

Origin Story: The Salish Sea Fellowship

On the first Sunday of May, the [Salish Sea Fellowship](#) celebrates its first anniversary of holding services in Port Hadlock, Washington. That's a big event for us! In about one year's time, we have managed to build a small and generally happy U&U community of 61 members (and another 50 or so folks on our email list), a religiously liberal congregation of Unitarians and Universalists that embraces the seven principles. We didn't do this because we wanted to, we did it because the Quimper UU Fellowship (QUUF) in Port Townsend, WA essentially left us behind and without a spiritual home.

Loss of Community

"We recommend that all congregations adhere to a standard of free expression without censure. If most congregants-or even individual members-disagree with something that is said, they should also have the right of dissent. Members can be permitted to address the gathered community without disrupting the worship if limits are set on the time and the place. Such a practice would further democratic expression."

UUA.org, discussing Congregational Governance and Freedom of the Pulpit

We went through a slow and painful separation that began almost six years ago. After the 2019 General Assembly of the UUA and the subsequent Gadfly affair, some of us at QUUF, especially those of us more involved in our Adult Learning Programs (ALPs) at the time, started to ask questions about what was going on at the UUA after years of happily ignoring Boston. But the issues of censorship, undemocratic structural changes, the 8th Principle, the UUA's approach to anti-racism, and evt. the Art. 2 changes, raised many questions. Many of us feel that a core UU value is the right and the ability to talk about difficult issues, as the UUA has itself expressed in the quote above.

Unfortunately, these issues became siloed at QUUF into certain committees and were not allowed to be discussed in adult education classes or other fora. Deliberation around what we could not talk about continued for quite some time, eventually resulting in a Congregational vote against any classes on certain subjects (a 53/47 vote); this process included *ad hominem* attacks and misrepresentations by QUUF leaders on some of us that were advocating for open discussion. Feeling alienated but wanting to stay part of the community, we rented space offsite and began meeting (QUUF's building was closed for 2-1/2 years!) Rev. Dr. Todd Eklof visited us, sharing his experience and offering encouragement. We eventually formed an affinity group as part of QUUF (The Tomato Soup Group, or TSG) that was focused on the 4th Principle. We met monthly and would have discussion topics, including topics around the issues not permitted to be discussed more broadly. No other communication outlets to the general membership of QUUF, such as use of the weekly fellowship update or broadcast emails to the membership, were permitted by those of us expressing an opinion counter to the UUA position.

The TSG as a discussion group, social group, and a place to vent our frustrations worked for some time. Most of us hoped for some form of eventual reconciliation, especially as many of us were long-time members, had served in governance and had been deeply committed to QUUF. Unfortunately, the relationship with some parts of QUUF leadership deteriorated to the point of name-calling and outright lies about us 'dissenters'. Basic UU values, like the right to dissent and to be heard, were not respected. Our sense of a loving community of mutual respect and support was gone, and even basic trust was gone.

In what became a breaking point, QUUF's Minister told a delegation of us 'dissenters' on two separate occasions that reconciliation was not one of her goals. This was when talk about leaving the Fellowship became serious.

Breaking Away

In early 2024, The Tomato Soup Group, still a QUUF affinity group, decided to hold several meetings away from the Fellowship. Our first meeting sounded out interest in creating something new, possibly a whole new Fellowship. We dealt with a lot of the emotions around our love for QUUF, the problems with staying and the pain of possible separation. Seeing momentum to go forward, our second meeting focused on creating a working group. We presented two big questions to people right up front: 1. How many of you are committed to creating a new Fellowship, and 2. How many of you will help to financially support the Fellowship? Without sufficient numbers, which I thought of as at least 20, ideally closer to 30 to start, and funds to pay for what's needed, we weren't going to get far. We saw about 28 (more or less) committed, with about 10-12 willing to work to make it happen, and decided to go ahead.

If starting a church seems daunting (gee kids, let's put on a show!), it is at least something that you can break into discrete tasks. Initially we knew we needed:

- a place to hold services;
- to legally establish ourselves as a religious non-profit 501(c)(3) under US Federal tax law; and
- to choose a name.

We picked a team of two to look for a physical home for our 'church,' designated several others to work on a name and left the legalities to the lawyer in the bunch (me).

The choice of name of course generated a lot of discussion and process (think dot exercises), which is appropriate. Typically, once you pick a name it's yours forever, and it is new folks' first sense of who you are, so it's certainly important. Salish Sea resonated well (a reference to traditional native name for the waters including Puget Sound, the Strait of Juan de Fuca, etc.), and we thought of ourselves much more as a Fellowship than a church. We spent a lot of time arguing over a tag line and still haven't settled on one!

The legalities are tedious, necessary, and manageable. While you can of course simply proceed as a simple association of individuals, forming a non-profit entity gains many obvious advantages. Among what is needed to do (at least in WA state in the US) are:

- Register with the Secretary of State (of our state, Washington) as a religious non-profit corporation
- Draft and submit Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws of the Corporation
- Name a founding board, choose officers, start meeting and follow your bylaws; most states will also have specific laws around non-profit boards and how they operate
- Buy insurance before holding services; most venues will require this anyway
- Obtain an EIN from the IRS and ideally/eventually a 501(c)(3) letter (not legally required but also advantageous)

Where to meet became a trickier decision. QUUF is located in the middle of Port Townsend; its membership peaked around 420 people (not counting 'friends') before the conflict and before Covid in a town of about 10,000 people. Negative feelings about our departure from QUUF were talked about in town, and a good venue in Port Townsend became difficult. We decided that discretion was the better part of valor: we were not out to directly compete with or try to harm QUUF and made this clear by renting the Methodist Church in Port Hadlock, about 8 miles south of Port Townsend, and holding our services at a different time than QUUF's. We found that the (slight) physical separation was an advantage in that we started to draw not only disaffected UU's in Port Townsend, but also from Port Hadlock and communities further south.

Whether serendipitous or strategic on our part I'm not sure, but our working group and our founding Board included members willing to take on the key functions needed to get us going — music coordination, website creation, technology, communication, speaker recruitment, Sunday Service management, pastoral care, adult learning classes, and finances. We started slowly, with just one service last May; our very first speaker was Terry Anderson! We soon went to two services a month on the 1st and 3rd Sundays, both in the afternoons, added a community potluck dinner on the 3rd Sunday, and have just started experimenting with a 4th Sunday community event.

Who We Are as a Spiritual Community

At the outset, a driving factor for many in joining us was the sense of loss of community at QUUF and a desire to reestablish community. This sentiment was strongly echoed by Rev. Peter Morales in his sermon delivered at Salish Sea last summer. A different kind of issue, and a conversation that I believe the Fellowship should keep alive, is around who we are as a *spiritual* community. We have no intention at this point of affiliating with the UUA, but many of us consider ourselves UU's. We are considering joining the NAUA, but that congregational decision is down the line. We had an early conversation around what we knew we agreed on, which included core ideas of religious liberalism, or free faith, as expressed in a paper by UU Minister Rev. Bruce A. Bode. This led us to the following statement in our membership application:

We have each separately chosen to be a part of an independent community of free faith. We have organized not only as a religious and charitable institution, but one offering spiritual, growth-oriented, and community-building education. We hope to be a center for liberal religion, growing out of Unitarian and Universalist traditions while embracing the seven principles of Unitarian Universalism adopted in 1985.

As such, our objectives include the promotion of freedom of faith and the creation of a forum in which reason will guide religious thought and expression. In the pursuit of this, we will strive for an atmosphere of fellowship and a community of mutual support. We believe that if we hold each other in community and without judgment, with care and respect and kindness, there should be no issue of our time that we could not take on.

The seven principles are called out specifically in our bylaws and included as an appendix. Beyond this, our references to UU'ism remain circumspect, for several reasons. First, the UUA has a registered US trademark on the phrase 'Unitarian Universalist' and we are not members of the UUA. Second, since our founding, the UUA has amended Article 2 of its bylaws to remove the seven principles in favor of the six value statements, so reference to UU'ism may be increasingly misleading to others as to our religious foundation. Some of our members certainly still consider themselves a UU, some consider themselves more of a Unitarian, others are perhaps more Universalist, and still others worry less about the label and the particular tradition behind the label. So we have come to describe ourselves more as growing out of UU'ism and UU traditions, as you can see from the above.

One can play with the idea of who we are and what to call ourselves. Suggestions have included Orthodox UU's, Traditional UU's, Unaffiliated UU's (UUU's!), etc. I have tended to use the phrase U&U, as in, we are a group of Unitarians *and* Universalists, as both have traditions long predating the formation of the UUA. Ultimately, however, I'm not sure how much it matters. We are clearly a religiously liberal spiritual community, but the most important word in there is COMMUNITY. That is the need and hunger of so many of us: a spiritual community where we connect at a basic level around our beliefs, our values, and our desire to learn and explore, and where we support each other with love and kindness, ultimately letting us reach out to help others beyond our own community.

Looking Forward

A very fortunate set of circumstances has allowed us to succeed so far. We have excellent folks able to take on recruitment of speakers, music, our website and technology issues like Sunday Services setup and Zoom capability. (Among our members and friends are many who took on similar roles at QUUF, including seven past QUUF Board presidents.) This has let us get to an average attendance in the 50's, with 90% typically in person. Zoom lets those that are remote or homebound participate, but I think services in person are more valued. Our members seem comfortable with our manageable size, so far leading us to allow growth to happen organically rather than as a goal.

A smaller size is both more manageable and more limiting of course. Our two small pledge campaigns have been more than fully supported by our members and friends, allowing us to hire a part-time contract administrator. But the smaller size also reduces the number of volunteers that we can draw upon and the amount of outreach or community work that we can do. And while we are fortunate to be able to afford our administrator, the bulk of our work, speaker recruitment, most music, pastoral care, coffee, clean-up etc., is still done by volunteers.

Our relationship with QUUF also seems to be thawing with time. We have members that are part of both congregations and there is little or no conflict. Indeed, members of QUUF have reached out to invite those of us interested to the QUUF men's retreat this year, which is certainly a good sign. Ultimate reconciliation with QUUF is probably a remote possibility, given in part that QUUF is now an Article 2 'values' congregation and we remain a seven principles congregation, but more that there are still many hurt feelings that would need a serious commitment to a real reconciliation process. And there is of course still the issue that started to drive us apart in the first place: censorship of members trying to exercise their right to talk about their religion.

Ultimately, I believe that most members don't stay with, or leave, a particular congregation because the six value statements, or the seven principles, uniquely capture their views or aspirations. That may be part of what attracts them in the first place, but they stay because they have found a community. If QUUF had gone a different road and entertained open discussion (as other congregations have successfully done) of UUA changes, the 8th principle, the article two changes, etc., most of us would have been content and stayed, even if we ultimately disagreed with the changes. We would have felt heard and seen, we would have felt respected as equal members of the Fellowship, entitled to our separate views, and still a part of the community.

To me the mission of the Salish Sea Fellowship is its members. The Fellowship exists to serve its members under the umbrella of the seven principles. As a board, serving the members means listening to what they hope to get from the Fellowship, not substituting our own personal vision of what a congregation should be like and what it should do, and never treating members as fungible.

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Note: the author is an attorney in private practice in the state of Washington in the US. The above represents the author's personal views and opinions, and no part of this should be considered a legal opinion on any law implicated by any of the above.