

# Resources for Communities of Ongoing Religious Exploration

V. 2 Unit 1

Mission

## Suggested Chalice Lighting

Your purpose is never going to be accomplished. Think about it. You're not going to get the leaders together one Monday morning and say, "Well everyone, guess what? We've gone into all the world and everyone is a disciple." You'll always strive for it. It will always guide you, but you're never going to be done accomplishing the task.

*~ChurchFuel*

## I. Introduction

Unitarian Universalists cherish congregationalism. It is an idea that is foundational to both of the U's in UUism. In the United States, we trace our history to the Puritans, who established a society under a covenant known as the Cambridge Platform, which makes clear that "there is no greater church than a congregation, which may ordinarily meet in one place." Congregationalism emerged in reaction to corruption and abuse of power in ecclesial hierarchy; therefore, we have no priesthood, no bishops, no pope -- no governing authority of any kind, outside of each congregation.

Congregationalism is not unique to liberal religion; it is part of Baptist and other orthodox Christian traditions. For religious bodies that claim a particular deity and authoritative sacred text, the purpose and mission of the church might be inferred or extracted from their doctrine or scripture. In affirming the individual conscience, human reason, and the free and responsible search for truth, liberal religion discards any such possibility. It becomes the responsibility of each congregation to discern its reason for being.

Inherent in this discussion is the assumption that there is a reason for our congregations to exist. It is also assumed here that we must have a sense of what that reason is, or we inevitably will fail to honor it. Many individual UUs, like members of any other religious body, take a passive approach to this question. For some of us, it is sufficient that we do gather; if there is no compelling reason for us to gather, we will no longer gather. For others, this question is a problem for others to solve.

A Unitarian Universalist congregation can only be responsive to, or governed by, its members if those members participate both in articulating and in fulfilling its mission. We elect a Board of Trustees to make tactical and strategic decisions for the congregation, to serve a higher end than the preferences of each member. In the words

of ministry and polity consultant Dan Hotchkiss, “The ‘owner’ that the board must serve is the congregation’s mission, the covenant the congregation has set its heart to and the piece of the Divine Spirit that belongs to it.”

## II. CONNECT: Readings

Saints by calling, must have a visible political union amongst themselves, or else they are not a particular church: as those similitudes hold forth, which Scripture makes use of, to show the nature of particular Churches: as a body, a building, or house, hands, eyes, feet, and other members must be united, or else, remaining separate are not a body. Stones, timber, though squared, hewn and polished, are not an house, until they are compacted and united: so saints or believers in judgement of charity, are not a church, unless orderly knit together.

~ Cambridge Platform 1648 ch4

And what is the mission? The great management consultant Peter Drucker wrote that the core product of all social-sector organizations is “a changed human being.” A congregation’s mission is its unique answer to the question, “Whose lives do we intend to change and in what way?” A congregation that limits its vision to pleasing its members falls short of its true purpose. Growth, expanding budgets, building programs, and such trappings of success matter only if they reflect positive transformation in the lives of the people touched by the congregation’s work.

~ Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry*

The mission statement ensures that different functional groups within the organization or individuals within a department have the same underlying rationale for actions. In this sense, the purpose unifies efforts and maximizes the utilization of resources to reach the established goals and objectives. Acting as a compass, it ensures that everyone is pulling in the same direction... It addresses the deeper, emotional component of why people do what they do for an organization or customer base. It taps into the right-brain (emotional, intuitive, visual, and synthesizing) versus the left-brain (logical, reasoning, quantitative, analyzing). As we discussed before, the left-brain is satisfied by the paycheck; the right-brain needs something more, something that appeals to the emotional side. The mission statement acts to fulfill the emotional needs of the right-brain, creating a satisfied whole.

~ Rich Horwath, *Discovering Purpose*

It’s important for churches to be clear and forthright about who they are and what they teach. This helps newcomers have a clue about whether they’d feel at home there and it helps current church members by encouraging them to do a periodic re-examination of who they are and what they profess. And yet I’m not suggesting that the goal is to have only theological birds of a feather flocking together. Indeed, I think we grow only when we’re challenged by people who are in different places theologically than we are... It’s

sometimes not easy to hold together such diversity, but I think it makes us stronger and richer and, well, just more interesting. It also helps with our humility because sometimes you realize that those other goofballs are, um, right.

~ Bill Tammeus, *A Small-c catholic*

### III. GROW: Questions for consideration and discussion

1. Is Peter Drucker (as cited by Dan Hotchkiss) right, that the ultimate mission of any social sector organization is ‘a changed human being’? As diverse as nonprofits are, is this sometimes but not necessarily true? Is it generally true of not-for-profit bodies, but not for churches? Is it true of doctrinal churches, but inapplicable to liberal religious bodies?
2. Who or what is the governing force of our congregation? What is the ultimate authority? Does your answer have enough clarity or specificity to be the ‘boss’ to which the Board of Trustees reports?
3. Is it reasonable to suggest that the entire congregation needs a single mission statement? Is it even possible? Given that each of us comes for a uniquely personal reason, seeking something particular to each of us, is it right to even think of ourselves as a “congregation”?
4. Can we find agreement (at least in spirit) on the mission of the congregation, knowing it does not describe the reasons that each of us engages with the congregation? Can we share a single organizational mission, maintaining our unique and personal aims and desires, without contradiction?

### IV. SERVE: Taking it home

Mission statements may capture the spirit of an organization, without offering any clarity on the organization’s activities. Consider Smithsonian’s mission: *The increase and diffusion of knowledge*. Others are specific about what they do, and what they value in their work. *Doctors without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) works in nearly 70 countries providing medical aid to those most in need regardless of their race, religion, or political affiliation*. Some statements cover the ‘what’ and the ‘why’: Mayo Clinic’s mission is *To inspire hope and contribute to health and well-being by providing the best care to every patient through integrated clinical practice, education and research*. For some, the mission says little or nothing about what they actually do; *Susan G Komen for*

*the Cure is fighting every minute of every day to finish what we started and achieve our vision of a world without breast cancer.*

Clearly, there are many different approaches to articulating mission, and they seem to serve different purposes. A statement might tell others what who we are and what we do, to make us more intelligible and appealing to strangers. It might stir an emotional response, to encourage engagement of volunteers and donors. In this particular case, we need a concise statement that can be a guiding authority, giving both inspiration and boundaries, for the congregational leadership.

What priorities, principles, ideals, etc. would you choose to direct our Board? What is a word, or two, perhaps even three words that capture one of those things for you? Don't try to create an entire statement; just reflect on what elements are essential to your understanding of who we are and why we exist as a congregation. Jot them down; we need them. When it is convenient, go online and send them in:

<http://uumontgomery.org/governance/mission-bits/>

## **V. Conclusion**

Was the discussion interesting? Or did it get bogged down or off track? How might you have approached the topic differently?

Were there moments in which you felt uncomfortable? Confused? Anxious? Affirmed? Eager? Hopeful? Surprised? What other feelings did you encounter?

If people in the group would like, allow them to share these things, without interrogation or challenge.

### **Suggested closing words:**

We must consider what is vital in our endeavor; are we most concerned with the community in our ministry, or our ministry in the community? In the end, we do not choose. If we do not have both, we cannot have either.