

Can creedless Unitarians make it another 50 years?

by [Daniel Burke](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

A recent Sunday service at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore ended with an apology. Laurel Mendes explained that religious doctrine had been duly scrubbed from the hymns in the congregation's Sunday program. But Mendes, a neopagan lay member who led the service, feared that a reference to God in "Once to Every Soul and Nation" might upset the humanists in the pews.

"I didn't want to make anyone uncomfortable by reciting something that might be considered a profession of faith," said Mendes, 52, after the service. "We did say 'God,' which you don't often hear in our most politically correct hymns."

Such remarks are typical in the anything-but-typical Unitarian Universalist Association, a liberal religious movement with a proud history of welcoming all seekers of truth—as long as it's spelled with a lowercase *t*. For 50 years the Boston-based UUA has conducted a virtually unprecedented experiment: advancing a religion without doctrine, hoping that welcoming communities and shared political causes, not creeds, will draw people to their pews.

Leaders say its no-religious-questions-asked style positions the UUA to capitalize on liberalizing trends in American religion. But as the UUA turns 50 this year, some members argue that a midlife identity crisis is hampering outreach and hindering growth. In trying to be all things to everyone, they say, the association risks becoming nothing to anybody.

The UUA does promote seven largely secular principles that emphasize human

dignity and justice. Membership in the UUA dipped in 2011 for the third consecutive year to 162,800, a loss of about 1,400 members. The number of congregations fell by two to 1,046.

The UUA was formed in 1961

by the merger of two small historic groups: Unitarians, who believe in one God, rather than Christianity's traditional Trinity; and Universalists, who hold that God's salvation extends to all, regardless of race, creed or religion.

Nearly 4,000 Unitarian Universalists

gathered in Charlotte, North Carolina, June 22-26 for the association's annual assembly, where they celebrated their golden anniversary with hymns, remembrances and a large cake.

As usual, progressive

politics prevailed, with pledges for an "institutional commitment" to ethical eating, an antidiscrimination rally and a special collection taken for ministry to immigrants. Such activism dates to 19th-century Unitarian godfather William Ellery Channing, who argued that the aim of religious life is to encourage public virtue.

"That sense that

religion must be practical and influence the moral and spiritual context in which we live remains absolutely central to Unitarian Universalism today," said John Buehrens, a former president of the UUA.

Like

the UUA, one in four Americans sample from a variety of faith traditions, according to a 2009 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. A separate Pew survey found that 65 percent believe that multiple religious paths can lead to eternal life.

"There has

certainly been an increase in the amount of people who are open to the kind of ideas the Unitarian Universalists have championed," said John C. Green, a political scientist who worked on the Pew studies and has studied the UUA. "Whether they can convert that into members joining them is an open question. But the opportunity is certainly there."

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Morales, the UUA's current president, calls those trends, as well as the exodus of Americans from most Christian denominations, "an amazing opportunity."

"Millions of people are actively seeking a progressive, nondogmatic spiritual community," he said. "Our challenge is to be the religious community that embraces those people."

But

some say the UUA is held back by members' reluctance to proclaim religious tenets—a tricky task for an association that includes Christians, Buddhists, Jews, pagans, humanists and spiritual refugees from a host of more dogmatic faiths. Many UUA members say they find meaning and purpose in the familial bonds forged in congregations—regardless of religious beliefs.

David Bumbaugh, a professor of ministry at the UUA's Meadville Lombard Theological School in Chicago, was present at the founding of the association in 1961. He says the UUA has always shied away from God-talk for fear of offending members and shattering congregations.

But Bumbaugh has made the rounds recently at regional UUA conferences, encouraging them to publicly wrestle with foundational questions. "What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible? Those are the questions with which every viable religious movement must wrestle," Bumbaugh has said. "So long as those essential questions remain unaddressed, the dream will remain unfulfilled."

An internal UUA report from 2005 suggested that more than dreams could die. The whole association could collapse if members continue to muffle religious discussion, the report said. "The consensus of experts from an array of fields—from organizational development to systematic theology—is that to grow effectively, a religious organization needs clearly defined boundaries," the report states. "And one cannot put even the most permeable boundary around nothing." —RNS