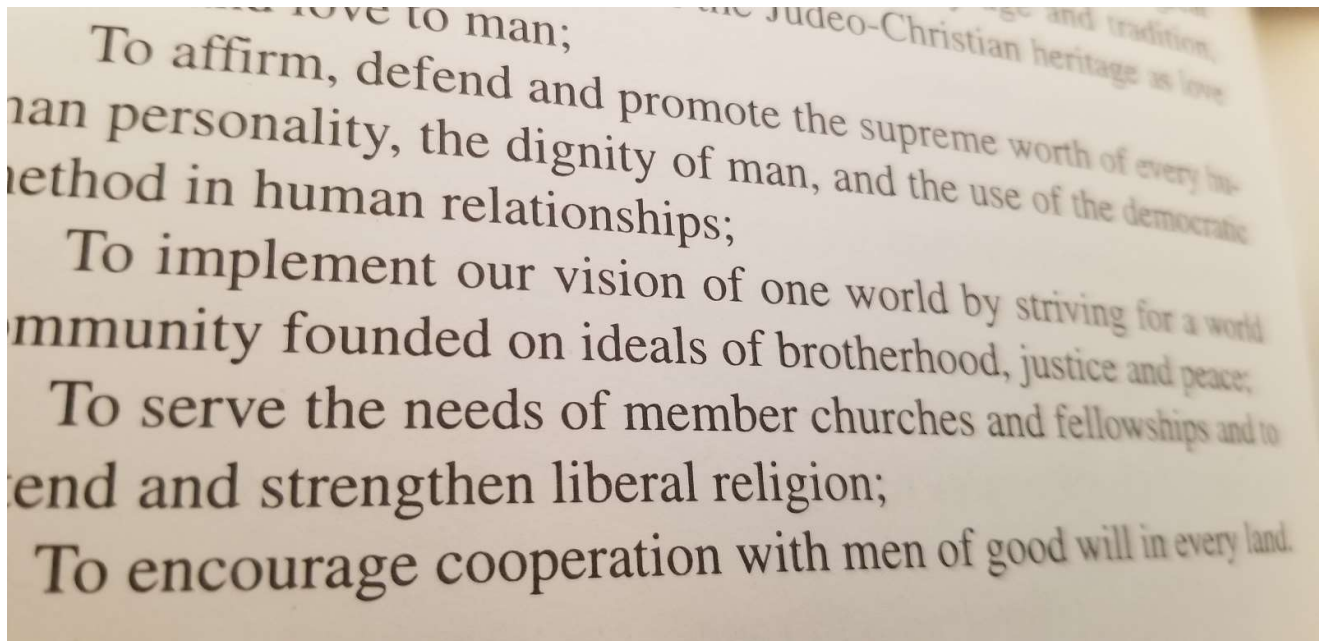


Perpetual Beta

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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1961 Principles (since amended) © 2022 Rod E.S.Q.

When the web browser-based e-mail platform *Gmail* was released in 2004, its logo came with a little tag attached to it: the word *Beta*. Named after the second letter of the Greek alphabet, this is a software development concept in which the product has passed its initial *alpha* stage and can be considered “complete” insofar as it includes the features the developer wishes to deliver... while still expecting a number of bugs and issues to come up.

There are many ways of doing *beta*, but one way is to do a limited release of the product for some live testing by an initial cohort of users. Indeed, at first, you could only get a Gmail account by invitation only, from another user. Getting an invitation wasn’t all that difficult, as each user had 100 invites to give, so if you really wanted an account, it wasn’t long until someone you knew could give you an invite. Fairly soon, people could simply get an account on demand.

The official *beta* stage lasted around five years, although even now, there is a section in each Gmail account called *Labs*, in which new features are constantly tested by users, and you can only access those features if you specifically sign on to take them on in a trial basis. Some of these features might never catch on, while others eventually become part of the standard package.

In some ways, the *beta* mindset is a built-in feature of the product, even if it's officially past the *beta* stage.

Indeed, some software developers have a looser definition of the *beta* stage, and have embraced an approach that could be called *perpetual beta*, in which the users of the product are effectively co-developers of it on an ongoing basis.

Our Unitarian Universalist faith also embraces much of the *perpetual beta* ethos. Of course, we tend to use more... theological language, such as *living tradition*, in which we actively recognize that, just as we honour past experience and wisdom, we also welcome ongoing reform and development.

In the condensed histories of our Universalist roots, and of our church of Olinda, Louise Foulds takes care to include some of our roots in the appendices. These include proclamations of faith that might still resonate with some among us, but which have given way to broader and more inclusive statements and covenants that we have determined are more reflective of our tradition as it is today and as we want to be.

Each of these statements has been years in the making, each building upon previous ones. And the adoption of each new statement has not come automatically – each one included countless hours of discussion and deliberation, and did not come without moments of controversy. Nonetheless, each one also came about because the groups that came up with them identified a need in the community for changes – or upgrades, as they might be called in the software development lingo.

The latest of these developments is the addition of an 8th principle, as the member congregations of the Canadian Unitarian Council covenant to affirm and promote: *“Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions.”*

This was a change that came with many hours of discussion and debate in our denomination nation wide. It did not come without controversy and resistance. And while support for this was not unanimous – for various reasons – it was also overwhelmingly adopted by our delegates nationwide, last November.

While this was a momentous change to the original document that was adopted in 1985, it wasn’t the first change made to the original 7 principles and 5 sources, as adopted in 1985 – a 6th source was added in 1995, recognizing earth-centred traditions as part of our heritage, practice, and community.

The 8th principle is the latest addition. And the wording adopted in Canada is itself modified from a similar proposal in the United States, which is still under consideration by the Unitarian Universalist Association. The Canadian wording came with its own set of questions that included considering how it applied in our national context.

The “original” 7 principles and 5 sources – later 6 sources – were themselves the product of a wholesale revision of the previous 6 principles that were adopted in 1961.

I won’t go through all the 6 principles from 1961 here, but if you were to look at them, the similarities – and the differences – would likely jump out at you. Obviously, 6 principles are different than 7; also, the order is different. The wording and general sentiments, however, would look very familiar, and much of it was carried over into the newer 7 principles of 1985. There would, however be some wording that would

immediately look rather strange – the conspicuous use of the word “man”.

In the 1961 statement, its 3rd principle speaks about “the dignity of man”, its 4th principle speaks of “a world community founded on ideals of brotherhood”, and its 6th principle proclaims “To encourage cooperation with men of good will in every land.”

I think we know what the *intent* of those words was, but the *impact* it will have on us now is of a gender-exclusive use of language.

It will not surprise you that it was in large part the initiative of women in our movement that prompted the revision of the principles in the 1980s. Not only were the principles reworded and reordered, they added a 7th principle that speaks to our interconnectedness, recognizing, among other things, a rising environmental awareness. And, of course, the language became more inclusive.

Now that the 8th principle has been adopted in Canada, there is no illusion that the work is done, and that this covenant is to remain static. In a living tradition, a covenant is a *living document*, which warrants periodic revisiting to consider how it will serve us better in the service of humanity. Already, there are plans to review the *process* by which we adopt and amend our principles in Canada (this was a point of contention during the discussions about the 8th principle). Once that process is determined, there may come a time in which our principles may be re-developed again, perhaps with minor edits, or perhaps with wholesale changes, like entire re-orderings and rewordings.

It has not escaped our attention, for instance, that our current 2nd source speaks about the “Words and deeds of prophetic women and men” – more inclusive than the male-centric wording from 1961, but still reinforcing a gender-binary that does not recognize members of our community along a broader gender spectrum.

My friends, at the church of Olinda, we have started adopting some covenants among some of our ministries. Some of these are short-lived, intended to serve us during specific settings, such as educational programming groups. Others are longer-standing, as is the case in some committees. These are all living documents, in perpetual beta, as their ongoing development and redevelopment help guide us in who we seek to be, and on how we want to be with each other.

My friends, in a living tradition we continue an ongoing practice, as we make our church the place where we practice being human.

My friends, may this practice be our ongoing covenant.

So may it be,
In optimism and grace,

Amen

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Suggested Hymns:

Opening Hymn #290 Bring, O Past, Your Honor

~)-| Words: Charles H. Lyttle, 1884-1980

Music: John Bachus Dykes, 1823-1876

NICEA 12.13.12.10

Hymn #123 Spirit of Life

Words & music: Carolyn McDade, 1935 © 1981 Carolyn McDade

~)-| harmony by Grace Lewis-McLaren, 1939- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

SPIRIT OF LIFE 8.12.8.12.8.10

Hymn #318 We Would Be One

~)-| Words: Samuel Anthony Wright, 1919-

Music: Jean Sibelius, 1865-1957, arr. from *The Hymnal*, 1933, © 1933, renewed 1961 Presbyterian Board of Christian Education

FINLANDIA 11.10.11.10.11.10