

THE ANNUAL MEETING & CONGREGATIONAL POLITY

PRINCIPLES OF THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ASSOCIATION

We Covenant to Affirm and Promote:

- 1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;*
- 2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;*
- 3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;*
- 4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;*
- 5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;*
- 6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all;*
- 7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.*

One of the great privileges and weighty responsibilities for members of congregations which are organized via a Congregational Polity, is that pretty much all of the important decisions of the congregation are made by the vote of members at periodic Congregational Meetings. Buying and selling property; ordaining, calling or firing ministers, setting annual budgets; electing board members and other leaders to handle lesser decisions throughout the year; creating and publishing statements of beliefs and organizational documents of the congregation; joining, re-affirming membership, or leaving the Unitarian Universalist Association; and a variety of other major decisions must be handled through voting either at the annual meeting or special called meetings.

A Congregational Polity is very different from a church run by Bishops, with an Episcopal Polity like the Catholics, Anglicans, and Methodists, even though they may vote on many aspects of church life. It is also different from a Presbyterian Polity, in which Presbyters, or chosen elders make the major decisions. In a Congregational Polity, the members of each congregation make the decisions and carry the weight of those decisions.

First Unitarian Universalist Church of Stockton, like every other Unitarian Universalist congregation, is organized by Congregational Polity. We will gather in a little bit to exercise our democratic process by making important decisions for the life of our congregation. The most important parts of that process at this annual meeting will be to elect leaders and to pass a budget for the coming year. We also will receive the packet of annual reports that describe the workings of the congregation in this year now ending. At a recent called meeting we made a few changes to the organizational documents of the church, so we will not need to discuss any such changes at this meeting. Some of this work is mundane and often in UU congregational meetings, the liveliest part of the discussion may be over relatively minor matters.

Frequently in UU congregational meetings we go out of our way to listen to minority voices, to give everyone a chance to speak, and then vote in near unanimity! This is not representative democracy, as in the various levels of governance in our republic, this is the raw democracy where each member gets a vote and a voice to ask questions and make comments. There are processes which can be used to limit debate, but this is the democratic process in its truest form, and this is part of the statement of UU Principles that we claim.

At our UU General Assembly, rules have been enacted over the last 2 decades to move much of the debate on various matters into separate hearings and to limit floor discussion to matters passed in those hearing groups. The once lively debate has become significantly constrained at General Assembly and in some ways I miss the rough and tumble practice of democracy that once occurred. Some of this is because of generational differences in which many members of younger generations are turned off by lengthy, argumentative and often repetitive discussions of matters with which they may not even identify. This also happens in congregations, where families may not stick around if meetings last too long or become too argumentative. Though most UUs have many strong beliefs, it is often more important to emphasize love and the range of beliefs that we accept, encourage or tolerate than to argue to agreement.

Even though we are non-creedal and non-doctrinal, we do generally agree upon the statements of Principles and the Living Tradition. Most UU Congregations try to accept and encourage members with a wide variety of individual beliefs and practices, so long as they are not harmful to, oppressive toward, or alienating toward others. Within our Principles and Living Tradition there is quite a wide array of acceptable beliefs and practices, but not all beliefs or practices are acceptable, especially those that injure, oppress, or otherwise harm others. Most congregations put forth the UUA Principles and the statement of Living Tradition as their main statements of beliefs, though some have other statements and affirmations, either from the UU Hymnal, their own history, or other sources that they commonly use.

Within our movement and congregations, we of course include Christians and Jews, Buddhists and Pagans, Humanists, and others who may or may not believe in God, the Goddess, or any Divine entity. Many of us come from Christian backgrounds but no longer can in good conscience claim that name. Many of us value the core teachings of Jesus, Buddha, and other religious exemplars. As an institution, we are a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and we seek to welcome all those that wish to be a part of our tradition.

We are also a member congregation of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations, and of the Pacific Central District of the UUA. As a UUA member congregation we are expected to pay dues to the Association and to the District to facilitate the workings of those bodies which support our ministries. For a number of years we have failed to pay our full fair share of dues to the Association and the District, but I am hopeful that we shall begin to increase our payments to the UUA and PCD in coming years. The Association and District help to connect us with other congregations and provide services around changes of ministers, internal disputes, training programs and mentoring for congregational leaders, and coordination of efforts around the world with other UUs.

The UUA and PCD also provide staff assistance and resources for religious education and committee work, support Beacon Press, Skinner House Books, and the UUA Bookstore. The staff of the UUA and District support the ministries of our congregation in many ways and Rev. Peter Morales, the President of the UUA, is able to represent our movement in various issues of concern in religious, political, and public forums around the world. Thus we are part of a movement that is bigger than our congregation.

Back here in Stockton, at First UU Church, we provide ministries to members and friends of our congregation, but we also reach out to touch the lives and concerns of the broader community. We are the one representative congregation of Unitarian Universalism in San Joaquin county and as such we have a moral responsibility to be aware of the needs of people of our community and county. We host the local PFLAG group, Delta Harmony Express singers, and have opened our doors to various civic minded organizations and justice oriented groups over the years including the Western Farm Workers. Our commitment to work with such groups is rooted in our Principles and made possible by the decisions of this congregation and its board. We may listen to suggestions from various places including the District and UUA, but what we do here is decided here, in meetings such as the one which will convene shortly.

I know many of you know all these things, but some others may not know how things get decided around here, and others may need a brief refresher course anyway! My main point today is to remind us all that we each are important to the functioning of this congregation. We had a wonderful response to the pledge drive this spring, which has allowed the Board and Finance Committee to present a balanced budget without starting out by cutting or scrimping. This is a great indicator of your commitment to this congregation and to Unitarian Universalism, and I thank you and commend you for your support. Your involvement is also needed in making the decisions of the congregation at today's meeting and in your service to this congregation and humanity.

We each can do something to aid the work of this congregation by volunteering, and we each have a duty to do what we can. This congregation has more gray hair than some others, and many members and friends have reached the point of life when they are limited physically, so it is even more important that we share the load! When we work together we can accomplish amazing things!

This first year I have spent as your minister has been wonderful. It has been a pleasure to share in ministry with you, and I am looking forward to many more years working with you. This past week has been a challenge for many of us, and I really appreciate all of you who helped prepare for Lois Hulseley's Memorial Service and Reception and for this meeting. Without Mary, Cindy, Rosemary, Dwane, Sara, and Dave, and so many others we would really struggle to get done all that needs doing. Nichole broke her wrist and so she was working one-handed this week! I don't know about the rest of you, but I found myself exhausted by Saturday afternoon and I hadn't even finished the sermon! Thank you to all of you that work so hard to make this church a success! It is really a good thing that we are going into a more relaxed period over the summer for we have worked hard this year!

As members of a Unitarian Universalist congregation, we enjoy the freedom and liberty to believe and practice as our journeys have led us. We also carry the weight of responsibility to make our congregation successful, welcoming, and open to all those whose journeys lead them to Unitarian Universalism. We provide a spiritual, religious, and/or philosophical home to all those who can live by our principles and who seek to be a part of this tradition. For some of us, being Unitarian Universalist is a way of life, while for others it is not quite so important, but in this mix of commitments we are far more than a club or even an ordinary church. When we meet for our annual meeting, we set the tone for how we shall share ministry together in the coming year. Fortunately we can laugh at ourselves, but always we should remember that we have a message that can change the world and transform the lives of all who come into our movement, into our congregation.

We have blessings to share but also we have beliefs about the value of all persons, and about organizations, nations, and the world that can truly bring humanity together in justice, equality, acceptance, compassion, and love. And in our seventh principle we voice a respect for the threads that hold all things together, recognizing that all life is sacred and that the choices made by humans in each day can echo through succeeding generations of plants and animals and humans and planets. What we do here on and to the earth can leave far more ripples in the universe than we have even considered.

In your decisions of this day, I challenge you to decide thoughtfully and courageously, make your votes and your words count. This grand journey of life depends upon each of us, this congregation holds great promise and its fate is ever in each of our hands. Many have gone before to build this legacy, this opportunity whose fate is now our responsibility. Dare to dream, risk laughter, share transformative ideas, live by our principles, vote courageously, work for an even brighter future!

Friends, live well and prosper, and may the force be with you! And as we say in Chicago, vote early and often! Peace, out! Amen!