

Subgroup 5: RELIGIOUS VALUES MADE MANIFEST

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At last Saturday's strategic planning retreat, we selected the theme religious values made manifest to explore further. We offer the following observations about this topic, as well as suggestions regarding how to proceed with it. There were three angles, summarized below, to this theme.

1. We are a religious community, and our strategic (and tactical) planning is undergirded by established principles that should be kept in the front of our minds and guide our thinking. This is the most important idea that drew the four of us to this discussion topic. We found that while the retreat direction was very powerful, it needed to be imbued with the guts of our institutional purpose in a much more transparent and powerful way. In this regard, we noted that the many very valuable suggestions regarding future vision for RRUC and its community, and the actions to achieve that vision, have common underpinnings that should be reiterated as part of the planning process. These principles can, in fact, provide criteria to help guide decision making, and frame the direction that unfolds during the strategic planning process and resulting action.

Strategic planning begins with a common understanding of our purpose as a religious institution, as embodied explicitly, not by assumption, in the RRUC principles and beliefs. As the strategic planning process unfolds, we should at regular intervals be asking ourselves how our plans support our UU goals. There will clearly be trade-offs, and proposed directions that are more (or less) supportive of these principles, and trade-offs to be considered as well. It might be advisable to have a statement that frames the strategic plan that establishes our commitment to furthering the UU principles, and tie strategic action back to them to ensure alignment.

2. In our view, UU theology and practice has a lot to contribute to contemporary civic and political debate, though this contribution is both under-realized and under-appreciated. We should actively seek new and creative ways to demonstrate the relevance of our principles and values to the contemporary public conversation. This is not a matter of better public relations and media strategy. Rather it is about changing the way we interact with those who are not "of the fold" and may have very different views and traditions from our own. How can we speak a language, consonant with our UU beliefs, which resonates with, for example, the religious right? How do we begin to shift the national conversation? How do we contribute to strengthening participatory, informed democracy and civic life? A good point of departure for thinking about this issue is Lynn's post election sermon regarding civic engagement.
3. UU principles and beliefs are at the core of our involvement in RRUC. There is also an internal component to making religious values manifest that is geared toward ensuring that our discourse, programs and positions eschew particular (possibly partisan) political agenda and rather rise to the level of UU theology and its practice in every day life. This is to say that we need to be vigilant that we not unintentionally embrace one of the "u"s in UU at the exclusion of the other, and that we also take care to not overly politicize the pulpit. Rather, our focus on action and social justice should be an expression of our UU principles rather than a particular viewpoint on a given issue.

As far as next steps go, we recommend that a statement that reflects #1 above be incorporated into the strategic planning process, and that our UU principles be explicitly at the foundation of further planning. For #2, we recommend the creation of a separate theme group to address the external civic involvement and positioning issue, possibly through a "merger" with one of the groups already underway. For the third item, we suggest that this be left at the discretion of the ministerial staff and board in their overall oversight and leadership of RRUC intellectual content and programs.

Thanks for your consideration, we look forward to your comments!

Our Principles

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- * The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
- * Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
- * Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
- * A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
- * The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
- * The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
- * Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

We Believe In

- * Freedom of religious expression and tolerance of religious ideas -- all are encouraged to develop their own personal theology and to openly present their opinions without fear of censure or reprisal.
- * The authority of reason and conscience -- the ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, or a document, or an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.
- * Unity of experience -- there is no fundamental conflict between faith and knowledge, religion and the world, the sacred and the secular, since they all have their source in the same reality.
- * The worth and dignity of each human being -- all people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty and justice; no ideal or philosophy is superior to a single human life.
- * The ethical application of religion -- good works are the natural product of good faith, the evidence of an inner grace which finds completion in social and community involvement.
- * The necessity of the democratic process -- records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism, so that people may govern themselves.
- * The importance of a religious community -- the validation of experience requires the confirmation of peers, who provide a critical platform along with a network of mutual support.
- * The motive force of love -- the governing principle in human relationships is the principle of love, which always seeks the welfare of others and never seeks to hurt or destroy.
- * The never-ending search for truth -- if the mind and heart are truly free and open, the revelations which appear to the human spirit are infinitely numerous, eternally fruitful and wondrously exciting.

-- from "Our Beliefs," by Rev. David O. Rankin