

P e t e r   
**M**  **R A L E S**  
**for UUA President**

*"We can be the religion for our time."*

## Platform

### Introduction

Unitarian Universalism should be much more than the tiny, fringe religion that it is today. The need for liberal religion has never been greater. Hundreds of thousands of Americans long for spiritual depth, religious community and a place where they can work with others to create a better world.

Sadly, we have not responded effectively to the great longing for liberal spiritual community. Our movement is about the same size that it was when the Unitarians and the Universalists merged nearly 50 years ago. In the meantime, the American population has grown by 68 percent.

The opportunity for our faith is breathtaking. We could be the religion for our time. We can touch the lives of hundreds of thousands of seekers. We can be a more powerful force for compassion, justice, peace and environmental stewardship. However, we cannot seize the opportunity before us unless we are willing to make significant changes. We are not talking about minor adjustments. We need to change our religious culture. We need to become more welcoming, more relevant in the lives of our people, and more involved in the great moral issues of our time.

If we are to seize the opportunity before us, we must focus our energies in three primary areas: growth of our movement, prophetic social action, and the creation of a new ministry for a new century.

### Growth

#### Background

Our congregations are surrounded by the spiritually hungry and religiously homeless. Growing our movement is the moral equivalent of feeding the hungry and housing the

homeless. Growth is not something that is merely organizationally desirable, growth is a moral and religious imperative.

If the need is so great and what we have to offer is so vital, then why have we failed to grow? Why have our growth initiatives proved ineffective? We have failed to grow because we have misplaced our attention and our energy. Growth will not result from ambitious media campaigns or costly efforts to start mega-churches. There are no gimmicks or magic bullets.

We will grow our movement primarily in our existing congregations. We must grow our movement one Sunday at a time, one relationship at a time. This is how our fast-growing churches have always done it. They grow because they are welcoming, because they have a sense of mission, because they insist upon quality, and because they are passionate.

### **What I'll do as UUA president**

- Create and sustain a sense of urgency throughout our movement. We will grow by unleashing the commitment and idealism in our congregations. Our president must be both a bold visionary and a practical realist.
- Work in close partnership with our fastest growing churches. These are the people who know how to grow our movement. I would challenge them to use their knowledge to help us grow our movement.
- Focus growth efforts by ensuring that the Association's staff is an effective partner to our congregations. Our field staff must focus their efforts on working with congregations committed to sharing our faith and serve as capable consultants who help unleash the congregation's potential.
- Reorganize how we deliver services to congregations so that we are more agile, more versatile, and more useful. There is broad consensus that we should move to a more flexible regional model. Much work has been done already by the Congregations Come First Task Force. As president I'll put high priority on leading the design and then implementing a new service delivery model informed by this work.
- Start new congregations in growing and underserved areas, using new approaches that build on the expertise of our leading congregations and seize opportunities of modern technology.

### **Relevant experience**

I have been a passionate and effective advocate for growth at both the local level and the national level. I team-taught a course entitled "Evangelism and the Liberal Church" when I was in seminary. I have led growth workshops at General Assembly, district meetings and in individual congregations. As a minister, I lead one of our movement's fastest-growing churches. My church led the membership track at the first UU University in 2006, and produced the "Ideas for Growth" video sent by the UUA to all of our

congregations. I proposed the growth conference that brought together 12 of our most successful ministers. That conference resulted in the “Listening to Experience” DVD that has been distributed to leaders throughout our movement. I am the only candidate who has led effective growth efforts at the local, regional and national level.

My service on the Association’s Board of Trustees, and especially my two years on the senior UUA staff as Director for District Services, have provided crucial experience for shaping our staff and resources to ensure the breakout growth of Unitarian Universalism.

## **Social action and public witness**

### **Background**

We have always been a people who believe that true spirituality bears fruit in acts of compassion and action to combat oppression and injustice. We point with pride to our forebears who were in the vanguard in the struggle against slavery, rights for women and the civil rights movement. Today our compassion and love for justice lead us to confront the great moral issues of our time: racism, human rights, immigration, economic justice, rights for GLBTQ people, and preservation of life on our planet. Today we are called to resist forces of ignorance and fear that give rise to militarism, nativism, and fundamentalism.

Under Bill Sinkford’s leadership, our movement has gained a new level of public exposure. Our public witness is more strategic than ever before. This is a foundation upon which we must build.

### **What I’ll do as UUA president**

- Be a relentlessly passionate and articulate spokesperson for our religious values.
- Lead efforts to help our congregations be moral beacons in their communities – this is the only way we can make a real and enduring difference in the world.
- Ensure that the reorganization of staff services increases the Association’s effectiveness in harnessing the compassion and commitment already present in our congregations. These services will include trainings and be buttressed by resources. Our people know what the pressing issues are in their communities.
- Build the Association’s new commitment to the environment through the Green Sanctuary program, whose administration it has just undertaken, and in other initiatives to be developed in consultation and cooperation with Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth.
- Build on the Association’s historic opportunity for partnership with the UU Service Committee. The UUSC is a dynamic and revitalized organization. The new partnership between the UUA and the UUSC in response to disasters along the Gulf Coast and in Asia and the genocide in Darfur have made us more effective.

There is so much more that we can do together. As someone with close ties to the UUSC, I am confident that we can create many more opportunities to put our faith into action.

### **Relevant experience**

I would bring to the presidency a long track record of public witness. Before entering ministry I was a newspaper editor and publisher. I defended gay rights and opposed the religious right in hundreds of editorials. As a minister I have held leadership positions in the Colorado Interfaith Alliance, served on the ministerial advisory group of the UU Service Committee, and helped lead UUSC delegations to Guatemala and Chiapas, Mexico.

My congregation has one of the most active and effective social action programs in our movement. We are involved in many things from housing homeless families in our church to supporting human rights work in Latin America to leading interfaith initiatives in Colorado. I am proud that we are a Green Sanctuary.

## **Ministry for a new age**

### **Background**

About half the active parish ministers in our movement will leave or retire during the next presidency. In addition, the communities in which our congregations exist are undergoing a historic demographic change. Of the Americans who are 70 years of age and older, three quarters are “white.” Of the Americans who are 10 years of age and younger, only one quarter are “white.” The America that is coming into being is an America that is dramatically more multiracial, multiethnic and multicultural than the America of one or two generations ago. If we are not relevant to this new America, we will fade into oblivion.

We need a new ministry for this new America. We cannot sit back passively and simply hope that the right people will come along and decide to enter our ministry through our historic channels. The future of our movement is at stake. We need capable, committed ministers who can lead congregations into a new multiracial and multicultural America. We need more clergy who come from diverse backgrounds. We need ministers who are committed to visionary leadership.

### **What I’ll do as UUA president**

- Convene a task force charged with developing a strategic plan for ministry for the next generation. This task force will include, at minimum, leaders from our seminaries, the head of the UUA’s ministry and professional leadership staff group, representation from our ministerial association, seminarians, and people in our movement who have experience as members of diverse communities.

The strategic plan will be one of my top priorities. It must be comprehensive. This issue

is much broader than the issues of funding our seminaries or recent initiatives to raise the quality of our ministry. These are important topics, but we need to look at the entire process of how we recruit, train, place and develop our clergy. In particular, we need a strategic plan that emphasizes ministerial recruitment as central to our future.

### **Relevant experience**

This is an issue that is both strategic and deeply personal. I was born in San Antonio's West Side barrio. I spoke Spanish before I spoke English. The first sermon I delivered was in Spanish. I have lived in Spain and in Peru. Multiculturalism is at the center of my experience. I understand the potential our faith has to attract progressive people from all backgrounds.

## **Other issues**

### **Anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism**

To our credit, we have made anti-racism a high priority. Unfortunately, progress has been painful and slow. Our churches are still overwhelmingly ethnically European and are too often experienced as cold and elitist by newcomers. Many minority ministers have had tragic experiences in our congregations. While our movement has made great strides in opening the way for women and GLBTQ clergy, we still have only a tiny number of ministers of color and of Hispanic/Latino/Latina heritage.

We need a new approach.

### **What I'll do as UUA president**

- Convene a task force charged with developing a “truth and reconciliation” process that draws from similar efforts at Brown University and Greensboro, North Carolina. We need to acknowledge our failures and the pain they have caused — honestly facing our shortcomings and rededicating ourselves to beginning again. The task force will include Unitarian Universalists with experience in reconciliation as well as at least one expert in the field with national or international stature.
- Armed with the learnings from the truth and reconciliation process, lead an exploration of what we are trying to create together (in our churches and in our communities) and what we should do next. This conversation must be empowering and must build cooperation rather than nurture resentment. We must focus on how we are going to embrace a multicultural future.

### **Relevant experience**

As one of the very few Latino ministers in our movement and the only one serving a large congregation, I have been thrust into our Association's struggles with anti-racism, anti-oppression and multiculturalism. I served as a founding member of the Latino/a UU Networking Association (LUUNA) Steering Committee and on the Diverse & Revolutionary UU Multicultural Ministries (DRUUM) Steering Committee. I was the

first minister to hold the A-A-M portfolio on the UUMA Executive Committee. I published an article on Día de los muertos (Day of the Dead) observances in *UU World* magazine. I know first hand how painful and difficult this subject is for us.

Truth and reconciliation is only the first step. We must not confuse catharsis with progress. We need to change the conversation.

## **Governance and modern management**

Our Board of Trustees is moving toward a governance model called policy governance. Policy governance, properly implemented, has several important strengths: it brings a steady focus on the ends the organization seeks to realize, it insists on the importance of congregations as “owners” of the association, it clarifies the distinct roles of staff and board, and it emphasizes accountability by insisting on measuring whether ends are being attained.

The unfortunate truth is that we have allowed an “evaluation averse” culture to develop in our association. For example, our recent “metro strategy” growth initiative never built in outside expert evaluation as part of the implementation. No major foundation would ever fund an initiative without insisting on ongoing, on-site evaluation by outside people trained in program evaluation.

I welcome the Board’s initiative to hold the administration more accountable. The president must also do much more.

## **What I’ll do as UUA president**

- Initiate modern management practices where goals are clear, standards are high, results are measured, and everyone is held accountable. This is just good stewardship. Our work is too important to do it with any less dedication.
- Work cooperatively with the Board to establish procedures that ensure that the administration, staff and Board work together in the most productive manner.

## **Relevant experience**

While the term “policy governance” was not used, my entire career in management has been in organizations that were focused on ends, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and insisted upon accountability. I established a new evaluation process for field staff in welfare program operations in California. I published two award-winning newspapers in Oregon. I initiated a new evaluation process for UUA district staff as Director of District Services. I have always been a proponent of transparency and accountability. This is how we learn and improve.

## **Youth and young adults**

The ideal of a blessed community is one that has a place for everyone. One of the great challenges for our movement is involving our youth and young adults in ways that make

them want to make a lifelong commitment to our faith.

We often speak of “youth empowerment” yet many of our congregations practice youth abandonment. Lately there have been strong feelings regarding the change in the Association’s YRUU program. We should take the long view here and focus on our long-term ends.

### **What I’ll do as UUA president**

- Lead a restructuring of our staff efforts and resources to support programs that involve the great majority of young people in our congregations and that build intergenerational ties within congregations as well as across congregations.
- Ensure that the restructuring involves our youth in our work of transforming the world outside our church walls. I know our young people to be idealistic, creative, enthusiastic and passionate workers for good causes.

### **Relevant experience**

This is a personal concern to me, as I am the father of an active young adult Unitarian Universalist. And as a parish minister I’ve seen and worked side by side with our powerful youth in congregational life and in justice efforts.

And as a committed and experienced growth proponent, I deeply understand how crucial young people – adolescents, students, single young adults, and young families – are to the health and future of our movement.

### **Spirituality**

We must always remember that we are a religious movement. We are not a political party. We are not a social club. All of the great religious traditions upon which we draw place great emphasis on practices that help us connect to the deepest part of our selves, to one another, and to ultimate reality.

All the great traditions teach us that spirituality is ultimately about *connection*—connection with self, with other humans, with life, with the vast and powerful mystery of the cosmos. They also teach us the value of reflection. We need to take time for whatever spiritual practice helps us reconnect.

However, every great religious teacher and religious tradition teaches that spiritual reflection is not an escape, or an end unto itself, but rather a preparation for a more purposeful relationship to life. There is great danger here! Escapism and narcissism easily take on the guise of spiritual reflection. This is especially a danger for us as a people susceptible to the lures of individualism and privilege.

A spiritual practice is something that prepares us to live transformed lives. The measure of our spirituality is how we live and what we do, not what inspiring things we read. Jesus, the Buddha, Mohammed, Martin Luther King Jr., Gandhi, and Mother Teresa

understood this fundamental lesson. Our lives, not our words, speak most powerfully of our spirituality. Compassion that does not lead to action is not true compassion. A love of nature that does not lead to acts of environmental stewardship is superficial.

The president of our association is not a “spiritual leader” in the way of other, more traditional religious movements. However, our president is still a spiritual leader.

### **What I’ll do as UUA president**

- I will seek to model and advocate for an engaged spirituality—spirituality that is so deep that it cannot help but act because its love is so deep that it cannot keep still. This, I would submit, is the spirituality of Parker and Emerson and Susan Anthony and James Reeb. Love that does not act is not true love.

### **Relevant experience**

An old Quaker saying admonishes, “Let your life speak.” As someone who works with people and words constantly, my personal practices involve exploring the wordless realms of music and nature. However, it is my life, just as it is your life, that speaks most truthfully and powerfully. My “relevant experience” is my life. I would have people look at my relationships—my marriage of 41 years, our children, friends and colleagues. I would have people look at my ministry—the health of my congregation, my sermons, our social action. I would have people look at my dedication to growing our movement and my commitment to social justice. And I would have people look at my work prior to ministry—community journalism, education and public service.

### **Role of the president**

The role of the president of our association must be seen in historical context. If we were a movement that was thriving and growing, a president who offered a steady hand and competent management might be a good fit. That is not where we are today. We are a movement that is gradually but steadily declining as a part of American religious life. We are a movement that has failed to seize a historic opportunity to touch individual lives and to be a strong force for transformation of a troubled world.

We need a president who sees and understands the opportunity before us. We need a president who understands how organizations change and who has a track record of leading positive change. We need a president who understands what leaders must do to transform an organization. We need a president who is both practical and visionary. We need a president who understands that without bold action, without pervasive organizational and cultural change, our movement is in deep trouble.

Most important, we need a president who can see and communicate the exciting possibilities before us. We can be the religion for our time. We truly can. Together we can transform our movement.