

Unitarian Universalism: A Living Tradition

How do changes get made? For example, with our Purposes and Principles?

We're so glad you asked! Unitarian Universalism is described as a living tradition (indeed, this is in the title of one of our hymnals, *Singing the Living Tradition*) which means we continue to develop and evolve in a variety of ways, including both structured processes and unstructured, or grassroots, ways of sharing ideas and practices.

When the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America merged in 1961 to form the Unitarian Universalist Association, these were the principles, reflecting the language and goals of the time:

In accordance with these corporate purposes, the members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dedicated to the principles of a free faith, unite in seeking:

- 1. To strengthen one another in a free and disciplined search for truth as the foundation of our religious fellowship;*
- 2. To cherish and spread the universal truths taught by the great prophets and teachers of humanity in every age and tradition, immemorially summarized in the Judeo-Christian heritage as love to God and love to man;*
- 3. To affirm, defend and promote the supreme worth of every human personality, the dignity of man, and the use of the democratic method in human relationships;*
- 4. To implement our vision of one world by striving for a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood, justice and peace;*
- 5. To serve the needs of member churches and fellowships, to organize new churches and fellowships, and to extend and strengthen liberal religion;*
- 6. To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.¹*

In 1986, following many years of work (particularly by women who did not feel represented by the male-as-default language, and by folks who wanted to recognize that we draw wisdom from more traditions than Judaism and Christianity), a revised set of Principles and Sources were adopted.² Here is the current language, as contained in Article II of our national UUA bylaws:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, 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.*

¹ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/the-uuas-original-principles-1961>

² <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted>

The living tradition which we share draws from many sources:

- 1. Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life;*
- 2. Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion and the transforming power of love;*
- 3. Wisdom from the world's religions which inspires us in our ethical and spiritual life;*
- 4. Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves;*
- 5. Humanist teachings which counsel us to heed the guidance of reason and the results of science, and warn us against idolatries of the mind and spirit;*
- 6. Spiritual teachings of Earth-centered traditions which celebrate the sacred circle of life and instruct us to live in harmony with the rhythms of nature.*

Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision. As free congregations we enter into this covenant, promising to one another our mutual trust and support.

These Principles and Sources have received updates, and have seen proposed changes, in the years since 1986. The sixth source, naming Earth-centered traditions, was added in 1995. And in 2017 the second source was updated from the wording of “words and deeds of prophetic women and men” to “words and deeds of prophetic people.”³

Other changes have been under discussion over the past ten years or so; ideas include adding Buddhism and Islam to our sources, amending the first principle to read “the inherent worth and dignity of every being,” and adding an eighth principle to name a commitment to anti-racism.⁴ The proposed first principle change was brought forth at the 2017 GA by the mechanism of having fifteen congregations vote to request that it be placed on the agenda.⁵ It was also withdrawn at that GA by its proposers, because they felt more consideration needed to happen prior to a GA vote.

Because we are a living tradition, our national bylaws include a requirement that we study our principles, sources, and purposes (contained in Article II) at least every fifteen years. In Article XV, the bylaws state that *“If no study process of Article II has occurred for a period of fifteen years, the Board of Trustees shall appoint a commission to study Article II for not more than two years and to recommend appropriate revisions, if any, thereto to the Board of Trustees for inclusion on the agenda of the next regular General Assembly.”*⁶

³ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/second-source-changes-ga-2017>

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/resources> - see Reading Materials

⁵ <http://firstprincipleproject.blogspot.com/p/getting-involved.html>

⁶ https://www.uua.org/files/2021-08/uua_bylaws_2021.pdf

There was a study process in 2006⁷ which yielded proposed revisions brought to a vote in 2009 which were not adopted,⁸ and there is currently an Article II study process underway⁹ with a team who began their work at the 2020 GA and are gathering input through conversations with UUs in a variety of settings including General Assemblies. Amending Article II of our national bylaws requires affirmative votes by delegates to General Assembly at two consecutive GAs.

The Article II Study Commission can report back with results that could be proposed adjustments (additions, changes in wording, etc.) to the current principles, or could be new wording for a re-written set of principles and sources (which might total to something other than seven and six). As the charge to the Article II Study Commission says, “There is nothing sacred about the number of principles or sources, nor their specific wordings, nor in the way that Article II is laid out.” The Commission is tasked with submitting their proposals for consideration on the agenda for GA in June 2022.¹⁰

Grassroots Congregational Adoption

In addition to the requirements for regular review laid out in our bylaws, we are a living tradition as UUs in other ways, perhaps most notably the grassroots way we create and adopt widespread rituals, traditions and commitments. Here are a few brief descriptions:

Flower Ceremony

The Flower Ceremony, in which individuals bring flowers to create a bouquet and then take a different flower home with them, is a beautiful way of showing how our differences come together to create communities that are enriched by those differences. The Flower Ceremony was created in 1923 by Revs. Norbert and Maja Capek, who founded and served the congregation in Prague, in what was then Czechoslovakia.¹¹ Rev. Maja Capek brought the service to Cambridge, MA, while visiting the US in 1940. The service spread from there because congregations recognized it as meaningful and wanted to join in the practice.

Lighting a Chalice

Our flaming chalice symbol was created during World War II, when the Unitarian Service Committee needed an easily recognizable symbol to aid in contacting folks who needed help escaping from Nazi persecution in eastern Europe. It is literally a symbol for our commitment as a faith to resist injustice and to help those who are marginalized. When we merged into the UUA in 1961, the chalice became encircled by TWO circles instead of one, representing the two traditions we were bringing together. It’s not clear how exactly the chalice moved from a two dimensional symbol to a three dimensional ritual, but the shift seems to have happened as children and youth created 3D chalices and eventually lit them while leading worship services.¹²

⁷ <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/reexamination-uaa-principles-announced>

⁸ <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2009/covenant-for-bylaws>

⁹ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission>

¹⁰ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/charge>

¹¹ <https://www.uua.org/files/documents/zottolireginald/flowercommunion.pdf>

¹² <https://www.uua.org/beliefs/who-we-are/chalice/flaming-chalice>

Water Ceremony

The first Water Ceremony was celebrated in a worship service at the UU Women and Religion Continental Convocation held in East Lansing, Michigan, in 1980. The worship was constructed by Lucile Shuck Longview and Carolyn McDade.¹³ As with the Flower Ceremony and the practice of lighting a chalice, this annual ritual spread in a grassroots way as the women who had been at that convocation brought the idea to their congregations.

Eighth Principle

The idea of an eighth principle came from the work of Paula Cole Jones and Bruce Pollack-Johnson, who began workshopping a draft principle in 2013 to address the lack of specific reference to anti-racism in the existing seven principles. In 2017 the UU Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia, PA, formally adopted the eighth principle.¹⁴ Since then, somewhere over 125 congregations have adopted the eighth principle by their own congregational votes.^{15,16} There is no single list of all the congregations which have adopted the eighth principle. Congregations adding a principle on their own is a novel practice of grassroots adoption which has not been done before, distinct from the process used to petition to put the first principle revision on the General Assembly agenda.

A similar eighth principle is also under consideration by the Canadian Unitarian Council during this 2021-22 congregational year, following an initial vote which was spontaneously moved from the floor at the CUC national meeting last spring.¹⁷

Are you interested in knowing more? Please do ask---
Rev. Monica Jacobson-Tennessee Rev. Jill McAllister

¹³ <https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/featured-new/water-rituals-and-ingatherings-revitalized/>

¹⁴ <https://www.8thprincipleuu.org/origin>

¹⁵

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/viewer?mid=1wy8PXall5SYDcxtXPm3BUJLEAhTDv1G7&ll=42.330201274943015%2C-71.08452504514864&z=12>

¹⁶ I know this list to be incomplete because I have personally worshipped at several congregations whose orders of service reflect their adoption of the eighth principle, but which do not appear on this list. - MJT

¹⁷ <https://cuc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/A-Way-Forward-for-the-8th-Principle-Process2-2021-05-13.pdf>