

Unitarian Universalists are pretty good at making fun of themselves---at least when we're not taking ourselves too seriously. It's said that working with UU's is like herding cats. Everyone is an individualist. Everyone wants to have a say in every decision, everyone is smart and everyone thinks they are "right"... about everything. And having worked with UUs in a bunch of different congregations, committees, and locations, I can tell you there's some truth in it. Everyone is unique and we value the worth and dignity of every one of us, even the one who might elsewhere be seen as a bit crazy.

But I can tell you that everywhere I have been in the UU world, there is at least one constant. There is a Chalice everywhere. And all UUs at some point light a chalice as they begin their work or worship together. Every Unitarian Universalist congregation I've ever been in has a chalice. There is one thing we can all agree on...the chalice is the common symbol of Unitarian Universalism.

Do you know where it came from? Do you know how that came to be? The chalice, often called the Flaming Chalice, I'm proud to say, has its roots in the social justice work that's so important to who we are as Unitarian Universalists. It has its roots in helping people, because we value every human being. It has its roots in WWII.

A man by the name of Hans Deutsch, an artist, designed the Flaming Chalice. He fled Austria when the Germans invaded. He went to Paris, but needed to escape from there when they conquered France. He went from there to Spain, and then to Lisbon. That's where he met Rev. Charles Joy, a UU minister. Joy was in Lisbon, working for the Unitarian Service Committee, helping refugees and war victims. The Service Committee was there helping Unitarians from Czechoslovakia, Jews, and others escape from the Nazis.

After Hans started working for Joy, he was asked to design an important looking symbol that could be put on papers to make them look official. Joy said, "a document may keep a man out of jail, give him standing with government and police...it has to look important." The symbol also had to reflect the work they did.

This is the design Hans came up with. It was built around the chalice, like the ones the Greeks and Romans used on their altars. And it had the flame, representing light and sacrifice. While it wasn't intentional, the chalice symbol could also be seen to reflect the cross and the sacrificial love of Christianity.

The symbol Hans Deutsch designed quickly caught on. You see it everywhere now, even around people's neck, hanging on a chain. The double circle around the flaming chalice was added to reflect the joining of the two denominations, Unitarianism and Universalism. So, by the circle, the chalice has come to represent the interconnectedness of life, the power of light and vision in the flame and our overarching commitment to human rights and being of service to others.

It must be said that the Universalists also had formed a Service Committee, which often worked in collaboration with the Unitarians. The two groups merged in 1963 to form the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee.

The chalice is the official symbol of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the unofficial symbol of Unitarian Universalism around the world. Many people don't know it but the UUSC is not a part of the Unitarian Universalist Association. It is an affiliate, stand-alone, separate corporation with its own board of trustees and by-laws. It is built on UU principles, beliefs and values but it is a separate, not-for-profit organization.

Within the United States and around the world, the UUSC works as a partner with local grassroots organizations to fight oppression and inequality. It primarily provides grants and technical support, while the local groups implement programs. It's charter calls for it to work in four areas: 1) it works to strengthen civil liberties and advance the democratic process. 2) it works to advance worker rights and sustainable living wages. 3) it works in the area of environmental justice, especially on the human right to water. 4) it works to alleviate problems caused by disasters, especially with people who have been left out of recovery efforts.

In all its work, the UUSC pays particular attention to issues of race, class and gender, because they recognize that systemic discrimination often plays a significant role in perpetuating injustice and human rights violations.

The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee is an important part of our UU history. In a real sense, it represents the best of who we are and what we stand for. It is an organization that truly Stands on the Side of Love.