



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve

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8th Principle--Is it necessary?

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We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying towards spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural beloved community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

The UUA has been encouraged to adopt an 8th principle. It is a principle that deals with the issues of diversity (or lack thereof) in our member congregations. It calls congregations to “dismantle racism” within our institutions, which is no easy task. In the past six years we have witnessed just how deep the institutions of racism are in the United States. It is a problem that keeps black and brown people from living with the dignity and respect that every person deserves. It keeps our schools segregated, denies people fair wages and can cost people their lives.

But is an addition to the Seven Principles necessary?

Walk into any UU congregation and you will find a copy of the Seven Principles on the wall, in a visitor packet or the order of service. It is what UU's often point to when someone outside of the faith asks us, “What do UU's actually believe in?” For a faith movement that eschews dogma and creeds, the Seven Principles are as dear to UU's as the Nicene Creed is to mainline protestants. The Principles are an institution, and considered sacred to many within our faith.

But we are a covenantal faith, first and foremost. In the grey hymnal, at the top of the page with the seven principles and six sources, it says, “We the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote.” The Seven Principles are a covenant, and covenants can and should be amended when the need arises. In fact, the original Six Principles, adopted in 1960, were amended in 1985. The wording and order of the original six was reworked and a seventh principle created. “Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part” was added to encourage people to be more conscious of environmental issues. Pollution and air quality were a major concern in the 70's and 80's and the UUA felt the need to respond.

This is what a faith should do. It should respond to the injustices of the time. Just as we saw the need to clean up the environment and save the planet, now we see a need to clean up systems of oppression that we have been a part of in order to truly allow the worth and dignity of others to shine.

But don't the other seven principle basically cover the idea of the proposed eighth principle? Of course they do. You could argue that the first principle covers the idea of all the others. If we respect the worth of others, we would automatically follow the second principle of seeking justice for them. The sixth principle of the goal of world community would automatically fall into place if we followed the first principle. Why not just have the one principle and be done with it?

Covenants are aspirational. They are our communal values writ large: Respect, Justice, Spiritual Growth, Truth, Shared Power, Peace, Connection. The Principles are reminders of what our best selves could look like and should guide our actions. While the proposed Eighth principle touches on ideas of justice, respect and shared power, it covers one idea that is not specifically addresses in the other principles: multicultural diversity. It is a reminder to us to see who is not in the room with us and challenge us to find ways to invite others into community. It is a call to examine how the systems we utilize may exclude others and actively work to change those systems. Like the other principles, it is something that we all strive toward and often fall short of in our everyday lives. It is a reminder not only to do better, but what better looks like.

Recognizing systems of exclusion is not easy. I remember at General Assembly 2015 in Portland, there was a hotly contested debate about the language of an Action of Immediate Witness regarding supporting Black Lives Matter. The debate came over the phrase, "abolishing the prison system." There were many white people who were using the Roberts Rules of Order to propose amendments and ask clarifying question, while a large group of young adults, many of whom were people of color, sat waiting at the PRO microphone. White men were silencing voices of color using a system that had been in place for decades.

I see this silencing when people want to parse the specific wording of the Eighth Principle. While I have no doubt that their concern comes from a genuine place, it has the effect of telling voices of color, "you aren't doing it our way." To support the Eighth Principle and what it truly means, is to support the language that people of color have endorsed. It shows we respect their abilities and worth with our actions.

Lastly, this principle is about action. By supporting this principle, you are pledging to do the work. The words working, build, actions, and dismantle are extremely active. They demand more than a focus group and a week of Share-the-Plate. They demand we work to change how we do things, that we go out into communities of people who do not look like us, that we listen deeply to the voices we have silenced all these years and support their goals. Adopting this Principle is not an end, it is a promise to start.