

ANNUAL REPORT, 1902

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649434206

Annual Report, 1902 by Various

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**ANNUAL
REPORT, 1902**

ANNUAL REPORT

1902

BOSTON, MASS.
AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION
25 BEACON STREET



CONTENTS

	PAGE
OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS, 1901-1902	3
ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT	5
REPORT OF THE SECRETARY	13
REPORT OF THE LIBRARIAN	31
REPORT OF THE TRUSTEES OF THE CHURCH BUILDING LOAN FUND	33
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON NON-SECTARIAN EDUCATION,	36
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON RETIRING ALLOWANCES	43
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE TO CONFER WITH THE UNI- VERSALISTS	51
REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON SOURCES OF THE UNI- TARIAN MINISTRY	53
REPORT OF THE TREASURER	59
Treasurer's Statement	60
Auditors' Report	68
Income and Expenditures	69
Contributions from Societies	70
" " Sunday-schools	75
" " Individuals	75
" " Miscellaneous Sources	76
Income of Invested Funds	77
Expenditures for Home Missions	79
Bequests and Gifts to increase Funds	83
Property of the Association	84
Report of Treasurer of the Church Building Loan Fund,	85
Property of Church Building Loan Fund	86
MINUTES OF 77TH ANNUAL MEETING	88
OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS, 1902-1903	108

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ADDRESS OF REV. SAMUEL A. ELIOT, D.D.

PRESIDENT OF THE ASSOCIATION

It is good that we can come to this annual gathering with a record of fruitful work behind us. It is good to know that materially and spiritually our little fellowship is reasonably healthy, that its prophetic impulse is as strong as ever, and that its horizon of expectation broadens with advancing years. We come to enjoy friendship, to vivify will, to inspire courage, and to rejoice together that the way before us still contains difficulties to be overcome and problems to be solved and duties to be done in the cause of pure religion and of public virtue. This Association is the organized, visible, tangible, audible body which chiefly represents the movement in the Christian Church which we inherit and would transmit. It is an institution having an honorable pedigree and prophetic tasks to perform. There can be, there ought to be, no indefiniteness, no uncertainty, about our special mission and its vital importance. Whatever of such indefiniteness there may have been in the life and work of our fellowship in other days, we have all, or almost all, of us come to the conclusion that, if we are to accomplish anything useful and permanent in this world, we must have an organized life, an efficient ministry, a sense of fellowship, and a great variety of means and agencies and instruments with which to accomplish the purposes we have at heart. And, when we come to this annual gathering, we must talk about these things and add up our columns of figures and take

attention of our constituency to the possibility of the application of the principle of the referendum to the government of our democratic organization. I do not desire to press this suggestion, and its adoption obviously involves a large increase of labor on the part of your executive staff. I remain, however, of the conviction that this suggestion has in it something worthy of the consideration of the Association. Again, the obvious crowding of the programme of this gathering may legitimately raise the question whether the time has not come to extend the time limit of the annual meeting of this Association. I know of no similar body which expects or pretends to conclude its business in the sessions of a single day. I venture to suggest that the time has come to request the other societies accustomed to hold meetings upon Wednesday and Thursday of Anniversary Week to postpone their gatherings for a day, in order that the Association may occupy Tuesday and Wednesday, and the exercises of Anniversary Week conclude with the festival on *Friday* instead of Thursday night.

Now, having said these things, it is good to remind ourselves that he who lingers long in the consideration of the mechanism of the religious life is missing that for which this Association really stands. Let it not be supposed that any one who is interested in the better organization of religious freedom loses sight of the main purpose of his work because he must give deliberate thought and patient drudgery to the efficient administration of business affairs. We all know that the ends we seek are more important than the means; and, however much we may plan together to improve and enlarge our work, we do not lose sight of the vision of service which impels and mightily attracts us. It is a superficial habit of mind that dispar-

ages institutions, for institutions are only another name for the organized forces of life by which God moves in the world; but it is undoubtedly and profoundly true that we no sooner have an institution, whether in society or education or politics, then we are threatened with the danger that the institution may exaggerate its own importance, and harden and stiffen into a mere machine. Let us, then, as we gather here, not forget that the one thing for which this Association stands is simply public serviceableness. Let us recognize that the end of all our mechanism and ministry is simply to impart life.

The officers of your Association, whether wisely or unwisely, assume that they are more than administrators. They refuse to permit their activities to be limited to the mere running of a machine. They crave the exercise of prophetic gifts, and desire to seize the large opportunities of service which open always before our hesitating fellowship. They desire to be your officers, not by means of the petty mechanism of officialism, but by the strong, strenuous, and unwearying proclamation of the truth, by endeavoring to lead their fellow-workers to the mount of vision from which man may see God and his righteousness, and become aware of the fact that they are fellow-workers with the Most High.

If I may interpret the inner spirit of this organization, it represents your effort to solve the problems of the common good, to lead men out of isolated, self-centred interest into the brave, self-effacing service of the modern world. It represents a generous and healthy movement of human life and thought. It is an effort not so much to systematize religious life, but to revive the religious life, not to originate a doctrinal system, but to restore a vital system, to bring to the world weary of theological debate, perplexed by in-