

# “Works in Progress”

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As you surely know, we are a congregation without a shared statement of beliefs.

Unitarians have always chosen covenants over creeds.

Rather than battling it out over the finer points of theology, we have chosen instead to affirm a covenant—a mutual commitment, if you will—to how we will be, and how we will behave towards each other and the wider world.

Today, our over-arching covenant is based on seven principles, a statement of our guiding values that shape our way of being, both within and beyond our congregations.

These seven principles are hopefully quite familiar to you.

First Unitarian, joining with other member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council, affirms and promotes:

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.

It's sometimes said that the 1<sup>st</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Principles

are the pillars that hold up the remaining five—  
that the inherent worth and dignity of every person as one pillar  
and respect for the interdependent web as the other  
provide the needed foundation and structural supports  
for our work for justice and equity,  
for acceptance and spiritual growth,  
for the free and responsible search,  
for the right of conscience and the democratic process,  
and for the goal of peace, liberty, and justice for all.

On this final Sunday of April, the month  
when our worship and Journey Group theme has been Acceptance,  
we turn to focus on the meaning of our 3<sup>rd</sup> Principle,  
which calls us to “acceptance of one another.”

Now, what does that actually mean?  
Just what does this particular principle entail?

Ultimately, it involves coming to terms with human difference.  
With beholding another for who they are—  
seeing them, ideally, in the fullness of who they know themselves to be—  
and choosing to open our hearts to them,  
even if it involves a bit of struggle, a bit of work,  
rather than close our hearts and turn away.

Now, acceptance doesn't always mean approval or agreement.

What it does mean is recognizing the value of relationship,  
of building bridges to connect us one to another,  
even over what are sometimes great chasms of difference.

It means being open to a genuine encounter,  
and to the possibility of—or even the need for—change.

It means understanding that we are each other's teachers,  
and that, through our differences,  
we may also become one another's spiritual practice.

I know that I, for one, have learned so much more  
about the world and about myself  
from people who have lived lives very different from my own.

And I have grown more when I have had to really work  
to better understand the lessons someone else's life has to teach me.

What has this been like for you?  
What have you learned from navigating human difference?

I'm guessing by your involvement in a Canadian Unitarian congregation,  
that you've likely come to embrace the gifts of human diversity,  
that you celebrate and cherish the great Canadian mosaic  
and the stunning mix of cultures, languages, and backgrounds  
that make Toronto such a marvelous place to call home.

One of the things I most love about this city  
is the experience of entering the Arrivals Hall at Pearson Airport.

Were it not for the Canadian flags tucked into the corners,  
you might be anywhere in the world,  
judging by the great cross-section of humanity all around.

Given this reality in our city,  
it's natural that we question, at times,  
our own congregation's apparent lack of diversity.

Obviously, our congregation doesn't fully reflect  
the changing story of Toronto, which has, of course,  
for years now been considered the most multicultural city in the world.

We obviously have a very long way to go,  
if our congregation is ever to reflect more fully the diversity of Toronto—  
from racial and cultural backgrounds,  
to education level and economic status,  
to varying degrees of physical ability and mental health,  
to the spectrum of gender and the full span of human sexualities.

There are, of course, many different ways to measure diversity.  
And there is more diversity among us than we often recognize.

Compared to most religious groups,  
our congregation is made up of a tremendous range of theological beliefs.

In the orbit of this congregation are people who believe in God and people who emphatically don't.  
As well as people who know the Divine as Goddess,  
or by many different names.

Some among us pray daily,  
while others consider prayer a waste of time.

Some of us practise Buddhist meditation and some Pagan rituals.  
While others also drop by Christian churches for communion,  
or attend the High Holy Days in a local synagogue.

Beyond religious belief, there is a broader range  
of educational and economic backgrounds  
than most people here ever acknowledge.  
Our congregation is made up of people who are well off,  
some whose lives are relatively comfortable,  
and those who are just struggling to scrape by from week to week.

And we range in age from toddlers to almost-centenarians.  
Religious communities are, after all, one of the few remaining places  
where multigenerational community can be found in our society,  
a place where, when we're not in the middle of a pandemic,  
the generations mingle and where we, hopefully,  
learn from one another, no matter our age.

In our congregation, we have relative ease with the fact  
that so many of our members are lesbian and gay and bisexual.  
And we are growing in our capacity  
to truly celebrate the diversity of genders.

In terms of politics, some of you are NDP to your core,  
while others are Libs or Greens.

We even have a small handful of Conservatives,  
though they most often keep that to themselves.

There's an argument to be made that any one community  
can only sustain so much diversity  
before coming unravelled by the pressures of difference.

That may be an argument we find ourselves making—  
whether out loud or not, whether consciously or not—  
when we're feeling challenged or frustrated or overwhelmed  
by the difficulties that can come with diversity.

Sometimes it's easy to think ourselves as being past all that,  
confident in our ability to accept anyone and everyone.

That is, until we find ourselves in a conversation with a fellow congregant,  
having an unexpected chat about, say, prayer or carbon taxes,  
about how best to fund long-term care homes,  
or whether women should be allowed to wear the niqab,  
and we discover that—lo, and behold!—  
not everyone sees things exactly the way we do.

We learn that perhaps our greatest diversity  
is our great diversity of opinions.  
Most any survey taken of any population of UUs  
can yield pretty confounding results.  
We can be all of the map—  
and sometimes that's just the views of a single person!

These dynamics obviously are not wholly unique to First Unitarian.  
They apply to our schools and our workplaces,  
our dinner tables and our family reunions, too.

But the test in all of this—the spiritual test, if you will—  
comes in that moment when we decide what to do with our differences,  
in how we negotiate the distance between ourselves and the other.

The test is whether we can open our hearts to genuine acceptance.  
If we can lead with curiosity.  
If we can hold back our very human tendency to judge.  
If we can hold on to a capacity for real humility.

The sacred task in these moments,  
the work of spiritual being,  
the work of being human,  
is to look at the difference we find between ourselves and the other,  
and see it for what it is—and then, resolving to find the bridge,  
or even to build the bridge, if necessary,

that will connect us more deeply, one to another.

This is, I believe, the work of building up the Beloved Community.

Though I speak of this concept often,  
I recently came across a new definition I think is worth sharing:

Beloved Community happens when people of diverse  
racial, ethnic, educational, class, gender,  
sexual orientation backgrounds/identities  
come together in an interdependent relationship  
of love, mutual respect, and care  
that seeks to realize justice  
within the community and in the broader world.<sup>1</sup>

It's important here to state clearly that diversity and inclusion  
are not so much ends in and of themselves,  
especially within our congregation,  
as much as they are a commitment—a covenant—  
to a certain way of being in the world  
that seeks to make room for all.

This is where the work of acceptance becomes more challenging.  
Because this means going beyond simply being nice or welcoming.

This is when acceptance comes to mean more than mere tolerance.

It's the place where things actually begin to change—  
because there's injustice or oppression involved,  
or an imbalance of power or privilege.

It's the point when those who are marginalized  
are empowered to “take up space” at the centre.

This place, this point,  
is where true transformation happens in a community—  
in that moment when it becomes at last widely understood  
that our liberation is ultimately a shared and sacred endeavour.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/what-is-beloved-community>

This is the work of transformation  
that we are being called to embrace.

Earlier, I reminded you of our Seven Principles.

As you may know, over the last few years,  
across Unitarian Universalism,  
there has been a growing movement to adopt an Eighth.

The currently proposed wording is this:

Our congregations “covenant to affirm and promote:  
journeying toward spiritual wholeness  
by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community  
by our actions that accountably  
dismantle racism and other oppressions  
in ourselves and our institutions.”<sup>2</sup>

When the idea for this new principle  
was first floated a couple of years ago—  
and discussed at the Annual General Meeting  
of the Canadian Unitarian Council—  
I felt some real resistance to it.

Happily, the language has been further refined  
in a way that I now fully support.

But I will confess that my initial opposition wasn’t just about the language.

Over the past couple of years, I have had to work through  
my earlier view that our current set of principles was sufficient.

I have had to let go of my deep-seated desire  
that our First Principle about the inherent worth and dignity  
of every person was somehow adequate  
to help us counter and overcome  
the injustices of racism and other forms of oppression.

I so deeply wanted then, and I want so very much now,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org>

for our First Principle to truly mean what it says, with no exceptions.  
I want its promise to cover absolutely everyone.

And so part of me grieves that the need to add this Eight Principle  
is in some way an admission that we have not been able to fulfill  
the promise of our First Principle.

I was reluctant to abandon my dream that with just a little more effort,  
our principles could lead us to do the work that must be done.

I was so invested in my vision,  
that it took me more time than it should have to shift my understanding.

In the end, I had to resist turning my idealism into an idol.

And I listened more closely to the voices  
of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour,  
raising their concerns about the limitations of our language  
and the need for Unitarian Universalism to get much more explicit  
about the call to dismantle systemic racism and other oppressions  
in our world, our congregations, and ourselves.

I share my own experience in this way,  
because it illustrates the change of heart,  
the tiny transformations, involved in this work—  
work that for many of us is about our inner life,  
and how that translates into action in the wider world.

In the coming weeks and months,  
you will be hearing more about the Eight Principle.

And you'll be hearing more about an initiative  
the board and staff are gearing up to present in June  
that will help us, as a congregation,  
deepen our commitments to reconciliation and racial justice.

For now, I leave you with this story  
told by Unitarian ethicist James Luther Adams  
that gets at just how very personal this work can be.

[Back in the 50s, he said] in the First Unitarian Church of Chicago

we started a program some of us called “aggressive love”  
to try to desegregate that Gothic cathedral [of a congregation].

We had two members of the Board objecting.

Unitarianism has no creed, they said,  
and we were making [racial] desegregation a creed.

It was a gentle but firm disagreement  
and a couple of us kept pressing.

“Well, what do you say is the purpose of this church?” we asked,  
and we kept it up until 1:30 in the morning.

We were all worn out, when finally [Adams says] this man made  
one of the great statements, for [his] money, in the history of religion.

“OK, Jim. The purpose of this church . . .  
well, the purpose of this church  
is to get hold of people like me and change them!”<sup>3</sup>

Friends, may we take up the work of aggressive love, within and without,  
as we move ever onward towards deeper acceptance of one and of all.

Blessed Be.

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<sup>3</sup> As told by Reverend George K. Beach, in a 1999 Minns Lecture.