

SPECIAL EDITION

Quest for Seekers:

An introduction to Unitarian Universalism
& the Church of the Larger Fellowship



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Welcome! Welcome to *Quest*, welcome to the Church of the Larger Fellowship, and welcome to Unitarian Universalism.

This is a special issue of *Quest* meant specifically for those who are new to the Church of the Larger Fellowship (CLF) and Unitarian Universalism, and want to learn more about both. We are a community of spiritual seekers: Unitarian Universalism is a faith bound not by dogmatic beliefs, but by a commitment to love, learn, and grow with one another. We learn from and are resourced by many different spiritual paths and wisdom traditions, and embrace theological diversity within our communities. Our shared beliefs center around love and liberation for all people, and a commitment to creating more justice in the world. If that intrigues you, keep reading.

In this issue you'll find the guiding principles and values of Unitarian Universalism, a timeline of our

congregation's history, and more about our shared theological commitments. You'll also see some testimonials from members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, the Unitarian Universalist congregation behind *Quest*, about the impact that the CLF has had on their lives.

Regular issues of *Quest* include reflections on monthly spiritual themes, poetry and artwork from our members, and opportunities to engage with the life of our congregation. The CLF is a congregation with no geographical boundary, and *Quest* is just one way that we connect with our 3000+ members, more than half of whom are currently experiencing incarceration. Our members who have access to the internet can join our weekly online worship services, take classes and be a part of small discussion circles, and our members who are not online have access to correspondence courses, reading packets, and pen pal connections. Please visit our website or write to us if you would like to learn more.

We hope to connect more soon—until then, enjoy this introduction to our vibrant, liberatory faith community!

Quest

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UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PRINCIPLES & VALUES

Our Unitarian Universalist faith is bound by covenant – the sacred promises we make to one another – instead of by creed or dogma. The covenant that connects all of Unitarian Universalism is articulated in Article II of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) bylaws. As of 2023, the language of that covenant is in transition; a new articulation of our shared faith values is under discussion, and may be voted in as the official language of our faith in 2024. We have included both the new language, and our existing Unitarian Universalist principles (which were adopted in 1985) below.

UU PRINCIPLES

Principles 1–7: adopted by the UUA 1985
Principle 8: adopted by the CLF in 2020

We, the member congregations of the UUA, covenant to affirm and promote:

- 1 *The inherent worth and dignity of every person*
- 2 *Justice, equity and compassion in human relations*
- 3 *Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations*
- 4 *A free and responsible search for truth and meaning*
- 5 *The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large*
- 6 *The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all*
- 7 *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*
- 8 *Journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions*

UU VALUES

Language proposed by the Article II Study Commission in 2022; up for a vote to adopt denomination-wide at UUA General Assembly in 2024

Love is the power that holds us together and is at the center of our shared values. We are accountable to one another for doing the work of living our shared values through the spiritual discipline of Love. Inseparable from one another, these shared values are:

Interdependence

We honor the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. With humility and reverence, we covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation, creating and nurturing sustainable relationships of repair, mutuality and justice.

Pluralism

We declare that we are all sacred beings diverse in culture, experience, and theology. We covenant to learn from one another in our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We embrace our differences and commonalities with Love, curiosity, and respect.

Justice

We work to be diverse multicultural Beloved Communities where all thrive. We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression. We support the use of inclusive democratic processes to make decisions within our congregation and the society at large.

Transformation

We adapt to the changing world. We covenant to collectively transform and grow spiritually and ethically. Openness to change is fundamental to our Unitarian and Universalist heritages, never complete and never perfect.

Generosity

We cultivate a spirit of gratitude and hope. We covenant to freely and compassionately share our faith, presence, and resources. Our generosity connects us to one another in relationships of interdependence and mutuality.

Equity

We declare that every person has the right to flourish with inherent dignity and worthiness. We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities.

THE HISTORY of the CLF

American Unitarian Association (AUA) dispatches itinerant ministers and missionary expeditions to fledgling Midwest cities and distant prairies. Universalists devise similar outreach efforts. A Unitarian Women's Alliance forms the "Post Office Mission."

1800s

Rev. William Channing Gannett launches 'Ministry by mail'

1904

AUA President Frederick May Eliot envisions a 'larger' fellowship beyond the concept of geographical location, in his words:

"a church by mail . . . a church in the fullest sense of the word, a church which will serve isolated religious liberals wherever they live."

On May 24, 1944, the Church of the Larger Fellowship is founded at the Annual Meeting of the American Unitarian Association. The CLF is semi-autonomous: a self-governing member congregation of the Association, but with its budget and leadership under the Extension Department of the AUA with a two-fold purpose:

To provide a spiritual home for isolated Unitarians and their families, and to transfer the allegiance of its members to local Unitarian churches whenever and wherever possible.

1944

With the denominational merger, the Unitarian and Universalist, CLFs conjoin, and the Church of the Larger Fellowship UU is born. The new entity retains the semi-autonomous nature and dual purposes of its predecessors:

To provide a spiritual home and connection for isolated religious liberals as well as programs and services designed to promote the growth of Unitarian Universalism.

1961

The CLF grows from its original charter of 34 members to membership in every state in the USA, eight Canadian provinces, and 20 countries. Geographically clustered CLF members start new fellowships—more than 400 by the end of the 1960s.

1948

The Universalists found their own Church of the Larger Fellowship.

1947

A prisoner at San Quentin becomes the first incarcerated person to join the church.

1965

1970

Facing a budget crisis, the UUA terminates its ownership of the CLF, and we become chartered and legally incorporated as an independent religious society, no longer under the auspices of the Extension Department of the UUA.

1970s
-90s

The next few decades saw significant changes—many under the ministerial leadership of the Rev. Eugene Pickett. Membership now includes people affiliated with a local congregation who also want a 'church by mail.' Small congregations can now join the CLF. This change ushers in a two-fold mission: to provide a spiritual home for isolated religious liberals as well as programs and services designed to promote the growth of Unitarian Universalism. The succeeding ministry of the Rev. Scott Alexander introduces the popular 'minister's 800 line,' increasing the accessibility of pastoral connection with the minister.

1999

The Rev. Jane Rzepka becomes the Senior Minister, and the CLF moves into the new millennium with a creative and contemporary approach. 'Church by mail' became church "online"; the 'post office mission' becomes a mission by website. The church becomes increasingly de-centralized with board members from diverse geographical locations conducting business via teleconference, e-mail, and annual retreats.

2010

The Rev. Meg A. Riley becomes CLF's Senior Minister bringing the concept of an online sanctuary to include sermons via live stream and online classes via videoconference.

2020

The CLF Board makes a bold new move in calling the Lead Ministry Team of Aisha Hauser, MSW, CRE-ML; Christina Rivera; and Rev. Dr. Michael Tino. This shared ministry team immediately sets out to realign CLF resources to a stewardship model and vision of liberatory theology.

Having embraced its place as the largest and most far-reaching congregation in the UU world, the CLF strives for excellence, relevance, and innovation across the still daunting frontiers of geographical, social, and spiritual separation. Today's CLF sustains spiritual strength of isolated and vulnerable people everywhere, upholding our mission:

As a Unitarian Universalist congregation with no geographical boundary, we create global spiritual community, rooted in profound love, which cultivates wonder, imagination, and the courage to act.

10 things to know about Unitarian Universalism



AISHA HAUSER, MSW, CRE-ML
Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

Despite the theological diversity within Unitarian Universalism, there are many things that we agree on and hold sacred within our communities. The following list is of 10 things that are important to know about what Unitarian Universalists believe, and how we try to be in the world.

1

Hell Outta Here

We do not believe in hell nor any kind of afterlife eternal punishment.

6

Heaven on Earth

We believe and work towards creating a more equitable and just society right here, right now.

2

Big Love

We affirm that every person is worthy and deserving of love.

7

Co-Exist

We are a pluralist faith, we affirm all the wisdom traditions of the world and do not believe any one is better than another.

3

World Wide Web

We know that we are interconnected with all other forms of life, and care about tending to that web of relationship and connection.

8

All Souls

You don't need your soul saved, your soul is already awesome.

4

Curiosity Nourishes the Cat

We are a people of questions and curiosity. Curiosity doesn't kill our cats (or humans), it nourishes and expands their imaginations.

9

Our Holy Trinity: Community, Liberation and Love

We are a community of people trying to figure out what it means to be human and how to center love and liberation.

5

This Queer Pastor Loves You

Many of our faith leaders are openly part of the LGBTQIA community.

10

When Life Gives You Lemons, Turn to Community

We affirm community care and nourishment. The world is a mess and we need each other more than ever, the CLF is the congregation without geographical boundaries. Join us from anywhere around the world and find community.

Our Flaming Chalice: History & Current Use



REV. DR. MICHAEL TINO
*Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship*

In the 1940s, as the German army began to impose its totalitarianism across Europe, many people fled in fear of their lives. At the time, the Unitarian Service Committee (USC) committed itself to rescuing as many refugees as possible. Their work was dangerous, and they saved the lives of many.

The documents created to help these refugees escape needed an official

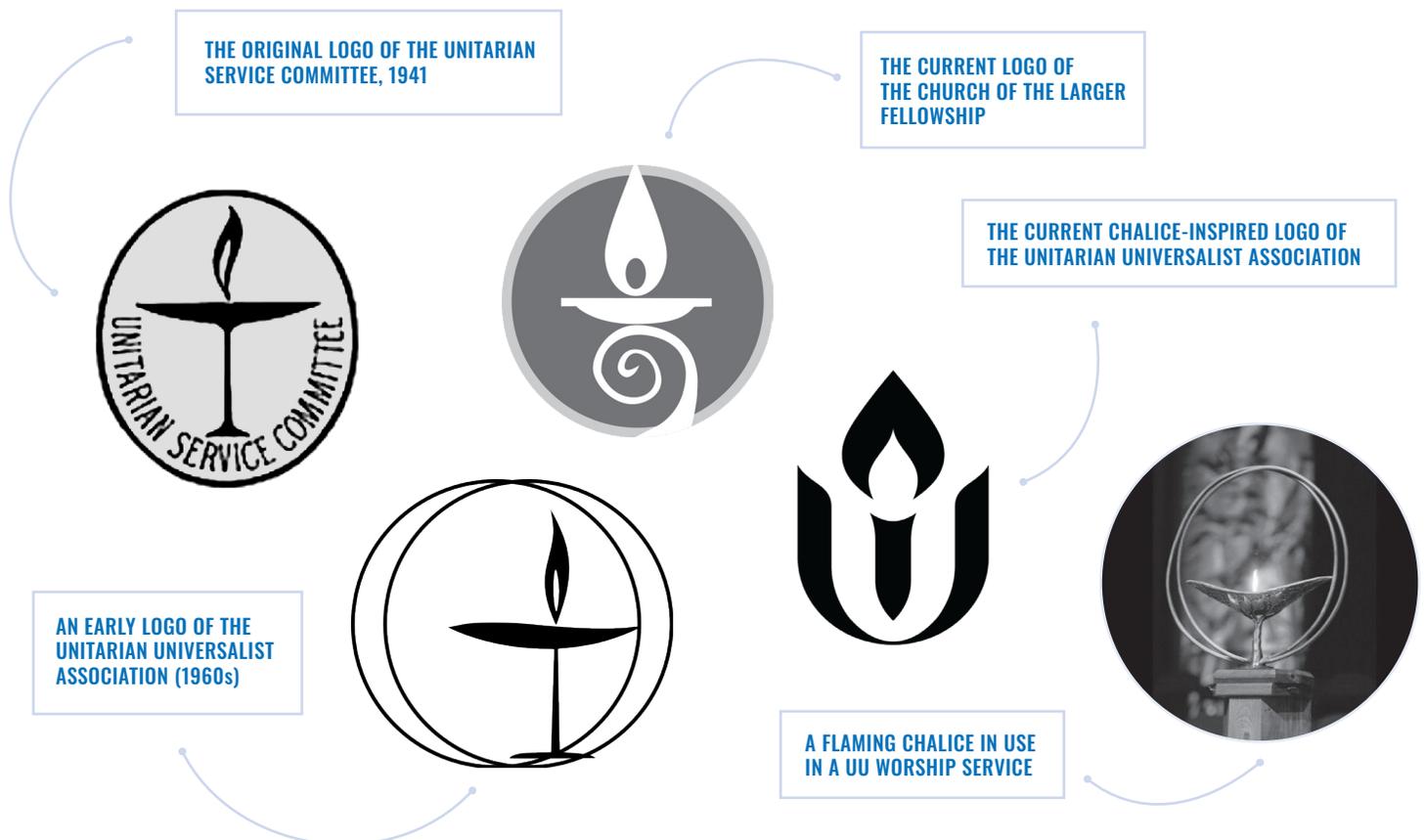
logo, so Dr. Charles Joy of the Unitarian Service Committee hired a graphic designer, Hans Deutsch, himself a refugee, to create one. The flaming chalice drew upon ancient religious symbols to be an official seal for the USC. The communion chalice, the holy oils used for blessing in many religions, the altars of Greek and Roman times, and lights put in the window as a symbol of hospitality are all evoked by the flaming chalice.

Throughout World War II, this symbol guided refugees to safety on travel documents, business cards,

and in the windows of otherwise hidden offices.

After the war, the flaming chalice gained popularity as a symbol of Unitarianism, and then later of Unitarian Universalism. The ritual lighting of the chalice in UU worship became widespread in our congregations in the 1970s.

Our flaming chalice is still a symbol of life-saving welcome. Where it burns, its light beckons us all to live up to our shared principles and participate in the liberation of all people. ■



Our Theological Mandate for Liberation



CHRISTINA RIVERA
Lead Ministry Team,
Church of the Larger
Fellowship

Christina delivered the following sermon during a worship service titled “Liberation, Incarceration, and Our Faith,” at General Assembly 2023, the annual gathering of the Unitarian Universalist Association. Her words express the UU theological mandate to work for liberation, particularly the liberation of all people through the abolition of the prison system.

The Rev Dr King: “I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: ‘I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;’ who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a ‘more convenient season.’”

This quote played over and over in my mind as I visited the Peace and Justice Museum and Memorial in

Montgomery Alabama. It was my 5th time experiencing the Museum but only my second since becoming the Co-Lead Minister for the Prison Ministry team at the CLF. And I was trying to work out why it was on loop in my brain. It was a very different kind of “ear worm.” And I think I’ve figured it out.

We are on the daily, bombarded with news too terrible to really react to: guns are the #1 cause of death for children in the US, the climate crisis, attacks on reproductive justice, anti-trans legislation, and the general unraveling of our political systems.

And in that overwhelm, it is easy to say that abolition (yes, it is still that same old abolition of slavery we’re talking about, just dressed differently today) must wait. We’ll figure out what to do about cops and prisons later. But beloveds, I tell you true, the millions who are enslaved and caged in our prisons ask “when? When is this so-called more convenient season?”

So I say this, what we put off today will be even more difficult tomorrow. Evil relies on the principle that a body at rest stays at rest. It overwhelms us until we feel unempowered and ineffective. It relies on our certainty that there will be a “more convenient season” tomorrow, next week, next month, next election cycle, next and next and next.

But we can no longer afford to put off for tomorrow that which must be done today. To be true, we couldn’t afford it yesterday either. Our children literally march in the streets begging us for abolition, in the form of gun control. Our scientists beg for abolition, in the form of climate justice. Our Black and Indigenous peoples demand abolition, in the form of reparations. And our incarcerated siblings demand the abolition of slavery, in the form of prison and police resources transformed into community care resources.

My colleague the Rev. Julian Soto writes, “You are here to put out the ravenous flames of the world. Enough is enough.” In their words I hear that liberation is everyone’s responsibility: it is ours, it is yours. We can try to avoid the discomfort of that or we can face it, knowing we do it in solidarity with the communities whose lived experiences are the keys to making abolition a reality.

These are the tenets of our Unitarian Universalist theological foundation: we are *all* worthy of universal love and we are *all* responsible for creating heaven on earth. Beloveds *now* is the moment, *now* is the time, *now* is the season of our Unitarian Universalist mandate for liberation. Now is the inconvenient season of liberation.

So say we all and amen. ■

FROM OUR MEMBERS

We love hearing from members and friends of the Church of the Larger Fellowship about what our church community and the wider world of Unitarian Universalism mean to them. The following page includes testimonials from members and friends of the CLF.

My name is Michael. I have been incarcerated for eleven years. I was raised in the South. Very fire and brimstone stuff. No acceptance. Six years ago I found the CLF's address and completed your New UU course. It was the first time I questioned what I believed in and why. It changed my life and showed me to love people in a way that I had previously not known was possible.

Your letters and publications are filled with such love and acceptance, it brings joy to my heart. It has allowed me to stop some prejudices that I was brought up in. I try to share true love with everyone around me. You are great examples and inspirations. I know I am only one voice, and it may not seem like much, but this one voice spreads the value of Unitarian Universalism to everyone he meets. I hope this is your goal. I can honestly say that I would not be in the spiritual state I am in without your ministry. From my heart and soul, thank you.

— Michael, incarcerated CLF member

I feel more connected to the wider world of Unitarian Universalism through the CLF. Belonging is an emotional value for me and the CLF fulfills that portion of my spiritual need.

— Ira Lerner, free world CLF member

Of all my formative experiences, none have shown me a clearer vision of possibility as my internship at the Church of the Larger Fellowship. Covenantal relationship is at the heart of UU faith, and the CLF offers a radical interpretation of that message. Not only are we to be in relationship with the people near us, but we have an ability and obligation that is greater than that, that spans the globe and connects people with similar work and similar aspirations. As an intern at the CLF, I experienced church without a building or primary worship gathering to hold its center, where the essence of religious community was laid bare: A church is not just the gathered body; it is also the spider-webbing networks of relationship and being that hum around the clock, woven into the fabric of our lives.

— Sarah Prickett, former CLF Learning Fellow

The CLF is one big, strong, beautiful, spiritual family, full of loving people from all walks of life. It's a place where you won't be judged from your race, gender, or sexuality. I humbly respect all members of the CLF, especially those of you that are in staff positions, because it is you all who are holding it all together. Thank you for being strong. Thank you for being loving. Thank you for being here for me in my time of need. Because of you all, I feel blessed every day I wake up. I'll be a member of the CLF for all of my life.

— George, incarcerated CLF member



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The CLF: A Teaching Congregation



TANNER LINDEN
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The Church of the Larger Fellowship is a teaching congregation. Each year, we welcome intern ministers to our staff and community, they serve our church for a two-year fellowship. We call these intern ministers "Learning Fellows." Learning Fellows come from all walks of life, with many backgrounds and experiences. They bring rich teachings and passions to our community. We learn from them as much as we teach them. We are grateful to be a part of their ministerial formation journey.

The following prayer was written by one of our 2023 Learning Fellows, JeKaren Olaoya.

Prayer for Survival

To the God of many names
 and faces
 We pray.
 We ask for mercy as we
 look ahead
 Unsure of our path
 But clear in our need
 To feel safe.
 To feel whole.
 To feel held.

We ask for time as we move
 Planning as we go
 For things that matter deeply
 To find joy.
 To find hope.
 To find community.
 We ask for warmth as we are
 solitary
 Connecting through screens
 Touching hearts without hands



JEKAREN OLAOYA
*Learning Fellow, Church
 of the Larger Fellowship*

To stop loneliness.
 To stop hurting.
 To stop silence.
 All of these things we ask
 From each of us
 In our own way
 With our own spirits
 As we survive.
 Amen.