

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTRY FOR EARTH

Comments presented by
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The Green Revolution in Religion

Good morning! *Buenos días*.

Today, we'll celebrate a success story in organized religion. Something good happened. And many of you, perhaps most of you, have been a part of the story. All of you have shared in the benefits. So this is a very special anniversary, and it's appropriate to share the good feelings, at the 2009 General Assembly.

This is the twentieth anniversary of the affiliate organization that is now known as the Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth. It's the grassroots organization that created the Green Sanctuary program, which is one of the programs that is now included with Congregational Stewardship Services. The Ministry for Earth is still involved with the Green Sanctuary program, in a variety of ways, and the Ministry is also involved with some other good organizations. This year, the Environmental Justice Passport program has been introduced at the General Assembly, to bring Unitarian Universalists together.

My name is Bob Murphy. I'm a parish minister, with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Falmouth, which is an active, and growing, congregation on Cape Cod, in Massachusetts. I'll

speak today as a parish minister. I'm an environmentalist, but, also, I'm engaged in the life of a liberal congregation. So my thinking, some of my experiences, and even some of my language, may seem a bit unusual for a presentation about religion and environmental issues. I'm involved with all sorts of congregation things, like pastoral care, weddings and funerals, the installation of solar panels, and encouraging car pools.

Twenty years ago, I was one of the people who helped to establish the Seventh Principle Project. The name was changed to "Unitarian Universalist Ministry for Earth" in 2005. It's the same program, with a new and better name. I've been asked to say a few words about how and why the Seventh Principle Project started. More important, I'll try to answer the questions, "Why did the Seventh Principle Project succeed?" "Why did it last for twenty years?" "What can we learn?"

Looking back to the early days – well, none of us knew that programs like the Green Sanctuary program would prosper. Twenty years ago, we were a handful of "nature nuts" who had very little experience in church administration, so we made all sorts of mistakes. We didn't have a budget, or a strategy, or a well-crafted statement of beliefs, or much of anything. We had a vision, and we had some passion, and we were willing to take some risks, and, sometimes, we wound up looking rather naive and foolish.

Eventually, I went to Harvard Divinity School as a candidate for the ministry, but if you had suggested that possibility in 1989, I would have laughed. In 1989, I was working for SEIU, Local 254, which was the labor union that represented the janitors at Harvard. I worried about harsh chemicals and skin cancer.

Claudia Kern has developed a timeline that summarizes the progress of the Seventh Principle Project. The first generation of zealots met in a pizza parlor in New Haven, Connecticut, while the 1989 General Assembly was in session at Yale University. We had a shared sense that "something was wrong in the environment." We came from different backgrounds, but all of us, without exception, had seen a lot of suffering and too much pollution and waste caused by human actions in the natural world.

After the 1989 General Assembly, one thing followed another. I went home and I became increasingly involved in the life of my church. I read about the Transcendentalists. Also, I read about process theology and about liberation theology. In 1991, the first edition of the Green Sanctuary Manual appeared. By 1992, the Seventh Principle Project was an affiliate organization and we were producing workshops for each General Assembly. We became involved in some community projects, including "Mother Earth's Medicine Show," in Providence, Rhode Island, and, later, we helped to plan and develop the environmental festival in New Bedford. In both cases, we brought hundreds of people together in multicultural towns where, supposedly, families and religious groups weren't interested in the environment. Leaders, both left and right, kept saying, "Oh, it's a fad. It won't last." Some of the critics said, "Well, the environment is just something for the Bohemians and the rich. Real people want real issues."

I agree that there has often been an elitist, even an escapist, side to some of the conservation groups. The same thing can be said about some of the churches. However, there is a richness and a diversity in religion, and within the environmental movement, that should be acknowledged and appreciated. By the late 1980s, the environmentalists and the mainstream theologians were moving into some significant discussions. Theologians like Thomas Berry were gaining national attention. Father Berry was a Roman Catholic priest who followed in the tradition of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, but, ironically, I first heard about his work from Unitarian Universalists. In Rhode Island, I worked with Jewish environmentalists and with Buddhists. Pantheists and panentheists – yes, there's a big difference between the two – influenced the Seventh Principle Project. However, looking back, I realize that African-American religious leaders and academics were especially important in shaping "the green revolution" in liberal religion. Leaders like Robert Bullard asked, "Have you thought about environmental racism? Do you know what it means?"

In 1993, Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley worked with the Seventh Principle Project, to introduce a proposed General Assembly resolution called "Environmental Justice." It was a turning point for some Unitarian Universalists. And, in some places, our "Environmental Justice" resolution

was iconoclastic. Some people were confused and one of the General Assembly leaders was furious. "This is supposed to be a program about the environment," he shouted. "Why do you people keep talking about racism?" Somehow, we managed to pass the "Environmental Justice" statement. However, it was radical, and it challenged old ways of thinking. Twenty years ago, environmentalists were supposed to quote John Denver and Chief Seattle, not Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King. So, for years, the "Environmental Justice" statement wasn't included with General Assembly statements about the environment. It was considered to be a statement about "Population. " And, in some ways, maybe this was appropriate, because the Seventh Principle Project gave some significant attention to population issues during its formative years.

During the 1990s, several people came to the Seventh Principle Project, and they said, "You've got to deal with population issues!" Now, keep in mind that Universalists and Unitarians have been trying to address population issues since the days of Margaret Sanger, and it's never easy. During the 1990s, there was lots of controversy, among religious groups, and among environmental groups, and in other circles, and much of it focused on family planning concerns. Some of the attacks and counterattacks were terrible. So the Seventh Principle Project decided to try something new, among the environmentalists. In 1995, we introduced the General Assembly resolution called "Population and Development." We called attention to the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development, which had taken place a few months earlier, in Cairo, Egypt. We said, in effect, "Instead of shouting at the developing nations, because of their high birth rates, why don't we try to be helpful?" If we want women to have fewer children, why don't we empower women, so that women can make their own decisions about their lives? What would happen if women had more authority in the world?

The General Assembly gave its support to the Cairo conference and to the Cairo report. Years later, there are still Unitarian Universalist ministers, like myself, who keep bringing the Cairo report forward. In summary, that's the story of the Seventh Principle Project, for its first ten years. There were some other things that happened during the 1990s, but, at this point, you have some understanding of who we were and what we did. There were many, many people

who wandered in and out of the Seventh Principle Project during the 1990s. However, there are a few who deserve some special mention. Rachael Stark, and Brian and Roxanne Reddington-Wilde were with us at the start, and they organized the religious activities for the big 1990 Earth Day rally in Boston. Ron Engel, who taught at the Meadville Lombard Theological School, in Chicago, Illinois, was our first mentor and source of inspiration. Ron was one of the movers and shakers responsible for a major conference in Middlebury, Vermont, in 1990. The Middlebury conference was called "the Symposium on Spirit and Nature: Religion, Ethics, and the Environmental Crisis." This was one of the first big events in "ecology theology," with famous leaders from different faith traditions calling for increased cooperation. Bill Moyers produced a documentary movie called *Spirit and Nature*. After twenty years, it's still one of the best introductions to the subject.

Jim Scott was the musical missionary for the Seventh Principle Project, starting in 1993. Jim Scott has performed at hundreds of church services, district meetings, and conferences, and he continues to bring the good news forward. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley taught us about racial justice needs. Ken Brown, who is now a district executive, introduced the Seventh Principle Project to farm labor concerns and to the National Farm Workers Ministry. In some ways, Ken Brown and Howard Matson were the godfathers responsible for the CSAI that's called "Ethical Eating: Food and Environmental Justice."

The Seventh Principle Project went into a slump after 1996. However, chiefs like Fred Mayer and Claudia Kern carried it forward, through some difficult times. In 1999, Fred Small delivered a call to action at the General Assembly, here in Salt Lake City. The Seventh Principle Project was "born again," with a new generation of activists. However, the tale of what happened after 1998 is another story for another hour. The main message is very simple, "Our program continued, with a new set of leaders."

Visitors may still be pondering the questions, "Why did the Seventh Principle Project succeed?" "Why did it last for twenty years?" "Why did it grow, despite all of its mistakes and all of its shortcomings?"

I'll offer three personal observations. After that, we can cut the cake for the twentieth anniversary.

First: I suggest that the Seventh Principle Project – which is now the Ministry for Earth – grew and flourished when it became a religious project, working in a religious context, with the insights, the vision, the mission, and some of the traditions of liberal religion. For a few seconds, think about this point.

A program like the Green Sanctuary program has roots. It's a natural for Unitarian Universalists. Respect for the natural world, concern for human rights and human have distinguished Universalists and Unitarians since the days of the Enlightenment. We're able to accept the teachings of Charles Darwin and Rachel Carson. Henry Thoreau's nature mysticism and poetry appeals to many of us. We have a long, long history of involvement with social reform movements, and we often respond to some of the problems of social oppression.

We're grateful for the religious pluralism that enables and enriches the life of our congregations. So we don't insist that you worship "the Creator," and if you want to celebrate "the Goddess," that's fine. We don't believe that the natural world exists for one religion, or for one race, or for one nation, or even for one species. We do, however, believe that deeds not creeds are especially important in the natural world. The Good Samaritan who picks up litter from the sidewalk, and who puts the congregation's coffee grounds in the compost heap, may do more good than another lecture about the promise of Ecotopia. The Unitarian Universalist Association has seven principles. One of the principles mentions "the interdependent web of existence." This is the metaphysical rock on which many Unitarian Universalists build their understanding of "ecology theology." The Association has six other principles, equally important, that help to define and explain our vision of environmental justice. All of our principles go together. So we're talking about something that's organic, and holistic, and interwoven. All of our principles are important and they support each other. We can't say, "Our church will work for environmental protection on Monday and Saturday, and, then, the rest of the week, we'll work for social justice." If you're trying to save planet Earth, but you're not worried about human rights, I'm confused. What's your vision for the future? If you want anti-

oppression programming, but you're ignoring environmental issues, you're missing something that's important to Unitarian Universalists.

Second: The Ministry for Earth is successful because it supports congregations.

Take a look at the first edition of the Green Sanctuary Manual. It's a down-to-earth guidebook that's written, primarily, for leaders in liberal congregations. Again, some of you may say, "That's obvious. What's the big deal?" Well, at the beginning, it was a very big deal. Twenty years ago, some people anticipated a book that affirmed individualism and consumerism. Yes, we were in favor of personal transformation. However, the Green Sanctuary people looked around and we discovered that books about enjoying the natural world and relaxing in the sunshine had been written a few hundred times. The bookstores had plenty of books with titles like, *It's Easy Being Green: How to Save the World Without Leaving Your Jacuzzi*. So we decided not to write another book in that series.

Some people wanted us to produce an elaborate statement of beliefs or, maybe, a political platform, in order to get all of the troops in order. This is how movements in philosophy, and in politics, and in religion often begin. A few patriarchs try to nail down all of the definitions and all of the rules for correct thinking, so that there won't be any unexpected ideas and actions, as the army moves along the straight-and-narrow path. Some of the commanders want to have one great narrative, not three or four hundred, all jostling with each other. For a variety of reasons, we decided not to write a catechism.

We decided to move in a different direction. We asked the question, "What can we do for congregations that will be helpful?" Maybe we should have said, "Congregations come first!" However, that slogan came a bit later. At the start, we were looking for ways to bring Unitarian Universalists together. We identified four major themes: (1) we were concerned about the quality of religious celebrations; (2) we were very interested in religious education, for all of the different age groups; (3) we looked at church administration and identified opportunities for energy conservation, recycling, church landscaping and water conservation, and a bit more; and (4) we encouraged church involvement in community projects. Environmental justice, especially, received some emphasis in our guidebook.

"Stewardship" was a theme that developed, bit by bit, in some of our early workshops. It's an old theme that has been important in village life for thousands of years. The Great Law of the Iroquois says, "In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations." We don't own the land or the oceans, we just enjoy them for a few years, and, then, they're passed along to future generations. "Sustainability" is a related theme. In Chinese tradition, it is believed that bits of heaven are everywhere, but there's a need for human beings to become stewards and co-creators, in order to make things work in the right way in the universe. If people move in the right way, they can assist the transforming and nourishing powers of heaven and earth. Men and women can become good ancestors.

Finally: I'll offer a quote from James Luther Adams. Dr. Adams said, "A faith that is not a sister to justice will bring us to grief." Dr. Adams was one of the great Unitarian Universalist thinkers during the twentieth century, and his influence is needed in the twenty-first century, as new projects develop.

The Ministry for Earth will continue to grow and prosper, if it stays with the principles of liberal religion, if it supports congregations, and if it works for social justice. We need to think about "social justice" in some new ways. Bioethics is still a new field, and the protection of biodiversity needs a lot of attention. This is a century in which we'll have to ask some religious questions about genetic engineering, about changes in energy production and in agriculture, about medical research, and about changes in other fields. If we accept the faith that Dr. Adams accepted, there will be moments when we will have to express "a preferential option for the poor." A group of developers will propose a new highway or an energy project – or a group of conservationists will try to stop a housing program – and we'll ask, "How does this plan impact on the poor and on others who are abused?" Insight and courage will be required. Martin Luther King said it best, when he wrote his famous letter from the Birmingham city jail. Rev. King said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny." He also said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

Groups like the Ministry for Earth are starting to think about Rev. King's letter in a new context.

Like the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Ministry for Earth is not a political party, or a center for scientific research, or the cathedral for a new religion. We're not a denomination in a cluster of religious groups. Instead, we offer a method for building liberal congregations that can work with other congregations, and with community groups, in good partnerships, in a multi-faith and multicultural world, with an emphasis on "deeds not creeds." Methods are important. Sometimes, I wish that we could call ourselves "the Methodists," but the name has already been taken. So, for the moment, perhaps we should identify ourselves as a protean, liberationist, ecology-minded, grassroots religious movement. It's a real mouthful. Don't try to say all of that while you're trying to eat cake and ice cream.

In any event, we can say, "That's who we are and what we do." We energize, mobilize, inspire, educate, support, and encourage the Unitarian Universalists. We help our congregations to help others. Today, we celebrate our twentieth birthday.

Thank you! Your hospitality is always appreciated.