

A Congregation of Congregations

A sermon by Rev. Fred Small

First Parish in Cambridge

November 30, 2008

Five years ago last winter, on February 2, 2003, I announced from the pulpit of First Church Unitarian in Littleton that I would no longer sign marriage licenses until the Commonwealth of Massachusetts extended equal marriage rights to same-sex couples. While I would joyfully officiate weddings in my religious capacity, I explained, my conscience forbade my serving any longer as an agent of the state's discrimination by signing the license.

As I finished my sermon, the congregation rose in a standing ovation. I was moved and I was grateful for their support, but I knew the ovation wasn't really for me.

It was the congregation's way of saying yes—yes to justice, yes to compassion, yes to equality, yes, we will stand with you and with our brothers and sisters who love and seek to marry someone of the same gender.

Less than ten months later, the Supreme Judicial Court issued its historic ruling in *Goodridge v. Department of Health* that discrimination against same-sex couples violates the Massachusetts Constitution.

As powerful political forces mobilized to undo the *Goodridge* decision, Unitarian Universalists, including many of you here this morning, leapt to its defense. You marched and you sang and you wrote letters and you lobbied the State House. You hung a banner above our church entrance saying "Support Marriage Equality. We do!"

On June 14th, 2007, after fierce lobbying by both sides, the last anti-gay-marriage amendment mustered only 45 votes in the Massachusetts legislature, with 151 opposed. Massachusetts continues to stand as a beacon to the world of marriage equality.

Back in 2003, the idea of refusing to sign marriage licenses had come to me only three days before I preached it, in an email from Deborah Weiner, Director of Electronic Communications at the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Her email alerted me to Rev. Rhett Baird of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fayetteville, Arkansas, who had taken a similar position the year before. Baird's decision had received scant attention in the mainstream media and even among Unitarian Universalists. The more I reflected on it, the more I found his logic inescapable.

Without Deb's email, I would not have made my decision to abstain from signing marriage licenses, at least not then, maybe not for a long time.

Martin Luther King Jr. often said, paraphrasing Unitarian Theodore Parker, that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." Without the Unitarian Universalist Association, the arc of my moral universe would have bent toward justice more slowly.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was formally convened in 1961 with the consolidation of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. But its origins go back hundreds of years before.

In the summer of 1648, right here in this parish, ministers from Massachusetts and Connecticut gathered for a synod at the request of the Massachusetts legislature. (This was before the separation of church and state!) The government wanted a clear statement

of faith and polity from the churches. The result was the Cambridge Platform, which guided Massachusetts congregations for more than a century and influences us still.

Ecclesiastical prose of the 17th century is a heavy slog, and much of the Cambridge Platform addresses archaic subjects like the militant church visible and invisible and saints by calling. But in the fifteenth of its seventeen chapters, the Platform becomes strikingly relevant to modern Unitarian Universalists. It urges “communion” among churches: communion “by way of mutual care in taking thought for one another’s welfare,” “by way of consultation one with another, when we have occasion to require the judgment and counsel of other churches, touching any person or cause, wherewith they may be better acquainted than ourselves,” by individuals joining in worship with another congregation, and by providing support and comfort to congregations in time of need.

The Cambridge Platform of 1648 states the essence of the Unitarian Universalist Association of 2008: communion, care, counsel, and support among congregations.

When we talk about Unitarian Universalist “principles and purposes,” we usually mean our seven principles, from “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” to “respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.”

The purposes of our Association are less well known, but they’re stated clearly in its bylaws: “The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.”

To emphasize its congregational foundation, the UUA has lately begun calling itself the Unitarian Universalist Association *of Congregations*, a name without formal authority but with ample justification. Indeed, the UUA’s recent national advertising drops “Association” entirely, with ads are brought to you by “Unitarian Universalist Congregations” or simply “Unitarian Universalists.”

The word “Association,” not exactly warm and fuzzy, may reinforce a negative image among some Unitarian Universalists. Some UUs disdain the UUA as aloof, remote, even ignorant of congregational realities.

I have not found it so. On the contrary, much of the best of my ministry and the strength of our congregations can be traced to the leadership and resources of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

First Parish in Cambridge is a Welcoming Congregation, affirming gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender rights and dignity. Welcoming Congregation is a UUA program.

First Parish in Cambridge has embraced Covenant Groups that foster close and authentic connection. Covenant Group resources and training come from the UUA and its member congregations.

First Parish in Cambridge is exploring a new model for focusing our social justice efforts outlined by Rev. Richard Gilbert in his book, *The Prophetic Imperative*, published by Skinner Books. Skinner Books is an imprint of the UUA.

Nearly all our children’s religious education curriculum, including *Neighboring Faiths and Our Whole Lives*, is produced or funded by the UUA.

Earlier this month, the Pastoral Care Planning Team heard an exciting presentation by members of the First Unitarian Society in Newton on ways to bring pastoral care more effectively to congregants in need. We learned about this model of lay ministry last fall at a conference of New England Unitarian Universalists sponsored by the UUA.

The Membership Committee and I are considering how we might better welcome newcomers and integrate new members, inspired by a DVD from the Jefferson Unitarian Church in Golden, Colorado, distributed by the UUA.

At every Membership Orientation, we show *Voices of a Liberal Faith*, an exciting DVD on Unitarian Universalism from the UUA.

The hymns we sing every Sunday, the responsive readings we share, all come from the hymnals published by the UUA.

Throughout September, we displayed a banner above the church entrance that read “Nurture Your Spirit. Help Heal Our World.” The banner was produced by the UUA.

This January, the JUUST Change Consultancy will begin a conversation with us on how to realize our vision of becoming a truly multiracial, multicultural, justice-making congregation. The JUUST Change Consultancy is a service of the UUA.

For me personally, the UUA has been crucial to my ministry.

When I needed advice on academic preparation, I met with the UUA Director of Ministerial Studies. When I was ready to be credentialed as a UU minister, I was examined by the Ministerial Fellowship Committee of the UUA. When this congregation began the search that ultimately brought me here as your new senior minister, your search committee and I both relied on the UUA Transitions Office for information and counsel. Before I became a public advocate for marriage equality, I attended a superb workshop on public ministry offered by the UUA. When I have a question about professional development, church finances, congregational growth—almost any aspect of ministry or church life—frequently the first place I turn for advice is the UUA.

The UUA not only supports ministers in our vocations, it also holds us accountable. The Ministerial Fellowship Committee investigates misconduct and when necessary removes offending ministers from fellowship, effectively barring them from serving our congregations.

A couple of years ago, I received a phone call from a Unitarian Universalist colleague from another state. Did I know, he asked me, that another minister was plagiarizing my sermons?

It turned out a minister was pilfering my online sermons and those of other UU clergy and passing them off as his own, even representing our personal childhood anecdotes as his own life story. Had he left it at that, the theft would probably have gone unnoticed, but he posted the plagiarized sermons under his name on his own church website, where my caller happened upon them in a routine Google search.

My caller, whose sermons had also been copied, had already filed a complaint with the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. What penalty did I think would be appropriate, he asked?

I hesitated, torn between compassion for a minister so insecure or so stressed he would steal from his colleagues, on the one hand, and on the other, concern that a minister unscrupulous in one realm might be so in others. I said I thought at least suspension from ministry was warranted, and my caller agreed.

While the case was pending, the plagiarist resigned from his church and from ministerial fellowship with the UUA. I was sad for him but relieved he would no longer be serving our congregations. Having experienced the Ministerial Fellowship Committee as a counselor to ministers in formation and gatekeeper to our ministry, I appreciated its guarding the integrity of our vocation.

Unitarian Universalists have many opportunities to support and participate in the work of the UUA. There are no congregational dues, but each congregation is urged to contribute its “Fair Share” of support to the UUA’s Annual Program Fund; this year’s Fair Share amount is set at \$56 per member in good standing. First Parish in Cambridge is a Fair Share congregation, and many of us give additional support to Friends of the UUA.

Last year, the UUA for the first time invited its member congregations to celebrate Association Sunday. Where the Annual Program Fund and Friends of the UUA support the Association’s regular operating budget, Association Sunday supports leading-edge and innovative special projects beyond the reach of the operating budget. First Parish in Cambridge was one of more than 600 participating congregations that raised over 1.4 million dollars for Association Sunday last year.

This year, the theme of Association Sunday is “Growing Our Spirit.” Half the funds raised today will return to congregations in grants for innovative programs for spiritual and theological deepening that can be replicated in other congregations. The remaining funds will be divided equally among continuing education for ministers, scholarships for seminarians, and the Diversity of Ministry Initiative to support ministers of color (an initiative in which First Parish itself may participate).

And so today we celebrate Association Sunday, joining with congregations across the continent to affirm our common bonds, share our strength, and combine our resources to let the light of Unitarian Universalism shine.

This is the purpose, not to put too fine a point on it, of the donation envelopes with your order of service. Postage is prepaid. They take credit cards. You can fill them out this morning and leave them in the box in the office or you can take them home and mail them in yourself. To reach the goals of Association Sunday, we’ll need an average gift of fifty dollars, which means of course that many of us will have to give more.

First Parish in Cambridge belongs to the Unitarian Universalist Association, but really it belongs to us. It is a congregation of congregations. Like every congregation, our Association is an imperfect assembly of imperfect members. Like every congregation, it struggles to make its ideals real, to match its aspiration with its perspiration, its principles with its practicalities. Like every congregation, it needs and it deserves the dedicated support of its members.

A lot has changed in the 360 years since the Cambridge Platform. But congregations still need communion with one another. You and I did not invent Unitarian Universalism, nor can we practice or maintain it alone.

“We are each other’s business,” wrote the African-American poet Gwendolyn Brooks, “we are each other’s harvest: we are each other’s magnitude and bond.”

Let us sow the seeds and reap the harvest.

Amen and Blessed Be.