

# Concerns with the Article II Revision Process

By Steve Myles     March 2023

## Introduction

The Article II Study Commission appointed by the UUA Board of Trustees in 2020 to review Article II of the UUA Bylaws, which includes the Seven Principles and Six Sources, has released their proposal.<sup>1</sup> It proposes a total replacement of our Seven Principles with Six Values, expands the use of covenants to promote a new to UU concept of covenant-enforcement “accountability”.

Previous claims of our being a “living tradition” that is, adhering to a process of incremental changes with amendments, appears to have been ignored. Although we are told that change is good, objective justification for such a dramatic change is absent.

## The Objectives Stated in the Charge to the Study Commission

There are three “shall” (must have) objectives that the Study Commission was charged with:

1. They shall seek to engage the active participation of UUs across all demographics, identities, and theological philosophical beliefs
2. They shall be open and transparent in its work, communicating progress frequently with UUs through as many channels and communication media as possible
3. They shall de-center habitual practices that reinforce white supremacy culture

It is not clear that these objectives have been satisfactorily achieved with this Proposal.

## Engaging Participants Across Demographics, Identities and Theological Beliefs

The list of “stakeholders” that the Commission was charged to contact included groups such as congregational lay and professional leaders, identity groups, GA attendees, those who left the faith because they were “harmed”, the Commission on Institutional Change, UUA staff. We are given no indication that these groups represent a statistically representative sample of all UUs. Moreover, the list of stakeholders given to the Commission omits the people who make up the bulk of our faith, the ordinary congregants at each UU congregation.

We are given no indication of how many from each group were contacted nor what their responses were. The Commission engaged in 45 feedback sessions with 4611 participants and conducted 29 surveys which generated 10,925 responses, but we are not given any indication that any of this “surveying” was done using rigorous, statistically valid sampling and analysis techniques or employing the use of outside consultants skilled in this type of work. Instead, we are told in UU World<sup>2</sup> that focus groups at GA used tools like “word clouds”. A change of this magnitude requires the use of more sophisticated statistical tools and methods. Furthermore, the pandemic was a major distraction for congregations during a significant portion of the time the Article II Study Commission was trying to obtain congregational feedback. We do not know how effective their requests for congregational input were, what proportion of congregations

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<sup>1</sup> Article II Study Commission Report 2021-2023 [https://www.uua.org/files/2023-01/a2sc\\_rpt\\_01172023.pdf](https://www.uua.org/files/2023-01/a2sc_rpt_01172023.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> UU World Magazine 7/26/2022- <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/ga-considers-article-ii>

responded and from what geographic regions they came, or how many congregants were involved.

By comparison with the last major change to our Principles, the work initiated by the UU Women's Federation in the 1977 – 1985, demonstrated a process for developing and recommending a substantial change to our foundational documents<sup>3</sup>. Data was presented that defined the problem of patriarchal language and sexism. Open ended questionnaires were sent to congregations asking them what a revised set of principles might say. There were no preconceived expectations. Initial proposals were separately reviewed in individual congregations. This was all before the time of ZOOM meetings and email, so feedback was received in context in face-to-face discussions. And it all took time. Eight years. The current process, if it goes to completion in 2024, including the disruption of the pandemic, has taken less than half the time, has presented no data defining the problem, and seeded discussions with preconceived directives and expectations.

### **Open and Transparent Communications**

There is little evidence that the communications from the Study Commission were open and transparent. The first time the majority of UU's even knew of the reality of the proposed changes was in late October 2022 when the Article II Study Commission finally published their initial recommendation<sup>4 5</sup>. Communications before then talked of "changes" and potential modifications but never said what the changes were, nor did they ever mention the replacement of the principles. Links to the draft proposal never showed a side-by-side comparison with the existing Article II leaving readers unsure of where the principles would eventually fit if at all. Although congregational emails did contain hyperlinks to the proposal and to the feedback sessions it is unknown if enough readers took the time to follow the hyperlink. Had the communications been truly "open and transparent", with no hyperlinks and with unambiguous wording regarding the replacement of the principles, the feedback might have been far greater and far more dissenting.

The online feedback sessions held by the Article II Study Commission were highly controlled. The format of small "break out discussion sessions" followed by a "spokesperson" reporting back to the full assembly is not a substitute for true discussion with and feedback from an individual. This format loses all the context and emotion of the speaker's original words as spoken and instead relies on the interpretation of the spokesperson to report back to the full assembly. The questions asked at these sessions, "how does the proposal make you feel", and "what does it make you think", were leading questions. Participants were never asked how the current Article II made them feel or think, nor how the proposal compared to the current version. There was no space or openness to a discussion of keeping the principles or of why the principles were to be eliminated.

The Commission's updated second draft proposal was published a few days before the Commission presented it to the UUA Board of Trustees without further discussion or comment.

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<sup>3</sup> UU World Magazine 5/1/2006 <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/how-uu-principles-purposes-were-adopted>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/blog/draft-feedback>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.uua.org/files/2022-10/article2\\_draft\\_language\\_102022.pdf](https://www.uua.org/files/2022-10/article2_draft_language_102022.pdf)

The Commission must have received much dissenting feedback on their first draft regarding the replacement of the Seven Principles, so it inserted key words from the principles into the explanation of the values in the second draft proposal claiming in Facebook posts that they weren't replacing the principles at all. That is just plain false. This approach permits the un-discussed second draft to advance to GA where major changes become more difficult to make.

### **De-Center Habitual Practices that Reinforce White Supremacy Culture**

The third "must have" charge required the Commission to de-center habitual practices that reinforce white supremacy culture. It is unclear whether this charge referred to the entire UU association or just the operating practices of the Commission. In either case, no documentation of instances of the manifestation of this culture were presented, nor do we know that these "habitual practices" are.

### **The Second Tier of Charges to the Study Commission**

The charge to the Commission also included a list of "should's" to include in their work. These are interpreted as less compelling than the previous "must do" objectives:

1. Should guide us in the transformation of ourselves our communities and our faith into active network of collective care restoration and justice
2. Should be a living document that challenges UU to place "the liberation" in all its dimensions, of all, at the center of our lives
3. Should be honest about our past, name what we are facing and our aspirations, and where we hope to be not for just today but looking out at the horizons
4. Should ask us to choose Love in Action as the path forward
5. Should center Love in Action in any revision
6. Should lead us into the second d quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while honoring the historic roots of our liberal, progressive faith
7. Should consider how the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle might be included
8. Should have language inclusive and welcoming and explicitly anti-racist,
9. Should not be a detailed programmatic or implementation plans

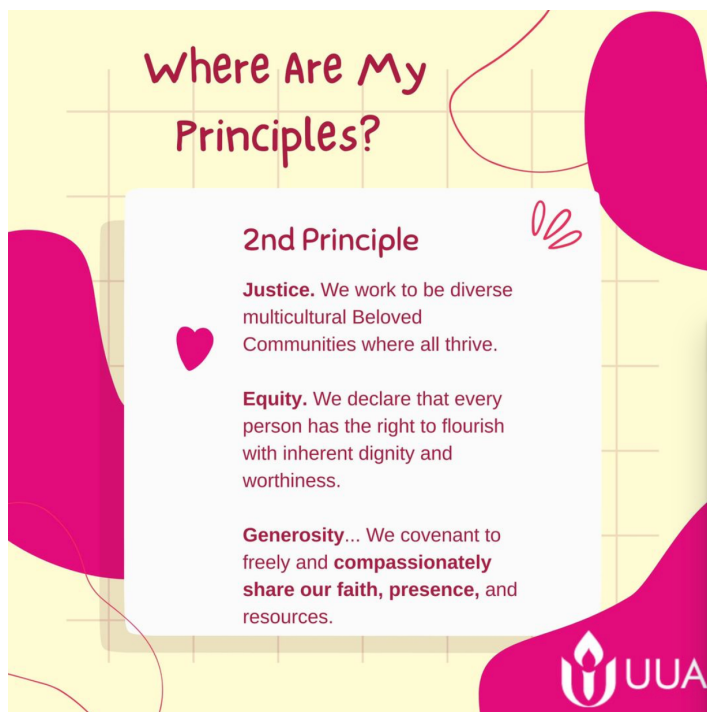
### **Justification for Replacing the Principles**

There is nothing in the Proposal that shows how our current Article II fails to meet these objectives or cannot be minimally modified to do so. The expectation was the addition of an 8<sup>th</sup> Principle. So, there must be something blatantly wrong with the other Seven Principles to justify a wholesale replacement. We are never given that explanation. Instead, we are expected to take the Proposal of the Study Commission at face value as the only acceptable action. Any proposal must explain in objective detail why our current Principles are now suddenly so inadequate. The Study Commission never provides that.

### **Why are Values Better Than Principles?**

Replacing the Seven Principles with Six Values severely narrows their overall appeal. The principles are broad, and each can accommodate many different values making them appealing to a wide audience. Choosing six values narrows that overall appeal. Putting the words and phrases from the existing Seven Principles into the words defining the Six Values not only demotes the Principles it decontextualizes them and begs the question of why bother replacing them at all. The Proposal never explains why values are better than Principles to explain the basis for Unitarian Universalism.

The following graphic from the UUA's Facebook page<sup>6</sup> unknowingly illustrates how Principles are more comprehensive than values. Three values are covered by one principle clearly showing that values are secondary to principles.



Out of the hundreds of possible values from which to choose, it is puzzling that the Commission picked only six. Why those six values? We can only hope that the chosen six did not come from simplistic “word cloud” exercises lacking any demonstrated validity and reliability. What happened to values like integrity, compassion, courage, gratitude, reason, or whatever else people might hold dear? Choosing values instead of principles leaves too many out for too many people.

### **Can Accountability Lead UUs to Beloved Community?**

Nothing in the charge to the Study Commission despite the words of the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle suggested introducing a concept like “accountability” as stated in the proposed Section C-2.2. “We are accountable to each other for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of love.” Being “accountable to each other” is a dangerous practice for it opens the

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<sup>6</sup> Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/UUAArticle2>

door to subjective accusations. One person's idea of acceptable behavior or speech may not be another person's idea. Coupled with all the covenanting language, it allows charges of "being out of covenant" to proliferate. The extensive use of "covenants" in the Proposal belies the objective #9 to not be a detailed programmatic or implementation plan. Covenants by their very nature are an implementation plan.

"Never assume malice when incompetence will do" is a far better bromide. Being "accountable" or being "out of covenant" cuts off discussion and sets up adversarial divisive exchanges which we are already beginning to see. Ministers charging ministers. Dissenting congregants being asked to leave. Disruptive Behavior Policies. People are motivated to action by their own personal values and principles, not by threats of breaking covenant or being accountable. It is impossible to imagine building a "Beloved Community" with tactics like these.

### **Are We Honoring the Historic Roots of Our Liberal Progressive Faith?**

The Commission was asked to develop a product that would "lead us into the second quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century while honoring the historic roots of our liberal, progressive faith." Those roots trace back to Ralph Waldo Emerson and his historic Harvard Divinity School Address in 1838 where he challenged the new divinity school graduates to use their God given abilities to determine what is true and good. That thinking appeared in the 1961 Article II of the newly merged Unitarian and Universalist faiths and has remained in our Principles ever since. In the Proposal from the Article II Study Commission, it appears in a role secondary to learning from one another.

### **The Words of the Proposal are not "Brief and Poetic."**

The final group of charges that the Article II Study Commission was given were encouragements. This included the encouragement to "consider the framings of our principles that allows them to be brief and poetic." With over three times as many words used to explain the Values than used in the Seven Principles, the Proposal is not "brief" and with specific programmatic covenants supporting each value, it is hardly "poetic."

### **We Must Reject the Article II Study Commission's Proposal in Total**

In summary, the Article II Study Commission has produced a work that would fundamentally change the nature of Unitarian Universalism. This might be the objective of those on the UUA or the UUA Board of Trustees, but there is no objective discussion on why a change like this is necessary, nor is there any indication that most UU members or congregations want such a drastic change, nor is there any indication in the charge to the Study Commission that this was an expected outcome. The Article II Study Commission did not meet their charge and instead has given us a product a few asked for.

The overall product is flawed, the result of a directive far too singularly focused, a rushed and undemocratic process, and a Commission far too focused on a preconceived product. The resulting product is unbecoming a faith like ours with the history of broad social and environmental justice. We need to address racism for sure, but Unitarian Universalism is broader than just anti-racism and to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century we need a wider, not narrower, focus and certainly a focus that is outwardly directed, not inward. One need only

look at the morning paper to see the actions being taken by our Congress and legislatures in states like Florida, Texas, and Mississippi that threaten the education of our children, health and safety choices for women and girls, the wisdom of science, the health of our planet, the right to vote, the safety of our food and water, the right to live in peace, and the need to end all oppressions against people because of their gender identities, sexual orientations, religions, physical abilities, age, as well as their ethnicities. These are the issues in addition to racism that will directly affect our future. These are the types of issues we should be focused on protecting.

If we want a true self-assessment, we should ask ourselves, where have we actively partnered with outside local non-profits and other faith organizations to address issues like school board practices, hiring practices, banking practices? Where did we get involved with programs to provide direct aid to local minority communities? And our clergy should ask themselves, how many sermons in the past 10 years were given explaining our Seven Principles and how they call us to address these issues? Any atrophied understanding of our Seven Principles is the result of inadequate attention and regular re-education. We have only ourselves to blame for that.

The Article II Study Commission's Proposal will now be taken to the General Assembly where it will undergo a process where amendments can be added. But the GA amendment processes are not viable. There are no amendments that can successfully change this Proposal to something that can be used to guide Unitarian Universalism into the future.