



**CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL
NATIONAL IDENTITY INITIATIVE**

INTERIM REPORT

MAY 2009

National Identity Task Force

BACKGROUND & MANDATE

The National Identity initiative was launched at the 2008 Annual Conference and Meeting, when delegates gave the go-ahead to the CUC Board to “articulate, and examine the utility and feasibility of promoting, a national UU identity”.

The rationale for the National Identity Initiative was defined thus:

- To provide more opportunities for congregations to engage in meaningful conversation;
- To clarify our identity, so that we can become better at living out who we say we are;
- To tell others more concisely about Canadian Unitarianism, so that those who haven't yet found their spiritual home might discover their place with us.

A call for task force members was sent out to congregations and communities in the fall, and the task force was subsequently established with representation from three regions, ministerial liaisons, a youth and a young adult member.

After initial consultations with a number of ministers and lay leaders, the task force created and offered National Identity workshops for congregations and all four Regional Fall Gatherings. A Sharing Our Faith service package was developed, based on the theme of National Identity. Congregations have made use of this material in innovative ways to generate engaged and lively “Who Are We?” discussions. The task force also continues efforts to involve UU youth and children.

The task force established several communication methods to gather input. An interactive website (wiki) was set up (<http://canadian-unitarian-council.pbwiki.com/Our-National-Identity>), through which UUs can find out more about the National Identity initiative, download workshop resources, and enter group and individual workshop responses. In addition, a blog and FaceBook group were set up to provide further means by which people can provide thoughts and comments.

This interim report contains a summary of the results from the workshops. These results will be presented and discussed at the 2009 ACM in Thunder Bay, where the Task Force will also host a workshop and a multigenerational session. Based on feedback from the ACM and on-going discussions and consultations, the task force will recommend next steps for the initiative, with a further report at the 2010 ACM.

The task force thanks all those who have been a part of the National Identity conversations to-date, and continues to invite input and dialogue on the initiative.

WORKSHOP QUESTIONS

Participants at the congregational workshops were asked the following series of questions:

- 1 a) What defines a UU? Is it our beliefs? Our values? Our actions? What are our defining characteristics?
- 1 b) What is unique about UUism as compared to other liberal faiths or philosophies?

- 2 a) What is it about your UU community that adds vitality and meaning to your life?
- 2 b) How do UU communities differ from other religious, philosophical or philanthropic groups?

- 3 a) What is our collective mission or purpose in society?
- 3 b) Are there areas where UUs are uniquely positioned to make a significant difference in society?

A scribe was nominated at each workshop to enter the group responses into the Task Force's website. Individual responses were also invited and received.

THE RESPONSES

The Task Force read all the workshop responses in their raw form, and found that certain themes emerged within the answers to each of the questions. Under each of the three categories addressed by the questions, the responses were grouped into those themes.

The 3 Categories:

1. What defines us and makes us unique
2. Joy and meaning from community
3. Our Mission and Purpose

The Task Force also cross-referenced the data using Margaret Wheatley and Myron Kellner-Rogers' *Dimensions of Identity*¹, to ensure that our interpretation of the components of identity was complete. These dimensions are

- History;
- Core Beliefs;
- Actions;
- Competencies;
- Values;
- Principles;
- Purpose; and
- Mission.

¹ *A Simpler Way*, Margaret Wheatley & Myron Kellner-Rogers, Berrett-Koehler 1996

Common Themes:

The **common themes** that emerged from the responses under each category are:

1. What defines us and makes us unique? (Questions 1a, 1b & 2b)

Religious Beliefs (Theology / “A-Theology”)

- ❖ We are non-creedal
- ❖ We have the ability to draw from many sources
- ❖ We possess principles instead of dogma

Journey & Process

- ❖ We engage in personal & communal open-ended search for truth & meaning
- ❖ We have freedom to ask questions

Diversity

- ❖ We celebrate a diversity of beliefs
- ❖ We believe that behaviour/action is more important than beliefs
- ❖ There is “acceptance without trial”

Self Determination

- ❖ We encourage personal responsibility in the development of our own theology
- ❖ We encourage our children & youth to question

Congregational Governance

- ❖ We are a grass roots organization, with a fluid hierarchy
- ❖ We have the ability to be flexible & adaptive in our processes, without being told what to do
- ❖ We practice congregational governance through participatory democracy and congregational covenants (“Polity”)

2. What is it about your UU community that adds vitality and meaning to your life? (Question 2a)

Community

- ❖ We are a safe, liberal, supportive, spiritual community of like-minded people
- ❖ We find friendship, openness & acceptance
- ❖ Our community is a second family; a “village” to raise our children in
- ❖ We have national and international community & connections

Spiritual Growth & Questioning

- ❖ We practice meaningful rituals & rites of passage
- ❖ We appreciate the diversity of services & pulpit messages, & ability to discuss content
- ❖ We have the ability to laugh together
- ❖ We accept people who don’t have a god in their religion

Individual Growth & Journey (Lifespan Learning)

- ❖ We are rejuvenated & challenged
- ❖ We have opportunities for personal & spiritual growth, & leadership
- ❖ We experience acceptance
- ❖ We find motivation for “right living”

Children & Youth

- ❖ We provide language & environment for our children & youth to ask questions & find their own answers
- ❖ We expose our children to morals, values & various religious traditions
- ❖ The youth are shining examples of our future

Music & Arts

- ❖ We enjoy the emphasis on arts in our services
- ❖ There is positive energy generated by music

Group Exploration & Process

- ❖ There is a commitment to dialogue as opposed to pronouncement
- ❖ We strive to be principled
- ❖ We work together to make a home for seekers

Congregational Polity & Governance

- ❖ We are non-hierarchical

Social Activism

- ❖ We focus on values & actions
- ❖ We are willing to work to change the world

3. Our Mission & Purpose (Questions 3a & 3b)

The World & Our Environment

We can:

- ❖ Make the world a better place through promoting UU principles in action
- ❖ Promote positive change towards peace & sustainability of our planet

Social Action & Social Justice

We can:

- ❖ Engage in social justice initiatives
- ❖ Promote justice within our own community
- ❖ Focus on public policy issues that are unique to Canada
- ❖ Connect people’s spirituality with social & environmental progress in Canada

Our UU Values & Principles

We can:

- ❖ Live our values and principles in Canada and the world at large
- ❖ Be a beacon of liberal religious thought & action
- ❖ Incorporate science & the rational into our spiritual lives

Communications & Dialogue

We can :

- ❖ Make connections with others in our communities - foster intellectual & spiritual engagement in warm & enriching environment
- ❖ Be a bridge between denominations in a nation that has a mosaic philosophy
- ❖ Be a voice for conscience & a call to compassion that speaks nationally
- ❖ Provide a voice for liberal humanist view, personal spiritual growth, & social justice in Canada

Creating Community

We can:

- ❖ Provide a place for ourselves & others who are like-minded
- ❖ Provide a safe home base where we are nurtured & affirmed to go out into the world
- ❖ Assist individual congregations
- ❖ Offer a spiritual home without religious dogma

Children & Youth

We can:

- ❖ Provide our children with knowledge base of world religious history, language
- ❖ Engage our youth & affirm the search for their own theology

Outreach

We can:

- ❖ Let people know we exist & how to find us
- ❖ Spread the word of our openness in accepting diverse viewpoints
- ❖ Grow vital religious communities across the country
- ❖ Support new & growing congregations
- ❖ Emphasize alignment of UU movement with Canadian values
- ❖ Let others know what we do for our members & wider community

HOW RESPONDENTS POSITIONED OUR “DEFINING” CHARACTERISTICS

- ❖ Non-creedal
- ❖ Ability to draw from many sources
- ❖ Possess principles instead of dogma
- ❖ Engage in open-ended search for truth & meaning
- ❖ Freedom to ask questions
- ❖ Celebrate diversity of beliefs
- ❖ Behaviour is more important than beliefs
- ❖ Acceptance without trial
- ❖ Self determination in developing own theology
- ❖ Encourage children & youth to question
- ❖ Grass roots, non-hierarchical
- ❖ Congregational polity

HOW RESPONDENTS ENVISIONED OUR MISSION & PURPOSE

- ❖ Improve the world through principles in action
- ❖ Promote social action within our communities
- ❖ Focus on unique Canadian public policy issues
- ❖ Connect spirituality with social & environmental progress
- ❖ Leader of liberal religious thought & action
- ❖ Incorporate science & the rational into our spiritual lives
- ❖ Foster intellectual & spiritual engagement in communities
- ❖ Be a bridge between denominations/interfaith groups
- ❖ Voice for liberal humanist view, personal spiritual growth, & social justice issues
- ❖ Provide safe spiritual home without dogma
- ❖ Grow vital religious communities
- ❖ Engage our youth & equip them for their own journey
- ❖ Support new & growing congregations
- ❖ Let others know we exist & how to find us (awareness building rather than proselytizing)
- ❖ Spread the word of our openness in accepting diverse viewpoints
- ❖ Emphasize alignment of UU movement with Canadian values

PROVOCATIVE THOUGHTS GLEANED FROM THE RESPONSES

While there were many similarities, the Task Force noticed that there were some ideas running through the responses that bear some mulling over.

- ❖ **The “Language Issue”**
 - Religious language vs. Secular language: there is a tension between using traditional “god” language, and a reluctance to use it
 - Beliefs: does this mean “religious beliefs” & “theology,” or does it mean a personal or moral code?
- ❖ **How diverse are we?**
 - Do we accept all beliefs and traditions?
- ❖ **We tend to define in negative rather than positive terms:**
 - “creedless,” “no dogma.” This may not be the most constructive way of framing who we are
- ❖ **Concern over proselytizing**
 - There appears to be an aversion to proselytizing - how do we spread the word?
- ❖ **There is broad (but not unanimous) agreement to engage collectively in social justice initiatives**
 - Many important causes were identified; however, no clear priorities have emerged
- ❖ **Are we truly distinctive?**
 - We lack formal understanding as to how (or if) we are distinctive

TASK FORCE CONCLUSIONS

1. **The process has been validated**
 - There were meaningful responses for each of Wheatley’s *Dimensions*
 - Responses coalesced around key themes
2. **We need to work further on how we define our distinctiveness, mission, and purpose.**

NEXT STEPS

The Task Force is recommending the following next steps:

1. **Validate and refine our findings** through:
 - sessions at the 2009 ACM
 - feedback from the UU community at large

Validation Questions:

- Do you find your personal UU identity reflected in the material presented? Is the information presented complete and accurate? What most resonates and what irritates? What is missing?
 - Which of the presented statements differentiate us from other liberal faith and philosophy based groups?
 - Do the mission and purpose statements define where Canadian UUs want to go?
2. **Continue engagement with ministers**
 3. **Clarify our distinctiveness**
 - seek external perspectives
 - consult through focus groups
 4. **Continue consultation with CUC Board re. progress**
 5. **Pursue articulation of identity, and examine feasibility of promotion**
 6. **Report to the 2010 ACM**

QUESTIONS, COMMENTS, INPUT?

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Respectfully submitted,

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