

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York  
**“Climate Change, Pipelines, and Indigenous People”**

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore October 10, 2021

**Call to Celebration**

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations have begun the practice of doing a land acknowledgement. The purpose of this statement is to show respect for indigenous peoples and recognize their enduring relationship to the land. Practicing acknowledgment can also raise awareness about histories that are often suppressed or forgotten. Our congregation sits on land originally occupied by people who call themselves the People of the Waters That Are Never Still, the *Mubheconneok*, today called Mohican. I contacted the Mohican surviving tribal community. They have formally authorized this statement.

“It is with gratitude and humility that we acknowledge that we are learning, speaking and gathering on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people who are the indigenous peoples of this land. Despite tremendous hardship in being forced from here, today their community resides in Wisconsin and is known as the Stockbridge-Munsee Community. We pay honor and respect to their ancestors past and present as we commit to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.”

**River Invocation** (by Rev. Sam Trumbore)

*Mubheacannituck*

Abundant source of life that nourishes and sustains your people  
 Waters that constantly move and are never still  
 You link us all to the past, the present and the future.

Europeans came to claim you and name you as their own.  
 They came on big ships and brought strange ways  
 They insisted on curious ideas about ownership of the land around you.  
 You know no one can own you any more than someone can own the sky.  
 The land owns itself and we are but temporary guests and stewards.

These occupiers are willing to use violence to claim  
     what was originally a gift exchange.  
 They put up no trespassing signs and harm those who cross lines.  
 They have little appreciation of native plants, animals and foods  
 They have poisoned your waters through reckless industrialization.

The old ways are forgotten by these squatters.

But your ancient covenant partners have not died out.  
 They remember the old ways.  
 They hold in trust the knowledge and memories of the before times.  
 They hold in trust the language of the indigenous peoples.

They remember.  
 They will endure.  
 They will not abandon you.

## Reading

Edited Responsive Resolution, passed at Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly  
 June 2021

### “Creating a More Just Future Through Divesting from Pipelines and Investing in Young People”

Whereas: The Report to the UUA General Assembly; Progress on 2020 Business Resolution, Embodying Human Rights in Our Investment Decisions submitted by UU Common Endowment Fund shows what limited progress the UUA has made on the Business Resolution; and

Whereas: The commitments uplifted in the report are:

“The UUCEF favors investment in companies with explicit human rights principles, encompassing the rights of indigenous peoples and immigrants and addressing racial justice. We seek to invest in companies that fulfill the responsibility to respect human rights as articulated in the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.” And

“A company may be excluded if it provides significant financing or other financial services to, derives a material percentage of its revenues from, or sources a material percentage of its raw materials from a country or area,

- i) demonstrating a prolonged and systematic pattern of human rights violations or
  - ii) where significant human rights violations have been widely documented”;
- and

Whereas: The UUCEF is currently invested in banks and other corporations that profit from fossil fuel extraction and the exploitation of human labor; the white supremacist intentions being uplifted by individuals in this General Assembly are a clear reflection of the intentions of these large financial institutions; and,

Whereas: The Enbridge Line 3 pipeline is violating human rights by currently being built without the free, prior and informed consent of Indigenous nations; and several UU justice organizations and UU individuals recently took direct action to stop Line 3; and, ...

Whereas: Youth and Young Adults are inheriting a world affected by these negative changes, felt first and primarily by Black, Indigenous and other People of Color; marked by more unstable climate as well as socioeconomic conditions; and, ...

Whereas: The current SRI Guidelines permitted the UUCEF to profit from corporations benefiting from exploitation, climate crisis, colonization, and the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, including but not limited to Enbridge, JP Morgan Chase, Amazon, Walmart, Bank of America, Uber Technologies INC, Facebook, Conocophillips, Comcast, General Mills, Blackrock, Microsoft, Chevron, Wells Fargo, and a number of other extractive corporations; ...

Be it resolved that the 2021 General Assembly of the UUA urges the UUCEF to

- 1) create a transparent, public process to encourage wide and equitable participation of UU congregations, justice organizations and individuals in the comprehensive review of SRI Guidelines, with a clear timeline; and,
- 2) only undertake this comprehensive review of SRI Guidelines with the active participation of at least five Young Adults, or ten percent of a review committee (whichever is larger), as selected by a transparent process determined by the wider UU Young Adult community at General Assembly;

Be it further resolved that the 2021 General Assembly of the UUA urges the UUCEF to immediately and completely divest its holdings from financial institutions currently funding the Line 3 pipeline, including JP Morgan & Chase, Wells Fargo, Bank of America, Citigroup, and RBC.

## Sermon

As most of you know, this past June, I was elected to the Unitarian Universalist Association Board of Trustees in a contested election. That victory came with a serious sense of responsibility to serve the many people who voted for me *as well as* my opponent.

I've been sampling different activities and committees of the UUA Board to figure out where I can best serve. Co-Moderator Meg Riley asked me to be the Board's liaison to the Presidential Search Committee nominating candidates to run for UUA President in a year and a half. I've been attending bylaws discussions as the Board considers overhauling the entire UUA Bylaws with the anti-oppressive lens from the Commission on Institutional Change report. I've also been interested in the Values and Resources Committee, also known as the Finance Committee. The UUA raises and spends a lot of money and I'm curious about the ways they are doing it. And I like numbers.

I attended my first meeting of that committee a week ago and was quite interested in the angst the UUA financial folks have been experiencing because of the Responsive Resolution I read portions of for you this morning.

I imagine many, if not most of you, have no clue what a "responsive resolution" is. As I learned going through the UUA Bylaws, the owners of the UUA are UU congregations not the individual UU members. Our delegates represent our congregation at our yearly meeting called General Assembly. The business done via resolutions are binding on the UUA Board and the UUA Staff. In just a couple of days at the end of June, very important decisions are made by delegates who are often poorly informed and easily swayed by skilled and emotionally manipulative rhetoric. In the last plenary session of General Assembly each year, there is the opportunity to propose and immediately pass a "responsive resolution" to some report or business item that has come up during that year's General Assembly business. They are not formally binding but do direct the UUA Board to act on the behalf of the delegates.

The divestment responsive resolution focuses on a fund called the UU Common Endowment Fund. This fund was created a few years ago to provide congregations with a safe, professionally managed and profitable place to put their endowment money. The fund is a “socially responsible investment”, or “SRI” fund that screens out harmful investments using lists of criteria. The UUA facilitates this fund’s existence and manages its investments but is restricted in the way it manages this money. Our congregation put our endowment money in it until recently.

The responsive resolution proposers did their research and looked at the SRI criteria the funds use. They saw a contradiction between the screening process and what companies were being held. In their interpretation, the big failure of application of our values to our resources came up with investments related to the Line 3 pipeline.

Line 3 is a thousand mile oil pipeline from Alberta to Lake Superior that has been operating since 1968. It runs across the width of upper Minnesota, across Ojibwe traditional land. The pipeline is quite old and had construction quality problems from the beginning that resulted in several oil spills over the years, including a million gallon spill in Grand Rapids Minnesota in 1991, the worst inland oil spill in U.S. history.

The owner of the pipeline, Enbridge, has wanted to replace much of this pipeline and upgrade it so it can carry much more oil. The source of that oil? The Canadian Tar Sands, some of the worst, most costly, and most environmentally damaging oil extraction in the world.

Investors have been moving away from Tar Sand oil because the Canadians haven’t had an cheap and easy way to export it. This new pipeline will give new energy to that extraction process.

The members of our Green Sanctuary Committee working to slow down and maybe someday reverse climate change will tell you we need to keep fossil fuels in the ground and invest in renewable energy sources. One way to slow down the extraction process is with a public commitment to no new fossil fuel infrastructure. Stopping new oil and gas pipelines are one way to do that. Enbridge protests this thinking. With regard to Line 3, they say this isn’t new infrastructure but rather a replacement of leaky, dangerous old infrastructure. Yes, protestors respond, and Enbridge plans to increase the pipeline capacity too.

The Ojibwe have additional reasons to stop new pipelines. Our wisdom story today gave us some important insights into the dangers of the black snake attacking their land and water. In the process of negotiating the new pipeline, indigenous treaties from the 1800’s haven’t been respected. Those treaties establish hunting and fishing rights on the land the pipeline will cross and disrupt. The most sensitive food source for them is the *manoomin* wild rice that grows in the swamps, ecosystems easily threatened by pipelines. And water contamination with oil would be disastrous for any ecosystem. There are many of the same arguments against the Dakota Access pipeline at Standing Rock.

The Ojibwe are not an insignificant tribe by the way. They are one of the largest tribal associations spanning the U.S.-Canadian Border and surrounding much of the Great Lakes. And they are not alone facing the dangers of climate change. The pressures to stop investing in fossil fuel infrastructure come from other tribes as well.

The abundant run of chinook salmon in the Yukon river has been in decline for over a decade. This year the chum salmon plummeted. Alaskan natives have no salmon to stock their freezers for the winter. They are angry and want to know who is to blame? What can be done to turn the situation around? They feel powerless considering that global climate change might be the most significant factor of the problem.

The same could be said for the Navajo and the Hopi of northern Arizona suffering a megadrought that has reservoirs at the lowest level in generations. Their cattle are dying and herds are being forced to be thinned to use precious water for agriculture. All while white folks are watering their lawns, golf courses and filling their pools with that valuable water in places like Phoenix.

The Ojibwe peoples have fought the pipeline in court and relentlessly led protests to slow down and stop the pipeline construction. Some Unitarian Universalists have been actively supporting their protests. This summer, UU young adults showed up to support the Ani-shin-aa-be water protectors for the Treaty People Gathering in early June. The UU College of Social Justice and UUSC collaborating with the UUA, UU Ministry for Earth, UU Young Adults for Climate Justice, and UU Justice Arizona raised funds to enable the young adult delegation to travel to Minnesota at the end of July, to support their service to their cause —be it protesting and risking arrest or doing chores in the long-term camps.

Aly Tharp, UU Ministry for Earth Director of Programs and Partnerships put it this way:

“As a Unitarian Universalist young adult, I know at the core of me that Life itself is on the line right now. I have a moral obligation to do everything in my power to shift the story and the trajectory of humanity, healing our relationship to Life and living on this planet. Thirty to fifty percent of all species on Earth could go extinct by 2050, if we do not make this change. I live my faith by joining this delegation to show up for the treaty rights and leadership of the Anishinaabe; for the water and the wild rice, for climate stability, for all our relations.”

Aly’s words went through my mind as I listened again to the recording of the General Assembly debate over this responsive resolution. It passed 80% to 16% opposed with 4% abstaining. I understand why. The young adults were passionate. Those who spoke against the resolution were older white guys, probably current or former treasurers or endowment fund managers. They know this isn’t how portfolios are usually handled, even socially responsible funds. No funds divest in banks because of the loans they make. Immediate divestment of funds would cause significant losses to the fund. The money managers and the UUA Board in their oversight have fiduciary responsibility to make sure their investors are protected from reckless investment practices. Legally, this kind of immediate divestment strategy could fall into that category.

But sensible, business-as-usual practices make no sense to these young adults staring into the climate change abyss.

Divesting bank investments because of their lending practices does have some novelty to it however. This idea came from the water protectors as a way to put pressure on banks not to make these kinds of loans. And there are other reasons to question big banks as an investment. The student debt crisis comes to mind. There are so many students drowning in student loan debt

that is crippling their ability to build lives for themselves, start families, buy homes, save for college for their children and maybe put money away for retirement themselves.

Also, the UUA has an interesting history with fossil fuels. The Shelter Rock UU Congregation benefitted from a bequest of Northshore Oil leases that, over the years, has brought 100's of millions of dollars in returns. Several endowment funds have been set up from that money that fund the UUA, theological education, and large grants to do social justice work. The social justice funds give millions of dollars away each year to do admirable work supporting Black Indigenous, and People of Color organizations and movements. Many are direct, on-the-ground, action organizations making a wonderful difference. All with fossil fuel money, though I imagine those funds are more widely diversified today.

And let's also appreciate the good uses of the UU Common Endowment Fund returns. Those earnings are keeping some of our UU congregations viable. It is paying to fix roofs, replace furnaces, buy solar panels, and renovate aging buildings. It is being used to pay for staff salaries and help smaller congregations retain their ministers. And it is being used for social justice work in the community. This fund holds the pooled assets of 100's of our congregations who depend on those returns to function.

Yet how good can any of us feel about making money by endangering the land and lives of the Ojibwe people?

As I participated in the Values and Resources Committee meeting, hearing the UUA financial staff wringing their hands over the non-negotiable expectations of the young adults about divestment, I thought to myself, These UUA staff shouldn't be holding this very difficult problem by themselves. They shouldn't be the ones triangulated between the fund's rules, currently followed SRI practices and the young adults demands. The investors in the funds should be involved in making these moral decisions.

And not just the UUA should be reflecting on its investments. What about us? Should we be considering divesting from these very same banks for the reasons the Water Protectors have outlined? If the banks knew that many people were choosing different bank investments for their portfolio than the banks participating in fossil fuel infrastructure loans, that action, hopefully, might have an impact. This could be a legitimate shareholder action to dump their stocks. If enough people did it in a coordinated fashion, it would likely get their attention.

Over the years, I've seen the UUA and related UU organizations used as the punching bag for whatever social problem we've got. It is easier to lash out and tell the UUA what to do rather than bringing those resolutions home and taking them seriously. What will our Albany UU endowment do with this responsive resolution? Are we willing to implement it with our endowment funds? How many of our GA delegates voted for it? This is part of taking responding morally and ethically to a troubled world seriously.

And on a personal level, what am I willing to do with my personal investment funds? I've been putting a large chunk of what you pay me into TIAA retirement funds in a plan provided by the UUA. I will look at the holdings and shift them around if the funds are heavily invested in these banks. Yet, anyone living on the income from investments knows the importance of being widely

diversified. The best investments tend to be index funds and those have holdings in a wide variety of stocks, some of them not socially responsible companies. Making enough to live on and doing good with one's money isn't an easy tradeoff.

I don't have easy answers to these questions. What I know is this isn't just the UUA's problem. Turning capitalism around toward serving human good rather than human greed is possible. But it can only happen when those with resources collectively work together to drive the changes. My hope is the UUA can lead but not by itself. It needs our support and encouragement to do so rather than our criticism and judgment.

After all we are the Unitarian Universalist Association. And you are fortunate to have your voice amplified by my election to the UUA Board.

Let me know what you feel, think and believe should be done