially since they “Spoiled me rotten!” Mike met his wife, Heather, in Manhattan where they lived for 15 years. He was always focused on alternative, speculative investments, creating the first managed derivatives department on Wall Street. He later managed the trading department of the largest global derivatives investment company. After leaving the institutional research firm he founded in Charlotte nearly 35 years ago, he turned to doing research for himself.

Heather, a Vassar graduate, who is also a member of NAUA, started her career as a page at NBC and, in addition to directing tours at NBC studios, worked with the original cast of *Saturday Night Live*. She later shifted her focus to the financial world. Mike and Heather have two daughters and a five-year-old granddaughter. Mike’s main passions are family, tennis, and, he says, “still going deep down rabbit holes,” resulting from an

insatiable curiosity for learning things.

While raised a Catholic, Mike discovered Unitarian Universalism 30 years ago after he and his family moved to Charlotte. He describes pulling out the Yellow Pages and paging through the Church section, penciling through one church after another until he reached the U section. After calling the local Unitarian Universalist church office and asking a few questions, he attended in person and was overwhelmed by the experience: an intellectually stimulating sermon followed by warm, friendly conversation and good coffee.

Mike became quite active, serving on the Board of Trustees of the church, the Board of the church’s Open Door School, chairing the Endowment Trust, and committing to small group ministry and the softball team. Mike’s whole family also became very involved in church life, with his two daughters attending Religious Education “from beginning to end.” Mike enjoyed relating that after they completed the OWL (Our Whole Lives) sex education program, they became the go-to sexual educators for all of their friends!

For the first 10 years of attending the UU church in Charlotte, Mike’s minister was humanistic in his theological approach, which encouraged him to become very involved in every sphere of church life. This minister was followed by a minister who was much more spiritually focused, whom Mike described as a “social justice fundamentalist” (Mike refrains from using “extreme wokeness,” as the term has already been taken).

The culture gradually changed at his church to the point that Mike became less enthusiastic and involved. After reading an article by John McWhorter in which he first learned of the illiberal trends ascribed to the UUA, Mike reached out to Todd Eklof, joined the UU Church of Spokane, and then became involved in the formation of NAUA. Mike says he is still very interested in small group ministry and hopes to bring this enthusiasm to various programs within NAUA.

Welcome, Mike! We are fortunate to have your enthusiasm, talents, and skills contribute to our budding Association!

**TO COVENANT
OR NOT TO COVENANT?**

**Is This the Best Word to Describe the
Relationship Religious Liberals Want?**

**By
Rev. Terry Cummings**

More and more lately, I hear concerns expressed about “accountability” in the context of our Unitarian Universalist relationships. Some folks worry in particular that “sanctions” will be imposed on UUA member congregations that don’t live up to the mandates of the proposed revised Articles 2 and 3 of the Association’s Bylaws.

[Article 2 contains the Seven Principles member congregations agree to affirm, along with six sources of wisdom and inspiration. Article 3 defines the Association as “a voluntary association of autonomous, self-governing local churches and fellowships,” a clause recognizing and guaranteeing congregational polity.]

A recent comment attributed to a person in a UUA leadership position, along the lines of “covenant without consequences has no meaning” (not an exact quote), seems to have raised some eyebrows among those who are skeptical of the proposed changes. I cannot vouch for the fact that the statement was made, but the concerns raised are worthy of consideration.

Indeed, the proposed revisions to Article 2 raise many questions about the nature of the relationship between the association and its member congregations if they are adopted. As of this writing, proposed revisions to Article 3 have not been made public and I understand that the process of drafting them hasn’t yet begun (a fact

that adds to the uncertainty around the potential impact of approving the proposed revisions to Article 2).

In light of the concerns that have been expressed, I wonder whether it is time to abandon use of the word “covenant” in the governing documents, or at least define it in simple terms that don’t make people feel so uncomfortable?

I first encountered the term covenant decades ago when I was a law student, and I used it (or tried to avoid using it) when representing clients in contract negotiations. In contract law a covenant is a formal promise to do or not do a particular thing.

A covenant can be a big deal, more than a mere statement of intention, or a promise to make reasonable efforts to do or not do something. A covenant is high up in the “I really, really mean it” category of promises.

Money damages for a breach of covenant can be significant, so in that sense, the UUA person was correct in reportedly saying that “covenant without consequences has no meaning.” Unfortunately, I doubt that many UUs appreciated that when they became members of their congregation, and there was no reason for them to do so.

Perhaps it was because I was still a practicing lawyer when I first became a UU that the word jumped out at me from the statement of principles; “we the member congregations *covenant* to affirm and promote....” I wonder whether those who wrote it knew or intended to use a term with such a strong meaning? Did they expect the congregations to “really, really mean it”? —I wonder.

Perhaps the drafters were inspired by the prominence of covenants in biblical and other ancient Near Eastern texts? The idea of a covenant has many references in the Hebrew scriptures, in particular, references which draw from contemporary treaties between conquered

people and their invaders. The covenantal relationship between Yahweh and Israel in the Hebrew Scripture may have been drawn from treaties in existence between different tribes and groups at the time the scriptures began to take their current form. Such treaties often required the payment of annual tributes to the foreign power by those who had been conquered in order to be left in peace. Such was the case when the Assyrians attacked the northern kingdom of Israel in the 7th century BCE.

Covenantal treaties generally followed one of two forms. “The parity treaty (between equal parties) and the suzerain/vassal treaty (between a greater and a lesser party). In suzerain/vassal treaties, the greater party (i.e., the suzerain) provided benefits such as military protection and land grants to the lesser party (i.e., the vassal). In response, the vassal owed the suzerain financial tribute and ‘consummate loyalty.’ Consequently, vassals could have only one suzerain, because taking another ‘lord’ or ‘father’ would be tantamount to treason.” (Meek, *The Suzerain Vassal Treaty (Covenant) in the Old Testament*, <https://russmeek.com/2020/10/the-suzerain-vassal-treaty-covenant-in-the-old-testament/>)

It seems implicit in the current iteration of the UUA bylaws that the drafters of the Seven Principles had in mind an agreement between parties of equal standing, each congregation with all of the others, rather than a “suzerain/vassal” covenant. (Of course, we might observe that some congregations by virtue of their size and financial resources are more equal than others.) Assuming that that is still the case, if the proposed Bylaw revisions are adopted it would be well for that to be so stated therein.

In either case, the prospect of holding congregations accountable seems not only retaliatory, but it also seems both impractical as well as unfair to their congregants. It seems improbable that any congregation would accept being cut-off from receiving the (limited) services it receives from the national Association

as punishment for non-compliance with goals and objectives prescribed by the Association, or otherwise fined or penalized. The Association’s

The prospect of holding congregations accountable seems not only retaliatory, but also seems both impractical as well as unfair to their congregants.

enforcement power seems very limited. Any congregation could conceivably leave the Association rather than submit to the sanction proposed.

In addition, since most congregation members are not involved in the day-to-day decisions and policies of their church, and since power is often exercised mostly by a few active members, it seems unfair that all the lay folks should suffer the consequences of being held accountable. Sanctions imposed by the national Association for being out of covenant, for example, blocking a congregation from having access to ministers in search, would unfairly have a negative impact on those congregants who are removed from decision-making.

It is worth mentioning also that the standard minister agreement between a minister and the congregation that they serve contains specific language that defines the relationship between the minister and their church as covenantal. The standard agreement was drafted by and required by the national Association, the UUA. It has been this writer’s experience that once the ministerial agreement is signed by the minister and their employer congregation, the language of covenant is seldom if ever referred to again. It especially seems to be conspicuously ignored when there is a conflict between the minister and their Board.

Perhaps now is the time, therefore, to reconsider the use of the term covenant. The whole question of congregational accountability, perhaps desirable in the context of congregations being

held accountable for the way in which they treat their ministers and staff, has all the appearances of a minefield that doesn't need to be crossed. At best, the meaning of covenant and the consequences in the event of a breach is murky.

In addition, in this writer's experience, the word covenant most often comes up in negative context, i.e., being used as a weapon to accuse someone of being out of covenant, a new euphemism for the word "sin." Freedom from this kind of accusation is what caused many UUs to join the denomination in the first place. It would be ironic if, in redefining our core values, the concept of sin should emerge under another name. Perhaps now is the time to engage in a conversation around the question, is it necessary to use the term covenant in the governing documents, and if so, should it remain undefined?

NAUA ACADEMY NEWS

Recent and Upcoming Academy Programs

The NAUA Academy held its second evening seminar on May 16th. The speaker was Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof, Minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Spokane and President of NAUA. His presentation was entitled, **What is Liberal Religion? Its History and Values.** Rev. Eklof discussed the origins and characteristics of liberalism in the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, its emergence as Unitarianism in Eastern Europe and its later development in the United States. He concluded by arguing that liberalism has been and remains essential to human progress in the world today. If you were unable to attend this seminar, you can view its recording online at:

https://www.youtube.com/@NAUA_Academy

June's NAUA Academy program, happening on Tuesday, June 20th, is about Climate Change and will be facilitated by Jan Dash, Ph.D. Dr. Dash is Editor-in-Chief of the Journal of Climate Action, Research and Policy; Editor of World Scientific

Climate Encyclopedia and Gabelli Fellow and Visiting Scholar at Fordham University.

The title of his seminar is, **UU Climate Action: Opportunity and Risk.** Dr. Dash will review issues of climate change, his vision for our liberal religion becoming a powerful international voice for more urgent climate action and the potential role of NAUA in this effort.

The seminar will be held on Zoom, Tuesday June 20th, 4:30 - 6:30 pm PDT, 7:30 - 9:30pm EDT. For more information and to register for this event, please open the following link:

<https://www.signupgenius.com/go/30E0549ABAF2DA6FE3-uuclimate>.

July's NAUA Academy program is on July 18th at 4:30 - 6:30 p.m. PDT, 7:30 -9:30 p.m. EDT. Its title is **Race Amity: America's Other Tradition.** Joyce Francis, Ph.D., will be our presenter. Dr. Francis taught international affairs at George Mason, Tulane, and American University. She is a member of Friends of Race Amity, a member of Quimper UU Fellowship in Port Townsend, WA, co-facilitator of its 4th Principle Affinities Group, and a member of the Advisory Board of the NAUA Academy.

Additional information and registration for this program will be posted shortly on the NAUA Academy section of NAUA's website.

NAUA Academy YouTube Channel and Planning for Future Programs

All NAUA Academy programs occur on Zoom and are recorded. Thanks to Bob Simoni of the Hayward (CA) NAUA Fellowship, we now have a NAUA Academy YouTube Channel where you can find videos of all past NAUA Academy programs as well as videos of the NAUA 3rd Saturday Services. For the Saturday Services, click on Playlists. Here is the Link:

https://www.youtube.com/@NAUA_Academy.

We are now actively planning the NAUA Academy programs for the Fall. We already have some very interesting topics and speakers who have volunteered to lead sessions. However, we do need more session hosts and we would also welcome additional proposals, suggestions, and teachers for new courses. If you wish to volunteer to help build the Academy, please contact Stephen Polmar or Terry Anderson at Academy@naunitarians.org. Thank you!

COMING EVENTS

NAUA Monthly Worship Service – June 17, 10:00 a.m. Pacific Time, 1:00 p.m. Eastern Time.

Our June speaker is Rev. Terry Cummings, who answers the question, “Are our hearts big enough to hold all of the infinite universe within ourselves?” with a resounding, “Yes!”

In her homily, entitled, *Making Room for Mystery: Searching for Stars on a Pale Blue Dot*, Rev. Terry will reflect on how the sources of our Unitarian and Universalist faith can open the gates to a lifetime of spiritual exploration, unencumbered by creeds, limited only by our imaginations.

A link to the Livestream and Zoom Room will be posted on our website and sent out to our members and subscribers in advance of the service.

NAUA Monthly Clergy Gathering – June 22, 10:00 a.m – 12:00 p.m. Pacific Time

Those attending last month’s Clergy Gathering enjoyed the kind of open discussion and supportive collegiality that has long been the norm among Unitarian ministers. We will likely keep this loose format during our future gatherings and invite ministers seeking this sort of gathering to please let us know.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

So far, we’ve had no takers, but we really do welcome letters from our readers for potential publication in *Liberal Beacon*! Letters should address matters of interest to Unitarians and Universalists and other religious liberals, including current news and events.

Please email your submission no less than five business days before the end of the calendar month in order for publication in our next issue. Letters are shorter than opinion pieces and should be no more than 250 words. Form letters and letters considered libelous, obscene or in bad taste will not be printed. Anonymous letters will not be printed. NAUA reserves the right to edit all letters for length. The decision to print any submission is completely at the discretion of the editors.

Please write “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line and email your submissions to nauaedboard@gmail.com or mail them to:

North American Unitarian Association
Letters to the Editor
4340 W. Whistalks Way
Spokane, WA 99224

Letters must include the writer’s name, full address, and phone number for verification purposes. Only the name and town will be published.

