

**ECCLESIOLOGY IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISM:
WHO STEERS THIS SHIP? WHO OWNS THIS CHURCH?**

6th in a Series on UU Theology for the 21st Century

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Roger Jones
UU SOCIETY OF SACRAMENTO

“WE COME TOGETHER TO DEEPEN OUR LIVES
AND TO BE A FORCE FOR HEALING IN THE WORLD.”

In our monthly sermon series about themes in UU theology, this is number six. Today’s topic is ecclesiology. This has to do with the nature, structure, and purpose of a religious community. What we do, and how we are governed. In earlier topics, we have considered whether human beings are good or evil, what salvation means, and how the world will come to an end. Those are themes that drive blockbuster action movies. Ecclesiology, on the other hand, is a theme which generates term papers in graduate school. Yet how and why a faith tradition or a congregation does what it does has everything to do with how we live together.

Our tradition uses congregational governance, also known as congregational polity. This goes back to the 1630s, to the Calvinist Congregational Churches of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Those Puritan churches were the congregations out of which the heresy of Unitarian theology would emerge in the 1800s. If you drive through towns in Massachusetts or surf the web to look at UU churches out there, you’ll see some very early dates. You may see a church signboard that says, for example, “First Church of Cambridge, gathered on February 1, 1636.” *Gathered*. This is how a church was formed, by people coming together. It wasn’t planted or decreed by a bishop or hierarchy but gathered by people making a covenant to travel together in fellowship and affection.

Some UUs are shocked to hear that we owe our form of governance to American Puritans! I was too. To be sure, the Puritans were not perfect ancestors, assuming anybody has perfect ancestors. Church matters were decided by discussion and by vote, yes--but only the men could vote in their churches. Moreover, they followed the ugly Calvinist beliefs of a vengeful God, an eternal hell and total human depravity. The Puritans didn’t like

the Quakers, so they persecuted them. They didn’t like the Baptists either, and chased them out of Massachusetts. And worst of all, as white settlers living by the doctrine of white supremacy, the Puritans felt it was their God-given right to take over Native lands and to murder many Native people in the process.

So, we can’t idealize these ancestors or overlook their sins. Yet their form of governance—for every church to be independent—was a radical idea. They had been bruised by Catholic and royal suppression of the Protestant Reformation in England and Europe, so they distrusted top down structures, hierarchies, bishops and popes. They devised that a congregation’s members would make decisions together about their future as a congregation.

At the other end of the spectrum from congregational independence is (among other structures) the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church. Every Catholic parish belongs to a diocese. It is the Bishop who sets major policies for parishes in the diocese, selects the priests to serve the parishes, and directs their social justice messages. Bishops are appointed by the Pope and accountable to him. Many faith communities fall somewhere in-between these two ends of the spectrum—governance by the local congregation and ownership and control by a larger hierarchy. Every kind of structure has its benefits and its weaknesses.

Though our UU congregations are independent, they are not alone. We in the UU Society of Sacramento are connected to the other 1,040 congregations in this country through the UUA, the Unitarian Universalist Association. Through our participation in business meetings at UUA General Assembly and our annual monetary donations to support the UUA’s programs and services, we live out our covenant with all the other congregations.

Covenant is a significant feature of our UU movement, and part of our heritage. A covenant is a set of promises that people make to each other. James Luther Adams was a major UU theologian of the 20th century. He said covenants are crucial in all human relationships and institutions. He said that of all species, “human beings are the promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise-renewing

animals.” In a community based on covenant, we keep learning and trying to live together. We practice learning how to make a place for ourselves and make space for others.

Guided by a covenant, we will experience disappointment or frustration with one another, but we learn to extend forgiveness and start over. We learn to practice patience. To have a covenant is to say: we have faith in one another. Together, we can discern a way forward. This faith underlies the Fourth Principle of the current Seven Principles of our UU movement. The Fourth Principle says: our congregations covenant to “affirm and promote the use of the democratic process in our congregations and in society at large.”

The democratic process takes a different form in a UU congregation than in secular politics. Rarely will you see two candidates running for a church position, debating and campaigning to prove which one is the better one for the job of Board member, Treasurer or another elected position. Most of the time, we rely on the spiritual practice of discernment. We elect a Nominating Committee and entrust them with the role of recruiting members who are able and ready to serve in an elected position. Those members then discern for themselves if it’s the right fit for them or the right time for them to serve in elected leadership. Of course, our UUSS Constitution does allow for somebody to run by petition, so it is possible to have a contested election. It’s even possible for the Nominating Committee to put up two candidates for a position, though it happens rarely in our churches. At UUSS, we operate on a Constitution, Bylaws, and a set of policies. Ultimately, however, our progress vitality as a church depends on our trust in one another.

One example of the work of discernment is the strategic plan the congregation developed in 2018. In contrast to having a quick vote to choose between detailed proposals already made, we had a series of forums and meetings. Our planning team invited as many people to participate as were able and interested. In any process of discernment, we don’t know all the outcomes in advance. We don’t even know all the *possibilities* in advance. But creative possibilities emerged in our meetings. We brought people together to think, imagine, ask

questions, and listen to one another. We knew our members would flesh out goals that felt relevant for these times, and which felt congruent with our mission. Not until we had refined the goals and had more conversations did the members take a formal vote for adoption of the plan. (The vote was unanimous.) Now we are working faithfully to implement our plan. Even so, we don’t know all the ideas and opportunities that might emerge in our discernment along the way to help us live into that plan.

Speaking of decision-making and voting, a UU minister, consultant and author by the name of Dan Hotchkiss has advice for congregations when we are taking a vote. He asks all of us to think about the people whom our choices will affect but who can’t vote. That is, we should remember the people of our congregation’s future, the people who haven’t found us yet. The decisions we make in the present will shape the future experience of adults and children who have not yet become part of this congregation. Some of them haven’t even been born yet.ⁱ

In her book *Salsa, Soul and Spirit*, Juana Bordas writes that organizational activists and leaders in communities of color make it a practice to be mindful of the coming generations as they do their work. They keep the long view. An example of this is the Iroquois nation’s classic reminder to consider the effects of a decision on the children of the next Seven Generations.ⁱⁱ If we affirm the kinship of all people, we must consider those who are yet to come. In a covenantal faith, we can practice learning how to make a place for ourselves and make space for others.

Furthermore, our discernment should extend beyond humanity and take into consideration the natural world. Benny Shendo is a leader of the Jemez Pueblo Indians, and a former official in the State of New Mexico. Looking at politics in the dominant culture, Shendo says, “When a person is elected to office, he is responsible in a sense to the people who voted for him. But the eagles don’t vote, the trees don’t vote, the buffalo don’t vote, the waters don’t vote.” Contrary to expectations in traditional politics, he says, one who serves as a leader of the Jemez Pueblo Indians “has to be

responsible for the community, for the future, and for the natural world in which all people live.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When people think of a church, what often comes to mind is a building. Moments ago (in her Worship Associate reflection), Karen told us of her vivid memories of the small wooden church of her childhood in Idaho. Then we saw images of our UUSS building projected on screen as our Chalice Singers offered a song, “Come Build a Church.” That was the same song our choir had sung back in 2015 at the re-dedication of this building after the renovation and expansion. Yet in our ecclesiology, a church is more than a building—it is a group of people who come together for shared purposes. For example, the First Unitarian Church of Sacramento was founded in 1868 by 17 families. However, as a congregation we existed without our own meeting space until 1915. Then we built a lovely home in Midtown. We settled in there till we outgrew it. Then, in 1960 we built this building and moved out here. When we vacated this space in 2014 for the renovation and expansion of this building, we rented space for Sunday morning programs at a congregational church a mile away from here. We took our hymnals, our piano, our name tag racks, our offering baskets, and our coffee. We were in that other church building every Sunday for 13 months. Even so, new people found us there, and many of them joined. In 2015, when we returned here, many UUSS members were encountering this building for the first time. A congregation may have a building, but it’s not a building.

Ministers often visit people in distressing circumstances—in the Intensive Care Unit or a skilled nursing facility or a prison or a detention facility of the federal immigration agency (ICE). When clergy make such a pastoral visit, it is often said we represent the Divine. That is, our presence reflects the care of God for the person in distress. This common perception is no doubt comforting, and that’s good. However, when I visit somebody, I have a stronger sense that I am representing the congregation. I have the idea that you are sending me there as a representative of your collective care and compassion. You might say I am taking you into the room along with me. I hope that’s okay with you. But this concept is not limited to clergy. We have a volunteer Pastoral Visitors Team here too. And of course, there are people who make

unofficial visits all the time to support people who have become their friends through this church. When you are showing kindness to someone, when you offer an open mind and heart, you represent this congregation’s compassion.

When Rev. Lucy or I meet with people who wish to join UUSS as official members, we show them a variety of materials, including the new Strategic Plan and a list of our staff members. We start with a colorful chart—the organizational chart for UUSS. Guess who’s listed in the *box at the top of the chart*? If you said The Congregation, that’s right. It is the members who have ultimate authority. Members elect lay leaders and approve the annual budget. We tell new members: When you join UUSS, you become a stakeholder. You get a voice and a vote. And you get some ethical responsibilities too. What I mean is, this congregation employs and pays a number of people. It has buildings and a large campus to be maintained and cared for. It is a neighbor in this local area. Our members bear a shared responsibility for mortgage debt for this building, and we have some investments to oversee.

So, it is all the members together who do their part in steering the ship we call a Unitarian Universalist congregation. But who owns this ship? Who owns the church? I already said it’s not the denomination, not the UUA. Isn’t the point of my sermon that the voting members own it? But maybe, instead, it’s the Board members and other elected leaders who own this ship, at least during their terms of office? Maybe that’s it. Or is it the funders who own it, the people whose donations, pledges and offerings fund our mission and ministries every year? Or maybe it’s those who are long departed who left bequests to the church. Clearly, they cared about what happens here if they left money to the place. Maybe they own the church.

Dan Hotchkiss, the UU minister who is a church consultant, says: not quite, not really. Dan invites us to imagine a different owner. He says that a thriving and vital congregation is one that belongs to its mission. It is our mission which guides us and calls us forward. The mission helps us to measure our choices when we have new ideas or to engage

with difficult hurdles. The mission inspires our gifts of time, talent, and financial support.

The current mission statement of this congregation was developed about twenty years ago through a broad process of discernment and then adopted by vote. The mission says: “We come together to deepen our lives and to be a force for healing in the world.” The first phrase is the most important part—we come together. It’s also the part that reminds us of our roots in those early congregations in the 1600s. We come together. That is the start. Everything else unfolds from that great gift.

If you are a member here, or if you are an involved participant here and a supporter, then you are a steward of our mission and ministries. You are a provider and a receiver of gifts. Your presence will change this congregation, and your participation in it will change you. It will shape your life.

In Karen’s story about growing up in Idaho, she showed how life in a congregation formed her as a child. The formative role of a spiritual community on us is probably more obvious if we can recall experiences there as a young person. It may be more subtle in our adult years. So, I invite you to take some time in the coming days to consider how this place has formed you. How has it formed or shaped your identity, outlook, commitments, spiritual grounding, or sense of belonging to something larger than yourself. All my own UU communities have done all those things for me. They have shaped my values, given me courage and guidance, and made me feel known and cared for. How does this congregation shape your experience as a human being?

As we often say, our UU tradition does not have a creed. This congregation doesn’t have a creed. There is not a uniform statement of theological beliefs which you must agree to in order to become a member or to participate in the congregation. In the words of minister and UU historian Alice Blair Wesley, what joins us together is not a uniform statement of belief but a shared sense of loyalty.^{iv} In these troubled and confusing times, I think that loyalty, courage and a sense of belonging and being together matter now more than they ever did.

In this community, we are joined by our loves and our loyalties—to shared values, to the congregation, to the common good, and to the web of life into which our lives are woven. We come together. That is the start. Everything else unfolds from that great gift. May we be grateful.

Blessed be, and amen.

ⁱ Dan Hotchkiss, *Governance and Ministry: Rethinking Board Leadership*. Second ed. Lanham, Md., 2016: Rowman & Littlefield. My words are a precis of his advice, which can be found in this book and on videos available online, and at his consulting website: <http://danhotchkiss.com/>

ⁱⁱ Juana Bordas, *Salsa, Soul, and Spirit: Leadership for a Multicultural Age*. San Francisco, 2007: Berrett-Koehler.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, p. lvii.

^{iv} Alice Blair Wesley, *The Lay and Liberal Doctrines of the Church: the Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant*, Lecture #1 of the six Minns Lectures, 2000.

<http://minnslectures.org/archive/wesley/wesley.php>