

**Reinventing the Wheel:  
Unitarian Universalist Youth History and Covenantal Theology**

---

by  
Carter Smith

---

Advisors:  
Dr. Emily Click, and  
Naohito Miura

---



A Senior Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Divinity  
Harvard Divinity School  
Harvard University  
Cambridge, Massachusetts  
May, 2021

© 2021

Carter Smith

Carter Susanna Hodges Smith

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

**Table of Contents**

<b>I.</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II.</b>	<b>Historiography How We Tell Our Stories</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>III.</b>	<b>The Birth of Unitarian Universalist Youth Ministry, A Brief Historical Summary</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>IV.</b>	<b>Liberal Religious Youth, Unitarian Universalism and Youth Culture</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>V.</b>	<b>Shifting into Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, Balancing Youth Empowerment and Adult Commitment</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>VI.</b>	<b>Ministry to and With Youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Governance and Resource Distribution</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>VII.</b>	<b>Covenantal Theology, Faithful Processes for Decision Making and Conflict Mending</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>VIII.</b>	<b>Synthesis, Youth Ministry Today and Tomorrow</b>	<b>41</b>
	<b>Appendix A: Historical Timeline</b>	<b>48</b>
	<b>Appendix B: Glossary of Terms</b>	<b>49</b>
	<b>Appendix C: Works Cited</b>	<b>51</b>

## I. Introduction

My Unitarian Universalism has roots in a little spot in Eastern North Carolina, in the middle of hog country, in the floodplains of the Cape Fear River.<sup>1</sup> Shelter Neck, with its old farm house, school house, and little white chapel is a historic Unitarian missionary effort that has since been transformed into a camp and conference center.<sup>2</sup> I had been attending Shelter Neck, for a couple of years as a youth leader before I began to get clued into the fact that this was part of a larger story. And I am speaking not of the historical property itself, but the story of more than a century of UU youth movements. One community member would talk about how her parents met on the property at a UU youth conference when they were in LRY. And, she loved LRY too when she was younger. Then, a young ministerial intern who was responsible for training the youth leaders would often incorporate goofy traditions from his “YRUU days” to teach us concepts about leadership. After hearing these acronyms enough times, I began to understand that LRY stood for Liberal Religious Youth, which was the original Unitarian Universalist youth institution that was disbanded and replaced with YRUU, or Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, the second major UU youth institution. Witnessing how my mentors’ nostalgia informed their work with us helped me to understand a defining feature of my own youth experience: I was part of no national UU youth institution, because there was none, and this was not how things had always been.

I embarked on this project in an attempt to reframe my own memories of UU youthhood at Shelter Neck. Thanks to the leadership of these adults, my peers and I were able to inherit the

---

<sup>1</sup> My nostalgia here is tinged with loss because Shelter Neck was severely damaged by floods from Hurricane Florence in 2018, and due to the high cost of repairing this historic property, it has been inoperable since.

<sup>2</sup> “History,” Shelter Neck UU Camp, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.shelterneckuucamp.org/Hist/History.html>.

living tradition of UU youth movements and echoes of the past surrounded everything we did together. At the same time, this past *felt* much less present than it actually was. Shelter Neck became its own world where my friends and I practiced being UU young people together, but without access to the full story of what brought us there and what it meant. These worlds that UU youth create together are sites of magic, and the unique gifts that each new generation brings is part of it. And, there are occasions—especially when conflict arises—that it is important for youth and adults who work with them to be literate in this history and better recognize the echoes that fill the air.

I believe that as Unitarian Universalists, our covenantal theology asks us to name difficult truths, be honest about the ways we've fallen short with each other, and learn from the past in order to live in community better in the future. This project, therefore, is an assertion of the importance of UU youth history in both better understanding our faith movement *and* in better living into our covenantal theology. As they always have and probably always will be, UU young people today are working to navigate their own identity and structural positionality to this wonderful faith. Youth, young people in the process of becoming, are sometimes at the margins of our faith, and it is important that Unitarian Universalism grows in order to invite them in more fully, in reverence for the gifts they bring. It is the responsibility of every UU to ensure that their communities are truly committed to youth as full members of this faith, and that this is expressed both sentimentally and materially. Paired with appropriate boundaries and practices of covenant, we can create thriving youth ministries that honor youth leadership now and always. We do this work for the future of our faith and its messy, beautiful present.

This paper is titled “Reinventing the Wheel” as an homage to Wayne Arnason and Rebecca Scott’s UU youth history book that was the entry point for my research. In it, they

explain that the cycles of youth trying things that have already been done before, struggling, and trying again can feel like a frustrating process of reinventing the wheel. But they, and I, argue that this very cycle of testing out, trying on ways of being in community, in repetitive and also uniquely innovative ways, is one of the important functions of youth ministry. In this paper, you may notice repeating patterns, ones you may have even witnessed firsthand. The title is an invitation to investigate and make meaning out of these cycles and to be open to the gifts that might be embedded in moments of frustration.

I begin this exploration with a section mapping this conversation historiographically, noting the ways our history is shared and passed down today, and changes I hope to see in our storytelling practices. The middle parts of this paper, sections three through six focus on telling a roughly chronological history of UU youth movements through thematic lenses that I hope will draw out key lessons from these different eras of youth history. Section three offers a brief foregrounding on the origins of UU youth movements. Section four discusses the organization Liberal Religious Youth (LRY) that operated from 1954 to 1982, exploring the ways that youth culture within UU spaces developed and clashed with the “adult denomination.” Further, it discusses how our faith communities can develop healthier relationships with boundaries, allowing the gifts of youth to be better shared and appreciated. Section five examines the transitional years that led to the dissolution of LRY and the life of Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU), the organization that replaced LRY and operated from 1982 to 2008. This section focuses on the task of balancing youth empowerment and adult commitment in youth ministry in order to complicate the duality of “youth autonomy” versus “adult control” that is frequently debated. Section six approaches the transition out of the YRUU era into the twenty-first century, looking closely at the role of governance and resource distribution as forms of

investment in our faith movement's youth. In many ways, this is a paper about institutions and the ways they work to live up to the values they espouse; this paper highlights the conversations on this topic that have been happening in the past couple of decades.

In section seven, I propose that Unitarian Universalists should center covenantal theology in our conversations about youth. Defining covenant as the faithful processes UUs use for decision-making and conflict-mending, I argue that covenant at its best can be a site of spiritual growth. UU theologian James Luther Adams articulated a covenantal theology that holds humans in all their promise-making, promise-breaking, and promise renewing capacity.<sup>3</sup> If this truth has been demonstrated anywhere in our faith movements, it has been present in our youth organizations. Additionally, I argue in this section that moments of conflict and transition in our youth organizations have been sites for the development and refinement of UU covenantal practices. I believe that much of the pain experienced by youth and adults who work with youth in these settings were caused or exacerbated by failures of covenant. Our covenants exist as guides to repairing ruptures that occur so that we may return to community with a sense of wholeness and renewal. This examination of youth history can offer insights from the successes and failures and messy in-between experiences of covenant throughout over a century of youth ministry. I offer it as a testimony to the importance of covenantal theology in youth ministry and all that we do in Unitarian Universalism.

My final section will offer information about current innovations and conversations in the world of UU youth ministry today. These are evidence for hope, furthering my conviction that

---

<sup>3</sup>James Luther Adams, "Prophetic Covenant and Social Concern", *The Essential James Luther Adams*, ed. George Kimmich Beach (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1998) page 232. In UU circles, Adams is an oft-cited articulator of covenantal theology, but he gained his description of humans as "promise-making, promise-breaking, promise re-making creatures" from Martin Buber's writing on human nature.

youth remain important leaders in Unitarian Universalism, whose creative efforts help them assert their needs in the wider UU context. This conclusion, bringing us back to the present day, highlights the nature of this history as one that is continuously unfolding and ever-present in our work today.

In addition to my works cited section, I offer two appendices for reference that readers may want to turn to throughout this text. There is a timeline, giving a broad outline of key dates mentioned in this paper, and a glossary with explanations of key terms that take on specific meanings in the UU youth world. I hope that these are helpful tools for contextualization of this conversation.

As a lifelong Unitarian Universalist who was shaped by youth programming, a current religious educator in a youth coordinator role, and a future UU minister, this work is deeply personal and I hope it will be an act of accountability to my wider community. Because mine is one voice alone, it is also only a starting point, a contribution to a wider conversation about UU youth movements that is much larger than I can capture here. I invite conversation and collaboration, and look forward to the ways that this project will unfold in the years to come.

---

## **II. Historiography: How We Tell Our Stories**

Examining UU youth history is important because many of today's leaders experience it as distant, opaque, and inaccessible. I have been in countless conversations with other UU young people who long to know the past as one way of better understanding these institutions they inhabit. I was involved in UU youth programs for years before I understood that there was any



wider context to connect with. For me, a wider context came slowly, through attendance at General Assemblies and other opportunities and other programs that got me in touch with youth from across the continent. Though I often credit my home congregation, the Community Church of Chapel Hill, with fomenting my call to ministry, I realize now that it only made sense as a life path once I discovered a wider story within which to contextualize this call. And, it was in this national context that I first experienced disillusionment with my faith community. I met peers who didn't have thriving youth groups to call home, whose leadership was diminished in their congregations, and who were upset with the status quo for national-level youth ministry. Yet, it was hard to get information about why this was the case, our history felt confusing and inaccessible. Youth can experience this contextualization as both affirming and destabilizing, so it is crucial that youth be offered their own history as a tool for navigating this complicated landscape.

I have heard first-hand how UU youth and young adults experience a longing for knowledge about this history, and that should be enough reason for UU communities to be more literate in it. But a commitment to telling these stories has important practical ramifications as well. Youth know that LRY and YRUU faced disbandment, largely officiated by the UUA administration, and get the sense that they must constantly fight for adult commitment and equitable use of resources. Because this history has caused pain for so many, there remains a sense that it is a somewhat taboo subject to get too far into the details, that any young person who attempts to do so may have to face some very ugly parts of our faith, and even some adults who have not fully worked through their own hurt. There's a level of accountability that is difficult when youth get the message that this history is taboo. When they've only heard hearsay about the past, they may experience fear that unhealthy dynamics are repeating themselves, but

without the direct evidence to name these patterns for what they are. We need to do better for the sake of healing, and for moving forward with clarity.

Notably, the problems posed by the failure to be rooted in history are not new, and they pose many of the same practical problems today as they have in the past. In an article in YRUU's journal, *Synapse*, published in 2004, Tim Fitzgerald and Heather Vail wrote, "YRUU leadership is slowly decaying due to our community's lack of a collective memory and its seeming inability to effectively pass leadership skills and vision on to younger youth"<sup>4</sup> This passage emphasizes that cultivating a collective memory and passing it on to those after us is a necessary part of doing our work well, and supporting the thriving of our leadership structures.

For now, our oral traditions are not quite enough, because the pain and fear and resentment they convey can cloud real understanding. If our faith calls us to name hurt and build transformative relationships, we must search for ways to understand and tell this history that strive toward healing and right relationship. I do not have the perfect formula for how to do this well, but believe strongly that it is important work that will sustain and strengthen Unitarian Universalism, now and in the future. To begin with, the only comprehensive book on this subject, *We Would Be One*—which, written in 2002, is outdated—has been out of print for years, and the publisher, Skinner House Books, has been unresponsive to my emails inquiring for more information. For myself and my peers, we have only been able to discover this book, and therefore our history, through the kindness of mentors who happen to have a copy and are willing to share it.<sup>5</sup> As a simple first step, this book should be made more widely available, or even updated.

---

<sup>4</sup> Heather Vail and Tim Fitzgerald, "Is It Time for Another 'Common Ground'?": Why YRUU Must Change or Die.," *Synapse*, Fall 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Judith Frediani, I plan to return the book after I finish this paper.

Further, many of my interlocutors and I dream of a central and accessible internet archive that houses oral histories, formal documents, old journals, and more, so that people seeking to understand this history have somewhere to go. There are people who have attempted to create this kind of work in little corners of the internet, and these websites have been invaluable pieces of my resource-gathering work.<sup>6</sup> They serve as evidence that this history is one that people are called to share and to devote their time to make available to the world. Could such an archive serve as a repository for the history that is being made now? I hope so.

*Emergent Strategy*, by adrienne maree brown, is a book that is increasingly being used as a tool and orienting ethic for UU youth and young adult work, and is a text that has inspired me deeply in this season of my life. It contains a language for explaining how individuals and communities are changed through relationships and dialogue, a concept named “dialectical humanism”.<sup>7</sup> In accordance with this principle, I offer this project as one contribution to this dialogue, in hopes that it will equip me to be part of the relationships and conversations that will shape UU youth ministry for the better. It is deeply important that we do the work of understanding this history and learning how to share it, so that youth can continue to reinvent the wheel with the knowledge that they are part of a wider story.

---

<sup>6</sup> “YRUU Institutional Memory Project,” <http://yruuinstitmem.blogspot.com/>.  
“Freedom to Question: Voices from a Century-Plus Tradition of U Youth Groups,”  
<http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/>.

<sup>7</sup> brown, adrienne maree, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017.

### III. The Birth of Unitarian Universalist Youth Ministry: A Brief Historical Summary

This study focuses on youth ministry in the era after the merger of Unitarian and Universalist youth organizations in the post-war period of the twentieth century. However, it is important to note that generations of youth leaders preceded this time, and the shape of youth ministry had already undergone many shifts and changes. Here I will give some basic background on pre-merger Unitarian and Universalist youth ministry as well as briefly noting the contours of UU youth ministry since.

American faith groups in the late nineteenth century saw a flurry of activity in youth and young adults organizing together; Unitarian and Universalist congregations were not exempt from this.<sup>8</sup> It was a time when voluntary organizations in general thrived, and church programming was beginning to be more specialized according to age groups. As such, the UU youth movement began in a very organic way, and carried on as such until after World War Two. In this time, generations of leadership passed through, created a strong financial basis, and did their share of engaging in current events and pushing for social change. Local groups organized young people, and worship-centered conferences gave them a space to broaden and deepen a sense of community.<sup>9</sup> Youth organizations in both denominations included a younger age range than what we today consider to be youth, and their structures were organized differently as well. Notably, in the 1890s, young people were considered those under 35, and ages of leadership tended toward the older end of this range. This constituency would have largely been married young adults who were already working and raising children. Therefore, they were able to do

---

<sup>8</sup> Wayne Arnason and Rebecca Scott, *We Would Be One: A History of Unitarian Universalist Youth Movements* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005), 2. Arnason and Scott date efforts to organize a unified Universalist youth organization to 1883, and date the emergence of “young people’s guilds” to 1887 in Littleton, MA.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-76.

most of their fundraising internally and operate more autonomously than youth of later generations.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after World War II, the Unitarian and Universalist denominations passed resolutions in favor of exploring a merger, and created a Commission on Union for that purpose.<sup>11</sup> Though the denominations had been “dancing around the issue of merger for years,” their youth took the charge seriously and began the merger process a full decade before the formation of the Unitarian Universalist Association<sup>12</sup>. The new organization, Liberal Religious Youth, was born at a conference in Lake Winnepesaukee, NH, and the merger was finalized in 1953. I’ve often heard LRY’s formation described as the great contribution of UU youth to our faith’s history because these youth are often credited with pushing the adult denominations closer to merger. Sam Wright, the final AUY president and first LRY executive director, composed the beloved UU hymn “We Would Be One” in celebration of the youth merger.<sup>13</sup>

Liberal Religious Youth would go on to define the shape of UU youth ministry, and it became a holding container where larger cultural shifts were lived out and tested in the UU context. By the 1970s, LRY became a radical voice within the UU polity, and began grappling with their relationship to the denomination as a whole. In the early 1980s, a duo of conferences dubbed “Common Ground” became the site of LRY’s dissolution and the birth of Young Religious Unitarian Universalists (YRUU), an attempt at a fresh start. YRUU was the national UU youth organization for nearly three decades, and they shifted the conversation about youth leadership by working closely with the UUA to define programs and governance structures.

---

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>11</sup> Dan McKanan, ed., “Constitutions of the American Unitarian Youth and Liberal Religious Youth, 1953,” in *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism, Volume 2* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017), 173–74.

<sup>12</sup> Arnason and Scott, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 77-97.

Since 2008 there has not been a national youth organization, though many gifts from previous generations of leaders continue to be carried forward. The UU youth landscape of today is one in flux, as it always has been. What follows here is an examination of this history in an effort to make meaning out of the past so that we may be more attentive to the patterns that show up in our work today.

---

#### **IV. Liberal Religious Youth: Unitarian Universalism and Youth Culture**

Liberal Religious Youth provides an interesting case study because it was deeply shaped by the larger changes in youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s and was key in defining a specifically UU youth culture for years to come. LRY leaders were actively testing out programming and leadership norms, creating games and rituals, and working (in often messy and sometimes harmful ways) to hold appropriate boundaries on behavior while allowing space for all things good that the counterculture had to offer.

Developing on earlier models, LRY operated largely through local groups affiliated with congregations who networked together at district and continental conferences (or, cons, for short). These large gatherings of youth, taking place over long weekends or whole weeks during the summer, acted as central sites for discovering meaning and community in LRY. They were places of intensity and consistency, keeping many youth in LRY even when they did not feel they had a comfortable home in their local congregations.

Various youth magazines over the years served as powerful connective forces between cons. These crowdsourced journals included content such as information on upcoming cons,

classifieds pages filled with inside jokes to their geographically distant friends, and even advice pieces such as a mini guide to hitch-hiking as one trick for attending youth events on a budget. They also included art, poetry, and essays on political topics such as nuclear disarmament, draft resistance, and reproductive rights.<sup>14</sup>

Historical sources show that LRY represented an era of unparalleled vigor and excitement for participants, especially during the larger societal changes brought about by the counterculture movement. Compared to their parents, youth in the 1960s and 1970s were experiencing more mobility and opportunities for political and social involvement. Plus, they were famous for their experimentation with “sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll”. This experimentation has always been contentious, no more than in these early years, when youth events lacked standardized behavioral contracts. LRY was famous for such wild behavior, causing youth advisors and supporting congregations to feel great anxiety over how to respond. As a relic of this era, *People Soup* editions are full of psychedelic art, pieces containing nudity, and essays debating how conference leaders should respond when they find this experimentation taking place. Depending on the advisors, this often meant either turning a blind eye or having the offending attendees removed from the conference. In one case, such a conflict was brought to the floor for a whole-conference meeting.<sup>15</sup> For better and for worse, LRY developed a strong “hippie” reputation during this time that stuck.

A particularly noteworthy example can be found in Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, in a passage memorializing a moment of the wider counterculture colliding with the

---

<sup>14</sup> “Supplemental Materials,” Freedom to Question, [http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/supplemental\\_materials.htm](http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/supplemental_materials.htm).

I am grateful to the archivists at Freedom to Question who gathered a repository of these journals (*People Soup*, *Promethean*, *Synapse*, and more) that were helpful in giving me a fuller picture of the youth experience in the pre-digital age.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 137-138.

UU youth experience. The book chronicles Ken Kesey and his merry band of pranksters' LSD-fueled road trip escapades with the likes of the Hell's Angels and the Grateful Dead. The chapter "A Miracle in Seven Days" portrays the crew in their bus crashing a LRY conference on a beach in Monterey, California, where some cool young ministers<sup>16</sup> and many youth joined in the merriment. Famously, Carolyn Adams (AKA Mountain Girl) was an LRY participant who became a main character in Wolfe's book and later would spend a decade married to Jerry Garcia. In the chapter, Wolfe references the appropriate adult nervousness at the scene. He writes, "But the Unitarian... Youth, the teenagers weren't uptight at all. They flocked around the bus as soon as it got there. Which only wound their parents up tighter, of course. By nightfall the Unitarian Church in California was divided into two camps: on the bus and off the bus."<sup>17</sup> I include this anecdote because this famous text fantastically captures the tension surrounding LRY, showing just how pervasive the issue was.

Speaking to the power of LRY for youth in this era, Arnason and Scott write,

From a broader sociological point of view, LRY was an organization in the right place at the right time, insofar as the cultural changes of the mid-1960s were concerned... On many parts of the continent, LRY was the only peer-group institution outside the all-pervasive social reality of high school that was neither organizationally nor psychologically dominated by adults. The communications network that LRY represented, with its regional and continental conferences, led people out of their high school and home-town cocoons at an earlier age. So when the 'lid blew off the culture,' LRY was one of the pressure points where the steam first began to burst through.

It is important here to emphasize that for liberal baby boomers coming of age, LRY was not only responding to the larger sea changes of the era, but was a site of actively engaging and testing them out.

---

<sup>16</sup> Including one who, in his retirement, became a member of my home congregation.

<sup>17</sup> For text box: Tom Wolfe, "A Miracle in Seven Days," in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York, NY: Picador, 1968), 182–97.



To narrow the focus some, the LRY era offers a glaring case study on how leaders have historically responded to sex and substance use at youth events. Unitarian Universalists generally consider themselves “sex positive,” and want to equip people, especially young people, with the knowledge to have healthy, consensual, and pleasurable sexual experiences in their lives. Though views on drugs vary a great deal more, UUs are generally not staunch prohibitionists. Therefore, our approach has been different than some other faith groups might be. All of this being true, I have heard worries about real hurt caused during LRY by this behavior that speak to the need for better boundary-setting.<sup>18</sup> Plus, sexual behavior and use of substances in settings like cons make parents and adult advisors wary of supporting the events in the first place and are often disruptive to community cohesion.

For the most part, a standard guideline for behavioral expectations was not set until the 1982 youth assembly that marked the transition from LRY to YRUU. For this event, the Continental Youth-Adult Committee (CYAC) that was responsible for writing the guidelines was in an uncomfortable position because they received threats of boycott and other sanction from ministers and an entire district if they didn’t place an outright ban on sex. These youth leaders wanted to make these decisions without coercion, and managed to strike a balance with their behavioral covenant.<sup>19</sup> Though UUs have followed a version of the Common Ground model for decades, youth experimentation with sex and drugs remain complicated topics. In cases where youth violate these rules and are asked to leave from a particular conference, that is usually not the end of the relationship, and it can be a long and painful process to restore them to the

---

<sup>18</sup> Kate Tweedie Erslev, “Bolster and Protect Youth Groups,” in *Full Circle: Fifteen Ways to Grow Lifelong UUs* (Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2004).

This text offers a helpful discussion on the importance of intentional youth group, and describes survey respondents’ negative experiences with sexual and substance abuse in youth groups, exacerbated by absent or actively harmful advisors.

<sup>19</sup> UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee, “Common Ground 1982.”

community in the aftermath. To further complicate things, there are still a few youth events where program leaders do not ask for participants to restrain from sexual behavior, and instead offer reminders about safer sex and local statutes regarding age of consent.<sup>20</sup>

When thinking about boundaries, youth interest in sex and drugs can stand out as the most scandalous and uncomfortable issues to address. But the conversation about boundaries should go much farther. In Unitarian Universalism, adults that hold positions of power to influence youth programming must be intentional about the reasons they feel inclined to restrict youth with the use of boundaries. They should be asking questions such as whether boundaries exist to maintain structures of power, or are to affirm and respect the humanity of everyone in the community.

I also want to assert that some of the aspects of youth culture that can be uncomfortable for adults *could* instead be seen as gifts to our faith communities. Youth experimentation with drugs and alcohol is often driven by an urge to experience new things, to seek out feelings of intensity and connection. Channeled into event planning and worship, youth have an amazing ability to create whole worlds as a community, build incredibly tight bonds, and seek spiritual depth that otherwise might be hard to find in UU spaces. Wise congregational leaders understand that youth can be skillful worship leaders and event planners when given the appropriate space and tools, absent of boundaries set by congregants who are nervous about youth being in charge of “real church.”

---

<sup>20</sup> Though I cannot comment on current policies, I attended the Southeast Unitarian Universalist Summer Institute (SUUSI) once as a teenager, where the orientation to the teen dorm included an orientation like I am describing here. Similarly, Star Island’s Youth Empowerment and Spirituality (YES) conference with roots in the LRY era hosts ages 16-22, and lore has it that it is because the age of consent is 16 in New Hampshire, where the conference center is located.

This does not just apply to worship. Jen Harrison's essay in *Essex Conversations* argues that youth models of small group ministry are an example "of what Unitarian Universalism as a whole could learn from young people's work and ministry, but are too egg-headed to ask." Youth groups, through their conversation-based and covenantal modes of being, are able to embody UU principles of inclusion, spiritual seeking, and interconnectedness in ways that are much harder to access through mere Sunday morning church attendance. I believe Harrison's essay is limited in that it portrays youth as a fully separate body that adults can observe and extract wisdom from. Still, it makes clear that wisdom and skills put in practice by youth are applicable beyond the youth group setting.<sup>21</sup>

In 1969, an event known most commonly as "the Empowerment Controversy" rattled Unitarian Universalism and intensified the question of youth identity. At that year's General Assembly in Boston, Black liberationists and their allies—both groups including LRY participants—organized to request funding from the UUA to establish a Black Affairs Council (BAC) in order to further the cause of Black Power. In the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, which had invigorated white UU commitments to racial justice, and in the face of a looming denominational budget crisis, this issue quickly became contentious. To be frank, the white-majority denomination was also suffering from internalized white supremacy, leading many "well-meaning" white UUs to respond with unhelpful alternative proposals while others were all-out hateful. The pressure burst during a UUA presidential candidates' forum when organizers held a planned mic seizure to pressure GA leaders to put the BAC question on the agenda. There was a shoving match at one of the mic stands between a youth and an adult

---

<sup>21</sup> Jen Harrison, "Youth Groups as a Model for Transformative Ministry," *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2001) 107-122.

leader—by the accounts I’ve read, the adult gave the first push—and BAC supporters walked out in tears to shouts of vitriol, because they experienced this moment as a denial of their place in the denomination. Accounts of this moment are heartbreaking to hear. White ministers who joined the walkout were spat on by their colleagues, accused of blackmail, and threatened with violence.<sup>22</sup>

It is tempting to get too far into the details of this time period because of its complexity and emotional weight, and because it is a moment in our denominational history that I believe everyone should know about. For deeper reading, I would like to direct readers to UU historian Mark Morrison-Reed’s work in *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy*, which offers a comprehensive narrative and an analysis that does more justice to the events than I could in this short summary.

Those who walked out of that GA session gathered to process and plan at Arlington Street Church, where LRY leaders led the evening worship.<sup>23</sup> In this setting, I imagine that the spiritual intensity and experience as outsiders in the UUA would have been assets in designing worship that night. This ritual had the power to prepare this community for the work to walk back in and make efforts at the repairs that were ahead of them. Then, it was the youth who poured balloons over the balcony during “the great walk-back-in.”<sup>24</sup> Thanks to concerted organizing efforts by LRY executive team members, youth played this important role because they numbered over 100, with 62 registered delegates.<sup>25</sup> With youth voting almost unanimously in favor of funding BAC, the final narrow vote passed 798 to 737, a margin of only 61.<sup>26</sup> I cannot

---

<sup>22</sup> Mark D. Morrison-Reed, “Boston General Assembly” *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism* (Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2018) 158-189.

<sup>23</sup> Arnason and Scott, p. 144-145.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>26</sup> Morrison-Reed, p. 177.

say how things would have turned out if youth were not present, but this moment solidified the youth caucus as a powerful voting bloc at GA, a position that they have maintained since.

I want to emphasize not only the way that youth shaped this important moment in UU history, but also the way that this moment shaped UU youth identity. Larry Ladd, the white LRY president at the time was deeply moved by his witness to the Black Power movement at the 1968 Cleveland GA and the broader cultural landscape. He worked to incorporate Black liberationist theories of marginalization and self-determination into his youth work in ways that were significant, messy, and at times problematic. In a sermon to his Brooklyn congregation that was widely circulated to drum up youth GA attendance Ladd laid out the demands of his Youth Agenda. He used rhetoric similar to that used by Black Power leaders in the denomination, and he went as far as referring to youth using the n word, and dubbing schools “youth ghettos.”<sup>27</sup> Though it would have been wiser to be more intentional with how far he should take the metaphor of Black and youth liberation, Ladd’s work shaped the direction of LRY.<sup>28</sup> This Youth Agenda demanded youth budgetary self-determination, programmatic decentralization, the institution of “field workers,” and asked for the UUA’s energy to support “youth issues” such as educational reform.<sup>29</sup>

As a last note about the empowerment controversy, there were many people, especially UUs of color, who did not experience this as a great victory but rather unveiled the UUA’s hypocrisy on issues of racial justice.<sup>30</sup> It caused for some an experience of disillusionment

---

<sup>27</sup> Larry Ladd, “Bitter Brooklyn,” *Nameless Newsprint*, October 1969.

<sup>28</sup> Wayne B. Arnason, *Follow the Gleam: A History of the Liberal Religious Youth Movements* (Skinner House Books, 1980) 173.

<sup>29</sup> Wayne Arnason, “GA Info,” *Nameless Newsprint*, October 1969.

<sup>30</sup> Morrison-Reed, 313.

leading them to leave this faith.<sup>31</sup> The 1969 General Assembly was difficult in some ways and empowering in others. Still, the funding was later defeated by President Robert West's budget cuts, causing more pain than the walkout itself.<sup>32</sup> For those who stayed, the rupture of these years changed the way youth saw themselves and related to the denomination as a whole. It put in stark contrast the radicality of youth culture and the reticence of adults to support or engage with it. At the same time, it strengthened the youth movement's commitment to social and political organizing, and further fueled energy for experiences of youth autonomy.

In closing, I want to ask about how UUs today respond to and value these aspects of youth culture. UUs today explicitly strive to form multi-generational communities, and these must be founded on our celebration of youth as important contributors to this community in their own right. We must be open to not only building relationships with and supporting people of all ages in our communities, but also to actively learning from those relationships, and being willing to experience spiritual growth alongside one another. The LRY era showed us some of the possibilities and pitfalls of youth culture, and can help us imagine what could be created when youth are given intentional boundaries and faithful support.

---

<sup>31</sup> Rev. William Sinkford, "The Dream of White Innocence," UU World, November 28, 2016, <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/dream-white-innocence>.

<sup>32</sup> Arnason and Scott, 149.

## V. Common Ground to Young Religious Unitarian Universalists: Balancing Youth Empowerment and Adult Commitment

For LRY, the 1960s were the decade for establishing a unique UU youth identity within the larger cultural landscape. Subsequently, the 1970s were spent negotiating the complicated relationship of youth and their organizations to the “adult denomination.” By 1980 though, many leaders began to believe that nothing besides a complete overhaul of the LRY could lead to UU youth and the UUA living in right relationship with one another. The 1981 and 1982 Common Ground conferences marked the end of LRY and the beginning of YRUU, and signified a moment of ongoing tension erupting into the foreground. Reports of these conferences, though they do not use the same language as I do, illuminate the ways that delegates hoped to create an organization that could hold youth empowerment *and* adult involvement as core values.

LRY in the early 1970s was shaped by disillusionment, budget cuts, and a newfound autonomy. It focused its energy on establishing new programs, shifting strategy, and trying to create a sustainable youth-run model that worked and maintained support from adult UU stakeholders. Though Larry Ladd’s Youth Agenda had won the LRY Board the right to control its \$45,000 budget, their first allocation attempt totaled \$62,000 and cutting programs was a painful process. But, within only a few months of the newly elected UUA President Robert West’s term, the denomination acknowledged that it was facing a budget crisis and the LRY budget was slashed to just \$32,000. This not only limited what the new LRY leadership team could accomplish, but contributed to further feelings of disenfranchisement from the UUA.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

In this context, LRY continued organizing with BAC supporters, worked to maintain a youth presence at General Assemblies, and pressed the UUA to support its political goals.<sup>34</sup> At the 1970 General Assembly in Seattle, LRY Executive Committee members successfully lobbied enough support to pass landmark social witness statements in favor of marijuana legalization and civil rights for homosexuals.<sup>35</sup> Structurally, LRY also experimented with a new Youth-Adult Committee as a trust-building process, abolished their previous hierarchical leadership model in favor of collective decision-making processes, and worked to develop up-to-date curriculum materials for congregations to use with their high school youth groups. Titling this era *The New Community*, the LRY Executive Committee worked to support local groups in developing their identity as a familial religious community in support of personal liberation.<sup>36</sup> These internal efforts demonstrate that some LRY leaders were interested in having a positive and productive relationship with adult UUA leaders as well as local congregations, though within a climate of ongoing fear and animosity between these constituent groups.

By 1975, though, the UUA was concerned about LRY's membership declining in numbers while relationships between youth and adults in the denomination were not significantly improving. Taking action, UUA leaders commissioned a Special Committee on Youth Programs (SCOYP) which investigated and reported on the denomination's youth ministry, attempting to make recommendations for approval. This report was controversial among LRY members who charged it with favoring adult voices over youth. As a result the report and its recommendations

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 151-152.

<sup>35</sup> Note that these may have been less contentious than the 1969 BAC resolution because Social Witness Statements are non-binding expressions of belief, rather than commitments to active funding and support. "Legalization of Marijuana | General Resolution," UUA | Social Witness Statements, 1970, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/legalization-marijuana>. "Discrimination Against Homosexuals and Bisexuals | General Resolution," UUA | Social Witness Statements, 1970, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/discrimination-against-homosexuals-and-bisexuals>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 153.



were discredited by LRY participants though it contained a valid assessment of some of LRY's issues. They experienced it, reasonably so, as adult intrusion on their work, an effort by the UUA to rein in youth radicalism.<sup>37</sup>

Still, the UUA remained committed to reforming youth programs. As part of this commitment, UUA President Eugene Pickett hired its first full time adult staff for youth programs in a decade.<sup>38</sup> Beginning in this role in 1979, former LRY president Rev. Wayne Arnason wrote his first youth history book, *Follow the Gleam*, and worked with LRY leaders to address the discord surrounding the SCOYP report. Arnason and the LRY executive team hosted a two-part Youth Assembly, called Common Ground I & II, for youth and adult stakeholders to re-imagine and re-constitute the UUA's youth programs together.

Common Ground I, in 1981, used small consensus-building circle groups to propose recommendations to the LRY and UUA Boards, the first of which was to dissolve LRY over a two-year period and build a successor organization. Additionally, they requested a specialized Youth Programs department of the UUA with both youth and adult staff, expanded the participant age range to 12-22, and advocated youth representation on the UUA Board.<sup>39</sup> Ultimately, most of these were adopted, but the UUA Board of Trustees was not interested in reserving a seat for a "special interest group." As an attempt at compromise, they promised that their nominating committee would try to recruit more youth candidates to the Board.<sup>40</sup> The first Assembly appointed the Continental Youth Adult Committee for planning the second Youth Assembly that would determine the shape of the new youth organization.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 161-166.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>39</sup> UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee, "Common Ground 1982".

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 3

Maintaining the first Assembly's 3:1 youth to adult ratio, Common Ground II had delegates from all 23 UUA districts, and used a parliamentary-style process (like the modified Robert's Rules of Order used at UUA General Assemblies) for crafting the bylaws of the new organization. This five-day business meeting to birth the "Common Ground Baby" was interspersed with workshops, games and social events. Focusing on determining the structure and crafting the bylaws of the new youth organization, it is clear that delegates were striving to improve relationships and boost collaboration between youth and adults at all levels of the UUA. On the final day, after much debate, they named the new organization Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, or YRUU.

After Common Ground, LRYers were left to mourn the loss of this group that had been an integral part of their adolescent experience. Beyond solidifying this personal loss, many feared that the change to YRUU would signal the end of the "youth autonomy" that they had fought so hard for. In some ways they were right. The organization made a significant shift from thinking in terms of youth autonomy to talking more about youth empowerment. I am not just speaking here of adults setting boundaries and navigating generational differences of culture, but real negotiation of power. This boils down to one debate: Does having close structural ties and dependence on the adult UU denomination strengthen a youth organization's ability to access resources and sustain itself over time, or does it ultimately water down the message of radical youth empowerment, leading the organization to be a shell of what it could be?

Unfortunately, there is truth in both sides of the question, calling those of us doing youth ministry to seek a middle path, rather than charging with full force in the direction of either youth autonomy or adult control. YRUU was an attempt to strike this balance, creating governance systems that placed youth affairs firmly within the work of the UUA, and included

supportive adults at every level. Notably, the organizers of Common Ground II went further than instituting a 3:1 youth/adult ratio. They made an effort to ensure that every participant was well-informed on the issues and procedures so that they could participate fully and without coercion.<sup>42</sup> In fact, this was LRY's main problem with the Special Committee on Youth Programs Report, that it was too heavily balanced toward adults, and the youth voices were not chosen with intention. This ratio then became a central organizing feature of YRUU for the decades to come.

The work of Common Ground I & II effected massive cultural changes in the UU Continental Youth. The most spirited debates of the Assembly highlight the questions they were grappling with that would reappear throughout YRUU's tenure. Front and central was the relationship between this new organization and the UUA administration and congregations. YRUU also developed the norm of district and continental Youth-Adult Committees as a key leadership structure. The new organization itself was run by the YRUU Council, consisting of twenty-three district youth, and eight adults (one from the UUA board) who met annually, balanced by the Steering Committee, with a smaller membership and more frequent meetings.<sup>43</sup>

Another major innovation was the institution of a new Youth Office in the UUA with two full-time youth employees working alongside the adult staff member. LRY, on the other hand, had an ebb and flow of executive committees who lived and worked in a shared apartment in Boston on a meager stipend, but did not have formal positions within the UUA. By introducing the two full-time Youth Programs Specialist positions in the Department of Religious Education, adult staff members had the opportunity to build collegial relationships with these youth leaders.<sup>44</sup> YRUU completely reshaped the relationships between the youth organization and the

---

<sup>42</sup> UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee, "Common Ground 1982."

<sup>43</sup> UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee, "Common Ground 1982".

<sup>44</sup> Arnason and Scott, 190.

adult denomination. Many youth leaders were given the experience of being valued voices in denominational leadership. Their dedicated labor ensured that the organization would be one led by a combination of empowered youth and committed adult leaders.

In my time as a youth, my work with youth, and my work on this project, I have come to the core belief that youth leadership needs to be viewed and respected as an amazing and important form of leadership *and* adults need to put in the time and effort to respond to and advocate for that leadership, rather than letting youth figure it out on their own. This is why I suggest, rather than a singular focus on “youth autonomy,” that we strive for a paradigm wherein youth empowerment and adult commitment are tied closely together and support one another. I see in YRUU’s development a positive shift in this direction. This conversation is not about *who* holds power, but *how* leaders with different positionalities can hold power intentionally and in harmony with our values as a faith. This balance can be struck in any youth ministry space, from local youth groups to regional conferences to continental business meetings. Such groups work best when adults are present, invested, and supportive of youth trying on power and making decisions for themselves.

I believe that at the heart of this issue is the Unitarian Universalist view of youth and how they fit into our faith communities. Because Unitarian Universalists identify as religiously liberal, believing in many possible paths to truth and meaning, there is a problematic tendency to assume that young people raised UU will turn eighteen, go out into the world, and start their own spiritual journey. This pattern is rooted in a number of important places of our living tradition, from interpretations of our beloved Transcendentalist odes to individuality to our Fourth Principle promoting “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” Yet, this causes parents, congregational leaders, and even religious educators to believe that the role of a

congregation in a young person's life is to equip them with positive morals and spiritual tools so that they are well-equipped when they eventually fly the nest. This mindset is beautifully supportive of people who make diverse life choices, yet it is problematic to treat youth as if they will not find a permanent and sustaining home in our faith. Unfortunately, this leads to the process of aging out of youth programs feeling more like "cliffing" than the "bridging" into young adulthood that we strive for.<sup>45</sup> Though this impulse makes sense within the context of UU culture, I believe this is partially connected to many UU adults' inability to see youth as full and potentially life-long participants in Unitarian Universalism.

If we are not invested in *raising UUs*, then it seems like an insurmountable task to invest in radical and life-changing youth programs that fully honor youth as important and long-term members of our communities. I am grateful to YRUU leaders that came before me who gave language to this phenomenon and worked to address the ways it showed up in their own context. Unfortunately this tendency continues. It is my hope that we can use this awareness to push for further cultural shifts, cultivating balanced youth empowerment and adult commitment.

---

## **VI. Ministry to and with Youth in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Governance and Resource Distribution**

Without much delay, YRUU became as vibrant and meaningful in participants' lives as LRY had been. After three decades, there were, inevitably, ways the organization was shifting and functioning in less than perfect ways. Again, the UUA pushed for a restructuring that

---

<sup>45</sup> Eric Swanson, "Eric Swanson Guest Contribution," *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008, <https://yruuinstitmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/eric-swanson.html>.

upended youth ministry as people knew it, the consequences of which still ripple out today. Leaders' hopes that by refining the details of governance shows us that the shape of organizations plays an important role in whether they can actually enact the values they purport to hold. Though youth leaders and supporting adults have expressed commitment to the project of thriving equitable youth ministries, this commitment is always enacted in governance and resource distribution. At the dawn of the new century and today, youth and adults who support them have worked hard to analyze the institutions they reside within, leading changes when needed.

I am grateful to a collection of blogs published in this era, cataloguing the changes during roughly 2005 to 2008. Primarily, the "YRUU Institutional Memory Project" contains a series of letters and guest posts documenting these last years of the institution. In one post, former youth leader Nick Allen explains how YRUU had not been meeting the goals it set out to accomplish. He wrote of the structure,

It does not efficiently disseminate information to district and congregational levels of youth leadership. It does not give youth a strong and influential voice within the institution. It is not accessible to the great majority of Unitarian Universalist youth. And, most importantly, it does not provide authentic empowerment to young folks, especially Queer/Genderqueer youth, Youth of Color, and otherwise marginalized youth. As stated at the Summit on youth ministry, YRUU cannot continue to function as it does: with great ineptitude and at a high cost to all... It's clearly time for something new. But starting again, unlike the letting go process, cannot be an administrative mandate.<sup>46</sup>

I include this last sentence to illuminate what was seen as the core conflict of the restructuring process of the mid-aughts. YRUU had been doing serious work towards self-examination and re-evaluating their structure since the late 1990s, but felt that the UUA administration's pushes to join in this work were too forceful and disconnected from YRUU's

---

<sup>46</sup> Nick Allen, "Letter from Nick Allen to YRUU Steering Committee Representative on the Youth Ministry Working Group," *YRUU UUology* (blog), February 15, 2008, <https://uuology.blogspot.com/search>.

priorities.<sup>47</sup> It felt like the kind of intrusion represented by the Special Committee on Youth Programs of the 1960s.<sup>48</sup> YRUU participants needed the UUA to show that it was not only interested in shaping youth ministry for the future, but also deeply invested in the leadership and wisdom already present in their existing, albeit flawed, YRUU structures. And, youth wondered whether the UUA was interested in pairing this effort with significant and equitably distributed material investment.

To explain, I'll back up and give an outline of events. In the late 1990s, the UUA was undertaking a process called the "Journey Toward Wholeness" in order to study racism within the denomination and chart a path towards being a fully anti-oppressive UUA.<sup>49</sup> Youth leaders at the time were deeply committed to dismantling oppression within YRUU, though felt left out by some of the work of The Journey Toward Wholeness. The Youth Council 1999 signaled the youth commitment by adopting a resolution titled, "It's Time We Do Something About Racism in YRUU!" and holding an anti-oppression training as part of their business meeting.<sup>50</sup> In 2000, they took this conversation to the level of ensuring equitable decision-making processes adopt a formal consensus model in lieu of their previous parliamentary-style proceedings.<sup>51</sup> These moves signal that YRUU leaders were eager to change their institutions because they believed in

---

<sup>47</sup> Duncan Metcalfe, "Contribution from Duncan Metcalfe," *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 15, 2008, <http://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/duncan-metcalfe.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Heather Vail and Tim Fitzgerald, "Is It Time for Another 'Common Ground'?": Why YRUU Must Change or Die.," *Synapse*, Fall 2004.

<sup>49</sup> "The Journey Toward Wholeness Path to Anti-Racism," UUA, <https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/history/jtw>.

<sup>50</sup> Matt Moore, "Contribution from Matt Moore," *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008, <https://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/matt-moore.html>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

governance as a tangible tool for expressing UU values. They wanted to use this tool to support youth at all levels of UU programming, especially those with marginalized identities.<sup>52</sup>

In 2003, YRUU and the UUA held a joint Long Range Planning meeting. I have not found materials that depict the details of this meeting, beyond one heated debate: Should the UUA and YRUU host a Common Ground III conference?<sup>53</sup> Some leaders were interested in having such a large assembly in order to seriously grapple with YRUU's institutional problems. Others were concerned that agreeing to a Common Ground III would result in YRUU's dissolution, interrupting the internal progress YRUU was making, and leaving youth worse off than before. Ultimately, the 2004 Youth Council blocked consensus and the proposal was denied.<sup>54</sup>

The UUA remained determined to facilitate this necessary revisioning process and plowed ahead by commissioning the Consultation on Ministry to and With Youth. This process from 2005 to 2007 was meant to support UUA staff in understanding the needs of people participating in UU youth programming. I believe that this process demonstrates that UUA leaders & the youth they consulted were deeply committed to youth ministry and were able to craft an incredible vision for what it was capable of being. Despite their bold vision, the Consultation was shaped in a way that sidestepped rather than relied on the leadership and wisdom of people in YRUU. After the Consultation, a new Youth Ministry Working Group was tasked with making this vision concrete. In a letter announcing the plan using language crafted by Consultation participants, UUA President Bill Sinkford wrote:

---

<sup>52</sup> Will Floyd, "A Youth and Young Adult History of Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Work in UUism," *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008, <http://yruuinstitmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/will-floyd.html>.

<sup>53</sup> YRUU Steering Committee, "Letter on End of YRUU Structure," *YRUU UUology* (blog), February 11, 2008, <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/02/steering-committee-letter-on-end-of.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Heather Vail and Tim Fitzgerald, "Is It Time for Another 'Common Ground'? Why YRUU Must Change or Die.," *Synapse*, Fall 2004.



The Working Group will help us make concrete the vision of a youth ministry that is central to the mission of Unitarian Universalism, offers multiple pathways for involvement, and is:

- congregationally-based;
- multigenerational;
- spirit-centered;
- counter-oppressive, multicultural, and radically inclusive.<sup>55</sup>

In response, YRUU leaders pressured the Board of Trustees to agree to bringing more youth, and especially YRUU youth, into the Working Group than there had been in the Consultation. This way they could ensure that there was a significant delegation of youth and adults who had extensive “on the ground” experience in youth ministry.<sup>56</sup> As had been the case with the dissolution of LRY, many youth leaders experienced this process of change as frustrating, painful, and disenfranchising. YRUUers at the time also felt that they were not given much choice in the question of whether or not the organization would disband, but only in how that disbandment would take place.<sup>57</sup> At many levels, these events highlight the need for a just balance of power shared between youth and adults who do youth ministry, as represented in organizational structures.

2008, the final year of President Bill Sinkford’s term, then became the final year of YRUU. At this moment, I still hold unanswered questions about the governance decisions that happened between then and now, and realize that they could comprise an entire research project on their own. From what I know now, I believe that the leaders who crafted and led the

---

<sup>55</sup> Rev. William Sinkford, “Letter from Rev. William G. Sinkford Re: Transitions in Youth Ministry,” Pr, September 16, 2008, <https://www.uua.org/youth/adults-ministry/competencies/6-major-models-youth-programming/workinggroup/119463.shtml>.

<sup>56</sup> YRUU Steering Committee, “Letter to Board of Trustees,” *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), April 24, 2008, <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/04/steering-committee-letter-to-board-of.html>.

<sup>57</sup> YRUU Steering Committee, “Letter to Board of Trustees,” *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), April 24, 2008, <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/04/steering-committee-letter-to-board-of.html>.  
Floyd Will, “YRUU UUlogy: URGENT: Committed Youth Advocates Needed!,” *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), July 3, 2008, <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/07/urgent-committed-youth-advocates-needed.html>.

Consultation on Ministry to and With Youth as well as the Youth Ministry Working Group acted faithfully from a place of deep commitment to youth issues. They made mistakes, as highlighted previously, in terms of the structural conditions of these processes. In the aftermath, there was some failure to institute structures for long-term follow-through, wherein YRUU leaders aged out of the conversation and many services that YRUU provided were never fully handed off to future leaders. As a result, today's UUA structures that are responsible for youth ministry were not part of a clear master plan, but have been continually shifting and changing as staff move through various positions and as the UUA institutes different budgetary constraints. Notably, there are currently no permanent youth leadership roles housed within the UUA offices to compare with the Youth Programs Specialist position.<sup>58</sup> Ambitious youth leaders today do have the opportunity to serve as youth staff at General Assembly, and the youth representative on the Board of Trustees, as well as being welcomed on various committees.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, youth leaders and adults who work with them are learning to navigate these shifting structures, and are asking hard questions about historical patterns of governance and material resource distribution. These concerns are far from new, though. Throughout time, there have been Unitarian Universalists acknowledging that whether or not there is a healthy attitude of adult commitment to programs that minister to UU young folks, these programs are not possible without material investment and the existence of governance structures that ensure adequate use of those resources. The spirit of commitment can only adequately be expressed when paired with specific and accountable use of money and staff time to support youth ministry.

---

<sup>58</sup> "Ministries and Faith Development Staff Directory," Unitarian Universalist Association, accessed April 6, 2021, <https://www.uua.org/offices/staff/mfd>.

One way to trace this thread is through business resolutions from past General Assemblies aimed at supporting youth and young adult (YaYA) empowerment. I have studied resolutions from 1979, 2008, and 2020, which clearly demonstrate an increased emphasis on structural and material requests, including calls for systems of accountability to the presented goals. These demonstrate what I view as positive developments, wherein youth leaders are refining their needs to the UUA and being very clear about the impact of governance and finance decisions. Referencing UUA bylaws, and other stated commitments, these resolutions are a tool for young UUs and their advocates to bring this conversation to the General Assembly floor, and ask UUs to take up YaYA programs as a worthy investment.

Notably, each successive resolution contains both more supporting evidence (the “Whereas” section) and more detailed requests (the “Therefore be it resolved” section) than the ones preceding it. For example, in 1979 it was noted that “our denomination profits from young people to enliven and sustain our Unitarian Universalist ideals,” while in 2008, this idea was expanded upon to state that “the *future* of the denomination profits from the *full participation* of youth and young adults.”<sup>59</sup> For an even further contrast, the resolution from 2020 states that “youth and young adults are not only the future of this faith, but our past and present, and Unitarian Universalism will benefit from supporting people raised and formed in this faith.”<sup>60</sup> Regarding the actual requests of these resolutions, the 1979 resolution called for generalized “program development and resource sharing between youth and adults” while continuing the

---

<sup>59</sup> “In Support of Youth Programs | Business Resolution,” UUA | Social Witness Statements, 1979, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/support-youth-programs>. Added emphasis is mine. “Youth and Young Adults | Business Resolution |,” UUA | Social Witness Statements, 2008, <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/youth-and-young-adults>.

<sup>60</sup> “Responsive Resolutions - GA 2020,” Google Docs, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hTRZjlrXjaFchjxZY07IZiGBv-n-sKr\\_XSPsnBTFv6E/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hTRZjlrXjaFchjxZY07IZiGBv-n-sKr_XSPsnBTFv6E/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook). “Business & Social Witness at General Assembly 2020,” UUA | General Assembly, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2020/business>.

status quo of LRY's financial status. Last year I was privileged to be able to take part in the drafting of the 2020 resolution, which had an explicitly structural focus, calling for the hiring of a full-time staff person at the national level, plus tasking a leader in every region with specifically supporting youth and young adult ministry. In that conversation, I suggested the action item that encourages congregations to explicitly charge new ministers with responsibility for supporting YaYA ministry, because it should be part of the assumed job description of every parish minister.<sup>61</sup> Additionally, these more recent resolutions have called for youth involvement in decision-making processes at all levels, from congregations inviting youth to serve on their boards, to the UUA ensuring that youth voices are heard as part of the Accountability Commission tasked with following up on *Widening the Circle of Concern*.<sup>62</sup>

This increased attentiveness to issues of resource distribution demonstrates that Unitarian Universalist youth are seeking concrete methods of support that go beyond the tokenization that many youth experience. Further, the work of drafting and presenting these resolutions has been done by youth, young adults, and their allies. Because the *idea* of supporting youth is popular, and these resolutions have passed by a wide margin, the weight they carry is found more in the systems of accountability they include than in the mere symbol of their passage.

As another note of material progress, youth finally took a seat at the table on the UUA Board of Trustees in 2019. After two decades of including two Youth Observers without any voting power, and generations more lobbying for any form of youth involvement, youth are finally full Trustees.<sup>63</sup> As mentioned earlier in this paper, having Youth Trustees is something that youth have been advocating for since at least around the time of Common Ground I, if not

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> "Youth Trustee to the UUA Board of Trustees," UUA | Youth, <https://www.uua.org/youth/leading/observer>.

longer.<sup>64</sup> 2016 Youth Observer Andrea Briscoe noted that she was treated as a full voting member, though she was not, which shows that the UUA was ready for this formal move. In reflection on her experience, she says “After every board meeting, I left feeling as though I had grown personally and that I was able to help our faith grow closer to being itself.”<sup>65</sup> Andrea’s experience demonstrates that youth being at the table can contribute to seeing this faith as one in the process of becoming, a process that youth know very well.

When YRUU began taking a critical look at itself leading up to the Consultation on Ministry to and with Youth, one of their leaders’ primary concerns was whether internal resource distribution privileged some youth over others. They noticed that leadership beyond the congregational level was frequently inaccessible both financially and culturally, especially for youth of color and LGTBQ youth. Efforts to transform youth ministry since have focused efforts on internal equity and inclusion, with awareness of the way systems of oppression in our larger society can find their way into the power structures of our own organizations.<sup>66</sup> Further youth have been vying for and seizing opportunities to be involved in larger conversations about becoming an anti-racist faith institution.<sup>67</sup> Moves toward congregationally-centered youth ministry, and virtual participation or youth scholarships at national events are, at their best, strong moves to prioritize accessibility. Still, our current system relies heavily on rockstar leaders at rockstar congregations who take initiative and teach themselves how to navigate our complicated denominational governance structures. If we want to ensure thriving youth

---

<sup>64</sup> Arnason and Scott, 176.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> Heather Vail and Tim Fitzgerald, “Is It Time for Another ‘Common Ground’?: Why YRUU Must Change or Die.,” *Synapse*, Fall 2004.

<sup>67</sup> Will Floyd, “A Youth and Young Adult History of Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Work in UUism,” *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008, <http://yruuinstitmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/will-floyd.html>.

ministries with the right balance of youth empowerment and adult commitment, we must be constantly thinking about how to widen the circle.

This shift in focus demonstrates the importance of UU communities following through on their commitments to youth by offering them financial investment and positions of real power. I must give a caveat that even if this is done well, there are still many questions that arise about how to distribute resources between the congregational, regional, and national scales of programming, and which programs to prioritize. Yet, with committed adults and empowered youth, the tools to answer these questions will be present. Through stronger material support for youth leadership, and better training of adults who work with youth, we may be able to get closer to the vision proposed by the 2008 Youth Ministry Working Group.

---

## **VII. Covenantal Theology: Faithful Processes for Decision Making and Conflict Mending**

I chose to study Unitarian Universalist youth ministry because I have experienced directly the joy, creativity, spiritual depth, empowerment, and strength of community that I have written about here. When parts of our history have become taboo, when certain subjects fill a room with tension, we put up barriers between our history and the possibilities of today. I chose to study the ways we have fallen short and caused each other pain in youth ministry, because my covenantal theology teaches me that this is the way we move through and forward into better fulfilling our hopes for the community.

When I set out on this research, I was interested in looking at main events in this history through the lens of rupture and repair. I wanted to understand moments of conflict not as solitary

events, but as breaking points when long-existing tensions burst out into the open and necessitated transformation. I focused my research on three key moments: the Empowerment Controversy of the late 1960s, the Common Ground conferences of the early 1980s, and the period of the Youth Ministry Working Group in the mid aughts. If we can pay attention to these moments as times of rupture, then perhaps we can understand the opportunities they present for transformation through the healing of wounds and easing of tensions. Ruptures ask us: Is now the right time to end this relationship, or to work toward repair? Either choice can be valid depending on the person and the circumstance. But covenant tells me that attempting to continue on as though no harm has been done is neither helpful nor possible.

Unitarian Universalist covenantal theology offers a process framework for working through human falling-short and re-entering right relationship when it's time. In short, UUs live within their covenantal relationships, the mutual and consensual agreements made in groups that determine who and how we want to be together, setting the conditions for everyone to be their fullest self. Often this exists in a physical, though living, co-created document. When any particular aspect of covenant is breached, our commitment to the covenant means that we speak up, name the hurt that has been caused, and work together to repair and return. Many groups also practice regular "covenant check-ins" that open up conversation about how we're doing, rather than waiting for big moments of rupture.

In UU youth history, these moments of rupture have been part of an important naming process, followed by different attempts to repair and return. This cycle can be seen in the Empowerment Controversy, when tensions were rising for years, and the walkout constituted a breaking point. But that wasn't the whole story. Participants gathered for spiritual practice, recommitment to the work, and then re-entered the conversation in an attempt at repair and

return. I want to be clear though. The rupture/repair cycle at General Assembly felt like a great victory for some, but the harm continued in the aftermath. The UUA administration broke its promises yet again, and some people, particularly Black UUs, decided to leave the faith because they had experienced such a damaging breach of covenant.<sup>68</sup>

The disbandment of LRY tells a similar story, wherein many people were able to find right relationship again, and were invested in repairing and rebuilding with the institution of YRUU. But others were not, especially many who could not be present for the Common Ground process; this moment signaled the end of the road for them. Common Ground is an interesting case study because its organizers were so interested in creating decision-making processes that felt good for participants. They did this by establishing a 3:1 youth to adult delegate ratio in an attempt to center youth voices while building strong relationships with supporting adults. They variously used consensus-based and plenary meeting styles, with the goals of building trust and making the best decisions as a group. When I've been in covenant-writing practices in UU spaces in the past, we ask ourselves and each other, "What do we need in order to bring our fullest selves to this space?" I believe that this was what the leaders of Common Ground created for each other in that conference space, and attempted to do in shaping the future of YRUU.

But, oral history suggests such efforts were not thorough enough, that many youth were not ready to give up LRY and felt actively disenfranchised by the transition process. Quoted in *We Would Be One*, former LRY Executive Committee member Lisa Feldstein explained, "We were targets of a lot of hostility... The idea that we were participating in this thing we held as dear as life itself hung over us throughout the week." And speaking to LRY sentiment beyond Common Ground, she said, "We felt the UUA had unfairly forced us into this position, this

---

<sup>68</sup> Sinkford, "The Dream of White Innocence."



process, and the UUA was hated.”<sup>69</sup> This was the very real experience of some participants, while others saw this conference as acting to hit a reset button on LRY as a youth organization that was no longer functioning in a healthy way. Both stories have deep truth to them, and this may speak to the way that the processes for change and addressing conflict were built in ways that served some participants better than others.

At the end of the Common Ground conference, the LRY executive team held a worship wherein they turned a “final meeting” into a liturgy.<sup>70</sup> From accounts of this, it was a deeply meaningful ritual for the executive team and the rest of the conference delegates. It leaves me wondering about the LRYers who boycotted the conference, those who wanted to come but did not find it accessible, and all those who weren’t present for a variety of other reasons. What if there had been some form of ritual to help them make meaning out of the process, to honor the transition from LRY to YRUU? Because many people speak of this time as one of great loss and grief,<sup>71</sup> I believe that these processes are important to plan and learn from. It is my hope that UUs today and in the future will be better at responding to events by offering space and ritual to process that draw more people into the circle, rather than reserving those for the few who happen to be around.

Unitarian Universalist youth have also learned over time that paying attention to process can be a matter of justice and equity. YRUU in the late 1990s and early 2000s was deeply invested in figuring out how to shape their organization so that their work was more reflective of

---

<sup>69</sup> Arnason and Scott, 169.

<sup>70</sup> UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee, “Common Ground: Coming of Age, A Report on the 1982 UUA Youth Assembly” (Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees, September 1, 1982), Andover Harvard Theological Library.

<sup>71</sup> When embarking on this project, I stumbled into a private Facebook group for former LRYers, where I did not stay long, but was introduced to the group by an admin who explained to me that this was a space for people who felt harmed by the UUA to express their pain. I was astonished that, 40 years after Common Ground, this wound was so real and present.

their UU values of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multiculturalism.<sup>72</sup> They believed that better supporting youth with marginalized identities was crucial to this work, because no matter how smoothly their organization ran, it was not within covenant if someone didn't have a space at the table because of structural injustice.

YRUU's disbandment offers a final example of the importance of covenant. Beyond grieving the loss of this organization that had meant so much to them, YRUUers experienced pain caused by failures of process, by ruptures in relationship with the UUA. The UUA administration, I believe, had an earnest intention to hear youth voices and wield power responsibly, but they were not as skillful in this task as was required. Youth did not feel that their relationship with the UUA was one of mutually shared power. They did not feel their voices were heard every step of the process, and they feared being coerced into a position that did not sit well with them.<sup>73</sup> Of course, attempts at repair were made, with the UUA Board of Trustees giving YRUU leadership more opportunity to shape the Youth Ministry Working Group than had been done with the previous year's Consultation on Ministry to and With Youth.<sup>74</sup> President Bill Sinkford's earnest letters to YRUU leadership indicate an honest interest in repair. And, I think the youth ministry we've created since then, the youth ministry that shaped me, has been incredibly attentive to covenant and process. In other words, we're getting better at it.

Our covenantal theology asks us to be committed to the process of naming painful truths, believing when someone says we've hurt them, and sticking through the messy work of repair, as long as it feels possible and healthy for everyone involved. Covenant does not coerce forgiveness

---

<sup>72</sup> Will Floyd, "A Youth and Young Adult History of Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Work in UUism," *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008, <http://yruuinstitmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/will-floyd.html>.

<sup>73</sup> Heather Vail and Tim Fitzgerald, "Is It Time for Another 'Common Ground'? Why YRUU Must Change or Die.," *Synapse*, Fall 2004.

<sup>74</sup> Rev. William Sinkford, "A Letter to the YRUU Steering Committee," *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), February 18, 2008, <http://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/02/bill-sinkford-letter-to-yruu-steering.html>.

for wrongs that have not been reconciled, but it does provide a pathway for figuring out how to return to right relationship when it's time to do so. This is as true in youth ministry as it is in all other aspects of our faithful living. It is a necessary part of working towards joyful community where we invite everyone to bring their fullest self.

In both of his youth history books, Wayne Arnason offers a thoughtful meditation on some of the frustrating aspects of youth work, and suggests that there are ways to find beauty within the challenge. In *Follow the Gleam*, he writes,

The only thing I am sure of about Unitarian Universalist youth is that they will continually re-invent the wheel. Advisors know the pattern well. It was one of the most frustrating things for people who have related to our youth movements over a long period of time. Similar problems and similar solutions occur and reoccur. Progress happens in a spiral, however. There are new environments that surround the old problems, and the old solutions are never quite the same as they were last year. It's a marvelous dance to watch. Reinventing the wheel is one of those things a liberal religious youth group is there for.<sup>75</sup>

I appreciate the idea here that processes which appear repetitive, unnecessary, even futile, can be integral parts of what makes youth ministry important. After months reflecting on this passage, I believe that it speaks to the special potential of youth to live out covenantal theology. For a young person, the process of figuring out how to make community that can withstand conflict is an important and formative process, full of potential to repeat old cycles *and* innovate in new and surprising ways.

By framing youth work in terms of covenantal theology, we can create a container for youth to do this work and get practice caring for each other and growing together. And when covenant is broken, there is no need to fall apart. Rather, by spiraling around again, examining the roots of what when wrong, we can repair by crafting a new wheel that works better for the circumstance. "Repair" comes from the Old French "re-parare" meaning to re-prepare, or "to

---

<sup>75</sup> *Follow the Gleam*, 197.

make ready again.” This etymology reminds me that healing from hurt is not a matter of patching up and moving on, but circling back and making promises that help us get ready to move forward. The phrase “reinventing the wheel” comes with connotations of tediousness and stagnancy. I prefer to frame it as this circling dance, a preparing and re-preparing for the journey that we are on together.

---

## **VII. Synthesis: Youth Ministry for Today & Tomorrow**

To close, I want to list some of the ways (beyond a longing for a sense of history), that UU young people today are negotiating power with their institutions. UU youth and those adults who minister with them are asking many of the questions I’ve posed here. The way these conversations unfold will be indicators of how well Unitarian Universalism has learned from our history, and how prepared we are to take on the challenge of offering vibrant, life-affirming, sustainable, multicultural, and anti-oppressive youth ministry programs. Though I am a youth ministry professional, and have engaged with Youth and Young Adult spaces at recent General Assemblies, I am not positioned at the leading edge of this movement. That is to say that I am confident there are energies bubbling up, wheels being re-invented in radical new ways that I am not a direct witness to. Knowing there are youth out there committed to this work makes me excited for the future.

Widening the Circle of Concern:

One important feature of our present moment is the impact of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA)'s recent Commission on Institutional Change (2017-2020) and their 2020 Summary report, *Widening the Circle of Concern*.<sup>76</sup> The Commission on Institutional Change was created largely in response to 2017 organizing by UU professionals of color responding to a hiring event with racial implications. In the wake of these events, many white UUs became awakened to the way that our institutions still exhibit racist tendencies, and the need to take a critical look at our structures of power, especially through the lens of race. Since 2017, UUs have been learning how to dismantle internalized white supremacy (of the kind we've seen in moments like the Empowerment Controversy) and many have been working to shift our culture in ways that express our commitment to anti-oppression and shared leadership.

Because white supremacy culture affects Unitarian Universalism at all levels of our institutions, *Widening the Circle of Concern* addresses the specific ways that we can build youth and young adult movements that are anti-racist, multi-cultural, and support our larger faith in its journey toward wholeness. This work from the Commission on Institutional Change is also groundbreaking in the ways it identifies toxic dynamics in our community that hold us back from being the Beloved Community we dream of. Though the experiences of BIPOC UUs does not directly map on to that of UU young people, there are some similarities in the things that make congregations unwelcoming to both groups, and the ways that power structures are intentionally and unintentionally used to stifle the voices of both groups. As a small example, the ways congregations welcome newcomers who are young or non-white can sometimes be overbearing, sending the implicit message that we assume them to be outsiders who need extra effort to be brought in. As a lifelong UU preparing for ministry, it is frustrating to visit a new congregation

---

<sup>76</sup> UUA Commission on Institutional Change, "Widening the Circle of Concern" (Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, June 2020), <https://www.uua.org/book/export/html/43821>.

and be treated as though I just stumbled in and need to be taught what Unitarian Universalism is. I can't imagine the layers that get added on to this for UUs of color.

By identifying these elements of white supremacy culture, we can see the ways that such dynamics are present in and holding back our communities in many ways, including in how we minister to and with young people. To address these concerns, the report describes ways that the UUA and its congregations can better support youth of color, and all youth programs as they are often on the leading edge of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and multicultural efforts within the faith. The report's authors write, very much aware of this history:

A tragic and indefensible fact is that we have not reinstated a national youth leadership program or young adult program. While leadership and spiritual development programs for these groups do exist on a smaller scale, no national umbrella or unified programmatic approach for UUA youth or young adult programs has existed for more than ten years. These programs have been critical to supporting youth and young adults of color and to building the anti-oppression skills of white youth. Youth and young adults are already more expert than older members of our community on what it means to live in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, and their leadership is essential to our continued work.<sup>77</sup>

Paired with the 2020 Resolution calling for support for youth and young adult ministry, these astute observations are bound to ripple out in impactful ways. The report's authors recommend many action steps for UU institutions to take, and I hope that the emphasis on the role of youth programs will help us to understand the way youth ministry fits into this important denominational conversation.

### YaYA@GA Contract Negotiations<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>78</sup> "General Assembly: The Unitarian Universalist Association's Annual Meeting | UUA.Org," UUA | General Assembly, <https://www.uua.org/ga>. "Youth and Young Adult GA Staff Emergent Structure," UUA | Youth, October 23, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/events/yaya-ga-new-staffing-structure>.

Until the COVID-19 global pandemic, the UUA's General Assembly was always held in person. In recent years, there have been teams of youth and young adult staff responsible for facilitating YaYA space for worship, connection, and learning about GA business items and other delegate support. These teams have been compensated by means of the UUA paying their registration fees, travel expenses, and stipends for room and board at GA and pre-GA staff training events. When GA 2020 moved online, these staff teams had to put in a lot of extra work to respond to this major planning shift in addition to the hardship of being young people living in the beginning of this world-changing event. This increased labor was not accounted for, and staff were offered financial compensation for their work at a level that amounted to much less than what it would have been if the event were in person. Feeling burnt out and undercompensated, and after many insufficiently productive meetings with GA planning teams, the GA Youth and YA@GA staff teams stepped down from their formal roles in a public video, opening up this conversation to the larger UU community.

In many ways, this was the catalyst for the 2020 Responsive Resolution which brought this conversation directly to the virtual GA floor. In the months since, the staff teams and other UUA leaders have been in communication to negotiate the strikers' demands that GA planners rethink the role of these positions in the future. This action has already resulted in important changes, primarily in calling attention to the need for the UUA to have clear understanding and intentionality with the way it delineates and compensates staff, volunteers, interns, fellows, consultants and other positions. This conversation has long been needed beyond the context of youth staff at GA, and I believe will be very fruitful.

Additionally, youth and young adults are now being actively included and consulted in GA planning processes, and they have restructured and re-visioned their staff team itself. For

example, they plan to focus their work in advance of GA on facilitation training rather than planning a complex agenda of events. This “emergent strategy” is based on adrienne maree brown’s book by the same title.<sup>79</sup> Because there was no formal staff team for youth and young adults at GA in 2020, the community and programming created there were by some measures emergent, and we had really amazing conversations together as a result. Intentionally equipping leaders in this way will be a move to strengthen the team’s skills for working well at the event, while de-emphasizing elaborate programs. This interrogation into how our values show up in our compensation practices, as well as leaning into emergent strategy, serve as powerful examples of how young UUs today are shaping this faith and its culture for the better.

#### UUntitled Network<sup>80</sup>

In partnership with the UUA’s Office of Lifespan Faith Engagement (the one that used to house the Youth Office), a group of UU young people are in the process of crafting a network for UU youth and emerging adults to connect with each other and grow spiritually. Announced in September 2020, this project is very much in the works at the time of this writing, indicated by the name UUntitled. This project speaks to the need for UU youth to create and participate in spaces that provide affirmation and spiritual deepening beyond their local context. In a time when the pandemic has halted non-essential travel *and* we are becoming more aware of the inequity that can arise when our central programming requires travel that is not equally accessible, it is likely that this network will operate primarily online for the time being. This work should be an indicator that current youth ministry offerings within Unitarian Universalism

---

<sup>79</sup> brown, Emergent Strategy.

<sup>80</sup> “UUntitled | National Network for Unitarian Universalist Young People,” UUA | Youth, September 3, 2020, <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/announcing-uuntitled>.



are not sufficient to fulfill the needs of youth, and that youth remain willing and able to put in the work of imagining and building UU spaces that work for them. It is my hope that these leaders will maintain the support they need from the adult denomination, and have access to process and decision-making tools that can sustain their work for future generations.

### Conclusion

These are just a few examples of high-profile conversations happening right now in the Unitarian Universalist youth world. Whether or not individual participants in these conversations are well-versed in their history, they are part of streams branching off from this river of youth history that has been flowing for well over a century. I feel immensely privileged to have the time and resources to visit the headwaters and to study every bend in between. It is crucial that UU youth programming adapt and change for the challenges of the 21st century and beyond, for the sake of sustaining this faith and its youth which we love so dearly.

We are learning in this century that we should not be as concerned with carrying forward the institutions that brought us here as we should be with pushing Unitarian Universalism and its youth programming to live more fully into our values. To do this really well, we must know our history. This means naming the ways our institutions and our leaders have fallen short and committing to be better, while also celebrating the truth that we are part of a strong living tradition that changes lives and speaks to the good news of Unitarian Universalists. At the 2018 Service of the Living Tradition (the General Assembly worship service that honors ministers reaching career milestones), Rev. Dr. Sofía Betancourt offered a beautiful and powerful sermon that speaks to this journey that Unitarian Universalism is on.<sup>81</sup> She spoke, saying,

---

<sup>81</sup>Sofía Betancourt, "Service of the Living Tradition: 'Sounding the Call', General Assembly 2018," UUA | General Assembly, June 2018, <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2018/worship/slt>.

The journey toward redemption is about truth telling, lamentation, and owning our wrongs, while at the same time claiming the profound possibility that calls us forward. We are the inheritors of the legacies of white supremacy, but also of an unimaginable grace, of certainty in the possibility of redemption, of weaving a tapestry of leadership that may not yet be what we long for but is called to be the richest expression of humanity's sacredness. We believe in human capacity great enough, a god loving enough, values strong enough, communities dedicated enough, and leaders humble enough to move us toward redemption.

Here, I am offering an assertion that these words are as true for youth as it is for anyone, and that youth must be seen as valuable leaders in this journey. To "claim the profound possibility that calls us forward," we must know and understand what our youth movement has inherited from its ancestors, and is a vital expression of humanity's sacredness.

At the end of this research project, I am left to ponder questions of faith and calling, and I invite my fellow Unitarian Universalists to join me in this searching. As Unitarian Universalists of all ages, how can we better see youth and youth history as an integral part of this living tradition? How can we shape our governance structures so that they might better serve and be served by youth? How are we called to covenant together, to work through conflict? Lastly, how can we lean into this faith when history doesn't have all the answers?

It is my sincerest hope that we will learn from our history, be invigorated by the questions it asks, and be ready to move on the paths that call us forward.

May it be so.

## VI. Timeline

1890s: distinctive youth organizations become commonplace in congregational life, and Unitarian and Universalist youth self-organize and form institutions.

1954: the American Unitarian Youth and Unitarian Youth Fellowship merge into one organization, Liberal Religious Youth, which became a precursor and model for the larger denominations merging.

1961: the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America formally merge, becoming the Unitarian Universalist Association.

1968-1970: Empowerment Controversy emerges over a call for the Unitarian Universalist Association to form and fund a Black Affairs Council. A famous and divisive walk-out (partially led by youth) occurs at the '69 General Assembly in Boston leading to a narrow vote in favor of BAC, a decision that is ultimately undermined by UUA budget cuts. Youth make similar demands for self-determination, especially in financial matters, which are also granted at GA and swiftly undermined by budget cuts.

1979-1982: A UUA Special Committee on Youth Programs is formed to assess the state of UU youth ministry, releases a report that is highly controversial to youth in LRY, and leads to a series of Common Ground Youth Assemblies wherein LRY is disbanded, and leadership transitions into the new organization, Young Religious Unitarian Universalists. The new organization is an attempt to carry forward the best parts of LRY, while strengthening youth UU identity and relationship with the adult denomination.

2005-2008: The UUA administration calls for another re-examination of youth ministry, forms a Youth Ministry Working Group to create a new vision, and ultimately disbands YRUU. The vision put forth is an attempt to carry forward the best parts of YRUU, while putting a stronger emphasis on congregational and district involvement as sites of important youth ministry, especially for youth of color and with other marginalized identities.

2017-2020: A hiring controversy highlights ongoing racial disparities in Unitarian Universalism as a whole, leading to many high-level resignations, a denomination-wide White Supremacy Teach-In, the proposal of an 8th principle specifically addressing a commitment to racial justice, and the work of a Commission on Institutional Change, released in a report, *Widening the Circle of Concern*. Youth are very much a part of, and have been leaders in this conversation.

2020-2021: Youth and Young Adult staff at General Assembly go on strike and enter into contract negotiations with the UUA, engaging the denomination in conversations about labor compensation as a part of its commitment to youth ministry.

## VII. Glossary of Terms

Adult: Like the definition of youth, this definition has changed as well, over time. In this paper, I will use “adult” to refer either to people older than youth who are engaged in youth ministry, or to the wider “adult denomination” of Unitarian Universalism in cases where adults are the main people holding power and making decisions.

Boston/New England: Because Unitarian Universalism traces many of its roots back to the “Boston Brahmins” and other New England intellectual elites, Unitarian Universalists in the 20th and 21st centuries have worked to become more geographically dispersed and supportive of UUs in other regions, though the UUA still maintains headquarters in Boston. This tension is visibly something that youth organizations have attempted to work through as well.

Conference/Con Culture: As long as Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist youth have been organizing themselves, they have been hosting conferences, lovingly called cons. Hosted at a camp or congregation, youth plan a few days of workshops, worship, talent shows, games, and more. “Con culture” is often used in UU spaces to refer to the intensity of feeling, traditions, and inside jokes formed at cons. “Con culture” can also have a negative connotation referring to issues of experimentation with sex and intoxicating substances, cliquishness, destruction of property, or other general misbehavior of youth in this intense setting.

Congregational Polity: UU governance structure inherited by their Puritan forebears<sup>82</sup>. Because power rests ultimately in congregations who choose to freely associate with each other, decisions are made through covenantal relationships. The UUA, as the centralized denominational body, can influence congregations through the allocation of funding and staff time, but the power of governance in Unitarian Universalism ultimately rests in the congregations. This results in a diversity of worship styles, youth programs, and administrative structures across the denomination, which means “the UU experience” for people of all ages, but especially for youth, cannot be understood as remotely monolithic.

Continental/National: When the UUA formed in 1961, it was a main service provider and central body for North American UU congregations in both the US and Canada. As such, large-scale UU programming happened at the “Continental” level. Since 2002, the Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) has stepped up in the services it provides to congregations, and it is now less common for UUs from the United States and Canada to actively collaborate on programming, including youth ministry<sup>83</sup>. In the current model, it is more appropriate to call large-scale programming “National” because it is the exception, rather than the norm for Canadians to be a large constituent in UUA programs.

---

<sup>82</sup> Cambridge Synod, “The Cambridge Platform,” 1648.

<sup>83</sup> “CUC History,” Canadian Unitarian Council/Conseil Unitarien du Canada, <https://cuc.ca/unitarian-universalism/history/>.

Covenant: Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith based in histories of congregational polity. When UUs gather, it is customary for those present to create and/or agree to abide by a written covenant specific to that setting, as a set of behavioral norms that support the group's functioning and well-being. Covenants can include regulations on use of intoxicants, but are just as likely to offer norms for group discussion, or attending to oppressive behaviors (like misgendering) that even people with good intentions can fall into. Though used to varying degrees of success, UUs also have restorative processes for “coming back into covenant” or “returning to right relationship” when the covenant has been violated.

District/Region: For much of UU history, the UUA organized congregations into 23 districts. The congregations (and youth groups) within each district would self organize for collaboration, conferences, and other events, making it a level that many people were active participants in. Starting in 2015, the UUA began its transition to recognizing 5 large regions, such as one covering the entire Southern US, from Virginia to Texas<sup>84</sup>. Now, there are staff teams appointed to each region who provide congregational support, including in religious education and youth programming. Because the exclusive use of regions is not mandated, there remain a few holdover district structures, especially in the Pacific West Region, that offer programming for their constituents.

General Assembly: The annual business meeting of representatives from the member congregations of the UUA. Until 2020, it was hosted in a different city every year, and consisted of a week of plenary sessions, workshops, worships, social events, public witness events, and more in a convention center and its surrounding hotels. Starting in 2020 and moving forward into at least 2021, General Assembly has transitioned into being a fully virtual event. This change was occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic and solidified by the increased accessibility that makes virtual GA closer to a truly democratic process<sup>85</sup>.

LRY: Liberal Religious Youth. The youth organization formed in 1953 by the merger of the American Unitarian Youth and the Unitarian Youth Fellowship. It was disbanded and succeeded by Young Religious Unitarian Universalists at the striking of the New Year in 1983.

UUA: Unitarian Universalist Association. The denominational administration founded in 1961 by the merger of the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America.

Worship: In UU spaces, worship most often means the Protestant-in-shape Sunday morning services held at most congregations. In UU youth spaces, worship can be much more amorphous and can consist of any intentionally set aside time for planned liturgical elements or spiritual practice. Elements might include: a chalice or other flame(s), sitting in a circle, group singing,

---

<sup>84</sup> “General Session V, General Assembly 2015,” UUA | General Assembly, <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2015/business/v>.

<sup>85</sup> “General Assembly: The Unitarian Universalist Association’s Annual Meeting | UUA.Org,” UUA | General Assembly, <https://www.uua.org/ga>.

interpersonal sharing in response to a prompt, meditation, ritualized movement, and more. Youth worship, like many things youth do, can be recognized for its spiritual depth and intensity of feeling.

YaYA: Shorthand, which has especially emerged in recent years to refer to any efforts that pertain to Youth and Young Adults as a group.

Young Adult: Currently, the UUA designates “young adults” as people aged 18-35, including the additional category of 18-24 for “emerging adults.” Youth programs standards also designate that adults who are responsible for supervising youth must be 25 or older. Some congregations use “20s and 30s” to designate participants of their young adult groups, because it is more fitting to their community. Though youth organizations in the past have included participants over the age of 18, I will generally use current UUA designations when I refer to “young adults” as a group, and will be more specific as necessary.

Youth: Currently, the UUA designates “youth” as people who are middle or high school-aged, with people “bridging out” of youth programs around the age of 18 or high school graduation. In the past, UU youth organizations have held different age ranges for “youth” such as 12-22, 14-20, and so on. In this paper, I will either use “youth” to refer to the participants of a specific youth organization (within the bounds of their age restrictions). Or, if I am talking about “youth” as a general category, I will be referencing current UUA designations and will be more specific as necessary.

YRUU: Young Religious Unitarian Universalists, the UU youth organization formed at the Common Ground conferences, and officially founded in 1983 and formally defunded in 2008 after years of conversation and work to reform the national youth ministry program.

## VIII. Works Cited

- Adams, James Luther. *The Essential James Luther Adams*. Edited by George Kimmich Beach. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 1998.
- Allen, Nick. "Letter from Nick Allen to YRUU Steering Committee Representative on the Youth Ministry Working Group." *YRUU UUology* (blog), February 15, 2008. <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/search>.
- Arnason, Wayne. "GA Info." *Nameless Newsprint*, October 1969.
- Betancourt, Sofia. "Service of the Living Tradition: 'Sounding the Call', General Assembly 2018." UUA | General Assembly, June 2018. <https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2018/worship/slt>.
- UUA | General Assembly. "Business & Social Witness at General Assembly 2020," 2020. <https://www.uua.org/ga/off-site/2020/business>.
- Cambridge Synod. "The Cambridge Platform," 1648.
- Canadian Unitarian Council/Conseil Unitarien du Canada. "CUC History." <https://cuc.ca/unitarian-universalism/history/>.
- Dan McKanan, ed. "Constitutions of the American Unitarian Youth and Liberal Religious Youth, 1953." In *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism, Volume 2*, 173–74. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2017.
- UUA | Social Witness Statements. "Discrimination Against Homosexuals and Bisexuals | General Resolution," 1970. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/discrimination-against-homosexuals-and-bisexuals>.
- Fenimore, Rev. Natalie Maxwell, Aisha Hauser, and Sofia Betancourt. "The Religious Educator of Color, and Response." In *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, 87–102. Skinner House Books, 2017.
- Floyd, Will. "A Youth and Young Adult History of Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression Work in UUism." YRUU Institutional Memory Project (blog), February 12, 2008. <http://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/will-floyd.html>.

“Freedom to Question: Voices from a Century-Plus Tradition of U Youth Groups.”

<http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/>.

UUA | Youth. “GA Youth & Young Adult Fall Town Hall,” November 10, 2020.

<https://www.uua.org/blueboat/events/ga-yaya-fall-town-hall-2020>.

Freedom to Question. “General Assembly 2003: 2101 Youth Leadership: Our Legacy, Our Future,” 2003.

[http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/supplemental\\_materials/2003\\_ga\\_youth\\_leadership\\_panel.htm](http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/supplemental_materials/2003_ga_youth_leadership_panel.htm).

UUA | General Assembly. “General Assembly: The Unitarian Universalist Association’s Annual Meeting | UUA.Org.” <https://www.uua.org/ga>.

UUA | General Assembly. “General Session V, General Assembly 2015.”

<https://www.uua.org/ga/past/2015/business/v>.

Shelter Neck UU Camp. “History.” Accessed April 6, 2021.

<https://www.shelterneckuucamp.org/Hist/History.html>.

YARN. “Home | Young Adult Revival Network,” 2020. <https://www.uuyarn.org/>.

Hopper, Leon. “A Short Subjective History of the Unitarian and Universalist Youth Movements.” Chicago, IL, 1963.

UUA | Social Witness Statements. “In Support of Youth Programs | Business Resolution.”

<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/support-youth-programs>.

Kain, Rev. Julie. “Handout 1: Empowerment Controversy Time Line | Faith like a River.” UUA Tapestry of Faith.

<https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/adults/river/workshop15/178882.shtml>.

Ladd, Larry. “Bitter Brooklyn.” *Nameless Newsprint*, October 1969.

UUA | Social Witness Statements. “Legalization of Marijuana | General Resolution,” 1970.

<https://www.uua.org/action/statements/legalization-marijuana>.

Mark D. Morrison-Reed. *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2018.



- Metcalfe, Duncan. "Contribution from Duncan Metcalfe." YRUU Institutional Memory Project (blog), February 15, 2008. <http://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/duncan-metcalfe.html>.
- Moore, Matt. "Contribution from Matt Moore." *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008. <https://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/matt-moore.html>.
- Morrison-Reed, Mark. *The Selma Awakening*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2014.
- Pope-Lance, Deborah. "Liberal Religious Youth Merged Fifty Yeras Ago." *UU World*, December 2003. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/liberal-religious-youth-merged-fifty-years-agoRjMP2p5/liberal-religious-youth-merged-fifty-years-ago-pdf>.
- "Report of the Special Committee on Youth Programs to the UUA Board of Trustees," 1977. <http://www.freedomtoquestion.org/governance/scoyp/procedure.htm>.
- Google Docs. "Responsive Resolutions - GA 2020." [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hTRZjlrXjaFcHjxZYo7lZiGBv-n-sKr\\_XSPsnBTFv6E/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1hTRZjlrXjaFcHjxZYo7lZiGBv-n-sKr_XSPsnBTFv6E/edit?usp=sharing&usp=embed_facebook).
- Sinkford, Rev. William. "A Letter to the YRUU Steering Committee." *YRUU UUology* (blog), February 18, 2008. <http://uology.blogspot.com/2008/02/bill-sinkford-letter-to-yruu-steering.html>.
- Sinkford, Rev. William. "Letter from Rev. William G. Sinkford Re: Transitions in Youth Ministry.", September 16, 2008. <https://www.uua.org/youth/adults-ministry/competencies/6-major-models-youth-programming/workinggroup/119463.shtml>.
- Sinkford, Rev. William. "The Dream of White Innocence." *UU World*, November 28, 2016. <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/dream-white-innocence>.
- Sinkford, Rev. William, and Megan Dowdell. "Summit on Youth Ministry Report." Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, July 16, 2007.
- Swanson, Eric. "Eric Swanson Guest Contribution." *YRUU Institutional Memory Project* (blog), February 12, 2008. <https://yruuinstmem.blogspot.com/2008/02/eric-swanson.html>.

- Tweedie Erslev, Kate. "Bolster and Protect Youth Groups." In *Full Circle: Fifteen Ways to Grow Lifelong UUs*. Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, 2004.
- UUA. "The Journey Toward Wholeness Path to Anti-Racism." <https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/history/jtw>.
- Unitarian Universalist Association Essex Conversations Coordinating Committee. *Essex Conversations: Visions for Lifespan Religious Education*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2001.
- Unitarian Universalist Association. "Ministries and Faith Development Staff Directory." Accessed April 6, 2021. <https://www.uua.org/offices/staff/mfd>.
- UUA Commission on Institutional Change. "Widening the Circle of Concern." Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, June 2020. <https://www.uua.org/book/export/html/43821>.
- UUA Continental Youth Adult Committee. "Common Ground: Coming of Age, A Report on the 1982 UUA Youth Assembly." Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees, September 1, 1982. Andover Harvard Theological Library.
- UUA | Youth. "UUntitled | National Network for Unitarian Universalist Young People," September 3, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/announcing-uuntitled>.
- UUntitled Network. "UUntitled: National Network for Unitarian Universalist Young People." Unitarian Universalist Association, September 3, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/announcing-uuntitled>.
- Vail, Heather, and Tim Fitzgerald. "Is It Time for Another 'Common Ground'?": Why YRUU Must Change or Die." *Synapse*, Fall 2004.
- Wayne Arnason and Rebecca Scott. *We Would Be One: A History of Unitarian Universalist Youth Movements*. Boston, MA: Skinner House Books, 2005.
- Wayne B. Arnason. *Follow the Gleam: A History of the Liberal Religious Youth Movements*. Skinner House Books, 1980.
- Will, Floyd. "YRUU UUology: URGENT: Committed Youth Advocates Needed!" *YRUU UUology* (blog), July 3, 2008. <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/07/urgent-committed-youth-advocates-needed.html>.

Wolfe, Tom. "A Miracle in Seven Days." In *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 182–97. New York, NY: Picador, 1968.

UUYARN. "Young Adult Revival Network." <https://www.uuyarn.org>.

UUA | Youth. "Youth and Young Adult GA Staff Emergent Structure," October 23, 2020. <https://www.uua.org/blueboat/events/yaya-ga-new-staffing-structure>.

UUA | Social Witness Statements. "Youth and Young Adults | Business Resolution |," 2008. <https://www.uua.org/action/statements/youth-and-young-adults>.

Youth Ministry Working Group. "Recommendations for Youth Ministry." Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association, March 25, 2019.

"Youth Ministry Working Group | UUA.Org." <https://www.uua.org/youth/adults-ministry/competencies/6-major-models-youth-programming/workinggroup>.

UUA | Youth. "Youth Trustee to the UUA Board of Trustees." <https://www.uua.org/youth/leading/observer>.

"YRUU Institutional Memory Project." <http://yruuinstmemblog.blogspot.com/>.

YRUU Steering Committee. "Letter on End of YRUU Structure." *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), February 11, 2008. <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/02/steering-committee-letter-on-end-of.html>.

YRUU Steering Committee. "Letter to Board of Trustees." *YRUU UUlogy* (blog), April 24, 2008. <https://uulogy.blogspot.com/2008/04/steering-committee-letter-to-board-of.html>.