

The UUA is inviting possible amendments to the proposal to rewrite Article II of the UUA bylaws (https://www.uua.org/files/2023-01/a2sc_rpt_01172023.pdf, pp 19-22). Below is my proposal in the form of 4 major amendments. These would be called “striker”-type amendments, in the parlance of state legislatures, in that they strike and replace major sections, not just wording here and there. General reasons for this are given by the draft “con” statement that follows (from a national group that has arisen in opposition, since the proposed rewrite distorts or diminishes our 7 principles in favor of concepts such as covenant which have played a notorious role, historically, in persecution and bigotry).

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Proposed Amendments to the Article II Study Commission (A2SC) Proposal by Dick Burkhardt

I. Replace the A2SC “Section C-2.1. Purposes” by

Section C-2.1. Purposes. The broad purposes of the Unitarian Universalist Association are religious, educational, and social, welcoming spiritual diversity, inspired by sources both sacred and secular, and governed by democratic principles. Particular purposes are to serve the needs of the member congregations, to strengthen affiliated organizations, and to extend Unitarian Universalism to nurture a more sustainable, peaceable, and equitable world.

II. Replace the A2SC “Section C-2.2. Values and Covenant” by

Section C-2.2. Principles. We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote these principles in the spirit of Love:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations;
3. Respect and generosity, nurturing pluralistic spiritual growth;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. Universal rights of democracy, due process, and ethical behavior;
6. World community in balance with divergent cultures and ecosystems;
7. Discerning the interdependent web of all existence.

Image description: The 6 petal image would be retained but with “Inherent Worth” in the middle. Then clockwise from the upper right corner: “Justice & Compassion”,

“Respect & Pluralism”, “Truth & Meaning”, “Rights & Democracy”, “World Community”, “Interdependent Web”.

III. Replace the A2SC “Section C-2.3. Inspirations” by

Section C-2.3. Sources

1. The wisdom of the world’s major historical religions, especially the Abrahamic faiths - Christianity, Judaism, and Islam - but also eastern religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism.
2. The many prophetic words and deeds, both religious and humanistic, calling for harmony and justice, drawing from diverse historical, pagan, and indigenous cultures world-wide.
3. Modern voices of reason and science which warn us against the “idolatry of mind and spirit”, voices grounded in both the natural and social sciences, skeptical of ideology.
4. The voices of each other, both in joy and pain, as we strive to craft a faith rooted in deep ethics that inspires profound commitment.

IV. Replace the A2SC “Section C-2.4. Inclusion” and “Section C-2.5. Freedom of Belief” by

Section C-2.4. Inclusion.

1. We seek ever-widening circles of mutual respect with all who have felt marginalized due to circumstances of ethnicity, race, or class, or to experience of gender, disability, or other conditions.
2. These circles shall include those with dissident or peripheral tenets or practices, provided that these are consistent with our principles and ethics and do not demean others.

A Case for Retaining the Current UU Principles and Sources

A Commentary on the proposed changes to the UUA Bylaws - Article II

Prepared by Save The UU Principles (savetheuuprinciples@gmail.com)

A Commission appointed to review Article II of the UUA Bylaws, which includes the Principles and Sources and Purpose, has proposed a rewrite that throws out most of Article II and starts over from scratch. The Principles, as such, would no longer exist, having been replaced with Values that are expressed in an entirely different way. The

Sources would no longer exist, having been replaced with a short paragraph labeled “Inspirations”. The stated Purpose of the Association is significantly changed, including changing the distribution of authority in UU. This commentary makes the case for voting against such a radical overhaul of this core document, which has been the foundation of UU since 1961. Reasons for taking this stance will be explained further down in this analysis.

To make sure Unitarian Universalism remains dynamic and responsive to the evolving wisdoms of its members, it is mandated in the UUA Bylaws that Article II (containing the Principles and Sources) must be reviewed at least every 15 years. At the end of a 2-year long review process, an Article II Study Commission appointed by the UUA Board of Trustees can conclude that no revisions are warranted, or alternatively conclude that specific revisions should be proposed. At the end of the last review cycle in 2009, the recommended revisions were voted down at General Assembly. The proposal in this new review is for a dramatic rewrite of almost the entire Article II.

Before getting into the reasons to vote against this proposed rewrite, ask yourself:

- What attracted you to UU in the first place?
- What about UU convinced you that UU was a good fit for you?
- What has compelled you to continue to make UU an ongoing part of your life?

It is likely that the Principles and Sources in Article II were directly or indirectly a magnet that brought you to UU and keeps you in UU. The Principles serve as the core foundation that naturally begets an even wider (but not enumerated) set of values and ethics that are guiding lights for becoming a better person and making the world a better place. They attract and bind together people who have similar goals for themselves and their society.

The Commission has not put forward a compelling rationale that justifies the major changes they are proposing. Change is not automatically better. We should not replace UU’s magnet and glue with such a radical rewrite.

Here is a short summary of the objections to the rewrite. Each objection will be explained in more detail later.

- 1) **Clarity:** The current Principles are clear and concise and cohesive and show what makes UU unique. The proposed Values are not clear, not concise, and obscure what makes UU unique.

- 2) **Freedom:** A high priority in the Principles and Sources is you as an individual with inherent worth and dignity and the right of conscience. The new version over-emphasizes the collective over the individual.
- 3) **Spirituality:** Listing UUs Sources of Inspiration visually alerts potential members to UU's emphasis on spiritual and intellectual diversity. Don't diminish that emphasis. Don't remove that magnet.
- 4) **Polity:** The current Purpose of the Association is to serve the congregations. The rewrite makes congregations subservient to the Association. Don't centralize authority. Retain congregational autonomy.
- 5) **Agency:** The Principles let you decide *how* to express your values and *what* to do. The extra covenants don't leave those choices up to us. We should do things because we feel called to, not because we have to.
- 6) **Accountability:** The new version's insertion of accountability is an unworkable idea. The standards are too ambiguous. The mechanism for enforcement is not defined. Groups judging groups is divisive and toxic.
- 7) **Universality:** The language in the current Principles is universally understandable. The rewrite uses words and phrases with special meanings that will be inconsistently interpreted, and confusing to outsiders.
- 8) **Covenant:** Covenants would be created between congregations, and with the Association, for the 1st time. These are intended to be enforced, with consequences, which would reverse the flow of power in UU.
- 9) **They Work:** The Principles are eminently capable of inspiring and guiding us. The rewrite considers the Principles irredeemable. There is no justification for this. Don't abandon UU's legacy for no good reason.

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Reasons to retain the current version of Article II

- 1) **Clarity:** The current 7 Principles are clear, concise, cohesive, and succinctly communicate what makes Unitarian Universalism unique among all denominations. The proposed rewrite completely replaces Principles with Values that are not clear, are not concise, and obscure what makes UU unique. Three times as many words just makes it three times harder to describe UU to potential members. Listing dozens of related values just dilutes the overall impact, trivializing the core Principles. The new graphic showing 6 Values encircling 'Love' says too little, the new words say too much. The current Principles are just right.

2) **Freedom:** The current 7 Principles clearly communicate that UU places a high priority on you as an individual with worth and dignity and the right of conscience and an equal participant in democratic processes. This makes UU unique. The Principles light an aspirational path for you to develop as a person and safeguard your sovereignty. The proposed rewrite is an over-reaction to a perception of excessive individualism, over-correcting by over-emphasizing the collective and relentlessly emphasizing covenants.

3) **Spirituality:** The second part of the Principles section that UU members know as the Sources is completely eliminated in the proposed rewrite. In the place of an enumeration of 6 Sources of spiritual and intellectual inspiration, the new proposal has added a paragraph in a new section it labels "Inspirations". There appears to be a fear that being specific about the sources of inspiration would leave out something important, so the new paragraph ends up saying nothing useful. Being specific is actually a potent visual alert to potential members that UU embraces a remarkably diverse set of spiritual and intellectual inspirations. Don't diminish that emphasis. Don't remove that magnet.

4) **Polity:** The current Article II intentionally avoids conflicting with Congregational Polity, except where Article II safeguards individual sovereignty. The proposed rewrite has numerous places that open the door for making congregations subservient to the national UUA institutions. This sets the stage for a reversal of the flow of power in Unitarian Universalism and an unacceptable centralization of power and authority into the national UUA institutions. We must safeguard congregational autonomy by continuing to emphasize in the Purposes that the Association serves the congregations, not the other way around.³

5) **Agency:** Many UU members embrace the notion that it is important to express their values by working to improve the lives of others and ensure a sustainable world. The current Article II leaves it up to each person and each congregation to discern how best to use their time and resources to express those values. The proposed rewrite, by conspicuously attaching covenant to every Value, assumes it is better to prescribe how to express those values and what you and your congregation's time and resources should be devoted to. We should reject the usurpation of those prerogatives. People should do things because they feel called to do so, not because they could be punitively judged as 'out of covenant' if they don't.

6) **Accountability:** The concept of accountability is a horrible idea. It is not workable. The standards that members and congregations would be judged by are too ambiguous. Ambiguous words and phrases are often helpful as sources of creativity and inspiration but are unacceptable as standards for punitive judgements. The mechanism for enforcing accountability is not defined. Who are we agreeing to be accountable to? What are the consequences for being judged as not "*doing the work of our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love*" with the proper enthusiasm and focus? We should not agree to an open-

ended contract with punitive intentions. Furthermore, identity groups judging other identity groups is bound to be divisive and toxic. If Actions of Immediate Witness (AIWs) from the past 5 years are indicative of what “accountable actions” will be proposed, it is inevitable that conflict will arise between those who consider some actions too extreme and others who will be upset if UU doesn’t support their cause aggressively enough. Whichever identity groups are granted the authority to make judgements about accountability are going to be deeply resented by identity groups who do not agree with the judgements. This is a recipe for disaster. We need to reject commitments to accountability in Article II.

7) **Universality:** The language in the current Principles is universally understandable. There is no insider jargon and no phrases with special meanings. The language in the proposed revision includes many words and phrases that will be inconsistently interpreted and, in some cases, incomprehensible to outsiders. Will everyone have a common understanding of these new phrases that are being added to Article II?:

vital ministries, lifelong faith formation, heal historic injustices, the transformation of the world, liberating Love, accountable to one another, the spiritual discipline of Love, repair harm and damaged relationships, multicultural, Beloved Communities, dismantle, racism, systemic oppression, inclusive democratic processes, collectively transform, relationships of mutuality, religious ancestries, covenant.

For instance, people will not understand that the word ‘Love’ with a capital ‘L’ has a special meaning. It does this in 3 places. The instructions from the Board to the Commission defined love this way: “*Our commitment to personal, institutional, and cultural change rooted in anti-oppression, anti-racism, and multiculturalism values and practices is love in action*”. We should assume that the UUA will interpret ‘Love’ as “Love is dismantling White Supremacy Culture” even though those exact words are not used.

Even words like ‘equity’ must be seen under a different light in the context of accountability, because many people interpret ‘equity’ as ‘equal outcomes’, not just ‘equal opportunities’. Equal outcomes is an impossible goal to be accountable for. In a similar vein, racism is now defined as unequal outcomes, not just unequal opportunities, so being accountable for dismantling racism is also an impossible goal.

Speaking of the phrases ‘White Supremacy Culture’ and ‘Culture of White Supremacy’ – these are perfect examples of phrases used a lot in UU that are often misunderstood because they have a special meaning. If UU becomes accountable for “dismantling White Supremacy Culture”, what does that really mean?

8) **Covenant:** Many leaders in UU now interpret the word ‘covenant’ in a special way. Instead of a ‘soft’ promise of “*mutual trust and support*”, which is a promise of best intentions, covenants will now be like contracts with consequences. There will

be distinct expectations about what are acceptable ways to participate in the UU community and sharper clarity that being an obstacle to the Association achieving their goals is 'out of covenant'. The new phrase "*we covenant, congregation to congregation and through our Association*" means that for the first time ever, covenants would be created between congregations, and with the Association. This means that congregations will now be accountable to the Association, which would mean the Association could enforce consequences if congregations were declared 'out of covenant'.

The UUA Board of Trustees is already creating their own covenants to make the Board accountable to identity-based groups. These identity-based groups are not subject to democratic control. If congregations are accountable to the Board, and the Board is accountable to identity-based groups, the highest level of power in UU would be insulated from influence by UU members. This would represent a reversal of the hierarchy of authority and power in UU. Congregations currently have no covenants with the Association because the Association is an administrative body, serving the congregations, not the other way around. We need to keep it that way. Centralization of authority and power is an idea that should be rejected.

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9) **They Work:** The current Principles are eminently capable of inspiring and guiding us. The Article II Study Commission considers the Principles in their present form to be irredeemable. There is no justification for discarding the style and orientation of the Principles. Don't toss aside UU's legacy for no good reason. Many UU members identify very closely with the Principles. Imbedding them in a forest of verbose paragraphs, often surrounded by ambiguous language, diminishes their power to attract new members, inspire current members, and serve as a glue to build and sustain UU communities. Don't abandon a style that works.

Concluding Thoughts

The radically revised Article II appears to be the first phase of a transformation of Unitarian Universalism from a Liberal Religion into an organization focused on activism, a Social Justice Activism Organization, for want of a better term. The addition of numerous ambiguous words and phrases that have special meanings, combined with the introduction of accountability and ubiquitous references to covenant, portend an end goal of centralization of authority into the national UU institutions. That centralization of authority is the only plausible way to impose a consistent interpretation of ambiguous words and special meanings. That centralization of authority is the only way to mandate what are considered to be 'accountable actions'. Centralization is required in order to have identifiable standards for enforcing accountability. Why insist on accountability if there is no way to enforce it?

We need to reject this proposed rewrite of Article II in the UUA Bylaws, to preserve congregational autonomy and safeguard individual sovereignty. We need to avoid the toxic divisiveness that identity groups judging other identity groups would lead to. We

need to keep easily misinterpreted ambiguous language with special meanings out of UU's legacy document. We need to preserve Unitarian Universalism's orientation as a Liberal Religion.

Preserve UU's magnet and glue. Retain the Principles and Sources in their clear, concise, and cohesive form.