

Six Arguments Against the Article II Revision
By Rev. Rick Hoyt-McDaniels
May 5, 2024

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<https://rhmc.com/?p=3347>

INTRODUCTION

At the June, 2024 General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association, delegates from the member congregations will be asked to decide whether to approve or reject proposed language that will revise Article II of the UUA Bylaws, the Article that defines our shared faith and the mission of the UUA.

The text of the [current Article II is here](#).

The text of the [Article II Revision is here](#).

I argue that:

- There is no present need or popular call for a Revision
- The Revision is inferior in style and content to the current language
- The Revision fails to define our faith.
- The Revision is incoherent in that it twists the meaning of commonly used words
- The Revision fundamentally changes our faith from a faith of guiding principles to a faith of required action.
- The Revision expands the mission of the UUA into work inappropriate for a voluntary association of independent congregations.

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The Revision is a grave threat to our UU faith, but at first thought it may seem that a proposed revision of a section of the UUA bylaws is of little concern to a local congregation. Every congregation is independent. The UUA has no power over independent congregations. A quick review of the proposed revision doesn't reveal anything too horrifying. If some UUs are energized about revising the statement of our faith they must have their reasons, why not let them? And if the current statement of faith, the Seven Principles, is important to individual UUs, they can retain it as a personal statement of faith even after it is eliminated from the UUA Bylaws.

But every sentence in the above paragraph is false.

The UUA Bylaws do concern every local congregation. We are bound to other UU congregations through a shared covenant. Article II is the agreement that congregations sign on to when they become member congregations of our Association. Member congregations have a spiritual obligation to enter that covenant unreservedly, with the understanding that they will fully support and commit to the language of the covenant.

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The Revision is a wholesale re-conception of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. No longer will our faith be defined by broad principles that leave us largely free to organize our congregations as we wish. Now our faith will be defined by a small set of narrow values, further narrowed by being precisely constrained in their meaning, and attached to action statements that will now require specific action around specific issues. To be a UU, or a member congregation of the UUA will no longer be defined by being a person of principle, but by doing specific actions.

At present there is little mechanism to enforce compliance with the covenant but this could change. Article III of the UUA Bylaws defines membership criteria for congregations in the Association, which at present requires only the minimal actions of “regular religious services”, “at least one business meeting”, and a “financial contribution” to the UUA. But in the annual recertification process congregations are already asked to give data on many other areas of congregational life besides those three (e.g. membership, attendance, RE enrollment, estimated percent of members and leaders that represent certain demographic groups). It would be a short step for the UUA to add new questions to the certification form requiring that congregations give evidence of how they fulfilled the actions required in the new Article II covenant with continued membership in the Association potentially at stake.

And the Revision would inevitably affect an individual UU’s personal faith. A new Article II will quickly begin to shape the life of UU congregations in preaching, RE Curriculum, social action initiatives, and other programs, just as the Seven Principles run through much of our current church life. Article II would eliminate the Seven Principles not only from the UUA Bylaws, but also from the life of the congregation. So, it’s not correct to say that the Seven Principles could continue to be a meaningful part of a personal faith when the Principles would no longer be part of the ongoing life of the community where our UU faith is explored, confirmed, and renewed.

SIX ARGUMENTS

Argument One: [There is no present need or popular call for a Revision](#)

When the current Article II was adopted in 1984, delegates to the General Assembly also instructed the UUA to regularly review the article to insure that it stayed current with the needs of a living tradition. Delegates recognized that our faith had changed over time and expected it to continue to change. Our faith statement should change along with the evolution of our faith. Language itself changes over time and we want the words of our statement to continue to say what we mean them to say in current usage. A regular review is justified.

But a call for review and the possibility of change does not mandate change when no change is warranted. If our faith hasn’t significantly changed, if language has not significantly changed then a review doesn’t require any further action.

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We have made a few tweaks to the Principles and Purposes since they were adopted, and we could make more if we thought necessary. But the current revision comes not in response to a groundswell of dissatisfaction from our congregations but from a commission from the UUA Board of Trustees. Their motivation is summed up on the UUA website, on the page devoted to the Article II revision, as:

“There have been many projects, resolutions, task forces and other strategies that have come from the Board, Commission on Appraisal and grassroots groups which encourage us to take a look at our principles, purposes, bylaws and rules. It is time for us to do a review and make changes so that we are living into the Unitarian Universalism of the future, a Unitarian Universalism that holds us in times of great need and ethical, moral and spiritual crises. We are in one of those times now.”

Review is always welcome but making changes require justification not merely “it is time.” The Bylaws do not come with an arbitrary expiration date. And what of the “crises” time we are supposedly in now? There is no explanation of why our present time is so fraught that our existing faith language can no longer guide us.

There is no evidence that our faith statement is out of date. Our congregations don’t hide away the Seven Principles out of embarrassment, or search for a substitute to guide us. The Seven Principles continue to be revered and respected, displayed in our churches, shared with visitors, and taught to our children. The Seven Principles form the basis for sermon series from our pulpits, and to guide our responses to current issues. Phrases from our principles are set in choir anthems. The second section of our current Article II, the Sources, are the basis for the organization of the hymns and readings in the hymnal still most commonly used in our worship, published in 1993, and the supplement printed in 2005. The Seven Principles are used and useful in our congregations.

[Argument Two: The Revision is inferior in style and content to the current language](#)

The Seven Principles are a well-crafted, poetic, statement. They are organized in a logical order that moves from “individual worth” to “all existence” completing the circle with, “of which we are a part.”

The language is concise. The statements employ parallel construction. Each short phrase has one clear idea, and each phrase is distinct from all the others.

The language of the Principles is lofty, elevated, and touches the place within us where we connect to the spiritual.

The language of the Revisions is clunky and pedestrian. The much longer Revision is rambling and awkward. It could easily be a statement of a corporation’s core values at the beginning of an earnings report, rather than the faith statement of a religious organization.

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Compare these sentences from the “Inspirations” section that replaces the original “Sources”

“Direct experiences of transcending mystery and wonder are primary sources of Unitarian Universalist inspiration. These experiences open our hearts, renew our spirits, and transform our lives. We draw upon, and are inspired by, sacred, secular, and scientific understandings that help us make meaning and live into our values. These sources ground us and sustain us in ordinary, difficult, and joyous times.”

The first two sentences are about experiences “Direct experiences” and “these experiences”, which the statement identifies as primary sources. The third sentence is about “understandings” which are not identified as sources. The fourth sentence refers again to sources. So does the statement intend that the “sacred, secular, and scientific understandings” also “ground us and sustain us” or do only the sources/experiences do that? It isn’t clear. And what does it mean to say “sacred, secular, and scientific”? Is science not also secular, or is science a third thing neither sacred or secular?

The language of the Seven Principles is elegant and beautiful, which is a subjective judgment, but they certainly have the elegance of clarity of meaning, and the beauty of brevity. The Seven Principles require only a bit of attention to memorize. The entire set can be recited to open a meeting or worship gathering. Individual principles are easily referenced as touchstones for various purposes.

The Revision has the “fussed-over” hallmarks of being written by committee with extra explanations and addendums intending to clarify but doing the opposite, and all the buzz-words of an eager acolyte wishing to satisfy constituents rather than communicate clear thoughts. Although the Seven Principles were also written by a committee, they don’t have that quality.

Argument Three: The Revision fails to define our faith.

Article II should be a summary of what Unitarian Universalists have in common. “What unites us?” is the leading question. The Revision offers a fundamentally new conception of what lies at the core of our shared faith. Where we now have Seven Principles that define our faith by describing the guidelines UUs refer to as we move through our lives and make choices about how to organize our relationships and act in the world, the Revision attempts to define our faith by a short list of values. But the list of values it gives is woefully generic and incomplete.

I have often described Unitarian Universalism as a values-based religion, so this change is not entirely misguided. It’s not possible to define Unitarian Universalism by a statement of shared beliefs; we have none. Nor are we a cause-based organization, so it’s not possible to define Unitarian Universalism by a shared mission. But conceivably you could define Unitarian Universalism by a set of shared values.

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Indeed, the Seven Principles already refer to several values we hold in common. Here are the values extracted from the Seven Principles and the new value words in the proposed Revision:

Seven Principles values:

Individual worth
Justice
Equity
Compassion
Acceptance
Growth
Freedom
Responsibility
Democracy
Community
Peace
Liberty
Justice (again)

Revision values:

Love
Justice
Equity
Generosity
Pluralism
Transformation
Interdependence

Justice is mentioned twice in the Seven Principles, first in the context of human relations, then in the context of world community. Other values could also be teased out from the Seven Principles that don't exist as single words, such as an environmental value described as "respect for the interdependent web."

The Revision cuts off the values list at seven, fewer than are named in the Seven Principles, and even the Seven Principles weren't intended to be a list of all the values we hold in common. This invites the question, why seven? Why not eight, or fourteen? What are we leaving out? Justice, equity, and interdependence appear in the Seven Principles and the Revision, but what about important values that are now dropped, such as compassion, acceptance, peace?

And are the values that made the cut the ones best suited to define the unique faith of Unitarian Universalism? I like to think Unitarian Universalists are generous, but is generosity the most UU thing about us? In what way does "transformation" get at something essential and distinctive about our faith?

There is no logical order to the seven value words as there is to the statements of the Seven Principles. Nor is there a sense that this is a set of words that relate to each other in a comprehensive way, as the statements of the Seven Principles do. The Revision thus invites the question why these seven words, and why not others? Like trying to remember the names of Snow White's Seven Dwarfs, I'm sure I'll always be forgetting one or naming one that isn't actually there. Sneezzy?

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Admittedly, most people would find it easier to memorize seven words than Seven Principles, but good luck trying to memorize the seven words and the accompanying definitions and covenants that give them their intended meaning.

The seven chosen values aren't necessarily wrong. We are those things. They just seem random. I could think of seven other values that would serve just as well or better. Our value of democracy, for instance, makes us different from authoritarian religions. Our value of reason makes us different from mystical faiths or religions based on revelation. Our value of freedom defines us as a liberal religion. But none of those values make the list.

The Seven Principles, on the other hand, successfully define who we are to visitors and strangers. I can share the list with friends and proudly say, we are these people. The Seven Principles say something true, and meaningful about us. The Seven Principles clearly show how we differ from the way other religious groups define themselves. The seven value words of the Revision do not communicate a similar, clear picture.

Argument Four: The Revision is incoherent in that it twists the meaning of commonly used words

In response to the challenge of trying to define a faith by a list of seven individual words, the Revision only compounds the problem by then elaborating on each word. The values are not left alone to speak for themselves. Each value is accompanied by a statement which defines each value with a particular meaning. Thus, it's not just "Interdependence" that we value but a particular meaning of interdependence in a particular context that UUs are supposed to hold in common.

Each accompanying statement begins with a verb that turns the associated value into an action statement illustrating how someone would live out that value. But the connection between the value and the defined action is sometimes vague and sometimes simply wrong.

Generosity is easy to understand. But here's what the Revision means by that word, "We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope." That's a good way to live, but that's not the definition of generosity! So the meaning is incoherent. Are UUs generous, or grateful, or hopeful, or...what, exactly?

Transformation means many things. In a statement of faith, transformation might mean personal and spiritual growth. But the Revision requires us to think of transformation as "We adapt to the changing world." Well, sometimes we do, but sometimes we assert ourselves against the changing world (e.g. stopping climate change) and sometimes we work to push a change when the world isn't changing quickly enough (e.g. equality for oppressed persons). Transformation and adaptation are two different concepts. So which is it?

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Justice is a huge, complicated, value word. Justice means many things to many people, and has for thousands of years resisted a clear definition by the best philosophical minds. In the Revision, justice is narrowly defined as: “We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities” which is perhaps one example of justice but certainly not a definition of justice. Justice as a guiding principle, the way it is used in the Seven Principles, applies to all the complicated circumstances and contexts where we might seek and strive for justice. The Revision limits justice only to the circumstance of “diverse multicultural Beloved Communities”

The value words alone are far too wide-reaching to define our faith, so the Revision attempts to add specificity by appending definitions and action statements. But the additions to the value words only succeed in creating confusion in the definitions and restrictions in the context, not clarity.

[Argument Five: The Revision fundamentally changes our faith from a faith of guiding principles to a faith of required action.](#)

Commercial corporations and cause-based non-profit organizations have mission statements. The UUA as an organization has a mission, too: supporting the member congregations. But our faith is not defined by doing anything in particular but by a particular way of being in the world defined by our principles and our values. What we choose to do, as individual UUs or as UU congregations depends on the interests and capabilities of the person or group. UU congregations and individuals rightly express their shared faith in multiple ways.

The Unitarian Universalist faith is not defined by our actions but by that which inspires and guides our actions. But the Revision now asks UUs to covenant around a host of action words. Each value word is accompanied by an action statement: we honor, we celebrate, we work, we adapt, we cultivate, we declare. And then each value and elaboration of that value is further accompanied by a covenant statement that requires more collective action. We protect, create, nurture, work, learn, embrace, dismantle, support, transform, share, use, build, and sustain.

None of this has any place in a statement of faith. There are no action words in the Seven Principles except that we “affirm and promote” the principles. When the proposed “Eighth Principle” was being discussed, which was filled with language intended to require our congregations to be more actively engaged in anti-racist work, many people noted that the statement was more appropriate for a congregation’s mission statement rather than a faith statement.

The work that an individual UU chooses to do, or that a congregation chooses to do collectively, is up to them. Our faith cares about how you act in the world, not what action you undertake. People attend our congregations for many reasons. Some of us are social justice activists, some of us seek a quiet place to pray, some seek wisdom, others want friends. Some of us may choose to do some of the actions that the Revision names, but they would do so inspired by and as an expression of a deeper and more generally defined faith. The Revision would require that we

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covenant together to do every one of the actions named in order to call ourselves Unitarian Universalists.

The concluding statement of the Revision respecting Freedom of Belief acknowledges that “Congregational freedom and the individual’s right of conscience are central to our Unitarian Universalist heritage”. The nod to the defining feature of liberal religion is appreciated. But that affirmation does not release an individual from the covenants elsewhere in the Revision that require action, thus making the affirmation of freedom hypocritical.

This is a fundamental and wrong-headed re-direction of our faith, re-making our Unitarian Universalist congregations as cause-based organizations gathered to do together rather than spiritual communities gathered to be together.

[Argument Six: The Revision expands the mission of the UUA into work inappropriate for a voluntary association of independent congregations.](#)

The Seven Principles are only one section of Article II which also includes the Sources and a statement of Purpose (a purpose for the UUA, not for our members congregations). The Revision begins with a Purpose statement that repeats much of the language of the current Purpose statement but also includes a new statement that radically shifts the work of the UUA.

Both statements begin by speaking of the UUA’s “Religious, educational and humanitarian purposes” and then continue with phrases that describe work appropriate for the UUA, an organization formed by the voluntary association of independent member congregations in order to support those congregations. The phrases are altered in the Revision but cover much the same ideas: serving or assisting congregations, forming new congregations, advancing UU values or implementing UU principles.

But the revision adds a new, very different purpose: “to heal historic injustices”.

This is an admirable purpose, but it is not the purpose of the UUA. This may be work that individual UUs support, or that particular UU congregations might wish to focus on, but it is not the work that the UUA is formed to do. Independent congregations support the UUA with our financial contributions and volunteer work because the UUA can do work for our congregations that it would be impractical for churches to do themselves, such as credentialing ministers and publishing hymnals. The UUA is not a cause-based organization with a mission beyond supporting the member congregations. Nor is the UUA an advocacy organization designed to lobby the government for legislation to redress past wrongs. Other organizations exist for those purposes. Individual UUs, or independent UU congregations might choose to support or partner with organizations working to heal historic injustices but we don’t fund the UUA to do that work.

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We need the UUA to stay in its lane: the necessary work that only it can do for us. The UUA is a service organization formed by UU congregations to support UU congregations. Any other work is a distraction and a dilution of scarce resources.

The revised Purposes ends with a final sentence that again takes the UUA out of its lane and comes with additional disturbing implications:

“The Unitarian Universalist Association will actively engage its members in the transformation of the world through liberating Love.”

The purpose of the UUA is to serve our congregations, not to direct them. It is the prerogative of each independent congregation to write its own Bylaws and Mission statement based on the interests and capabilities of their members. The work of the UUA should focus on supporting, encouraging, and advising UU congregations to be their most healthy and effective in whatever work they choose to do. Some of our congregations may choose a mission of “transformation of the world” but others may choose other work. It is not the place of the UUA to tell them what to do.

The point is not that “transformation of the world through liberating Love” is an offensive mission statement. The point is that the UUA should not be “actively engaging its members” in any mission statement. The work of the UUA is to support the congregations in the work we choose to do, not to assign work to congregations and manage it. The disturbing implication of the Revision is that it authorizes the UUA, per their Bylaws, as part of their defined purpose, to direct our congregations rather than respond to the congregation’s needs, a change that contradicts the polity of an Association of independent congregations and moves us in the direction of a centralized Denomination.

CONCLUSION

In every aspect, the Revision represents a diminution of the current Article II.

The Revision replaces a clear and concise set of faith principles with an arbitrary and incomplete set of values.

The Revision confuses the value words by accompanying each value word with a statement that channels the value into a specific action, sometimes distorting the common meaning of the value, or narrowing a broad value to apply only to a particular context.

The value words are further abused by a covenant statement that inappropriately requires specific actions of all UUs and UU congregations rather than leaving the expression of our faith to an individual’s personal interests and capabilities and our independent congregation’s own sense of mission.

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The purpose of the UUA is to serve the member congregations, not to “heal historic injustices” or to direct the congregations or individual UUs to do any particular work, yet this statement is filled with required work for UUs and UU congregations, and drags the UUA itself out of its appropriate lane. And most concerning, the Revision’s reference to specific actions and accountability, open the door to a creeping denominationalism that could eventually erode the independence of our congregations in violation of our historic congregational polity.

The Revision is too vague and complicated to communicate our identity to visitors, too meandering and long to memorize, and too badly written to inspire our reverence.

And yet the original Article II continues to serve us well! No wholesale Revision is warranted, and if adopted would serve us less well.

For these reasons the proposed Revision should be rejected.

ABOUT

The Reverend Rick Hoyt-McDaniels.

He received a Master of Divinity from the Claremont School of Theology in 1998 and was ordained and fellowshiped with the Unitarian Universalist Association later that year.

For 26 years he has served UU congregations in the greater Los Angeles area. He has served on the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Justice Ministry of California, two terms as the President of the Pacific Southwest chapter of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association and co-founded an In Care program to assist new ministers in formation that became the model for the UUMA’s national Ministerial Formation Network. He received the Pacific Southwest District Distinguished Service award in 2011.

Currently he serves the [Unitarian Universalist Church of Studio City](#) as Interim Minister.