

## Unitarian Universalism and the Kingdom of God

Jamaica Plain, November 14, 2004, Karl Haakonsen

Our church is a member church of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The UUA represents 1100 and some congregations in America which have a total membership of a little more than 100,000 people. Every year, around the end of June, the UUA holds what's called General Assembly. In 2003, GA was held in Boston, where the headquarters of the UUA is, and was attended by some 7,500 people. The Service of the Living Tradition was held at the Fleet Center and had about 10,000 people in its congregation. Before the service started, the congregation did the "wave." To sit in a church service in the Fleet Center with ten thousand other Unitarian Universalists was truly an awe-inspiring experience.

In his column in the January/February 2004 issue of UU World Magazine, UUA President, Bill Sinkford wrote,

What is General Assembly? Is it a convention? A pep rally? A leadership training opportunity? A public witness event? A tribal gathering?

It is all of these things, but none of them is at the heart of General Assembly.

"General Assemblies," our bylaws say, "shall make overall policy for carrying out the purposes of the Association and shall direct and control its affairs." General Assemblies are the coming together of the representatives of our congregations to do the business of the Association and to make real the covenant that binds us.

In that same letter, Sinkford said that he wanted to extend a special invitation to congregational presidents, which for us would be the Standing Committee Chair. For those of you who don't know, I'm that person in our congregation. Sinkford felt so

strongly about this that he offered to pay the registration costs of any congregational president attending.

I didn't have to be cajoled by Bill Sinkford or anyone else into going to GA. I was so moved and inspired by the experience of last year's GA in Boston, that I marked my calendar right away for this year's GA at Long Beach, California. And I plan to attend next year in Fort Worth, Texas.

The experience is truly rejuvenating and inspiring. GA in Boston in June of 2003, was largely responsible for transforming me from being apprehensive about what was then my new role as Standing Committee Chair into being inspired and looking forward to it. There are worship services every day, at least two large ones - one in the morning and one in the evening. I attended all of these. The rest of each day is full of workshops and lectures, so many and varied that it is truly dizzying. It is also sometimes difficult to prioritize what lecture or workshop to attend when it conflicts with another that you wish to attend. Many are offered multiple times to help you manage scheduling conflicts. There is programming from early morning, through midnight each day. My goal was and continues to be to try to balance three things:

- 1) my own spiritual edification;
- 2) church leadership workshops that educate and inspire me about what we can accomplish here at First Church; and
- 3) attending the voting plenary sessions.

Many of you are aware of our congregational polity here at First Church. You attend annual and semi-annual meetings and vote on the budget, and who gets to represent you on the Standing Committee. This congregational polity continues all the way out to the entire organization of the UUA. I attended GA both this year and last year not just for my own benefit, but also as a delegate from this church to represent our voice in the association.

I didn't want to spend this whole sermon making a report of what I did and how I voted at General Assembly, but I will try to find the best way to make that information available to everybody who's interested. For the present, I have added a page to our church's web site that gives users easy access to the list of actions and resolutions passed at General Assembly. I welcome anyone to talk to me today or at any other time about my votes on these things, or what all of it means. I would like to engage our congregation more fully in the UUA and the Mass. Bay District, our regional organization within the UUA. I think we should have an active denominational affairs committee that keeps the communication open between our church, the Mass. Bay District and the wider UUA community. All of the actions and resolutions came from congregations like ours before appearing on the agenda at General Assembly.

But the main reason I wanted to talk to you all today is to inspire you, and to get you thinking about our place in the religious landscape and what we're here to do as a church. In addition to ministering to ourselves, in the words of Bill Sinkford, "our objective is to help change the culture. Our goal is to help the universe bend toward justice."

The Kingdom of God, or, as the Gospel of Matthew calls it, the Kingdom of Heaven is a sort of mystical concept that is interpreted by many to mean different things. I have come to understand it primarily as the kind of society that Jesus envisions and calls on all of us to try to create; a sort of universal "beloved community," where people freely live in peace and harmony with one another; a society of people who love their neighbors as they love themselves, forgiving each other and themselves of their transgressions; a place where people reach out to help those in need and where they honor the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

When I was in Long Beach in June, spending several days among thousands of other Unitarian Universalists -- a pluralistically religious bunch of people who are committed to bending society toward love and justice -- I couldn't help but feel like I was, at that moment, experiencing a microcosm of the Kingdom of God. This was society how I imagine it should be. It is how I imagine Jesus thought it should be. Wouldn't it be lovely

if the whole of the world's people were like one big General Assembly? And I left, inspired to do what I could to move the world closer to that ideal.

I feel increasingly called to spread the message of inclusive and liberal religion outside the walls of this church. The following comes from a letter I wrote to the Boston Globe last week that never got published:

A lot has been said since the Election about so-called "moral values" with respect to influencing people's decision in voting for president. Let's be honest. What people refer to as "moral values" is a packaged agenda that includes opposition to same-sex marriage and women's reproductive rights. While people are entitled to their opinions on these matters, they hardly represent a comprehensive list of moral values and whether they represent morality at all is purely a matter of opinion only shared by some. I, for one, am sick and tired of being cast as amoral because I don't share the only publicly stated religious opinion on these positions. If people who profess to follow a Christian code of ethics are so concerned with moral values, perhaps they should take out their Bibles and read the Gospels again... or perhaps for the first time. Jesus makes clear how we should treat the poor, the oppressed and the outcast (which, in our society, includes gays and lesbians). He says again and again that one is to love one's neighbor as one's self. I can imagine Jesus shaking his head in sadness as he sees the vitriol and hatred directed toward our gay and lesbian neighbors in the name of "moral values." Jesus' circle of followers included "tax collectors and sinners" (the outcasts of his day) whom he instructed in the way of generosity, healing and forgiveness. These are truly moral values that I find inspirational and consistent with the larger message of the Bible. The agenda of politicians who claim the moral high ground, favors the rich at the expense of the poor (and the middle class), calls for exclusion of our society's outcast (gays and lesbians, among others), doing unto others before they do unto us (i.e. Iraq) and then lying to us and manipulating our fears, especially our fear of people different from us to promote the whole agenda. And we're supposed to sit back and listen to reports that this agenda is approved of by people who claim "moral values" as high on their list of concerns. It is precisely because of my strong sense of moral values that I reject that agenda and

actively seek to move our society toward the inclusive and compassionate Kingdom of God that Jesus calls us to do.

I have seen arguments that agree with my stance on these matters, but until yesterday morning, in a letter to the editor that did get published in the Globe, I hadn't seen any that put the arguments in religious terms. It has always been an argument of religious conservatives versus secular liberals.

I was heartened to see this letter to the editor, not only because it finally gave voice to non-fundamentalist religion in the newspaper, but because it gave me the transition I needed in my sermon to properly tie together all the threads of Unitarian Universalism, the Kingdom of God, religion in the public sphere, and what it all has to do with our congregation.

The author states, "... many believers in the more moderate churches have come to see talking about one's faith as something done by pushy people who knock on your door, insist that theirs is the only true faith, and don't take 'no' for an answer. And since they don't like having it done to them, they aren't going to do it to anyone else.

"When Senator Kerry said during one of the debates that he didn't like to 'wear his religion on [his] sleeve,' he wasn't alone. Millions of Americans feel the same way. However, it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy - the more that believers from mainline churches [and I'll add from liberal churches such as ours] shrink from talking about their faith in public and confine their 'God talk' to their own churches on a Sunday morning, the more the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Fallwells of the world come to dominate the public face of religious discourse. The more this happens, the easier it is for the media and a large segment of the public to think of them - and the [political party] they support - as the only ones concerned with faith and morals."

Over the next year, we plan to roll out an extensive church visioning process involving the congregation as a whole. When we think about the future of our congregation and any

vision we may have for it, it is important to think about it in the larger context of the world we are trying to transform. We need to view growth in our congregation not only as healthy for the vitality of our church, but because we know, in our hearts, that this broken and often unjust world needs us. People need to hear our healing message of love, peace, inclusiveness, forgiveness and personal transformation and be inspired by it to transform society, moving it closer to the Kingdom of God.

As we look to the future, what vision calls us? Bill Sinkford said that he hears the harmony of three melodies:

- "growing our congregations with radical hospitality, claiming the good news of this liberal religious faith we love, and turning our congregations into truly welcoming sanctuaries for the stranger;
- "inspiring the larger community with our liberating public witness, helping to bend the universe toward justice, raising voices with a liberal religious clarity that values the power of our pluralism and the possibilities of a genuine religious journey; and
- "strengthening our faith with challenging and deepening spiritual growth that calls us beyond our comfortable prejudices to a purposeful appreciation of religious diversity and depth, embracing both reverential language and scientific rationality."

This, I see is our call. To put ourselves out there into our community; to be a strong religious voice on the side of justice and love; and to grow as a congregation by welcoming strangers to hear our message and be transformed by it and thus enable them to help us, together with the rest of the Unitarian Universalist Association, to help transform society into one that is more just, compassionate and inclusive. May we be a mustard seed of the Kingdom of God.

Readings:

Mark 4:26-32

26 And he said, "The kingdom of God is as if a man should scatter seed upon the ground,  
27 and should sleep and rise night and day, and the seed should sprout and grow, he  
knows not how. 28 The earth produces of itself, first the blade, then the ear, then the full  
grain in the ear. 29 But when the grain is ripe, at once he puts in the sickle, because the  
harvest has come." 30 And he said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or  
what parable shall we use for it? 31 It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown  
upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; 32 yet when it is sown it grows  
up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds  
of the air can make nests in its shade."

Excerpts from UUA President Bill Sinkford's President's Report, given at General  
Assembly in Long Beach, CA June 24, 2004

This is the end of my third year as your President. Three years ago in Cleveland, you  
voted for the promise of greater visibility and voice for our faith. You chose a future in  
which Unitarian Universalism would move from the margins toward the center of the  
conversation in the public square. My election signaled our commitment to a future in  
which Unitarian Universalism would re-claim its rightful place as a leading liberal  
religious voice in this nation.

That vision required change.

The great jazz musician Miles Davis wrote:

"If you put a musician in a place where he has to do something different from what he  
does all the time, then... he's got to think differently.... He has to use his imagination, be  
more ...innovative; he's got to take more risk.

"He's got to play above what he knows---far above it...

"I've always told the musicians in my band to play what they know and then play above that. Because that's where great art and music happen."

Our religious witness in support of Freedom to Marry has resulted in more press coverage of Unitarian Universalism than...well, anything in the history of the Association.

The Supreme Judicial Court decision in Massachusetts, and political decisions in San Francisco and Oregon provided the opportunity. The religious right's attempt to use this as a "wedge" issue helped, as did the reality that so many traditionally liberal Protestant denominations are immobilized by deep divisions over gay marriage. But our effectiveness is not merely the result of an extraordinary opportunity. It is rather the culmination of 35 years of intentional work, and the building of capacity to seize such a moment.

Our support for equal rights for BGLT persons (including the right to marry) is deeply grounded, both in our theology (the inherent worth and dignity of every soul) and in our lived congregational experience. More than 400 of our communities are formal "Welcoming Congregations." We have supported comprehensive sexuality education for decades. Our clergy have performed religious ceremonies of union since the 1960's. Our [General Assembly] has passed resolutions in support of BGLT persons since 1970, specifically calling for the legalization of Same Sex Marriage in 1996. We've done the work.

The fit with our resources could not have been better: An Office of BGLT Concerns, Interweave, on-going media training for our ministers, an expanded Washington Office for Advocacy, and a Public Witness office which functions like a staff twice its size.

Grounding, fit, and opportunity made our effectiveness possible; and the experience, and our success, have been extraordinary. We are playing above what we know.

Images from the Goodridge wedding made the front pages of major papers from Boston to Borneo and from Chicago to China. Every major network carried stories of loving, committed same-sex couples being married by Unitarian Universalist ministers. All of the seven couples who were the named plaintiffs in the Massachusetts case were married on May 17, four of them by Unitarian Universalist ministers. We got coverage in periodicals, like People, that most of us don't admit to reading.

Let me be very clear. We are not raising our voice to make ourselves feel better, nor to attract new members-though I believe deep in my heart that thousands of persons and families want a faith community which stands on the side of love.

Our objective is to help change the culture. Our goal is to help the universe bend toward justice.

This requires a discipline about our message which we have never before had to exercise. It requires strategic thinking that we have never needed to do. It requires operating in partnership with others with a consistency that has never before been required of us.

This issue is far from settled. Now the work shifts to defeating the Federal Marriage Amendment: to convincing our legislators not to enshrine discrimination in our Constitution. And then our attention must turn to other states, as cases percolate through the courts and legislatures take action. The work of the UU Legislative Ministry in California, which we are supporting with a grant from the Freedom to Marry Fund, is an example of how we can focus our resources effectively. Contributions to that fund are still needed.

Unitarian Universalism will stand on the side of love...for as long as it takes.