

I Pledge Allegiance to...
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County Eustis, FL
Tri-County Unitarian Universalists Summerfield, FL
Sunday, February 19, 2023
Rev. Cynthia A. Snively

When I was in the fourth grade back in Lebanon, Pennsylvania I noticed that a girl in one of the classes always stood out in the hall during the pledge of allegiance. Someone explained to me that she was Mennonite and according to her family's faith it was wrong to pledge one's allegiance to anything or anyone other than God.

My family and childhood church had a different attitude. Every year Vacation Bible School at that church began with three pledges. First, a pledge to the American flag followed by the singing of "America;" second, a pledge to the Christian flag followed by the singing of "Stand Up, Stand Up for Jesus; and third, a pledge to the Bible followed by the singing of "The B-I-B-L-E."

Looking back at this now in adulthood my current thinking resonates more with the girl standing in the hall than with the plethora of pledges of my childhood Vacation Bible School. I think too often we let words, flags and other symbols become important to the point of idolatry. Do you remember back in 2001 when Roy Moore, then Chief Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, set up a 5,280-pound granite monument depicting the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the state's judicial building? [Ten Commandments Monument Controversy | Encyclopedia of Alabama](#). My thoughts then and now are that this was rather incongruous, making a golden calf of the ten commandments.

Still, I do understand how attached we can become to words and symbols. Years ago, when I was doing a yearlong residency in Clinical Pastoral Education one of the hospital floors my concentration was on was the orthopedic/neurological unit. Some stroke victims for the most part could not talk, except for those words they knew most of their lives and by rote; the Lord's Prayer, the 23rd Psalm, the Hail Mary. These words were apparently retrievable to injured brains even when the words for conversation were not.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is purposely creedless. Yet our congregations write vision and mission statements and covenants and article II of the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations currently begins, "We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote..." followed by our principles and sources.

The current last words of article II are, "Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test."

Many Unitarian Universalists have strong feelings for our current Purposes and Principles, but the rules of our Association are that they should be regularly reviewed. And, while we may be a creedless denomination, we have over time and currently tried to express in words what is important to our faith.

When the Universalists were forming as a denomination in this country the New England Convention in 1803 adopted what came to be called the Winchester Profession of Faith. One of our religious education curricula "Faith Like a River" tells us that, "The adoption of the Winchester Profession did not

come easily. The disagreement turned not on a point of theology, but on whether requiring any statement of belief at all was acceptable. Some felt that a statement of belief was necessary to clearly distinguish Universalism from among the various Christian beliefs being preached. Others felt that any statement, however broad, was limiting to personal conscience. Ultimately, the New England Convention adopted the Winchester Profession, with a Liberty Clause which allowed individual societies or groups of societies to adopt additional articles of belief provided these did not conflict with the beliefs laid out in the Profession.”

That same curriculum says, “William Channing Gannett, Unitarian minister and a leader in the Western Unitarian Conference in the late 19th century, is remembered as both an outspoken opponent of creedalism and author of the statement "Things Most Commonly Believed Today Among Us." While Gannett in no way meant his statement as a creed, it was an attempt to articulate the Unitarian beliefs of the day, and thereby answer challenges regarding... the theological basis of Unitarianism. The statement won wide support at an 1887 meeting of the Western Unitarian Conference.”

Gannett’s statement began, “The Western Conference has neither the wish nor the right to bind a single member by declarations concerning fellowship or doctrine. Yet it thinks some practical good may be done by setting forth in simple words the things most commonly believed among us—the Statement being always open to re-statement and to be regarded only as the thought of the majority. [Activity 2: A History of Statements of Belief | Faith like a River | Faith Like a River | Tapestry of Faith | UUA.org](#)

To make a very large jump in time, in 1961 when the Unitarian and Universalist denominations merged to become the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations a set of principles different from today’s was stated: It included such words as

“In accordance with these corporate purposes, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:...

2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;
3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;
4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;...
6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land,” [uuworld.org : the uua's original principles \(1961\)](#)

In an article in the year 2000 in our denominational magazine the [UU World](#) Warren R. Ross wrote on “How the (current) UUA's Principles and Purposes were shaped.... Ross wrote, “Much of the credit for starting on the long and meandering path that led to adoption of the reformulated Principles must go to UU women. Over many years, women (though not women alone) had been growing unhappy with the blatantly sexist language of the original bylaws... two other emerging understandings also helped make the existing Principles seem inadequate—first, that traditions other than the Judeo-Christian are important to our heritage; second, that our relation to the environment is one of our primary religious concerns. But the main impetus for change did come from the UU Women's

Federation (UUWF)... In 1981, a nonsexist revision of the Principles and Purposes drafted by various women's groups was presented to the General Assembly. It caused great uneasiness, especially among UU Christians, who saw it as tantamount to writing them out of the UUA.... (A committee to review the proposal was set up.) The committee ... decided to come up with a proposal that acknowledged UU diversity and to do it on the basis of a continent-wide consultation with as many congregations and individual members as possible. They submitted their first report at the Brunswick, Maine, G(eneral) A(ssembly) in 1982...(The Rev. Walter Royal Jones Jr., head of the committee) recalls that one committee member, the Rev. Harry Hoehler, came up with a solution to the problem that had created controversy both at the 1960 meetings and again in 1981: whether to refer to the deity and the Judeo-Christian tradition. Hoehler suggested dividing the statement into two parts: first, the Seven Principles, followed by references to five "living traditions we share." (A sixth tradition, earth-centered religions, was added to the statement in 1995.) No one objected to language about the "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love" when it appeared as part of an uncontroversial summary of historical influences on UUism." uuworld.org : [how the uu principles and purposes were adopted](http://uuworld.org).

"The UUA revised ... Principles (were adopted) in 1985. The revised statement, which serves as the covenant of the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, includes seven Principles, six Sources of the Living Tradition, and a statement of the Association's Purposes. In compliance with a bylaw requirement that the Principles be reviewed at least every 15 years, the Commission on Appraisal announced in April 2006 that it would begin a denomination-wide review process," uuworld.org : [the uua's original principles \(1961\)](http://uuworld.org).

As you may realize the Principles were not changed in 2006. What we currently use was adopted in the 1980s with the sixth source added in the 1990s. But, another 15 years have passed. In 2021 an Article II Study Commission was formed to look at article II of the UUA bylaws which is where our principles and purposes live. On the study commission's web page, it is noted that, "Our current Principles and Purposes were last revised in (1980s). At General Assembly (GA) 2017, there was discussion of amending the Principles to add an 8th Principle, addressing racism, and an amended 1st Principle, addressing non-human life. The 5th Principle was the subject of a report in 2009, which dealt with the ways in which GA and other Unitarian Universalist (UU) gatherings do and don't embody an inclusive democratic process. The 7th Principle has also been the subject of discussions about possible amendments....The Article II Study Commission has completed its two year study. They submitted their [report \(PDF 26 pages\)](#) to the UUA Board of Trustees at their meeting held on January 20, 2023. The report includes the Study Commission's recommended revisions to Article II," [Article II Study Commission | UUA.org](http://uuworld.org).

The proposed revision centers the word "love":

"Unitarian Universalist Association: Bylaws and Rules Article II Purposes and Covenant

Section 2 Values and Covenant is the section likely to end up on bookmarks and hanging in religious education classrooms.) "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. Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are: (There is then a drawing) Th(e) image is of a chalice with an overlay of the word love over the flame, with six outstretched arms that create a circle around each of the core values and form a six petal flower shape. Each arm is a different color and clockwise they are:

Interdependence (Orange), Equity (Red), Transformation (Purple), Pluralism (Dark Blue), Generosity (Teal), and Justice (Yellow).

(There is then a statement with each value and a covenant statement related to it.)

“Interdependence. We honor the interdependent web of all existence.

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

“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....

You can google the Article II study commission page and read the rest.

Section 3 is titled Inspirations. Sources are not listed. There is a more general statement.

Section 4 is titled Inclusion and addresses dealing with systems of power, privilege, and oppression.

Section 5 is our traditional end. Freedom of belief. Congregational freedom and the individual’s right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage. Congregations may establish statements of purpose, covenants, and bonds of union so long as they do not require that members adhere to a creed,” [Article II Study Report to the Board of Trustees \(uua.org\)](http://uua.org).

The first vote on this proposal will be at this year’s General Assembly in June.

We do not have a Unitarian Universalist flag or a creed or a pledge and no one is going to make you stand out in the hall if you are not willing to recite whatever article II may become with your hand on your heart. Still, we constantly strive to state as William Channing Gannett put it, “Things Commonly Believed Today Among Us.”