

The Cambridge Platform (1648)

This year marks the 370th anniversary of a religious treatise known as *The Cambridge Platform*, written by a gathering of Puritans in Massachusetts Bay in 1648. These pilgrims were the not-so-distant ancestors of New England Unitarians and the more distant ancestors to us modern Unitarian Universalists.

Exactly a decade ago, our denominational publisher Skinner House Books released a contemporary reader's version of *The Cambridge Platform*, in the hopes – editor Peter Hughes wrote – that people today would understand how clearly its “ancient words” articulated a vision for “a new kind of religious community, one in which individuals could seek the divine independently and yet continue to walk together” in faith.

In her introduction to that version, Unitarian Universalist minister Alice Blair Wesley stated:

“*The Cambridge Platform* explains and justifies how [congregations] work. It is heavily footnoted with references to passages from the Scriptures.... For the authors of the *Platform*, free churches are groups of people who have covenanted to ‘walk together’, as they are called by God to do, in the spirit of mutual love. People have covenanted to do this over a great stretch of time.... The living, gathered bodies of the members are the ‘matter’ of the free church.... The one end of everything the gathered members do, say the *Platform*, is ‘edification’, that is, mutual learning and teaching concerning the many and complex ways of love. The people must gather regularly and often for ongoing mutual learning to take place. Otherwise, the ‘spirit of love’ is just a bodiless abstraction... Only each member’s promise, made freely and individually, to walk together with other members in the ways of love makes the people a free church...

‘Ours is a covenantal church’. We join by promising one another that we will be a beloved community, meeting together often to find the ways of love, as best we can see to do. We have found there is always more to learn about how love really works, and could work, in our lives and in the world.... It is arrogant to belittle or demonize the generations before us with the benefit of hindsight. To understand ourselves, we need to be as clear as we can about their gifts to us as well as their mistakes, because the consequences of both have shaped us.... Like our congregational forbears, we need to reflect on what new patterns, based in the spirit of neighborly love, may be appropriate for our time and society.”

As the *Platform* itself declares:

“We are to be ready to render a reason of the hope that is in us to everyone that asks us....’

That certainly remains true for all of us gathered here today, as we recall our past and look to our shared future. In 2018, especially, we must be at the ready to render reason for hope to everyone that asks.