

Final Report of the Commission on Free Publications of the
American Unitarian Association

Earl C. Davis
Chairman

Concord, NH

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Introduction:

This report is prepared and submitted under authority of the following vote of the Board of Directors of the American Unitarian Association, passed on April 14, 1931:

VOTED: To authorize the president to appoint a commission whose duty it shall be (a) to make a survey of the books and tracts now published by the A.U.A. for free distribution; (b) to recommend the elimination or revision of such items as they may deem advisable and the preparation of new material; and (c) to consider ways and means of securing a wider distribution of this type of literature.

At a meeting held during the A.U.A. Week at Star Island August 4, 1930, the present chairman of the Commission, speaking on the subject, "If I Were President of the A.U.A.," said in part as follows:

"To publish and distribute books and tracts" was designated as one of the purposes for which the Association was organized. Through this channel very important work has been done. But it seems to me that we are not using it adequately. First of all, a study of the Descriptive Catalogue of Religious Literature published for free distribution by the American Unitarian Association will disclose the suspicion that very few of our tracts are of such a character as to be useful for reaching large numbers of people and dealing with the problems of religion with which they are concerned. However, important they may have been in the past; however valuable they may be under

certain circumstances today, I am certain very few of them, either in form, content or language are suitable for distribution now. Developments of the past fifteen years, not only in the world of religion, but in the field of philosophy and science, as well as in the social order, have made most documents ill-suited to current needs and demands. I suggest therefore, that we undertake a thorough overhauling of our tracts for free distribution; that in so doing, such new tracts as may seem essential be written having in mind the particular types of persons who may receive them. This seems to me such an important matter as to call for a special committee, carefully selected and representative, to be entrusted with the task.

This suggestion was immediately acted upon by the Association, which instructed Mr. George G. Davis, now secretary of the Commission, to investigate and report. Mr. Davis began his investigation September 1, 1930, and on September 30th made a preliminary memorandum of his findings, a copy of which is attached, marked A.¹ It is interesting to note that this private memorandum in the main contains or implies all the conclusions and suggestions to which the members of the Commission individually and collectively later arrived. Mr. Davis' investigation continued through the winter and his report and recommendations were submitted to the Administrative Council, a copy of which also attached, marked B. The Administrative Council in a meeting held at Senexet April 10, 1931, passed the following vote of recommendation to the Board of Directors:

VOTED: To recommend to the Board of Directors that they authorize the appointment by the President of a commission to study the whole problem of the free publications of the A.U.A. and recommend which tracts on the present list should be discontinued, also recommending the preparation of such tracts as they may find necessary to fill any gaps in our present list. This commission would also have the duty of

¹ None of the Appendices mentioned in the body of this report were included with the manuscript as I found it, and they are not included in this transcription.

arranging special series of tracts to meet the needs of certain groups, such as ministers of other denominations considering entering the Unitarian ministry, people in the orthodox churches and people definitely outside the Christian church.

Four days later, on April 14th, acting upon the recommendation of the Administrative Council, the Board of Directors unanimously passed the vote under which the Commission has been operating.

Personnel of the Commission:

Acting under the authority of the vote of the Board of Directors, the President of the Association appointed a commission, consisting of both laymen and ministers, which was believed to be representative of various theological, intellectual, and ethical interests and as widely distributed geographically as conditions permitted. The Commission consisted of Rev. E. Burdette Backus, minister of the First Unitarian Church, Los Angeles, Calif.; Charles Bolte, former President of the Metropolitan Conference, New York City; George G. Davis, Needham, Mass., Executive Secretary of the American Unitarian Association; Rev. Earl C. Davis, minister of the Second Congregational Society Unitarian, Concord, N.H.; William Roger Greeley, Lexington, Mass., Vice-President of the Unitarian Laymen's League; Ival McPeak, Braintree, Mass., Secretary of the Unitarian Laymen's League; Mrs. John B. Nash, New York City, Director of the General Alliance; Rev. Alson H. Robinson, minister of the First Unitarian Society, Plainfield, N.J.; W. Forbes Robertson, Belmont, Mass., Publication Director of the American Unitarian Association; Rev. Sydney B. Snow, D.D., President of the Meadville Theological School, Chicago, Ill.; Rev. F. Raymond Sturtevant, minister of the First Unitarian Church, Baltimore, Md. Professor Kirtley F. Mather of Harvard University consented to act as a consulting member of the Commission in matters relating to the field of science.

Of the personnel of the Commission, Mrs. Nash found later that she would be unable to serve and felt compelled to resign. Mr. Backus read practically all the tracts and made a preliminary report of very great value but illness prevented his attendance at the final meeting. Mr. Bolte read a considerable number of

pamphlets and submitted a preliminary report but was prevented by business engagements from attending the final meeting. Mr. Greeley completed the reading of a portion of the pamphlets but was unable to attend the meeting. Rev. Earl C. Davis was appointed chairman and George G. Davis was appointed secretary.

Preliminary Work of the Commission:

The appointment of this Commission was announced by the President at the General Conference meeting of the Association in Philadelphia in the fall of 1931. The members of the Commission who were present at the Conference—Earl C. Davis, George G. Davis, Mrs. Nash, Sydney B. Snow, Alson H. Robinson and Charles Bolte—held the first meeting in Philadelphia and laid out a general plan of action. It was contemplated, of course, that the bulk of the work would be done by correspondence. A second meeting was held during Anniversary Week in May 1932. This meeting was attended by Earl C. Davis, George G. Davis, Sydney B. Snow, W. Forbes Robertson and by invitation, Rev. Ernest Caldecott. The results of preliminary reports were reviewed; certain changes in procedure were determined upon.

The Survey:

In 1817 the free distribution of sermons and other printed material was begun by a voluntary group of liberal Congregational ministers. From this modest beginning later developed the American Unitarian Association, one of whose five stated purposes was to distribute printed matter. This has been one of the most important means of influencing the religious thought of our times. When one realizes that during the past twenty-five years alone 7,105,450 of the tracts still on the active list have been distributed, and in certain cases, notable tracts Nos. 2, 117, 240, 246, 275, over 100,000 copies have been distributed and that 175,000 copies of No. 8 have been distributed, the importance of this activity becomes increasingly manifest.

We were bound by the nature of the undertaking to make a thorough and painstaking survey of the material and its uses. In order to approach the task from a common angle we formulated a

general method and statement of the point of view to be maintained in the work. A copy of this is attached and marked C.²

As a result of an appeal published in the *Christian Register*, from personal interviews, and from replies to letters, the Commission has received many valuable suggestions. In addition to these sources of information we have had the great advantage of a report written in 1917 by the Rev. Jabez T. Sunderland, chairman, apparently, of a commission similar in purpose to the present one. This report by Dr. Sunderland, which was not discovered until our work was well underway, and was not brought to the attention of the commission until near the close of the Senexet meeting, is most interesting. It contains many valuable observations and suggestions. His report was never acted upon by the Board, but our recommendations incorporate practically all of the suggestions made by Dr. Sunderland fifteen years ago. It should be noted that his report, a copy of which is attached, marked D, anticipates many of our findings—particularly his emphasis upon the fact that there are far too many tracts, a large part of them no longer adapted to our time or useful for our purposes; and that there are important matters not covered at all—especially in the following fields: (a) the application of religion in daily living, (b) biography and autobiography; and (c) history of liberal movements in this country and abroad.

In making a general survey of these tracts as well as in the detailed study of each tract, our decisions were made in the light of the uses to which the tracts had been put in the past and, as it finally appeared, the probable uses in the future. Both on the basis of past experience and on our judgment as to future usefulness, these pamphlets may be divided into two main classes.

First, those of a general inspirational character, mostly sermonic in style and spirit. They have been and still are being distributed in large numbers, mainly through the channels of the Post Office Mission, the Cheerful Letter committees and the Associate Membership list. Great credit should be given to those who have worked through these channels, and to individuals who have sent these sermons and pamphlets out by the thousands.

² See footnote #1.

The second class of tracts, which by the way seems to meet more closely the intent of the originators of this work, may be classified generally as "propaganda." Both by historic usage and probable usefulness this class may be subdivided into four main groups: (a) those which are suitable primarily for the unchurched whose ways of life for many reasons have kept them apart from corporate religious interests; (b) unsatisfied clergymen of other fellowships and laymen who still give nominal allegiance to some church; (c) the vast number of students and teachers whose work in the fields of science and sociology has unsettled their religious beliefs and failed to provide an equivalent; and (d) the increasing number who are hostile to what they consider "religion" and definitely opposed to the churches and all their works.

In making the detailed study of these tracts and in formulating our recommendations we have had these four groups in mind.

The Detailed Study:

Every member of the Commission, with the exceptions noted in the opening paragraphs of this report, has read and in many cases re-read, every pamphlet and flyer that we have passed upon, some 300 in all. The results of this study, together with other information, has been collected on cards filed with this report, a sample of which is attached and marked E. Each card contains the title of the pamphlet, its serial number, the name of the author, date of writing (when available), date of first printing, total number printed, number distributed in the year 1931-1932, and the number on hand as of last May. Also each card contains the personal decision of each member of the Commission as to the disposition of the tract; the detailed comments of members of the Commission, and the final recommendation of the Commission as a whole.

In reading the tracts and passing upon their usefulness for the purpose above-mentioned, each member of the Commission, independent of the others, classified the list under four heads:

1. Those to be immediately discontinued.
2. Those to be retained until the existing supply is exhausted.
3. Those to be revised or a substitute provided.
4. Those to be continued indefinitely.

The reports of the individual members had been submitted and for the most part their decisions had been recorded on the cards before the final sessions of the Commission at Senexet.

The Senexet Meeting:

The Commission assembled for its final meeting at the Retreat House, Senexet, Conn., Monday noon, September 12th, and continued its sessions morning, afternoon and evening until Thursday afternoon, September 14th. The following members were present: Messrs. E. C. Davis, G. G. Davis, McPeak, Robertson, Robinson, Snow and Sturtevant. In addition, Dr. Cornish, who as President of the Association is *ex officio* a member of all committees, was present and rendered invaluable assistance both in the way of information and wise suggestion. The Commission is also greatly indebted to the very efficient work of Miss Elizabeth Spalding, not only for her services at Senexet, but throughout the work of the Commission and the preparation of this report.

The sessions at Senexet were devoted to a comparative study of the individual reports and recommendations. Each tract was passed upon in the light of the decisions and comments contained in the individual reports with full consideration being given to general recommendations and suggestions contemplated. Copies of these individual reports are attached, marked F. They show a remarkable unanimity of judgment, though arrived at independently, not only as to the merits of the individual tracts but in the general recommendations which follow. Every piece of printed matter was discussed and the conclusions arrived at in each case were substantially unanimous. In the comparatively few cases where there were sharp differences of opinion as to the merits and usefulness of a particular pamphlet, the matter was discussed until agreement was reached.

Findings and Recommendations:

I. As the result of our survey, the Commission recommends the following disposition of the individual items on the present active list. These recommendations concerning individual tracts should be studied in connection with the general recommendations contained in this report. It is interesting to note that in spite of the number of pamphlets rejected only three subject-headings listed in the catalog have been eliminated.

- a. We recommend that the following 112 be discontinued at once: [Here a long list of numbers, presumably of tract numbers]. We further recommend that the following 19 numbers be discontinued but that substitutes be prepared as soon as possible: [Here another long list of numbers.]
 - b. We recommend that the following 41 numbers be retained until the present supply is exhausted and then discontinued. [Here a long list of numbers.]
 - c. We recommend that the following 49 numbers be retained until they can be revised or a substitute provided (recommendations of definite suggestions concerning individual tracts are attached for the convenience of the Publication Director and the Publication Committee, in case this report is adopted): [Here a long list of numbers.]
 - d. We recommend the following 107 numbers be retained indefinitely: [Here a long list of numbers.]
- II. As indicated by the detailed recommendations above, the Commission believes and therefore RECOMMENDS that the number of tracts on the active list at any time should be limited to not more than one hundred and seventy-five.
- III. The Commission finds that a great preponderance of the present material is composed of sermons prepared for the ear and not the eye; the Commission believes that this type of material as a general thing is not suitable for "propaganda" purposes. We therefore RECOMMEND that in future only approximately 20% of the entire list should be sermonic or of inspirational character such as is so largely used by the Post Office Mission and Cheerful Letter Committees.
- IV. The Commission finds that the present list is complicated unnecessarily by the fact that it is divided into many different "series." We believe that with the exception of the Church Efficiency Series and the Religious Education Series, which are technical in character, all others should be contained in the regular A.U.A. list. We therefore RECOMMEND that the Biographical Series, the International Series, the Memorable Sermon Series, Social Service Series and Religion for the New Age Series should be discontinued as such and that any of the pamphlets now listed in these series which are retained should be

transferred to the regular A.U.A. list.

In making this recommendation it is understood that future catalogs may contain a list of pamphlets suitable for these various purposes. We further RECOMMEND that the pamphlets in the Church Efficiency Series and the Religious Education Series be revised and brought up to date.

Looking to the future, and having in mind the varied character and work that is being done by our churches, we were impressed by the preponderance of tracts written in an ecclesiastical language that is no longer used, and not adapted to the work that many of our churches are doing, and [to] the people they reach. A list of some 50 odd suggestions for new pamphlets is submitted with the report. These suggestions are literally derived from the field, from those who are working with students, and doing extension work. The diversity of the subjects suggested is interesting. With this in mind we offer the following recommendation:

- V. The Commission RECOMMENDS that in the future the free publications of the A.U.A. be representative of the principal viewpoints in our fellowship to that literature suitable for use in all our churches may be obtained through the Association.

Realizing that the task of rounding out a suitable and effective list of tracts is most difficult, and that filling in the gaps is most important, the Commission discussed at length a suitable method of obtaining new material of a desired quality and for a desired purpose. It seemed clear in theory at least that the Publication Department or the Publication Committee "should go out after tracts to meet its definite needs and requirements." We therefore make the following recommendations:

- VI. The Commission finding that there are so many gaps to be filled RECOMMENDS that for several years the primary duty of the Publication Department should be to fill the gaps and replace the more important "tracts to be revised" (see page 9 [above I-c]).
- VII. The Commission finds that in theory at least the Publication Department should seek material to meet its definite needs and requirements rather than merely to

pass upon manuscripts submitted to it. We therefore RECOMMEND that in future the Publication Department should seek its material, at least in the field of propaganda, from individuals best qualified by knowledge of the subject and literary style.

VIII. The Commission

RECOMMENDS that in order to secure this material that a moderate fee be offered even though this reduces the number of new tracts published during any particular year.

IX. In order to meet pressing demands as they have registered during the survey, the Commission

RECOMMENDS that the first twelve pamphlets to be prepared be as follows (the order of listing is not significant):

- a. A pamphlet by Dr. Dexter dealing with social problems
- b. A pamphlet on religious leadership by Rev. Fred R. Lewis.
- c. An international pamphlet by Dr. Cornish and possibly Mr. Joy jointly.
- d. A pamphlet in regard to Labor Day.
- e. A pamphlet on personal problems.
- f. A Christmas pamphlet.
- g. A pamphlet on Humanism.
- h. A pamphlet on some disputed theological point by a humanist.
- i. Revision of Tract N. 2, "The Unitarian Church," by Joseph H. Crooker.
- j. The Present Depression.
- k. Revision of Tract No. 112, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper," by Rev. Augustus P. Reccord, by the author

X. The Commission finds that the present list is almost entirely lacking in material on various subjects and particularly for use among college students. We have had very definite demands from many sources, including the Post Office Mission and those interested in student work, for which no suitable material is now available. The Commission

RECOMMENDS that the following subjects should have adequate treatment as soon as possible (a more complete list of suggestions with possible authors is attached hereto for the benefit of the Publication Committee and marked G):

- a. The relation of science to religion.
- b. What is morality (historical and descriptive)

- c. Humanism (Objective treatment)
- d. The Modern View. Revelation or Discovery; Authority vs. Freedom.
- e. Character Building.
- f. Conflicting Loyalties (a) Peace and War; (b) The individual and society.
- g. Racial Equality and opportunity.
- h. Free speech (historical approach)
- i. Religious Leadership
- j. The Devil.
- k. Worship.
- l. Has Unitarianism Done Its Work Today?
- m. The Sacraments
- n. Didache³ (consider reprinting)
- o. Individual Living and everyday problems
- p. Religious Festivals: Easter, Christmas, Labor Day.
- q. The Church's Responsibility in the Time of Depression.
- r. Stimulation of Leadership for the Way Out.
- s. Biography and Autobiography.
- t. What Geology Means to Religion
- u. What Biology Means to Religion.
- v. What Psychology Means to Religion.

The third task imposed upon this Commission by the Board of Directors was "to consider" ways and means of securing a wider distribution of this type of literature. The Commission believes that the size, typography and general appearance of our pamphlets vitally affect this question. Many of the letters which were received emphasized the desirability of having a more attractive pamphlet and of a more convenient size. The Commission realizes that a radical change would be more expensive than present conditions warrant. We believe, however, that the Publication Department should give this question very serious consideration. Meanwhile we make the following definite recommendations which we believe can be carried out without undue expense:

XI. The Commission

RECOMMENDS that the author's name, date of delivery of sermon or address and the occasion shall appear on the title page of each pamphlet.

³ Didache, also known as "The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles to the Nations," is a brief anonymous early Christian treatise.

- XII. The Commission
RECOMMENDS that a brief biographical sketch of the author shall appear on the title page of each pamphlet.
- XIII. The Commission wishes to commend the Publication Department for the diversification of type on the title page of the more recent pamphlets and we RECOMMEND that this be continued in future.
- XIV. The Commission
RECOMMENDS that so far as possible in future all of the shorter tracts be published in smaller or "pocket" size pamphlets.
- XV. The Commission
RECOMMENDS that certain tracts shall contain a brief bibliography on the subject treated.
- XVI. The Commission
RECOMMENDS that the following statement be printed on the cover of each pamphlet:
"The Unitarian Fellowship is dedicated to the progressive transformation of individual and social life through religion, in accordance with advancing knowledge and the growing vision of mankind. Moved by this common purpose, Unitarians inevitably arrive at a diversity of convictions, which are held in unity of spirit. These pamphlets, representing free inquiry and varying opinions, are issued to promote the purpose of the Fellowship."

Respectfully submitted,

E. Burdette Backus
Charles Bolte
William Roger Greeley
Ival McPeak
Alson H. Robinson
Sydney B. Snow
F. Raymond Sturtevant
George G. Davis, Secretary
Earl C. Davis, Chairman

Twelve new tracts recommended for publication
During 1932-1933
(For the Publication Committee)

1. New tract by Dr. Dexter on social problems
2. Tract on religious leadership by Rev. Fred R. Lewis.
3. International pamphlet to be written by Dr. Cornish and possibly Mr. Joy jointly.
4. Labor Day tract (possibly by Dr. Dexter). Other suggestions: Norman Fletcher, Whiting Williams, Clarence R. Skinner, Frank D. Adams.
5. Pamphlet on personal problems. Possible authors: Horatio Dresser of Brooklyn (see his recent article in the Meadville Journal).
6. Pamphlet on Christmas.
7. Pamphlet on Easter.
8. Pamphlet on humanism; a statement of what humanism is. Possible authors: John H. Dietrich; Curtis W. Reese.
9. A pamphlet on a disputed theological point by a humanist. Possible author: E. Burdette Backus.
10. Revision of No. 2, "The Unitarian Church," by Joseph H. Crooker. Possible author: Henry W. Foote.
11. The present depression.
12. Revision of No. 112 by the author, "Baptism and the Lord's Supper," by Augustus P. Reccord.

Gaps to be filled in the Free Publications of the A.U.A. and possible authors.

(For the Publication Committee)

1. The relation of science to religion. Earl C. Davis possible author.
2. What is morality? (historical and descriptive)
3. Humanism. Objective treatment. (See Chapt. 8 of Mason's book. See also McPeak's "Humanism, A Religion for Today" issued by the First Unitarian Church in Minneapolis; also McPeak's "Finding A Faith To Live By," League publication)
4. The Modern View. Revelation or Discovery; Authority vs. Freedom.
5. Character Building. (See Ernest S. Meredith's sermon, "The Spiritual Daily Dozen.")
6. Conflicting Loyalties: (a) Peace and War; (b) The Individual and Society. Possible author, Theodore G. Soares.
7. Racial Equality and Opportunity. Possible author, C. W. Reese.
8. Free speech. Historical approach. Walter Prichard Eaton, possible author.
9. Religious Leadership. Fred R. Lewis, possible author.
10. The Devil. See Sunderland's report.
11. Worship. Von Ogden Vogt and Vincent Silliman, possible authors.
12. Has Unitarianism Done Its Work Today? Horace Westwood, possible writer.
13. The Sacraments. Vogt and Silliman.
14. Individual Living and Everyday Problems.
15. Religious Festivals: Easter, Christmas (Dietrich), Labor Day (Dexter).
16. Milliken and Pupin possible tract writers on "Method of Science."
17. The Church's Responsibility in the Time of Depression; (a) the problem of uncongenial employment. Whiting Williams, John F. Murray, possible writers.
18. Stimulation of Leadership for the Way Out. See Richard Tonney's (?) "Equality."
19. Biographical and Autobiographical tracts.
20. What Geology Means to Religion.
21. What Biology Means to Religion.
22. What Psychology Means to Religion.
23. Vivian Pomeroy suggested as a possible tract writer.

Miscellaneous Suggestions
(For the Publication Committee)

New tract by Francis G. Peabody on Social Service.

Everett Dean Martin suggested as possible tract writer.

Frank W. Pratt might be consulted in regard to pamphlets on the Bible.

Dr. John H. Holmes is to be written to in regard to submitting to us his sermon in the Community Church Series on Immortality, to replace the tract now on our list on the same subject.

Dr. Charles E. Park suggested for a pamphlet on prayer.

Marion F. Ham suggested to write a revised tract.

"Why Are Unitarians Disciples of Jesus" as a title referred to Publication Committee

Tract by Eustace Haydon suggested, to supplement No. 84, "Will Mankind Outgrow Religion."

The suggestion is made that something be taken from Fenn's writings suitable for tract to replace No. 85, "The Bible in Theology."

Substitute new tract on same theme as No. 94, "Radical Difference Between Liberal Christianity and Orthodoxy."

Substitute new tract on same theme as No. 102, "Unitarianism as a Social Force."

Substitute new tract on same theme as No. 110, "A Plea for Sincerity in Religious Thought."

Substitute new tract on the nature of man, to replace No. 122, "The Divinity of Man."

Substitute new tract by Richard Boynton to replace No. 124, "The Divine Meaning of Life."

Substitute new tract on same theme for No. 142, "Is Going to Church a Duty?"

New tract on whole general theme covered in No. 154, "Unitarianism and Modern Discovery."

New tract by modern writer on same subject as No. 160, "Is the Bible Infallible?"

Substitute tract on same subject as No. 195, "The Influence of Unitarianism in the Church Universal."

Dr. Pierce to be asked to consider new title for No. 196, "A Reasonable Easter."

More adequate tract to supplement No. 203, "The Power of an Endless Life."

No. 221, "A Statement of Unitarian Belief," to be replaced by new tract, Ival McPeak suggested as author.

No. 223, "From the Old Faith to the New," suggested for revision every few years to keep it up to date.

Substitute for No. 237, "The Bible from the Liberal Christian Point of View," new pamphlet with the same emphasis.

Charles W. Casson suggested as possible tract writer.

Substitute for No. 242, "How About the Moral Man?" new pamphlet on the same subject.

No. 250, "The Peril of Paganism," should be considered for rewriting by the author.

No. 256, "Redemption or Recovery," to be considered for revision by the author.

No. 257, "In Darkest Naturalism and the Way Out," to be considered for revision by the author.

Suggestion made for a subtitle for No. 264, "The Sparrow's Fall," or title changed on reprint.

No. 287, "The Ultimate Principle of a Free Christianity," to be considered for revision by the author.

No. 292, "Unitarianism of Thomas Jefferson," to be retained with the addition of a preface in regard to newly discovered letters of Jefferson.

The title, "Why Are Unitarians Disciples of Jesus?" referred to Publication Committee for further consideration. Pamphlet of that title now in catalog suggested for rejection.

No. 301, "A History of Unitarianism," suggested for revision or substitute printed when possible, note on title page to state date to which this history goes.