

# The 200th anniversary of the founding of the American Unitarian Association (AUA)

**WORSHIPWEB THANKS REV. MARK HARRIS AND REV. DR. MEG RICHARDSON – UU HISTORIANS WHOSE EXPERT WISDOM SPANS MULTIPLE CONTINENTS AND CENTURIES – FOR SHARING THEIR PASSION IN PREPARING THIS “INSPIRATION” DOCUMENT.**

On May 25, 1825, the idea of creating the American Unitarian Association was presented to the Berry Street Conference. The next day, May 26th, the AUA was officially formed with the approval of bylaws. (In a fine coincidence, the British and Foreign Unitarian Association was also formed on May 25, 1825!)



Institutional anniversaries don't lend themselves easily to ritual in worship; this anniversary is no different. Instead, we suggest the following themes to explore in worship. Each theme is accompanied by reflective questions that might add some spice to your sermon!

## NAMING AND IDENTITY

Prior to 1819 (and Channing's pivotal sermon in Baltimore) our Unitarian ancestors called themselves *liberal Christians*. For a long time, the name "Unitarian" — often used pejoratively — was too radical to use comfortably because of its political connotations and theological radicalism. By 1825, however, many Unitarians had grown comfortable with the term — but not all, so it was prophetic and bold to formally claim the name "Unitarian" for the institution of the AUA.

- *When have we, as UUs, made bold claims or taken prophetic action that might have made some members uncomfortable?*
- *When UU leaders use language that brings you to the edge of your comfort level, what spiritual values are most helpful to you?*

## INSTITUTIONALISM VS. INDIVIDUALISM

In the United States, the creation of the AUA provided "institutional incarnation" for Unitarians. This was a new phenomenon: up until this point, Unitarians hadn't experienced the consolidation of institutional power. In fact, William Ellery Channing

was asked to serve as the AUA's first President — and Channing refused, because he felt that by accruing power, the institution would take power away from individuals.

It's important to note that the AUA was an organization for individuals, not congregations. Since congregations couldn't join the AUA until much later, in 1884, it took Unitarian churches a while to figure out how to relate to the AUA.

- *When is institutional power necessary? When is it detrimental?*
- *How does "power" get expressed by, or among, individual UUs? By congregations? What forms of power are held by the UUA?*
- *When have you been grateful for the institutional power of the UUA?*
- *Where is there generative tension between our institutions and individual UUs today?*



## CONNECTION

When an institution is formed, new legacies are both claimed and created. The organization of the AUA promoted new connections among individuals, and facilitated the sharing of religious tracts (printed pamphlets that functioned as "their version of the Internet").

Unitarians thought of themselves as a tract society, or a pamphlet society: they exchanged ideas in this way, and promoted Unitarian beliefs – and yet while they made attempts to expand westward, it's hard to think of the Unitarians as "evangelical." In fact, since tracts and pamphlets require a literate population, Unitarianism couldn't spread in rural areas, where literacy rates were very low. (This is one reason that Universalism was much more successful outside of big cities like Boston: while they also published tracts and sermons, the Universalists put a great deal of energy into evangelizing by horseback and itinerant preachers.)

- *In today's digital landscape, do you think there's a difference between exchanging or debating ideas versus "promoting" Unitarian Universalism?*
- *Can you think of ways that we limit our ability to reach seekers because of how we share ideas?*
- *Under what circumstances do you freely and comfortably share the "good news" of UU'ism? In what circumstances do you feel uncomfortable being an evangelist for our values and Principles?*