

## **History 101: A Unitarian Universalist Readers' Theatre Production**

### **THE BEGINNINGS**

Reader #1: Today, a few highlights of the history of our faith. Our roots include those who created Unitarianism and Universalism, who from before the time of the Reformation, believed differently than those of “orthodox” faiths, and who served as witness for the truth as they believed, and the heritage of faith we have inherited today. We have roots that go back over 2000 years, but our traditions became most visible starting in the 1500s.

Reader #2: Michael Servetus is clearly identified as one of our denomination's forebears. He was born in Spain in 1511 and is most famous for two events in his life, the publishing of his book, On the Errors of the Trinity, in 1531 and for being burned at the stake by John Calvin in 1553.

Reader #3: Francis David, born in 1510 in Transylvania, trained for the Catholic priesthood and successively became a Lutheran, a Calvinist, and finally a Unitarian. In 1566, he was selected to be the court preacher for Transylvania's King John Sigismund, the first and only Unitarian monarch in the world. As the spokesperson for Unitarianism in the national debates to clarify religious issues of his time, David advocated that Transylvania become a place of religious tolerance and welcome, which resulted in the King's edict of religious freedom for his subjects in 1562.

In 1571, Unitarianism reached the zenith of its popularity in Transylvania, counting almost 500 congregations in the Unitarian fold. However, King John died the same year, and without his tolerant spirit to guide Transylvania, David was condemned for “innovations” and the freedom of the Unitarians was curtailed. David died in a cell in the Deva fortress in 1579, a religious martyr and a national hero. From David's One God:

“In this world there have always been many opinions about faith and salvation; we need not think alike to love alike. There must be knowledge in faith also; sanctified reason is the lantern of faith. Religious reform can never be all at once, but gradually, step by step. The most important spiritual function is conscience, the source of all spiritual joy and happiness. Conscience will not be quieted by anything less than truth and justice. We must accept God's truth in this lifetime. Salvation must be accomplished here on earth. God is indivisible. God is One.”

Reader #4: On the Universalist side of our tradition, Georges De Benneville is one of our important forebears. Raised in England by French Huguenot parents who had fled persecution, in 1741 he immigrated to Pennsylvania.

“Our faith is essentially the combined faith of all Christians...to bring them all into one, as truth alone grants. God judges [people] by their deeds and not their creeds. The language of eternal love is expressed in actions. I hold the restoration of all souls; because having myself been the chief of sinners, God, through Jesus Christ, by the efficacy of his holy spirit, granted me the mercy and the pardon of all my sins, (so that) I could not have a doubt but the whole world would be saved by the same power.”

## **SOME IMPORTANT MOMENTS IN OUR HISTORY**

Reader #1: Both our Unitarian and Universalist traditions while having antecedents in Europe grew primarily out of the religious soil in this continent. Our early roots were clearly Christian, focused on the works and message of Jesus, but in the centuries since, our theology has expanded to be more inclusive. Our polity and governance are distinctly congregational – each of our churches functions as an independent body.

### **READER #5: THE CAMBRIDGE PLATFORM**

In 1648, a group of Puritan clergymen assembled from each of the five federated New England colonies and came to a final agreement on standards and practices that would govern the Congregational Church for several centuries, and in fact, still hold sway even today. The document they produced has come to be called the Cambridge Platform. It is also the cornerstone of our Unitarian Universalist polity and governance. It informs our understanding of the importance of the covenantal relationships within our congregations.

UU historian, Dr. Conrad Wright summarized a vital part of the Platform: “The autonomy of (a) particular church, by itself, is an inadequate definition of congregationalism. The authors of the Cambridge Platform included in their text a chapter on “the communion of Churches one with another,” which outlines six ways by which the churches were related in a seamless web. The six are mutual care, consultation, admonition, participation, recommendation, and relief and succor. So congregationalism meant, as it should still mean,

not the autonomy of the local church, but the community of autonomous churches.”

Reader#2: The Universalists, unlike the Unitarians, began forming regional organizations; in 1803 the New England Universalists gathered at New Hampshire for a convention. Here they passed a profession of belief, known as the Winchester Profession, and it served the Universalists until 1899:

Article I. We believe that the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain a revelation of the character of God, and of the duty, interest and final destination of mankind.

Article II. We believe that there is one God, whose nature is Love, revealed in one Lord Jesus Christ, by one Holy Spirit of Grace, who will finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness.

Article III. We believe that holiness and true happiness are inseparably connected, and that believers ought to be careful to maintain order and practise good works. for these are good and profitable unto men.

Reader#3: After spending a number of years debating whether to form some type of organization, the younger Unitarian ministers led the way to create the American Unitarian Association. Finally, in 1825, the American Unitarian Association was founded.

Reader #4: In the 1930s, caught up in the scientific and rational thinking of the day, religious humanists decided it was important to speak up for their beliefs, issuing the Humanist Manifesto in 1933. This declaration significantly impacted the Unitarian and Universalist churches and our denomination’s expanding theology.

“The time has come for widespread recognition of the radical changes in religious beliefs throughout the modern world...We assert that humanism will (a) affirm life rather than deny it; (b) seek to elicit the possibilities of life, not flee from, and (c) endeavor to establish the conditions of a satisfactory life for all, not merely for the few. By this positive morale and intention humanism will be guided, and from this perspective and alignment the techniques and efforts of humanism will flow...Though we consider the religious forms and ideas of our [forebears] no longer adequate, the quest for the good life is still the central task for [humanity].”

## UNITARIANISM AND UNIVERSALISM IN CANADA

Reader #5: Immigrants brought Unitarianism and Universalism to Canada. Universalists, mostly from the United States, flourished in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, creating some 30 churches across Canada but most were gone by the Second World War. Just three are left.

Unitarianism had broader roots, American and British and Irish, and most surprisingly, Icelandic. Starting in the 1890s, in Manitoba, the most vibrant Unitarian movement in Canada was among Icelandic immigrants, who created almost 30 Unitarian congregations. Two survive, but neither now has services in Icelandic.

Reader #2: Unitarianism began in Canada in Montreal, with a church founded in 1842. Its first minister, an Irishman named John Corder, served the Montreal congregation for 36 years. He was a tireless campaigner for justice and to spread the message of Christian Unitarianism. Here are some of his thoughts.

“ Nothing which is clearly against reason and the ascertained facts of science, shall be required to be held as true in theology.”

*“Freedom to think, freedom to speak, freedom to read. This must be the motto of every progressive community.”*

“Against the cry of sacredness of property we urge the sacredness of humanity.”

Many of Corder’s Montreal congregation were businessmen in that city, including brewer John Molson. Corder helped the Toronto congregation get started in 1845. Among its members was Emily Stowe, the first woman licensed to practice medicine in Canada and a pioneering campaigner for women’s rights.

Reader #5: Unitarianism grew slowly. When this congregation was founded in 1889, we were only the fourth Unitarian church in the country, and one of those, in St. John’s, had failed. By 1945, there were only six, plus the three Icelandic churches.

But in the wake of the Second World War, Unitarian fortunes changed. In 1945, a sense of national identity and denominational pride was created with the founding of the Unitarian Service Committee of Canada. Led by the tireless Lotta Hitschmanova for 38 years, this committee bearing the Unitarian brand became a household name across the country. At first the Unitarian Service Committee gathered clothing and other supplies for European refugees from the war. Later it became one of the first Canadian overseas development agencies. Today, as USC Canada, the agency continues her work. Hitschmanova's philosophy was simple:

“...we are all brothers and sisters, aiming at one single goal: to help make this torn, crying, bleeding world of ours a peaceful shrine for everyone—whatever his or her language, background or color... are we not on earth to make it a better, a kinder, world for all?”

Reader #1: Canadian Unitarian churches belonged to the American Unitarian Association. There were several efforts to create a Canadian organization. None lasted until the Canadian Unitarian Council was founded in 1961. The CUC was part of the newly formed Unitarian Universalist Association, a merger that year of Unitarians and Universalists across the continent. In 2002, the Canadian Unitarian Council became largely independent of the Unitarian Universalist Association.

Reader #3: The late Mark DeWolfe, minister of what is now the Unitarian Congregation in Mississauga, speculated in the 1980s about how being in the vast land of Canada could shape a unique Canadian Unitarian theology, centred on our seventh principle.

“It occurs to me that here in the presence of the majesty of this land, it is possible to be accurate about the smallness of human life, and yet positive about its worth and value. We cannot sing here of humanity astride the earth like a colossus. It does not do justice to our experiences ... Here we are aware of the grandeur of space around us; it is not our play-field, or ours to use up, nor are we its obvious most important part. ... We can recognize the majesty for what it is, and we can seek to know our place in right relationship, sacred relationship, to the world.”

Reader #4: Unitarians and Universalists in Canada and the US have always been at the forefront of liberal religious thinking and progressive social action. William Ellery Channing, Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Dorothy Day, Lydia Child, Theodore Parker, Clarence Skinner, James Reeb, and MANY others have worked to address poverty, the treatment of mental

illness, women's rights, the abolition of slavery, public housing, saving the environment, and other important causes.

## **THE MERGER**

Reader #1: In 1961 the Unitarians and the Universalists merged to form the Unitarian Universalist Association – it was a long time coming. The first suggestion at merger came before the Unitarians in 1865, they defeated it.

Reader #2: In 1899 a resolution was offered in the AUA to appoint a committee with five people from each group to “consider plans of closer cooperation, devise ways and means for more efficient usefulness...” Nothing seems to have come of this suggestion.

Reader #3: A motion was passed at the AUA May Meetings in 1931 “to look into the practicality of uniting these two communions.” Also approved by the Universalist General Convention, a joint commission was formed. It ended up recommending a higher body of the Free Church of America, it was formed but the last meeting was held in 1938.

Reader #4: Unitarian and Universalist youth groups attempted a merger in 1935, it didn't work. They tried again in 1953 and formed the Liberal Religious Youth – LRY.

Reader #5: In 1947 a joint commission was formed to look at merger, it issued a report in 1951, in 1953 another commission formed and foundered. Finally in 1955, the Joint Merger Commission led to finalization of the merger in 1961.

Reader #4: At the service to celebrate the merger two candles were used to light the symbolic merged candle and the assembly opened singing “As tranquil streams that meet and merge, and flow as one to seek the sea.”

Reader #3: At the close of the service the entire gathering stood and read a statement together that ended with, “We declare our allegiance to the new Unitarian Universalist Association, and pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our faith to its high purpose and sure upbuilding.”

Reader #5: Of course the new Association continued to have its ups and downs; it struggled with a wide range of religious and social concerns. In the

1980s there was a push to come to some common agreements about who we were as a religious community; you are all familiar with the outcome.

Reader #1: In 1985 in Atlanta the General Assembly passed the Purposes and Principles of the UUA. Let's read the Principles together: (from the gray hymnal.)

Reader #1: And that's our brief overview of Unitarian Universalist history – highlights of our history in Canada and the United States. Today, UU congregations can be found in Transylvania, England, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, and Mexico. We've heard this morning just a bit about the impact that our chosen faith has had on the ways of the world and its various cultures, and the heritage we are called to carry into the future.

Blessed be.