

10/04/09 Sermon

"Association Sunday"

Rev. Paul D. Daniel, Minister

Excerpts by Rev. Erik Walker Wikstrom

Today is Association Sunday, a day to focus on our wider connection to the broader UU Association of congregations, and to encourage diversity in our pews.

The UUA is, in a very real way, not a thing in and of itself but is instead a coming together of each and every one of the free and independent Unitarian Universalist congregations across the country.

Today is Association Sunday because we are celebrating it, and so will our neighboring Atlanta area congregations in the Mid-South District and throughout the country.

We do this because there ought to be at least one day out of all the other days that we set aside – like Mother's Day and Fathers' Day – to remember the wider community that we ought to be thinking about all the other days as well. Our Association literally would not exist without its member congregations, and we would be infinitely less without it.

This congregation needs the UUA because, by coming together in association, we are capable of things that would be unthinkable if we were left on our own.

We have benefitted by our connections to the wider UU world, through things like ministerial settlement services the congregation just used when I was called as your new minister. We also take advantage of district services, lifespan faith development curricula, worship resources, our two hymnals, and public witness on issues of national importance.

Not too long ago, we received a Chalice Lighter grant that offset the cost of our emergency repairs to the septic system. It should be obvious that together we are more than any of us alone.

And so the purpose of Association Sunday is not to convince anyone of the importance of our association but to encourage us to deepen and grow our association so that we can increase our diversity and the growth of our movement that will better allow us to share our unique good news.

Just take a look at the world we live in. Read the headlines; listen to the news. Is there any doubt that religious communities such as this one have a place in conservative Georgia and the country, where other faiths would stifle diversity and free thinking?

The first Association Sunday, in 2007, looked at the need to grow our movement's numbers in the world. It was once estimated that, on average, a Unitarian Universalist invites someone to her or his congregation once every 75 years! When was the last time you invited a friend to worship with us? Obviously, that has got to change – and it is changing.

The staff of the UUA, including Eunice Benton whom we welcome today, have been doing work on national media campaigns, and many of our congregations have been doing the same on the local level – getting the word out, without proselytizing, that there's something going on here worth checking out. Recently, a number of our members and I were seen on television protesting an ill conceived and illegal police raid that violated the civil rights of people gathered at a local gay bar. We stood for our values and were noticed, and helped make a difference in the local community's response to prejudice and hatred.

Much of the money raised in the 2007 Association Sunday – over \$700,000 – went to supporting the national media campaign (those ads in *Time* magazine that created quite a buzz); additional funds went back to the Districts to support local efforts to grow the movement; and other monies went into a national initiative to increase the racial and ethnic diversity in our ordained ministry.

The second Association Sunday, in 2008, focused on growth in spirit, and the funds raised were split between supporting lay theological education and efforts to support excellence in our professional ministries.

This year, Association Sunday is focusing on growth in diversity, and the monies we raise will help our movement to develop spiritual communities that are more welcoming to ALL people by focusing our efforts to become more anti-racist and to continue the fight against all oppression.

This campaign seeks to create a Unitarian Universalism that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse.

We seek to enable UU congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity

development, and leadership development. Certainly this will enhance the mix of our congregation.

You see, it doesn't really matter all that much if we grow the size of our congregations and our movement, and deepen the spiritual maturity of our congregations, if at the end of the day, we still look, sound, and act pretty much like we do right now.

If the only people we attract are carbon copies of the people who are already here – well we're already here! Do you only want only like-minded diversity?

And it's true that there are other folk out there like us who need what we have. But it's also true that there are other folk – folk who in very real ways are not like us – and they need it, too. And what's more, they have things that we need. Their very difference is needed, because too much sameness is stultifying.

No one likes change. People may say they do, but deep down people really only like change when it's other people who are doing the changing. Yet we UUMANites are spiritually mature enough to know that whether we like it or not, we *need* change. That's why we believe that even our beliefs – even our most cherished beliefs – should be held lightly, open to revision, because we know the importance of evolution in every facet of life.

Growth, movement, change, evolution, transformation – in the long run the only alternative is extinction. Death. And so this year's Association Sunday is not just about growth in diversity but also about growth *through* diversity.

Now in many ways, Unitarian Universalism is a pretty diverse religious tradition. We certainly are theologically. And we are around issues of sexuality and sexual identity. And our understanding about issues of race is pretty good, even though the actual experience in the majority of our congregations is still pretty white. And if we're honest with ourselves, we have miles to go on issues of classism. So for all the diversity we have to celebrate there is still much work to do.

Yet as a movement, we recognize that this is important work to do. It's important for the world, because we are too small a planet for us not to find ways to turn these divisions and distinctions from barriers and barricades into beautifying parts of the landscape, from reasons for us to be suspicious of one another into reasons for us to want to get to know one another, from causes of hostility into causes of celebration.

It's important for us as individuals, too, because the more we expand our contact with people who are different from ourselves, the wider and deeper we can grow, the richer our own lives can be. It's not always easy. Heck, it's hardly ever easy. But we know it's right.

We know that, as a religious community, we value the diversity that the GLBT (gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender) community brings to UUMAN, yet we are fearful of having a visible sign of welcome on our front sign or a pride flag on our property. Why are we not willing to publicize our welcome to the wider Roswell community – to publicly stand for our principles?

We have mixed race families but our children of color are not fully understood by other children and adults – for we often see issues of race through the lens of white privilege. We have work to do my friend in these areas and others such as the classism that exists in most UU congregations. Think about that if you will. We need to move into the conversation about diversity in all its many and glorious forms if we are to mature as a congregation.

Our congregation is a voluntary association of individuals who have come together to create UUMAN and the UUA. It is us; we are they. And the world needs the UUA, just as our community needs us. Today, we have the opportunity to help strengthen our movement for generations to come by deepening our efforts to grow in and through diversity so that we don't just talk the talk but actually walk the walk.

Blessed be!