

## **Principle 5: Conscience and Democracy**

We all know that Unitarian-Universalism is distinctive among Protestant Christian religions. Though most of our congregations are affiliated with the nation-wide Unitarian-Universalist Association, one of the ways our religion maintains its distinction is that we observe congregational polity, meaning that congregations ultimately decide how to run themselves and are not directed by the UUA. Typically, these kinds of decisions are put to a vote, democratically, by the members of a congregation, thus putting into practice our fifth principle, “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

The most moving experience during which I’ve seen this participatory, substantive practice put to use was two years ago while I was a Member at Large on the Board of the Unitarian Universalist Community Church here in Sacramento. It was then that we had to ask each other if... and eventually how our shrinking, little church would cease operations.

Many leaders and keen observers in that congregation saw it coming. Our membership was dropping as the recession took its toll. Then we lost the lease on our space in South Sacramento—the part of town where our cultural roots were, and the one and only space in the church’s 24-year history that we had to ourselves, where we didn’t have to juggle schedules or resources with another organization to use it as we needed. So we moved to Midtown, and did so with optimism, though the result never quite worked out to our expectations. As our membership continued to dwindle, our remaining leaders grew weary. Eventually, tearfully, we on the Board asked ourselves and the rest of the congregation, “What should we do?”

Over the course of a few months in late 2013 and early 2014, we held a series of congregational meetings in homes and at our meeting place in Pioneer Congregational Church to hear each others' wishes, consider our options, assign duties, and set a schedule. All of us listened to each other respectfully. All of us felt heard. Though there was plenty of emotion, there was no blaming. Finally, on May 18, 2014, with a quorum present, we together voted to suspend operations at UUCC.

Immediately after the vote, we all took a deep breath, and determined what the heck we just voted on. With a core group wishing to continue ritual with the UUCC identity, a modified constitution was adopted. An alternate meeting place was arranged as we cut short our current lease. Some equipment and furnishings were sold, some lent to members' homes, and some put in storage in hopes of being ready if or when there would be regrowth. An essential three-member board was put in place to administer both the scaling-down process, and to help the remaining members navigate their new organization.

All of this work was done by informed choice of almost every active UUCC member. We listened and considered each others' wishes and ideas with care and respect. Though not all issues passed unanimously, we acted together with love, and without regret.

Our last service together on June 29, 2014 was a powerful one... some serious interconnected web happening! Rev. Lucy was there. Today, a dedicated, lay-led UUCC group still meets twice a month, with some members also active here at UUSS. I'm also happy to report that UUCC is now once again growing, having recently begun services at the Asian Community Center back in South Sacramento. UUCC and its members are succeeding by living our principles, democratically, conscientiously, and with mutual respect.