

An Association Sunday Sermon

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Adapted by Rev. Victoria Ingram 10-14-2009

Today is Association Sunday, the day the UUA has declared that we should focus not on our own congregation but on the wider Unitarian Universalism. Now as soon as I say that there will be some people who'll no doubt think, "Who are they to tell us what to do? Just who do they think they are telling us to celebrate Association Sunday?"

And, actually, that's a good question. But let's put it another way—who do we think they are? When most people think of the UUA they think of the people who work at the Association's headquarters at 25 Beacon Street in Boston, or the people around the country who work with them. But those people are more properly called the staff of the Association. They're the people who work for the UUA.

The UUA itself is better known by its full name: The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. The UUA is really the UUA of C. The UUA is, in a very real way, not a thing in and of itself, but is instead a coming together of each and every one of the free and independent Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country. And that means that when the UUA declares this or that, it is really all of us in the association of congregations that is declaring it.

Today is Association Sunday because we are celebrating it, and so are congregations of UUs in Palo Alto, San Jose, and Redwood City, as well as UU congregations in Golden, CO, Boston, MA, and Rochester, NY. Today is Association Sunday because we've said it is, and because it's important for us to focus, at least once in awhile, on the value of our association with all other UUs.

Our Association literally would not exist without its member congregations, but we all would be infinitely less without it. We all, each of us, need the UUA (of C) because by coming together in Association with other Unitarian Universalists we are capable of things that would be unthinkable if we were left on our own.

Now is not the time, perhaps, to rattle off a list of ways we benefit by being a part of the UUA. However, if I was going to do that, the list would include the support UUFLG received in calling me as your minister, the Association-produced curriculum materials we use in our children's RE classes, our hymnals, and the publicity and visibility provided by UUA advertising and public witness on social issues. Providing those resources and services for ourselves as a congregation would add quite a chunk of change to our budget. It should be obvious that together we are more than any of us alone.

And so the purpose of our Association Sunday is not to convince anyone of the importance of our association but to encourage us to deepen and grow our association so that our movement might flourish. And of the need for that, too, there should be no doubt. Just take a look at the world we live in. Read the headlines; listen to the news. Is there any doubt that a faith such as ours, that faith communities such as this one, have a place in our world today? That the world needs what we have?

The first Association Sunday, in 2007, looked at the need to grow our movement's numbers, the need for us to find ways to increase the number of Unitarian Universalists in the world. The staff who work for the Association have been doing work on national media campaigns, and many of our congregations have doing the same on the

local level; getting the word out, without proselytizing, that there's something going on here worth checking out. Locally, Edna Windes has been providing news articles announcing our programs and activities to newspapers. We're also looking at ways to increase our web presence, through Facebook, blogs, Twitter, and other web links. The UUA provides valuable resources for congregations that are looking for ways to be more visible in the community.

The second Association Sunday, in 2008, focused on growth in spirit, and the funds raised were split between supporting lay theological education and efforts to support excellence in our professional ministries.

And these tie into the work that our UUFLG Board of Trustees accomplished at our recent planning retreat. This church year, the Board has chosen to focus on the following three areas:

1. FAMILIES/FOCUS ON THE VALUE OF FAMILIES

Attract and retain families with children by continuing family-oriented activities, increasing our children's participation in Sunday services, and insuring our children have adequate space for their classes and activities.

2. VISIBILITY/PROMOTION

Continuing to improve our signage, increase our rentals, web presence, and visibility in the neighborhood.

3. ENTHUSIASM/PARTICIPATION

Exploring ways to invite guest lecturers to our Fellowship for Sunday services and other occasions, expanding our social opportunities together by sharing in special events or outings, and continuing our social action outreach efforts in the community.

Now, this year's Association Sunday theme is Growing Our Diversity, but it's not just about growth in diversity, but also about growth through diversity. In many ways Unitarian Universalism is a pretty diverse religious tradition. We certainly are theologically. And we are around issues of sexuality and sexual identity. Our understanding about issues of race is pretty good, even though the actual experience in the majority of our congregations is still pretty white. If we're honest with ourselves we have miles to go on issues of class. So for all the diversity we have to celebrate there is still much work to do.

This year Association Sunday is focused on helping us and our movement to develop spiritual communities that are more welcoming to ALL people by:

- Expanding curriculum and associated resources we can use to continue to learn to be even more welcoming and accepting in realizing our commitment to be a faith community that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse.

- Enabling Unitarian Universalist congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity development, and leadership development.

You see, it doesn't really matter all that much if we grow the size of our congregations and our movement, and deepen the spiritual maturity of our congregations,

if at the end of the day we still look, sound, and act pretty much like we do right now. If the only people we attract are carbon copies of the people who are already here, well, we're already here!

It's true that there are more folk out there like us who need what we have. But it's also true that there are other folk – folks who in very real ways are not like us – and they need Unitarian Universalism, too. What's more, they have things that we need. Their very difference is needed, because too much sameness is stultifying.

Despite what we may claim, no one really likes change all that much. Deep down people pretty much only like change when it's other people doing the changing. Yet we Unitarian Universalists are spiritually mature enough to know that whether we like it or not we need change. That's why we believe that even our beliefs—even our most cherished beliefs—should be held lightly, open to revision, because we know the importance of evolution in every facet of life. Growth, movement, change, evolution, transformation—in the long run the only alternative is extinction. Death.

Yet as a movement we recognize that this is important work to do. It's important for the world, because we are too small a planet for us not to find ways to turn these divisions and distinctions from barriers and barricades into beautifying parts of the landscape, from reasons for us to be suspicious of one another into reasons for us to want to get to know one another, from causes of hostility into causes of celebration. It's important for us as individuals, too, because the more we expand our contact with people who are different from ourselves, the wider and deeper we can grow, the richer our own lives can be. It's not always easy. Heck, it's hardly ever easy. But we know it's right.

Here, we have worked together in the last few years to create and sustain changes that this congregation dreamed of, yearned for, and wanted enough to make happen. Our children's and adult RE programs are strong and growing; we have become a welcoming and embracing place for newcomers; our involvement in the larger community has grown, thanks in large part to the efforts of our Social Action committee, I'm starting my third year as your settled minister; and we have continued to grow our spirits together in fellowship. Yes, there are also opportunities for us to continue to mature, grow, and accomplish even more. But, we have an excellent foundation on which to reach for new dreams, hopes, and aspirations.

Our congregation is a voluntary association of individuals who have come together to create the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Los Gatos. Similarly, our congregation and over one thousand others have voluntarily joined together to create an association known as the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. It is us; we are they.

And the world needs the UUA, just as our community needs us. Today we have the opportunity to help strengthen our movement for generations to come by deepening our efforts to grow in and through diversity so that we don't just talk the talk but actually walk the walk.

May it be so.