

The 2000-01 Minns Lectures

**The Lay and Liberal Doctrine of the Church:  
The Spirit and the Promise of Our Covenant**

by Alice Blair Wesley

## Lecture 6: Toward a Covenanted Association of Congregations: On Patterns of Authentic Authority Among Free Churches

I'd like us to look at the mix of meanings carried these days by one little word. What does it mean, for example, when a church member, on coming back home, is asked by another who didn't go, "How was SWUUSI this year?" And the response is, "It was **super**."

Suppose you are asked if you know a certain UU in Texas, and you say, "Oh, he's a **super** guy."

Suppose you are on the nominating committee of your church. The name of a certain young woman comes up, and somebody says, "I don't know how she does so much. She defines the term, **super** mom."

I couldn't go last month to our church's Annual Meeting. Joe went. When he got home, I asked, "How'd it go?" He said the meeting room was so full some members had to stand. Even so, they voted on five complex issues in less than an hour. On one secret-ballot issue, whether to be a "Welcoming Congregation," the vote was 93% in favor, and except for two abstentions, the yes vote on the four other motions was unanimous! Members gave our outgoing president a long, standing ovation. In a challenging year she has been a **super** lay officer. Adjourned, the members were laughing and hugging all over the place. It was a **super** Meeting of a **super** church.

With reference to people we talk about **super** athletes or entertainment stars. But we also use this 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 **super**market."

Look at all the different realities we are talking about here! A week-long gathering of our religious folk; an individual; a short business Meeting; a high performer in sport or music; a material thing somebody bought; and a store. See then. Our word **super**, applied to all these realities just means - **quite good**. But what a variety of goods! At least five very different goods: the rich quality of worship services and workshops and play at a super SWUUSI; the easy decency of a super guy; 3) the efficiency of people who do well, even with many competing demands on their time; the prices at a store; or the striking abilities of a famous few way off somewhere, not here where we ordinary people are. That's a long list of meanings for one little word.

Note two other possible meanings of super, **not** present in these examples. In not one was there a hint of anything **supernatural**, that is, alien to or out of the range of the everyday. Even super athletes and entertainers only manifest unusual, extraordinary abilities, not abilities ordinary people don't have at all. Even I can shoot baskets and sing, *e.g.* just not as well as Michael Jordan or Sarah Brightman.

Also, **not** present in these examples, was any hint of hierarchical control, as when we might say, “Doubting Tom doesn’t believe in us. He thinks he has 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 actions manifesting certain **everyday living patterns**, which evoke, from other free people, a spontaneously offered 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 Latin specialist, a few centuries from now - say in 2401- making a study of the “old” North American Unitarian Universalist movement of the late 20th/ early 21st centuries, and concluding - from the fact that we often describe things as super - that in this “dark” age, UUs fell into gross **superstition!**

That could be someone’s conclusion in a later era, for lack of knowing a really simple linguistic fact of all eras: The meanings of words change, sometimes very quickly. 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 in just a few years 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 times 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. But, why begin a lecture, titled “Toward a Covenanted Association of Congregations,” by looking at the mix of meanings among us of this little word?

I wanted to start this way because we liberals can be sometimes really dense in our reading of other eras of our own free church tradition. Actually, we derive from a history of free churchpeople who spent their lives in constructive opposition to unfreedom in their times - as do we in ours. But we can get so hung up on what we take to be 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 quite good. *E.g.*, our 17th century ancestors - from whom we inherited congregational polity - 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.

We may say of members of our free churches now - they are super people. People of this 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 call our Association of Congregations.

The meanings of words change, all the time. 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 now 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** leaders, their locally elected 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 people in our liberally religious bodies which - without any outside supervision, and at our ordinary best - are pretty darned fine.

But wait a minute! 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 a 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, we'd better first do 'a' and 'b'."

And all the members meeting say, "Oh, yeah! Right. Of course." The heat and argument blow over, and we get on with making a 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 wisdom.

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 had not been even informal leaders, much less elected. These few extraordinary prophets just arose and spoke, with such transparently **authentic**

authority that many members were amazed at the simplicity of obvious truth. They said, “Well, 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 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 patterns of governance. They then 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 role in 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 - 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, a search committee or candidating for election. These prophets just started speaking; free churches listened, and then changed their whole way of “administration,” the way free churches do governance.

Or, as we might put it now, their clearly voiced insights made these extraordinary prophets a powerfully persuasive **voice of the situation**. That is, the situation of any religious people wanting to be free and loving and wise together, without supervision. There you have, right in the Cambridge Platform, a **natural theology of special revelation!** In our time we say, this sort of thing has happened among peoples of other traditions, too! Because in certain **crucial** ways, human nature is the same in all traditions, however these traditions vary 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’s 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 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 Treasury of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, or other continuing patterns of church leadership they adopted, as **wrong**. These “practical” patterns - so long kept - proved quite **impractical** and **worked ill** in the long run, among us. By the end of the 20th century we, their liberal heirs, did not have many liberal and quite good - super - free churches. According to the UUA board minutes of June, 2000, more than a third - 389 - of our thousand or so churches have 60 or fewer members. Almost another third - 325 - have more than 60 but fewer than 160. Only 25 have more than 800 members. 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, and just as gifted, as intelligent, as hard working and as good as any ordinary 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 and patterns of living and doing. 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 the 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 the nation.

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 about 250 members, 2 brand new ones and 6 a generation or two old. 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 troubles 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 buttoned at the waist

- \* naive ministers and lay officers who had no idea **how** to help our members build or re-build a healthy church

- \* onerous and foolish debts 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 began to change and grow, to keep it small

- \* leaking, 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 instead, 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 ever 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 another UU 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 **all** in areas thick with people. **They are isolated from other Unitarian Universalist congregations!** In not a single one of them did the members even 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 got me to come work with them - 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-or-committee-ridden "District" or "the UUA" - entities we describe as **over** us - or some affiliate organization, some of these being "super" in the worst sense of that word, **not** in our everyday sense of quite good.

If you good UUs listening have never, as officers or members of your church, 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 leading lay members, exactly twice. The help these two laypeople freely gave us 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, simply and with far less expenditure of time and money than we now spend 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 **Association 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. 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" elected *pro forma* elect the UUA board and president. These latter then **appoint** a jillion committees which 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. What do we mean when we speak of "the UUA"? We mean about 150 people on the board, the staff, certain appointed committees plus the officers of certain "affiliated" organizations. These folks are awfully busy doing something, but their doings do seem to most of us to have little to do with **matters that matter** on the congregational "level." Do you not often hear this talk of "levels?" Three levels: "Highest" is the continental, "UUA" level. District boards and committees are "mid-level." What happens in our congregations is on the lowest "level."

This year as many as 40 Canadian congregations may withdraw from the UUA. Many reasons have been recently put forward on the internet. I think by far the most cogent of them was given 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 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" to General Assemblies 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 and 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 now constantly work to influence decisions of the UUA

board/staff. This pattern is 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 completely 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**. GAs have become fairs, very, very expensive annual weeks of hoopla and propaganda. Many District patterns are no more helpful **in our churches**. All this is the product of **phony** democracy. These patterns are every one of them inefficient, a waste of precious time and energy, and 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 a few bylaw changes and change for the better the whole character of our Association.

We currently 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**, insightful 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 UUA bylaws to replace “delegates” with **officers** of our churches.

This change would 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 at home, 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 of them even 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 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. As things stand, we keep confusing the **governance** of free churches with the **government** of a free nation, two very, very different institutional realities. As citizens of a free nation, we elect Representatives to speak **for** us and to enact **laws**, which the government, then, has the power legally to **coerce** citizens to obey. In the governance of free churches, **no** “representatives” speak **for** the members. Congregational governance attends to a **holy**, ever moving dynamic of **local** power - the **power of** loving, reasoning persuasion - on which we stake the very life of our churches. Free churches **only live** by the power of the free spirit of mutual love, working in our own 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 by any legislature.

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 elected officers being welcome and urged to attend as well. Our annual Meetings will always be open to any members of our member Congregations, but only elected officers shall address the assembly or vote.

In any covenant there's got to be a **there** there, or there is no covenant. The covenant of an Association of Free Churches cannot be a promise merely to "affirm" - in our heads - certain 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 "issue statements" 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 four or five years.

5) If we made this change, our UUA elections would be - at once - **much** simpler and less expensive. Any 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 all 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 the days of congregational officers' Meetings, in any of the buildings used for these Meetings, thus ending the affiliates' dominance.

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

Our congregations very much need to associate, formally and informally, with the capital "A" of the UUA and with the lower case "a" of neighborly gatherings, like SWUUSI **and also in new kinds of regular neighborly gatherings of our officers**. Our elected lay and ordained officers need 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, 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, and also informally to learn, from one another, how to carry out our missions well, for the world's sake. 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, of areas much smaller than our whole Association or Districts.

What if **no** UU congregations were isolated! Even those UUs others would have to take a little commuter plane to visit. (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**, the 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 most small congregation's understanding of who they are. Members haven't seen that our worship services need to be super services for visitors looking for a good church, not just us "old hands," that our RE programs need to be super for new members' children who aren't 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 self-understanding of other UU churches **only** a couple of hours, or less, away. Otherwise, ministers and lay officers of these churches would be there sometimes - **listening** 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 never think of the need of nearby congregations' **lay** officers - for companionship with other officers. Ministerial colleagues help each other, sure. But as UUs we don't call on our **lay** officers to take counsel with nearby churches, as our ancestors did. And I'm not talking about service on some darned District Committee, or even a cluster "board!" We'd be better off without all these Committees or boards. I'm talking about elected church officers in a covenant of church friendship with other elected church officers, **next door**. And I don't mean **only** neighbors whose emphases or style is exactly the same. An informal association of neighbors has to include all UU congregations in one another's reach, or it's not a covenant embracing healthy diversity but an exclusive cabal.

Suppose we began every new effort of our Extension or New Congregation Program this way: We gather the lay and ordained officers from three fairly nearby churches - **with** officers of the small congregation - and talk about the

importance of getting **set** - healthy, super patterns in a free church and how we do that, with the counsel of UU neighbors, but without "usurpation" of independence. The officers, of all **four** congregations, could work out a **modest** agreement to **do** neighboring: meet once in a while to do what associating free churches do - give and take counsel together. Lay officers of any church would learn **so much** from - say - just two four-hour meetings a year with **all** the lay and ordained officers of three other churches, **where they live** - not off at some distant and expensive "workshop."

Currently, 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 a 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 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 find out 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 super UUs.

Am I a crazy dreamer? Or might we learn again to be superbly covenanted, neighboring UU congregations? As independent as ever **and** 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 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 or 6 area congregations for a day - or half a day - just twice a year? A two-hour drive to and from such a meeting is nothing to us, **if** they're not frequent and are **significant**, our agendas having to do with what **concerns us**. Helpful, interesting meetings would require a little thoughtful homework 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 church life: 1) worship, for any or all ages; 2) how our members choose, train and support our leaders; 3) education - especially of children and new members; and 4) and what members do in our church to work toward justice and mercy. Tell us about one program in each area you are proud of and feel good about, and mention the factors that make it good. 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.

After hearing these brief reports, the question becomes: Which of these matters do we need 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 our churches' elected leaders talking freely, in a super format, about what works well and doesn't, they have to be pried apart. Or they will talk forever.

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 same officers but, among **other lay leaders** - say - of two Finance Committees, or three 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."

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 - growth in the numbers of people in our liberal free churches. For where the spirit of mutual love is strong and we work in good patterns, you can't keep new members out