

**The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church:  
The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant**  
by Alice Blair Wesley

Lecture 6 of the 2000-01 Minns series of 6  
**Toward a Covenanted Association of Congregations:  
On Patterns of Authentic Authority Among Free Churches**

I want us begin this time by looking at the mix of meanings carried these days by one little word - an adjective, sometimes part of a compound word. What does it mean, for example, when one church member, on coming back home, is asked by another who stayed home, "How was SWUUSI this year?" And the response is, "It was super."

Suppose you are asked if you know a certain member of a UU church in Texas, and you say, "I've known him for years. He's a super guy."

Suppose you are this year on the nominating committee of your church and the name of a certain young woman comes up. Somebody says, "I don't know how she has the energy to do so much. She defines the term, super mom."

A few weeks ago I couldn't go to our church's annual business meeting. Joe went. When he got home, I said, "How'd it go?" He said members of our large church voted on five complex issues, in less than an hour. On the one secret-ballot issue, to be a Welcoming Congregation, the majority voting for was 93%. And, except for two abstentions on another, the yes vote on four motions was unanimous! Before adjournment, members gave our outgoing president a long standing ovation. In a very challenging year, she has been a super lay officer. The Meeting over, members were laughing and hugging all over the place. It was a super meeting of a super liberal free church.

With reference to people, we talk about super athletes and entertainment stars. But we also use this same word to describe material things and other enterprises as common as churches. A friend eager to tell you about a recent purchase could say, "I got a super deal on it at TomDick'nHarry's supermarket."

Look at all the different realities we're talking about here! A week-long gathering of our religious folk; an individual; a short business meeting; a high performance athlete or entertainer; a material thing somebody bought; and a store. See, then. Our word super, applied to all these realities just means - quite good or even extraordinary. But what a variety of goods! At least five quite different goods: 1) the richly varied quality of worship services and fun and workshops at a super SWUUSI; 2) the easy decency or wit or unpretentious wisdom of a super guy; 3) the efficiency of a super mom or a whole church - of people who do well, even with many competing and contrasting demands on their time and attention; 4) the economy and practicality of a store; or 5) the extraordinary, very striking abilities of a famous few way off somewhere, not here where we ordinary people are. That's quite a list of meanings for one little word.

But now note two other meanings of super, not present in any of these examples. In not one was there any hint of anything supernatural, of anything alien to or out of the range of the everyday. Even super athletes and

entertainers only manifest unusual, extra-ordinary abilities, not abilities ordinary humans don't have at all. I mean, even I can shoot baskets and sing, just not as well as Michael Jordan or Sarah Brightman.

Also, not present, in these examples, was any hint of hierarchical control, as in this example. We might say, "Doubting Tom doesn't believe in us. He thinks he's got to supervise everything we do." No. In all the earlier examples of typical UU conversation, the talk was about the actions of free people, these free actions - obviously - showing careful planning and work or certain everyday living patterns, these actions or patterns, then, evoking, from other free people, a spontaneously offered and glad assessment - super.

You may know that the Latin word *super* means "over" or "above," though in our usage it hardly ever has that connotation, at all. Imagine some specialist in Latin, a few centuries from now, taking up a study of the "old" or even "ancient" North American Unitarian Universalist movement of the late 20th and early 21st centuries and concluding - from the fact that we so often describe things as super - that in this "dark" age, even enlightened UUs fell into gross superstition!

That could be the conclusion of any student living in another era, for lack of knowing a really simple linguistic fact of all eras: The meanings of words change, sometimes in a relatively short time. I remember when little corner grocery stores first began to be replaced by supermarkets, after WWII. They seemed to me as a kid so grand! But soon, supermarkets were as common as corner groceries had been. And soon, we starting describing all sorts of ordinary quite good things as super. But anybody not living in our particular time could not know what we mean by super without - what literary critics call - a close reading of our usage in the context of our times.

I trust I'm making sense to you. But, why begin a lecture titled, Toward a Covenanted Association of Congregations, by looking at the mix of meanings among us of this one little word?

I wanted to start this way because we liberals can be sometimes so dense in our reading of other eras of our own free church tradition. Actually, we derive from a history of free church people who spent their lives in constructive opposition to unfreedom in their time - as do we in ours. But we can get so hung up on what we suppose are the meanings of traditional words that we can't read our own church history. In earlier eras our people have used different words for our super, or free and quite good. For example, our 17th century ancestors - from whom we UUs inherited congregational governance - simply meant by "the liberty of the gospel" - the freedom of loving good people to gather, unsupervised, in free churches and to associate freely, without supervision, in a community of free churches.

In our time we may say of members of our free churches - and of others not members - they are super people. People of the very same ilk our ancestors called "saints." By that term they just meant quite good people, super people. And by their term "communion of churches" they just meant a quite good community of free churches, or what we name our Association of Congregations.

The meanings of words change, all the time, though at different rates. But some realities do not change in human history. The reality and the ways of liberty in religiously rooted free church communities do not change. What our ancestors named the holy spirit of Christ, we liberals name the spirit of life or love or truth. They meant by their term the same crucial reality - of heart and mind and body - we mean by ours.

In the Cambridge Platform, our founders took great care to make it clear, they were only talking there about ordinary free church members and the members' ordinary elected leaders, the churches' officers. They said the free church records show that, in the whole centuries-long free church tradition, there have been only a few unelected, extraordinary leaders: Moses, David, Jesus and the twelve apostles. They said in our church bodies now, we don't have any extraordinary leaders, just ordinary. So it is with us. When we talk about super free churches - what they called gathered saints - we're only talking about the doings of ordinary live bodies in our liberally religious bodies which - without any outside supervision and at our ordinary best - are pretty darned fine.

But hold it! If the covenantal, congregational polity of ordinary free church members and ordinary officers was the whole subject of the Cambridge Platform, who were these unelected extraordinary leaders of ages past, and why were they brought into the discussion?

I'll try explaining this way. Don't we have in our churches now some informal leaders, our "wise old heads," not currently elected to any office but, so beloved and respected for their wisdom and insight, that we fairly often - thank God! - heed their counsel, especially when we get into some dispute? Often quietly, in the midst of a heated and confusing argument - one of our unelected "wise old heads" rises to say something like this: "Well, I think we'd better not do 'x', or 'y' and 'z' are apt to follow. And, I think if we want 'c' to happen, why we'd better first do 'a' and 'b'."

And all the members meeting say, "Oh, yeah! Right. Of course." The heat and confusion blow over, and we get on with making a some decision that we all think is quite good - super.

All healthy free churches have unelected leaders like this. They are our prophets, in Hebrew, the *nabi*. They are our informally acknowledged "wise heads," though not currently, or even ever, elected. Some are not even "old" but rich anyhow with the wisdom of experience.

But every once in a very long while - according to our founders' reading of the free church tradition - a few extraordinary "officers" have arisen and spoken in the midst of some historic, long continued, heated and confusing argument. These few were not even informally acknowledged leaders, much less elected. These few extraordinary prophets just arose and spoke, with such transparently authentic authority that many members of the free congregations were amazed at the simplicity of obvious truth. They said, "Well, I'll be darned. Of course, that's true. Why didn't we think of that? That's clearly what we should do and how."

And what did these few, whom the Cambridge Platform called extraordinary "officers," have in common? Just this. Words spoken by these few unelected prophets were so persuasive, to great numbers of then living free churchpeople, that - three different times in history - the free congregations changed their whole set of "bylaws," or decision-making pattern of governance. They adopted new patterns of free church governance, though always - crucially - keeping the same "substance" of any free church of any time - the spirit of mutual love, for one another and for their mission of making their whole society more loving and just - through their own doings of love.

So - our congregational New England ancestors reasoned - since the free churches never elected these extraordinary prophets, of such extraordinary power to persuade free people, God elected these. In these few cases the people didn't even have opportunity, before their "election" - as John Allin of our Dedham church put it - to

become "acquainted with their (spiritual) tempers and gifts." Nor in these few cases was there anything like a nominating committee, search committee or candidating week. These just started speaking, free churches listened, and changed their whole way of "administration," the way free churches do governance. Or, as we might put it now, their unsought, yet clearly voiced insights made these extraordinary few a powerfully persuasive voice of the human situation. That is, the situation of any religious people trying to be free and loving and wise together, without supervision. There you have, right in the Cambridge Platform, a natural theology of special revelation! We must say in our time, this sort of thing has surely happened among peoples of other traditions, too! Because in certain crucial ways, human nature is the same in all traditions, however varying in other important ways.

In Moses' time the free congregations broke the pattern of isolated family style churches and called themselves a nation, Israel. Meaning - that to make decisions affecting the whole nation, elders from all the congregations met and took counsel till they concurred. In David' time the governance of this free-church-nation became a monarchy, in theory dependent on God's "anointing of his Son" for the throne. There followed David, though, a long series of kings whose ways - the free church prophets kept declaring - did not much resemble the ways of the King of the Universe. In that long period the prophets of the congregations made the most noise and voiced the harshest criticism. Then, finally, in Roman times, Jesus and the Apostles arose and spoke. As a consequence, many free churches shucked nationalism and became again family style congregations, only this time, of every ethnic background in the Mediterranean world, not of one nation.

Our 17th century congregational ancestors reclaimed key and crucial elements of the free church tradition. Sadly - for us - they did not see the "nationalism" of their ties with the Offices and the Treasury of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, or other continuing patterns of church leadership they adopted as wrong. These "practical solutions" - so long kept - proved quite impractical and worked ill in the long run, among us. By the end of the 20th century we, their proud liberal heirs, did not have many liberal and quite good - super - free churches. According to a summary of UUA board minutes of June, 2000, among our 1000 or so UU congregations, only 25 have more than 800 members. More than a third - 389 - have 60 or fewer members. Almost another third - 325 - have more than 60 but fewer than 160. We can't do much good in the world in such small numbers as that.

So, what is our problem - as liberal free congregations - now? I'm not even going to say I believe; I know with all my head and heart - we UUs are just as loving and hungry to be faithfully loving people, just as gifted, as intelligent, as hard working, and as good as any ordinary everyday people who ever lived, the only kind that have ever lived in any time. Why, then, do we have so many weak churches, churches and fellowships not thriving, not growing, not going anywhere, not doing much? Of course, we have bright lights, spread across the vast North American continent. And of course, the health of churches is not a function of number, but spirit. Always, some of our churches, large and small, have been and are - super.

But, Friends, you can't keep a spirited, lively liberal church from growing unless it's located some place where there aren't any people! So why do we not have more, many more spirited, thriving liberal churches full of people? Have we lost something from our tradition, or forgot something very important? Are we quite good, super people doing things we don't see as wrong, that work ill among us, to the world's loss?

I guess you have guessed my answer. We've got the locus of authority wrong in our Association. In our UUA we have gradually turned many authority issues on their heads, topsy turvy. But I am also sure of this: A lot of harsh criticism of the UUA will not help us become a thriving Association! I dare say the great Hebrew prophets in the time of Israelite kings spent too much time fussing and threatening extinction. Amos, for example, fussed hard about meaningless assemblies the free churches had every year in his time, and the smell of burnt offerings - resources burnt up and wasted on expensive feasts and shows - with nothing to show from these mass assemblies in the poor neighborhoods of free churches.

Without fussing, if I can I want to try to show you a simple vision of many covenanted congregations freely and richly associating in neighborly ways throughout the UUA. I even hope you might say, "Let's covenant to do it."

### Where This Vision of Covenanted Congregations Came From

First, I have to ask what you know about our UUA Extension Program. In case you don't know much, I'll just tell you that I was an "extension" minister before "the program" began and after I was technically out of it. The vision I want to offer you comes from what I learned in 20 years of working with our congregations, ranging in size from about 40 to 250 members, 2 brand new ones and 6 a generation or two old. In our extension ministry I learned first hand and very personally about nearly every kind of trouble ordinary officers and members of our liberal free churches can get into, and also about some UUA staffpeople whom we should never appoint to positions so easily, and secretly, abused. At least I pray there aren't many more kinds of free church trouble than I learned about. Here I just list the troubles I walked into the middle of as an extension minister.

- \* the terrible after effects of ministers and members who didn't know when to keep their pants zipped and buttoned at the waist
- \* naive ministers and lay officers who didn't know how to help our members build or re-build a healthy church
- \* onerous and foolish debt a series of church boards handled very poorly
- \* ridiculously low pledging
- \* lay leaders who said they wanted to change and grow and really didn't, who fought, tooth and nail, once their church started changing and growing, to keep it small
- \* leaking and rotting and underinsured buildings
- \* a fire which destroyed a poorly wired building
- \* custodians and members who never happened onto the word clean
- \* prosperous non-member groups, larger in numbers than our membership, who used our buildings for such wildly low user fees that these prosperous non-church groups were, in fact, generously subsidized out of our churches' small budgets
- \* lay members sure they could preach, who couldn't
- \* teens whose lives were in ruins from hard drugs, two teens dead of drug use, and another in prison
- \* a District Executive who secretly pledged permanently to block any UUA funds ever coming to a promising new congregation, if the members called a certain minister that a neighboring UU minister feared would draw off his members
- \* the collusion of UUMA chapter officers with that District Executive to see that he got away with this secret corruption of our covenantal, congregational polity
- \* two other UUA staffpeople who ignored elected officers and, in stead, strengthened the hands of two congregations' least able, most destructive unelected leaders, thus stalling both congregations, in trouble they had been working their way out of, for several more years

\* and more and more bad, futile stuff like that, not exactly the sort of thing you hear about at our District Meetings or General Assemblies as presently structured, or read about in the *UU World*

Hear me now, please. With all these different and difficult problems, every congregation I served as minister had two things in common.

First, in every single small or mid-size Unitarian Universalist congregation stuck in trouble, I found numerous super people, young and old, our very own liberal saints under trial. Wonderful, splendid people who keep our covenant. They don't run. They will not desert our slowly dying churches. They keep trying, in the spirit of mutual love, doing the best they can see to do, no matter how mediocre and sad and dysfunctional things get. Why? Because they remember better days from the past, or they have a notion of excellence they brought from some other liberal church, or something. Somehow, they have a vision of the fine reality their church could be. And so they are there, every week, year in and year out, smiling, singing, hoping, waiting in faith. They keep our covenant alive.

And here's the second thing all our weak and troubled congregations have in common: isolation. Not from the general population; these churches are in areas thick with people. They are isolated from other Unitarian Universalist congregations! In not a single one of these isolated churches did the members know, or ever counsel with, members of other nearby UU churches - within only two or three hours or less driving distance. How far is that today? I know people who commute two hours, to and from work, everyday!

These congregations all got me to come be with them - one way or another, though not all through "official" channels - because they are all members of our Association. But not one - in my 20 years with them - ever got any freely offered, neighborly counsel from members of any neighboring UU congregation.

Why? Because we UUs have forgot how to be just ordinary, quite good neighboring congregations. We've forgot what it means freely to associate among our own free churches, except through some extra-congregational, title-and-committee-ridden District or "the UUA" - an entity "over" us - or some affiliate organization, some of these being "super" in the worst sense of that word, not in our ordinary everyday sense of quite good.

If you good UUs listening have never, as officers or members of your congregation, done anything just plain neighborly with other UU congregations, I'm not accusing you of dereliction. I am confessing. I'm as bad as we all are in this. In 20 years I thought of asking one ordinary lay member of a neighboring church to come and counsel with my congregation's leading lay members, exactly twice. The help these two laypeople freely gave was wonderful. Beyond that, I never thought to ask for help, and no UU neighbors ever thought to offer it. God help us! The wonder is not that our "movement" is so small. The wonder is that we are still here! Maybe we are still here only because of our isolated saints!

#### Poor Patterns We Have "Grown" in Our Formal UUA

Here I offer an analysis of how we UUs have slid into poor governance patterns in our UUA, without really thinking together of what we've been doing. Then I'll try to show you how our congregations could actually be transformed, in not too long a time, naturally, simply and with far less time and expenditure of money than we now

waste with very little to show for it. We have not even grown enough to get back up the number of members we had in our churches in 1968 - a generation ago.

In our free churches authentic authority resides in decisions made by the members of each congregation. We're all agreed on that. Members elect each congregations' officers - ministers and board members, ordained and lay. But we have fallen into a very bad pattern of UUA governance. Members elect "delegates" to District Meetings and GAs, who vote there or by absentee ballot, to elect officers of our Association. But in most congregations most of the time, "election" of these "delegates" is strictly *pro forma*. Most members either don't know about or don't care about these "delegate" elections; so we just rubber stamp as our "choice" whoever happens to have the time or interest or money to go to District meetings or GAs. And this is how we have got, in practice, a phony democracy.

What have we done? We have put authority to elect the officers of our Association carelessly, casually into the hands of people who may or may not have much wisdom, much understanding of covenantal congregational polity, or even any deep involvement with our local congregations! For a long time, we have hardly considered whether these "delegates" do or do not have these needed qualifications for making such decisions.

So, "delegates" elect the elected *pro forma* UUA board and president. These latter then appoint a jillion committees local members never heard of, and appoint staffpeople who appoint other staffpeople who appoint other staffpeople.

So, the only power to do what counts in our Association - design and administer programs for our congregations' optional use - winds up in the hands of appointees appointed by appointees - some of whom retain their offices for decades - these appointed by UUA officers, elected by "delegates," elected only *pro forma* by our congregations! UUA elections get more complicated and expensive every go-round, even while some, who care deeply, wonder why "the UUA" puts out programs members of congregations won't use - or if we do, many complain bitterly about. And we wonder why our congregations are so uninterested in "affairs of the UUA," an entity conceived as "on the continental level," awfully busy but, having little to do with matters that matter on "the congregational level." Do you not frequently hear this talk of "levels?" Three levels: Congregations on the bottom, Districts in the middle, and highest - the continental UUA level?

This year as many as 40 Canadian congregations may withdraw from the UUA. Many reasons have been put out on the internet. I think by far the most cogent of them was expressed by a Canadian minister, "Mac" Elrod. Someone had said that if Canadian churches withdraw, they will no longer have "input" into UUA RE programs they will still use after the proposed separation.

Mac responded, "We have had very little success in getting Canadian content into UUA programmes and curricula. For the first time the UUA is agreeing as part of the Accord [the proposed separation agreement] to relax copyright so that Canadian substitutions can be made for American references, [to] U.S. tax laws, quotations of the U.S. [political documents], references affected by our differing medical and criminal justice systems, as well as a differing racial pattern, bilingualism, and multi-culturalism."

Sadly, our Canadian "delegates" have been voicing for years - unheeded - complaints of UUA board/ staff inflexibility and of programs not appropriate to their needs, not to mention the hours at GAs spent on resolutions

aimed at the U.S. Congress. But these Canadian complaints are only different in focus, not in kind, from the same sort of complaints concerning rigidly prescribed procedures for raising capital funds or certain narrowly conceived - but insisted upon - adult education materials.

But our overall picture is still worse. UUs are quite good at organizing out in the world around specific social issues. That's one of our great strengths. Thousands of our members do responsible and super social action in these organizations. But our UUA board grants UUA affiliate status to all kinds of independently organized groups - not congregations. Unhappily, boards and staff of these affiliates have turned into lobbying groups who constantly work to influence decisions of the UUA board/ staff. This pattern is now so pervasive we seem at times more like an Association of UUA Board/ Staff and Affiliates than an Association of Congregations!

I need to be clear here. Some of these groups do marvelous work. I have belonged and contributed to many of them. I was president of one for four years. But our pattern of Association governance has gone far awry when UUA Officers pay more attention to these affiliate boards and their staffpeople than to elected officers of member congregations. Affiliate programs dominate General Assemblies. The GA Planning Office will help any affiliate group arrange for two hour-long programs each, and an exhibition booth, to promote their projects, some of which are "miles" from anything members at home would recognize as having to do with matters that matter in our congregations. Our GAs have become fairs, enormously expensive annual weeks of hoopla and propaganda. Many District patterns are no more helpful to our churches. All this is the product of phony democracy disguised as a product of our congregational life. These patterns are every one of them inefficient, a waste of precious time and energy, and terribly sterile, fruitless with reference to the world's need for more thriving liberal free churches.

#### How Could We Make the UUA Better?

We could make some simple bylaw changes and change for the better the whole character of our Association.

We list as our 1st principle, the inherent worth and dignity of every person. This does not mean we assume every person has grown equally in wisdom. Question: What do we cherish as most holy in our common life as congregations? Answer: The power of loving and reasoning persuasion, in the midst of ongoing dialogue among gathered members, to reveal to us what we together find to be those right and worthy acts we ought and need and want to do, in the spirit of mutual love. This is our theology of free church governance. This is what it means to believe in "deeds not creeds." This is what it means for members of a free church to be in covenant with one another to find together and then do acts matching our dignity and worth as free churchpeople.

So, when we elect officers in our congregations, the issue is: Who among us has the wisdom and skill, in the dialogue of our religious community, to help us learn together, what would be good for us to do. In free churches the only power we grant to leaders is - the power of persuasion

So, the 1st principle of our Association needs to be our common faith in the inherent worth and dignity of every free Congregation, specifically, our faith in our members' power to elect wise officers - lay and ordained. For a thriving Association can be based in nothing other than our faith in every member Congregations' capacity to be



quite good, super congregations. Ordained and lay officers of our members Congregations - elected directly, not *pro forma* - are best qualified to elect officers of our UUA. We need to change our bylaws to replace voting "delegates" with voting officers of our churches.

This change may be resisted by our many GA and District "buffs" who have attended these meetings as delegates, year after year. Some of these "buffs" are wonderful, informal leaders of our congregations, not currently elected but, beloved and respected Wise Heads, whose wisdom - thank God! - we often heed at home. But we also have far too many District and GA "junkies" - folks hooked on the false prestige of "titles," organizational "insiderism" and crowds. Many of these "junkies" are seldom there in our congregations. And currently, we get too many UUA "leaders" from among District and GA "junkies" who think they know, better than our Congregations, what "the UUA" should be doing. Some define "leadership" as being out "in front" on issues our poor benighted churches just don't "get"!

These advantages - of empowering our Congregations' officers to elect UUA officers - would soon follow.

1) UUA officers would have a much clearer sense of who it is they are accountable to - officers of Congregations accountable to members.

2) If we had more UUA votes in fewer meetings of our lay officers currently serving Congregations - along with our ministerial officers - we would soon have a UUA much more effective in strengthening our churches. For our elected church officers know - from daily experience - what our congregations really need and want the UUA to do. Ministerial officers already have a vote in District and GA Meetings. We should have long ago so honored and empowered our lay officers. For our most crucial votes, every year, are cast in Congregational Meetings, when we elect our lay officers.

3) Locating UUA authority in the hands of our locally elected lay Officers, would do much to clarify our understanding of free church governance. On "the continental level" we keep confusing the governance of free churches with the government of a free nation, two very, very different realities. As citizens of a free nation we elect Representatives to speak for us and to enact laws of our government, which the government has the power legally to coerce citizens to obey. In the governance of free churches, no "representatives" speaks for any free congregation. Congregational governance attends to a holy, ever moving dynamic of power - the power of loving, reasoning persuasion - on which we stake the very life of our churches. For free churches only live by the power of the free spirit of mutual love, working in our own free minds and hearts, with no coercion and no law save the natural laws of human nature and of all that is holy, these laws not enacted in by any legislature anywhere.

4) With a simple change in our bylaws - and practice - we could make our UUA, for the first time, a covenanted association. We could change our bylaws to say that Membership in our Association means: Our Congregations' officers shall meet annually for a few days to take counsel together concerning the overall life and health of our Congregations and our common needs. Each member Congregation will every year send to this meeting at least one elected lay officer currently serving, all other duly elected officers being welcome and urged to attend as well. Our annual meeting will always be open to any members of our member Congregations, but only duly elected officers shall address the assembly or vote.

In any covenant there's got to be a there there, or there is no covenant. For a covenant is not just a concept in our heads, a promise merely to "affirm" a list of principles. A covenant is a promise to be there, with and for one another, as live bodies in a reflecting, counseling, advising body making decisions - not on "statements of the truth" as though we were creedal churches but - about programs we want to develop for our free churches' decision to use or not use. We'd save a lot of money and time and hassle and have better church programs, if we also made it a rule of our bylaws: We won't undertake any common program unless at least half our congregations agree to do so, and we'll toss programs unless at least half our congregations elect to use them, within three or four years.

5) If we made this change our UUA elections would be - at once - much simpler and less expensive. Any of our members could urge their own elected officers, at home, to support candidates for UUA office. But the authority to vote would be in the hands of people vested with authentic authority by our Congregations.

6) We could greatly increase our congregational officers' participation in our common concerns as an Association if we put much more emphasis on Annual District Meetings of officers, and agreed to meet in General Assemblies only every four years, for election of UUA officers.

7) We ought in our UUA and District bylaws, to prohibit any and all affiliate organizations from meeting, on any of the days of congregational officers' meetings, in any of the buildings used for these meetings, thus ending the affiliates' dominance of either District or UUA meetings.

#### Why Care About a Covenanted and Healthy UUA?

Our congregations very much need to associate, formally and informally, with the capital A of our formal UUA and with lower case a of neighborly gatherings like SWUUSI and in new kinds of regular neighborly gatherings of our officers and, occasionally, other leaders. We need our elected lay and ordained officers to meet and talk together, not for our members but, of what our congregations are trying to do and how we might do these things better.

Why? Because in the long run of our own life stories, we can only fulfill missions our congregations take up when our elected leaders meet regularly - formally to cooperate in developing the program resources we need to fulfill our chosen missions, and also informally to learn, from one another, how to carry out our missions well, for the world's sake. For only we can teach each other how to gather and build strong, liberal free churches. Nobody else has a clue!

#### A New Pattern: Many Smaller Covenanted associations (lower case)

We need newly to think smaller, less formally and more neighborly in areas much smaller than our continental UUA or Districts.

What if no UU congregations were isolated! Even those we'd have to take a little commuter plane to visit with. (I flew to serve two churches, a year each. Nothing to it.) Think of our extension congregations, many with a decades-long history of not-good patterns. To become thriving, our lay members of these congregations need to learn a good deal.

In our current Extension Program a new minister is dropped into the middle of a complex story that hasn't been going well, largely because the relational piece is missing from the small congregation's understanding of what it means to be part of our larger movement. Members haven't seen that our worship services need to be quite good services for visitors looking for a good church, not just us "old hands"; that our RE programs need to be quite good for new members' children who aren't even here yet, not just our few children now, and so on.

But, the fact that we have so many little isolated churches means, a relational piece is also missing from the UU churches only a couple of hours, or less, away. Otherwise, ministers and lay officers of these churches would be there sometimes - listening to the members and offering counsel, teaching members of the small church, just by their presence and conversation, what it means to be neighbors in a community of independent congregations.

Mostly, in the past and now, even our ministers have not thought of the need of nearby congregations' lay officers - for companionship with other officers. Ministerial colleagues help each other, sure. But we haven't ever called our lay officers into helping nearby churches.. And I don't mean on some darned District Committee, or even a cluster "board"! We'd be better off without any District or UUA Committees or boards. I'm talking about elected congregational officers - ordained and lay - in a covenant of church friendship with elected congregational officers, next door. And I don't mean only others with needs or emphases in their programs or the same style as our own. An informal association of neighbors - one not designed for formal business decisions - has to include all UU congregations in one another's reach, or it's not a covenant embracing healthy diversity but, another exclusive cabal.

Suppose we began every new effort of our Extension or New Congregation Program this way: Let's gather lay officers and ministers from three fairly nearby churches - with officers of the small congregation - and talk about difficulties of getting set - quite good, healthy patterns in a free church, and how leaders need the counsel of UU neighbors - without "usurpation" of our independence. The officers, of all four congregations, could work out a modest agreement to do neighboring: meet sometimes to do what associating free churches to do - take counsel together. Lay officers of any church would learn so much from - say - just two four-hour meetings a year with all the ministers and lay officers of three other churches, where they live - not off at some distant and expensive "workshop."

We say an extension congregation enters a special relationship with "the UUA." What does that mean? Usually a "special relationship" with one UUA staffperson, or at best two or three off and on, for three years. What are members of the weak church to learn from that, about relating to our community of congregations? In my experience, very little.

Certainly, if a small congregation gets UUA money to support their extension minister for three years, there should be some accountability for concrete steps toward strength and growth. But accountability should not be grossly complicated - lots of records, numbers and multiple graphs.

Questions of accountability for funds could well go something like this: Have you counseled with the finance committee of a nearby UU Church? An RE Committee? A Committee on Ministry? Has your whole congregation attended another UU church's Sunday service? And stayed to talk with leaders about how this church serves visitors? Have you borrowed another church's adult education materials? How many participated? Have you

paired with another congregation to work for justice and mercy? How many participated? Let accountability be for breaking out of isolation and learning to be a healthy free church by neighboring, through experience with other able and dedicated UUs.

Do you think I'm a crazy dreamer? Or might we learn again to be covenanted, neighboring UU congregations? As independent as ever, and also members of a truly covenanted community of congregations? I think we would be super glad if we did. For the results would be super.

But why limit this sort of neighboring to funded Programs? How different our movement would be if we just dropped, from all UU schedules, our countless meetings of panels, commissions, special projects, committees, sub-committees, *ad infinitum*.. What if all our ministers and lay officers met in groups of 3, 4, 6 area congregations for a day - or half a day - just twice a year. In this society a couple hour's drive is nothing if meetings are not frequent and are significant, our agendas having to do with what concerns us, as congregations. Helpful, interesting meetings would require some thoughtful homework done beforehand but not much!

Suppose each congregation's officers covenant always to decide themselves, a week or so before each area meeting, which several individuals will give just three-minute responses to the following questions about their church:

Tell us about two programs of this current year in each of these areas of our churchlife: 1) worship, for any or all ages; 2) how our members choose, train and support our lay and ordained leaders; 3) education - especially of children and new members; and 4) and what our members do in our church to work toward justice and mercy.

Tell us about one program in each area of your churchlife you are proud of and feel good about, and mention the factors that make it good.

And tell about one program in each area which is not going so well as you hoped, and mention the factors making it not so good.

So, that's the preparation part, 8 oral reports of just 3 minutes each. Officers think some together about what they want to say and how to say it concisely, not in endless detail. At the meeting, listeners are asked to note, as they listen, any questions they want to ask about these programs or any insights or suggestions they have to offer because they have tried something similar in their own church.

After hearing all these brief reports, the question becomes: Which of these matters do we most want to talk about some more? In a meeting like this the asking for and the giving of rich counsel just flows. For when we get free churches' elected leaders who care about what we are doing - talking freely, in a super format, about what works well and doesn't, they have to be pried apart. Or they will talk forever. Money is not on this agenda. After church officers talk about what we really want to do together, the question of how we raise money to support all this comes up in a spirited and wise way, of its own accord. Our elected leaders will freely teach each other how to raise it.

In the last half hour, then, lay and ministerial officers together could ask if a few meetings are needed during the next six months, not among these officers but, among other lay leaders - say - of two Finance Committees or two RE Committees or two or three Committees on Ministry, any of whom can also give each other super counsel, because now their officers know the sort of help each congregation could really use.

Such neighborly meetings as this would be altogether different from meetings some Planning Committee or workshop leader prepares, which seldom strike our churches "where they are." Moreover, these neighborly meetings would not be at all like those silly meetings in which we argue over the wording of resolutions, as though there existed any statement, on any important matter, on which all UUs in independent congregations can or should agree.

In super meetings of a covenanted neighborly association, there have to be both "orderly rules" and spontaneity, high expectations of how we proceed and plenty of flexibility for the free spirit of mutual love to blow among us, as it will. There's a there there in this covenant. Live bodies meet, on time every time, ready to learn from and teach one another - with no supervision. And we'll be able to tell when our congregations are in such a covenant For there will be then a super growth in the spirit of affection and forbearance in and among our independent congregations. And then - just down the road a ways - solid growth in the numbers of people in our liberal free churches. For where the spirit of mutual love is strong, you can't keep new members out anymore.