

Keynote Address

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UU District of Metropolitan New York

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Thank you. Thank you to Lynda Bluestein for inviting me to speak to this Annual Meeting of the Metro New York District.

I have been president of the Association for almost a year now. Our Association is healthy and strong. Our growth in numbers is continuing as it has for 20 straight years, even when other denominations are losing membership. More important than our numerical growth is our growth in our sense of mission. In congregation after congregation, and within the leadership of the Association that serves all of our congregations and the staff that you pay, we are beginning to claim our Good News and know, in deeper and deeper ways, that we have an important ministry to live out in this hurting world.

This has been a momentous year for all of us. First, there was the media attention focusing on my election - and I will say more about that in a moment. But then, all too soon, came the tragic and horrifying events of September 11th experienced particularly acutely in this district.

In the dark hours and days that followed the terrorist attacks on the United States, Unitarian Universalism was a beacon of hope and comfort not only to members of our congregations but to others as well. We, as a faith community, were challenged to respond to the horror of those events, and I am very proud of the way Unitarian Universalists rose to that challenge. I am more convinced than ever that the message of hope and love that is the essence of Unitarian Universalism can be a blessing to our hurting world.

When I spoke to you all after the election last year in Cleveland, I told you that I was committed to raising the visibility of Unitarian Universalism in the public square, committed to making Unitarian Universalist public witness a priority of my presidency. That remains my prime commitment today. But while celebrate our successes in this area, we must also realize that there is more, much more, to be done.

That said, I must tell you that I never expected the deluge of media attention that greeted my election. In the hours following the election, I was interviewed by the **New York Times**, and the **Boston Globe** (the Globe article ran on the front-page of that newspaper). I did interviews with two wire-services, Associated Press, and the Religion News Service for articles that were sent out all over the U.S. and Canada. Reports of the election ran on CNN and Fox-News.

Soon after I returned to Boston, I was interviewed by reporters for two online news services, **Africana.com** and **DiversityInc.com**. More and more, people are turning to the Internet for news, and we understand the necessity of providing information on our public witness to those media outlets as well as the more traditional outlets.

For months following the election, the media were fixated on the story of the UUA, a historically white denomination, electing a black man to be its president. "Black Pastor, White Flock" was the angle that all the stories used. Now, we know that this is the way that the media work, and our task was to use the coverage we were getting as an opening to get the media to pay attention to the many more significant issues that Unitarian Universalism is concerned with. And I am happy to report that we have begun to have some success in this effort as well.

For instance, the article about Unitarian Universalism entitled "[Come All Ye Faithful](#)" which appeared in **Boston Magazine** last December includes these words about Unitarian Universalism: "...its message is suddenly becoming more appealing to a multicultural America searching for answers in a newly divided world. As hard-line Protestant ministers such as Jerry Falwell use the terrorist attacks to push divisive agendas - blaming gays, lesbians, and the American civil Liberties Union - the Unitarian Universalists have taken precisely the opposite approach, preaching tolerance and inclusion.....And while increasingly conservative mainstream denominations have hemorrhaged members over the past two decades, UUism has grown steadily for each of the past 19 years." Less about me, more about us.

A large part of our public witness work this past year has been envisioning new ways that we can partner with our congregations in the important justice-making work that they are involved in. This renewed support for congregational justice-making work can be seen in the efforts at First Unitarian in Cincinnati (my home congregation), and their work with the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center. In Tulsa, OK, our congregations have worked as members of an interfaith coalition, Tulsa Metropolitan Ministry, to begin the long, hard work of restorative justice on the issue of the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921.

We are now being asked to speak to issues of broad significance in our society. Reparations is one such issue. Another is the issue of mandatory reporting by clergy of sexual abuse of children. On this, and other issues, Unitarian Universalism is in the public conversation more today, I believe, than at any time since the Vietnam War.

Consider an article published in the New York Times entitled "Religions ponder stem cell issue". The Times reporter, Gustav Niebuhr, called us to get information on the Association's position on stem cell research. When he learned that we did not have an official position on this issue, he could just have left us out of the article. But he didn't. Instead, he wrote: "But among Unitarian Universalists, power is vested at the grass roots, and official statements come from an annual assembly. The assembly was in June, before attention focused on whether human embryos should be used in scientific research, and did not take up the subject." So the New York Times now knows not only to call us on issues like this, but it also does justice to our form of governance as it relates to an issue of moral significance.

I issued a personal statement on the issue of stem cell research, and just recently I was quoted in a Religion News Service article on the issue of human cloning. More and more, the voice of Unitarian Universalism is being heard in the public arena.

These stories are important to our public witness not only at the time they appear but also because of the ripple effect that they have. Other journalists read these stories and are motivated

to call our offices to get information on particular issues such our support for same-sex unions or comprehensive sexuality education. Or they call to get background information on UUism as they prepare to do a piece on the local UU congregation. This is another way that our public witness reaches out through our congregations to the wider world.

No account of our public witness work would be complete without recognition of the tremendous work done by UU ministers, congregations, and the UUA staff in the days and weeks following the terrorist attacks of September 11th. I was immediately clear about the pressing need for pastoral outreach, so the very next day, September 12th, I issued the first pastoral letter of my presidency. The response to this letter was so overwhelmingly positive that I was convinced that this form of pastoral ministry must become an important part of my leadership, and it has. I've written to you about the war in Afghanistan, about the conflict in the Middle East, and about safety in congregations. It has now reached a point where the media is picking up on these pastoral letters and writing about them. This is another form of our public witness.

And I must mention the exceptional work of our ministers during this time of grief and healing. I know the long hours put in by our professional religious leadership during that time after September 11th. The ministers in New York and the Washington, DC, area played particularly significant roles at this time. This is public witness at its finest and most compelling.

And, finally, two more examples of how Unitarian Universalism is playing a larger role in the public arena. On March 14, I was one of a dozen religious leaders who were invited to meet with the U.S. Senators on the Democratic Steering Committee. At this meeting at the Capitol, I had an opportunity to tell these political leaders of the Unitarian Universalist support for domestic programs to support the most vulnerable in our society: the poor, the homeless, and the marginalized.

As many of you know, I have spent a good deal of time this past year visiting our congregations across the continent and in meetings such as this one. I have attended ordinations and installations and building dedications, and it is a joy to me to be invited into the places that are your church homes and to meet with you and to speak with you.

There is one trip, however, which for me was a transformative experience. Just this past February, I traveled to India to meet, first, with the Unitarians in the Khasi Hills and then with our Holdeen India Fund partners.

Stewardship at the Association is healthy, even through this year of uncertainty when most non-profit and religious groups have struggled to maintain services. We will finish this fiscal year in the black, thanks to a prudent approach to spending. Annual Program Fund contributions will meet our budgeted goals.

I have had a busy year. But I want to tell you that of all the facets of my work as president of the Association - the committee meetings, the congregational visits, the public witness work - nothing has brought me as much joy and fed my soul as much as my work with our youth and young adults. They are our future, and they are a blessing to us.

It is a privilege to serve as your President. My spirit is buoyant. Our possibilities are so real. And my prayer life is filled with gratitude for the opportunity to serve this faith. Thank you all for the work you do on behalf of the congregations in the Metro New York District.