



CATHY CORDES: THE 2017 RECIPIENT OF THE CORNISH “LIVING THE MISSION” AWARD

[Rev. Roger Bertschausen, UUPCC Executive Director](#)

The UUPCC is pleased to award the 2017 Louis C. Cornish “Living the Mission” Award to Cathy Cordes. The award is given annually to honor a person who has worked tirelessly to foster the mission of developing and sustaining mutually beneficial congregational partnerships between Unitarians and Unitarian Universalists around the world. As we think about these qualities, for many of us Cathy Cordes is the person who immediately comes to mind. In her work on the Board of the UUPCC and then as the UUPCC’s Executive Director for fifteen years, she embodied the “Living the Mission” award. Cathy dedicated herself with passion, vision, skill and love to the work of developing and sustaining mutually beneficial partnerships.

Cathy will be presented with the Cornish Award at the UUPCC’s Luncheon and Annual Meeting in New Orleans, the place where she and Ron were married. The Luncheon and Annual Meeting will take place on Friday, June 23 from 12:00-1:30 p.m. in the Hampton Inn and Suites Fulton Room. Watch for details about how to reserve a place for lunch in upcoming newsletters.

We are grateful to the people who nominated Cathy for this award: Bishop Bálint Benczédi Ferenc (Hungarian Unitarian Church), President Derrick Pariat (Unitarian Union of North East India),

Barbara Beach (former UUPCC Board President) and Rev. John Gibbons (former UUPCC Board President and Senior Minister of Cathy's beloved First Parish in Bedford).

Here are some of their words about Cathy:

- “Her background, her able leadership and firm commitment to the international relations, her personality and the love of those she wished to serve made all the difference not just in relation with us, but with all the partner Unitarian and Universalist organizations.” (Bishop Bálint Benczédi)
- She has “been our friend, mother and guide. Cathy has always been a sterling support of the Unitarian Union of North East India and is someone we could rely on to handle any concern.” (President Pariat)
- “More than a leader of UUPCC, she was the spirit of partnership, of renewed friendship, of possibility, of a road toward justice and shared truth... We were blessed to have Cathy in a role for which her temperament was ideally suited: she became an activist, a savvy practitioner. Her flexibility and ability to absorb the content and context of a situation shone through it all.” (Barbara Beach)
- “She has traveled everywhere, met everyone, and done everything to make the UUPCC the vibrant organization it is today.” (Rev. Gibbons)



Among Cathy's many significant achievements in her UUPCC leadership are: moving the organization's philosophy from Charity to Parity—from a “Save Transylvania” mentality to a mutual partnership of equals; broadening partnership to encompass not just one country but partnerships across the world; moving the UUPCC from a volunteer organization

to a financially stable, firmly-rooted, professionally managed organization; and, with Dr. Richard Ford and Eileen Higgins, launching the UUPCC's Community Capacity Building program.

In response to receiving the 2017 Cornish Award, Cathy writes: “I am honored to receive the Cornish Award and to stand alongside of those who have received this award in the past. I am grateful for having the opportunity to be a part of the UU partnership movement that has touched the lives of so many people. I am most grateful for my husband Ron who has been with me every step of this journey, and for the amazing colleagues that have traveled this path with me – as board members and as staff of UUPCC. And I am thankful for the many people in UU churches in the US, Canada and around the world that do the work of international partnership every day. It is a joy and a blessing to have so many friends around the world!”

Here are words from Cathy about some of the most impactful moments for her in her UUPCC work:



- **“My most favorite partnership moment** was in 1999 traveling with 18 US teenagers on the first joint youth trip. We took the group to the top of a mountain in the Carpathian Mountains to watch a total eclipse of the sun. And that was just the beginning. We also attended the first outdoor gathering of Unitarians in Transylvania in 50 years, because they were forbidden to gather during the Communist years. It was held in a park outside Székelyudvarhely. Unitarians from almost every village came - in costume, on horseback, as marching bands. Old friends saw each other for the first time in many years. I was the vice-president of the UUPCC Board at the time and was asked by the Bishop to bring greetings from the UUA. So I watched from the stage as people poured in and as they walked around greeting old friends. It had been raining for days so the ground was wet and everyone stood for much of the 5 hour program. Every Unitarian dean spoke after the Bishop delivered a homily. Rev. Dávid Gyero spoke for ODFIE - the Transylvanian Unitarian Youth Association. At the end of his speech all those who had been part of the Unitarian youth organization over the years sang the youth anthem!

By the time they got to me they were tired of speeches. Rev. Kinga Székely was my translator. I told them I had brought American teens so that they could discover this beautiful country where our religion was born. And those teens stood and everyone cheered. And I told them how grateful we were to be there at this historic moment to witness this expression of their love for their Unitarian faith. I told them that our mission was to be true partners in faith and to find partners for every church in Transylvania that wanted one.

There was a choir group that performed after me and then everyone rose and sang the Székely Himnusz. Five thousand Unitarians singing together a song that had been forbidden for so long. There was not a dry eye in the house. It was a moment - a day - I will never forget!

There were 6 more youth trips after that - all amazing in their own right. It was a privilege to be present with so many youth who discovered new family and friends in Transylvanian cities and villages and who touched the roots of their Unitarian faith.”

- **“The most life-changing for me and possibly for those who participated** was the community capacity building work led by Richard Ford and Eileen Higgins. I participated in 9 workshops and watched over the course of several days in each as people tackled the issues of their community and gained new insights into the possible. The most memorable moment for me was at the end of the first of these in Árkos. I was standing outside next to the minister as the people left to go home. An older woman approached me, and with tears in her eyes took my hands and kissed them. She said something I did not understand so I turned to János. He said, “She is thanking you for asking her opinion and letting her speak.” She says, “No one has ever asked my opinion before.”



Working with the Women’s Association of the Unitarian Union of the Khasi Hills, I watched the same process in a remote village in India. And I saw both the men and women of village honestly discussing the burden on the community of teenage sex, early pregnancy and forced marriages. And then they developed some first steps to help them address this in a long term systemic way. Amazing!

I have also witnessed the birth of new partnerships - always a great joy! - and participated in multi-international gatherings and met so many dedicated and caring partners both here and abroad.”

- **“But, when I close my eyes and think of partnership I always see the same thing.** Riding in a van, or mini-bus or car or bus - we turn off the road in Homórodszentmárton - and follow a “roadful of holes” across a bridge, and winding down and around through fields. We take

the left fork and at last come around a big curve and there is the steeple of Bedford's partner village of Abásfalva. The tears well up every time - even after all these years and my heart begins to race. Five more minutes and we pile out at the parsonage across the street from the church, and I am home and hugging my "sister" Edit.

And this is what the miracle of partnership is all about - chosen family in a land so far away in miles and so close in my heart!"

Cathy: congratulations on receiving the Cornish Award—an award you so richly deserve!

