

Report of the President
William G. Sinkford
UUA General Assembly
June 25, 2006

Thank you, Gini. Just like your congregations, the Association is healthiest when there is strong ministerial leadership and strong lay leadership. Gini, it is a pleasure to work with you.

It is an honor and a privilege to stand before this assembly for the fifth time now and report to you on my work as President of your Association. These five years have been filled with growth and challenges, and the past year has seen its share of both. General Assembly is an opportunity to take stock of where we've been, to celebrate what we've accomplished, and to make commitments for the coming year.

My friends, we've come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

This past year I spent most of my working days far from home. In the fall I traveled to Barcelona to represent the Association at the annual meeting of International Council of Unitarians and Universalists. From there I went to Africa, to visit the camps where 200,000 refugees have fled from the ethnic cleansing in Darfur. The International Association for Religious Freedom meeting took me to the Fo Guang Shan monastery in Taiwan. And just a few days ago I returned from a historic event in Israel, at which Unitarians Waitstill and Martha Sharp were posthumously inducted into Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust Memorial, as "Righteous Among Nations."

In the past year, I preached at some thirty congregations, hosted President's round tables, spoke at district and cluster meetings, preached at one revival, and attended...well...too many meetings.

I visited Washington, D.C. seven times to lead our lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill. To further our advocacy efforts, I met with the Global AIDS Alliance, served on the Human Rights Campaign's religion council, urged the US House of Representatives to withdraw US troops from Iraq, and voiced the Association's first-ever protest of a Supreme Court nominee. Along with our enormously effective Washington Office staff, I visited the U.S. Senate to offer support for comprehensive sexuality education initiatives, and I represented the Association in an action to end torture in US military and intelligence operations. I marched on Washington to call for an end to genocide in Darfur, and I led another march without leaving my office, a virtual march to protest global warming. I've worked with colleagues and partners at meetings of the Urban League, the Save Darfur Coalition, and the Spiritual Progressives conference.

I gave dozens of newspaper interviews and represented UU values on Air America and National Public Radio. Just this past Wednesday I did an interview with the NPR affiliate here in St. Louis.

We now have the capacity to advance multiple public witness issues. This spring we launched a major campaign called “Standing on the Side of Love, 2006: No Discrimination in the Constitution.” We also provided leadership for the “Let Justice Roll” campaign to raise the federal minimum wage. Our congregation in Quincy, Massachusetts, The Church of the Presidents, hosted Senator Ted Kennedy for the primary Living Wage media event. And we managed to steer these efforts while at the same time being a key partner in the Save Darfur Coalition’s campaign to end genocide in the Sudan.

In other words, it was a pretty typical year.

We’ve come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

Twenty-five years ago the UUA Board of Trustees issued a resolution rejecting the political tactics of the “new religious right.” The 1981 resolution states,

“We object to the assumption ... that human beings can know with absolute certainty the will of God on particular public policy issues. We submit that to charge one’s opponents (as these groups have) with being “anti-family” or “anti-God” merely because of divergent views inflames and polarizes our society.”

The religious right is no longer “new.” But the words of the Board resolution ring as true now as they did then, and the need to raise an alternative, liberal religious voice is even more urgent today.

We’ve come a long way.

Ten years ago, our GA passed a resolution supporting full legal marriage for same sex couples. At the time Marriage Equality seemed a distant dream to even its most ardent advocates. Today, in this room, we have couples who have been fully and legally married in the state of Massachusetts during the past two years..

Please stand, in body or in spirit, and be recognized if you are a member of a legally married same sex couple. This Assembly blesses your marriage. And now, will you stand if you’re a member of a same sex couple who’s had a religious ceremony of union in one of our congregations. This Assembly blesses your union as well, and our congregations stand ready to bless your marriage when we have made that legally possible in your state. And finally, whether you’re gay, straight, partnered or single – please rise if you and your congregation are working to extend the civil right of marriage to all loving couples. Unitarian Universalism stands on the side of love.

Yes, we have come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

Marriage Equality is the most sustained public witness effort in our movement’s history. Our success is grounded in the life of our congregations. Today, more than half—that’s 512 –of our congregations are formal Welcoming Congregations. From the very start, ours has been the leading liberal religious voice in this cause, and our prominence is the

standard to which we should aspire in all of our public witness work. We celebrate our success in what will be a long struggle for Marriage Equality. But I promise you that our advocacy will not end until same sex couples can legally marry in all fifty states. We will continue to oppose the discriminatory, un-Christian, mean-spirited Federal Marriage Amendment, a crass, politically motivated ploy designed to divide the American people for the political gain of the few. We will witness against it every single time it is introduced.

We have a lot of work to do.

At the end of last summer, the devastation wrought by hurricanes Katrina and Rita on our Gulf Coast transformed our institutional priorities. UUs from around the world contributed in an historic out-pouring of generosity to a new fund that was created literally overnight: the UUA/UUSC Gulf Coast Relief Fund. You gave more than \$3.5 million dollars, and the gifts are still coming in. On behalf of our gulf coast congregations, our justice-making partners and myself, I want to acknowledge that generosity and thank all of you who contributed.

The work this fund supports is two pronged. First, it supports the creation of a vibrant Unitarian Universalist presence in a re-built New Orleans and Gulf Coast region. Second, it supports the most marginalized communities so that the Gulf Coast will move closer to the vision of the Beloved Community which we hold dear. To paraphrase some favorite words by Mahatma Gandhi, we are *trying* to become the change we want to see.

We've come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

We are not only looking outward. Since 1997 the UUA has been unable to offer a health insurance plan for congregational staff. There simply has been no insurance company that would offer us a national plan at anything like reasonable rates. But today I'm pleased to announce that the UUA Board has authorized a self-funded UUA health insurance plan for all of our congregational employees. This is a justice issue. This is our faith community coming together to do what is right, not simply what is economical. And until we can find a way to have our nation provide universal health insurance, we need to join together to offer it to those who work for our churches and cannot find affordable coverage.

As evidence of the Association's commitment, the entire UUA staff will be enrolled in this program, even though the cost is somewhat higher than what we are now paying. I hope that many of our congregations will make the same decision.

Speaking of the staff of the Association, I would like to recognize a significant transition. Jerry Gabert, who has served so well as UUA Treasurer is retiring at the end of this GA. Jerry, would you rise and receive the thanks of this assembly for your 10 years of dedicated service.

And let me introduce the next Treasurer of the Association, Tim Brennan. He is a member of our Needham, MA congregation and was selected in an exhaustive, and probably exhausting selection process. Tim, would you stand so that people can at least see you. I am confident that you all will find Tim a pleasure to work with in the coming years.

Before I move on, I also want to thank the extraordinary Executive Vice President of the Association. Kay Montgomery, would you please stand? Kay functions brilliantly as COO and keeps me from stepping in so many gopher holes that I will be forever in her debt.

The UUA's international work is moving into a one year period of discernment, led by Cathy Cordes, the new interim Director of the International Relations Office. What we know already is that international engagement deepens and enriches the spiritual life of our congregations. We know that many congregations are already engaged in international programs. The called and elected leaders of your congregations are being asked for information about this involvement, so that all of us can learn how we can more effectively support congregations in this important work.

My administration, the UUA Board, and, based on every survey we have ever done, the vast majority of Unitarian Universalists are all committed to growth. Numerical growth, not because we “need” more members, but because there are so many people who yearn for our liberal way of being religious. As I’ve said before, we will remain in experimental mode, and we know that some experiments will work better than others. The Association is already supporting a variety of local growth initiatives, from another new large church start to an incubator program for small congregation formation. Advertising Unitarian Universalism can no longer accurately be described as an experiment. It is here to stay. Our campaigns have appeared in Kansas City, Houston, Dallas, New York City. We are advertising right now in St. Louis, and soon we’ll begin campaigns in both southern and northern California. What we learn, every time we make ourselves known, is that people come. We certainly need to do a better job of retention...hear that as reasonable, not radical, hospitality, and we need to find a way to support new congregation formation. All of that is true. But the undeniable truth is that there are people out there who are looking for us. If we are willing to stay experimental, we can help them find us.

And we need roots to anchor those growth wings, by providing new resources to help deepen our spiritual growth. Right now the UUA’s Lifespan Faith Development staff group is busy developing the most ambitious curriculum series ever. “Tapestry of Faith” will be our first major spiritual education program in a generation. The initial Tapestry curricula, including the Association’s first Coming of Age curriculum, will be available this summer, free, on-line, ready for use, with more to follow soon.

By early this Fall, over 300 of our congregations will have completed focused conversations about our youth ministry. The Consultation on Ministry to and With Youth, a mouthful but an accurate one, has completed the youth survey (do you know that over 50% of our youth don’t consider their congregations their spiritual home?) and

is pointing toward district and stakeholder conversations in the coming year, based on the information we've collected.. The process of having these conversations is already beginning to transform our youth ministry.

We've come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

Investment in theological education is investment in the future of our faith. Just last month, Harvard Divinity School and the UUA jointly announced the creation of a new endowed professorship, The Ralph Waldo Emerson Unitarian Universalist Association Professor of Divinity. The creation of this chair will cement our historic relationship with this important school, add to our resources for UU scholarship and help the many future ministers who choose Harvard effectively prepare for service in our congregations. The gifts that make this professorship possible have been 20 years in the making, beginning with significant commitment from our Shelter Rock congregation, the Liberal Religious Charitable Society and the UUA. The final \$500,000 was just given by two generous families: W. Lowell and Janice Steinbrenner and the late Rev. Dr. Frank Schulman and his wife Alice.

And I would like to thank Jack Mendelsohn for keeping the issue of the Harvard Divinity School chair on the Association's radar screen for almost 20 years.

To keep the momentum supporting theological education going, we will be making long-term investments of staff resources and donor funds. In the past, our capital campaigns have relied heavily on the extraordinary generosity of a few donors, but at this moment, we are in the planning stages of a new capital campaign that will offer an opportunity for UUs of every income level, in all of our congregations, to contribute. This new multi-year capital campaign will secure the means to deepen our commitment to serious, multi-generational theological education, in our congregations as well as in our seminaries.

This new campaign will not be formally introduced until next year. But I want to give you a heads-up, because we are going to need your help. The public phase of the campaign will begin, in the Fall of 2007, with an opportunity for each of our congregations to make an investment in theological education by taking a special offering to support the theological training of our ordained and lay leaders. Virtually every denomination does this annually. What we are calling "Sharing Our Ministry" will be, I hope, the first step in the development of that habit for us.

Some of you know that our two UU theological schools, Starr King and Meadville/Lombard have been exploring the possibility of a consolidation, or merger. I have been representing the UUA in this process of discernment. Those conversations are on-going and it is too early to tell if they will bear fruit. I can tell you that the imagination that has emerged is compelling: centers in at least the two existing locations, support for the almost 70% of our candidates for ministry who are preparing at non-UU schools and addressing the need for theological training for lay leaders. I have become convinced that merger offers the best hope of building on the strengths of our two schools

and insuring vibrant and effective theological preparation for the next generation and beyond. Stay tuned.

We've come a long way. And we have a lot of work to do.

For UUs to advance our most cherished values, we need to keep looking to the future. Twenty-five years after that first board resolution, we are again called to oppose the agenda of the radical religious right. But effective opposition is complicated. The current debate, with its fear-based focus on sexuality and gender, is designed to distract the attention of America from the far more essential conversations that we should be having. We need to ask ourselves what it is that they don't want us to be talking about.

In addition to defending the civil rights and liberties that are currently under siege, we should be talking about war and peace, about economic justice, and about environmental sustainability. We must find a way to join our voice with others to lead the conversations that this nation needs to have.

A good colleague of mine, the Rev. Patrick O'Neill, had a friend in college who was a Masai from Africa. His friend told him a bit about the Masai culture. The Masai are renowned as warriors, for their prowess on the battlefield. But when two Masai warriors meet on the path, they greet each other with the simple question, "How are the children?" "How are the children?" they ask each other. And I was so struck when I heard this story that I thought, this is not a bad way for us to think about what we're called to do these days.

How are the children? How are the children in Darfur and Sudan, who have been uprooted from their homes, many of them killed and many young girls raped, in a genocide that the US could stop. How are the children? How are the children of Iraq? Living in violence and chaos as a result of an ill-conceived and bungled occupation by US military forces. How are the children? How are the children of New Orleans? Those still in a city where the public education system has been effectively closed? And for the thousands and thousands who are part of the largest diaspora this nation has ever seen? How are the children of New Orleans?

How are the children of the United States, the many who go to bed hungry every night in this the richest nation the earth has ever seen. How are the children? How are the children who don't have access to day care because our government funds day care at a stingy 1 billion dollars per year, instead the 2.5 billion that even President Bush agrees is necessary in this country. How are the children? How are the children who would benefit from Head Start, a program that's being gutted even though, time after time, it has demonstrated itself to be effective. How are the children? How are the children who live in families where the parents earn the minimum wage? A minimum wage that has not been raised in ten years. A minimum wage that would have to be increased by 40 percent today to match its purchasing power in 1985. How are the children?

And how are *our* children? The lucky ones who mostly live in comfort, but who will inherit a crippling national debt and a planet ravaged by pollution and global warming? Would we continue to plunder the one and only earth we will ever have if we asked our selves, how are the children?

I know this sounds bleak. But I have traveled much of the world this year, and I am convinced that we cannot retreat into our comfortable corners and not recognize the misery and despair that afflicts many of our sisters and brothers.

But Unitarian Universalism is a religion of hope and promise. At our best, we have the capacity to confront evil again and again and again until the arc of the universe bends towards justice.

This is a monumental challenge, but it is our sacred calling. We must take our faith to a new level of witness, engagement, and effectiveness.

We have come a long way together. And together, we have a lot of work to do.