

Why Support the UUA? What's Going on with the UUA, & Thoughts about General Assembly

I have now attended more Unitarian Universalist Association General Assemblies than I care to count, though I have also missed a few since I became a Unitarian Universalist well over twenty years ago. Most of the General Assemblies have been interesting, or at least included interesting components, workshops, presentations, worship experiences, and of course the exhibit hall! Being at GA gives me a chance to reconnect with friends and colleagues in other parts of the country and to get a sense of where our religious movement is going.

This year, more than most, I am preparing to attend GA later this month in New Orleans, with a good bit of fear and trepidation, but also a significant amount of curiosity. As slowly as any institution such as a congregation or religious movement usually is able to change, this year has provided almost Tsunami-like changes in leadership in the UUA similar in impact if very different in direction from the changes in our nation.

On April 1st, Rev. Peter Morales resigned under fire over accusations of racist hiring policies three months short of the end of his term as UUA President, then a few other top leaders resigned, and most recently, the UUA Moderator who chairs the UUA Board of Trustees resigned after a recurrence of cancer from which he quickly succumbed. The complaint over hiring practices that had been brought by a Religious Educator and UUA Board Member who is a person of color and who was passed over for a regional lead position in favor of a white male clergy person was that the UUA was continuing to support a culture of white supremacy and clergy privilege. And this week the director of the UUMA resigned.

In the aftermath of the first wave of resignations, over 600 congregations participated in some way in a White Supremacy Teach-In organized by religious educators. As I had mentioned previously from the pulpit and during a UU Thursday program, I was concerned about both the timing and content of the accusations and proposals for change that have been flying since April 1st. I have mentioned that as an old liberal, I totally accept that I have benefitted from white male privilege and that racism continues to plague our nation, but I continue to reject the demand that every one of us who is white confess to racism or white supremacy.

Beyond the concerns about racism within our movement, there also have been complaints about clergy privilege in Unitarian Universalism. Congregations of the UU Association have always been free to choose their own leadership, and most choose to ordain and settle persons who have graduated from an accredited seminary with a Master of Divinity or Doctor of Ministry and met the credentialing standards of the UUA Ministerial Fellowship Committee. This congregation has had a Black woman, a Transgender person, an atheist, and a good mix of women and men as ministers.

The President of the UUA up until the current short-term triumvirate of interim Co-Presidents has always been a UU Minister. There are also certain leadership positions that are probably best served by someone with the training and experience that ministry provides, particularly those District, Regional, and UUA positions that interact most with ministers and are involved in the selection and hiring of ministers. But of course, as a minister I am undoubtedly biased in that regard. There are many tasks of ministry, which when taken individually might be better accomplished by someone trained in that specific area, but there is no real equivalent for seminary training and experience in the whole range of ministry, nor with understanding of the particular challenges of ministry.

Though I do think the discussion of clergy privilege and responsibility is important, I really want to focus on the issues of racism which are at the core of the current disturbance within the UU force. I believe in and support programs of Affirmative Action and Restorative Justice to help bring about balance and fairness in organizations and society. I support reasonable efforts to level the playing field for those who have been disadvantaged in various ways, especially due to race, gender, and disability. Based on the intense efforts of programs and lenses of the Journey Toward Wholeness Programs of the last 20 years, I am not convinced that this new effort is likely to be any more successful in accomplishing system-wide change in Unitarian Universalism. How much more of a disproportionate balance of leadership by persons of color will it take to change a movement that does not attract that many persons of color?

Every UU congregation that I am familiar with has already worked at increasing acceptance and inclusivity and welcoming persons of color and LGBTQ persons, mostly with limited success. Is there more to do, yes, of course, but I am concerned that the current emphasis on Black Lives UU and the UUA Board's promise of \$5.3 million dollars to that group, about a third of the UUA annual budget, is likely to end as badly as did the promise of a million dollars to the Black Caucus in 1970.

Do I believe that persons of color should have a larger voice in Unitarian Universalism? Yes, absolutely! Do I believe that we should do more to include persons of color in our congregations and the UUA? Yes, definitely. But I do not believe that anti-racism is the only concern for our movement or society or that persons of color should be the only ones heard. I am concerned that our society is self-destructing and we are too distracted to notice. We have been working on issues of race within our movement for decades and have made significant progress while still not attracting many persons of color. I would like to see us put more of our energy into working together on some of the external issues in areas most at risk, like the environment, health care, peace, and education.

Hold onto those ideas a moment and let me take a step back to talk about what the UUA is and about our relationship to it. The Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations is an organization that was founded in 1961 as the successor of the merged American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America, after several attempts and possibly 100 years of discussion to combine the two main liberal religious groups coming out of American Christianity. Even at the point of merger, a few congregations became independent, but the organization has always been a loose association of congregations each making their own decisions under what is termed a Congregational Polity. The Association collects dues and provides a number of services, such as credentialing ministers and helping congregations select ministers that will hopefully meet their needs. It also provides Religious Education materials and training and helps to provide assistance and leadership when there are internal problems or needs within congregations. The annual General Assembly of the UUA includes lay and clergy representatives from member congregations. Districts and more recently Regional Organizations have also held annual or periodic meetings, planned trainings, and helped to implement Association programs and generally assist congregations. Over the years, a number of people, including one previous Minister of this congregation, have questioned the need for the UUA and encouraged the congregation to refrain from paying the full fair-share dues. The current reorganization that is placing emphasis on regions rather districts is raising further questions as to the effectiveness of the UUA, but only time will tell. The value of the UUA can only really be measured by its success in meeting the needs of and speaking for its member congregations. We do not currently pay our full dues and we have not sent our full allotment of delegates to District or General Assembly in several years. Whether we should pay more of our dues is a question we address each year when we pass our congregational budget. Recently, with tight budgets the answer has been no, even without getting into moral or ethical arguments! By the way, I believe the American Unitarian Association did help provide the funding to begin this congregation and build this church and also owned our organ until it was released during John Buehren's Presidency.

OK, let's get back to the current turmoil within the UUA. I had been looking forward to this GA, not least because it is in New Orleans, but also because the first elected Female President of the UUA will be chosen from 3 candidates who all happen to be white clergy women and a new Statement of Conscience on Escalating Inequality will be presented for a vote. There also will be a vast array of interesting workshops and the usual opportunity to meet with friends and colleagues and former parishioners. I had also hoped that other members of 1st UU would decide to go, but that will have to wait for another year.

After attending several General Assemblies, I am pretty familiar with how things usually work. This year, it feels like I will be going into a foreign land where I don't know where anything is and I don't speak the language! It may turn out that things will run very close to the way they normally do, but I certainly hope that there will be opportunities to discuss the decisions and situations that led to so many top leaders resigning!

I would like to see the UUA and each of our congregations be more multi-cultural, more inclusive, and more accepting of social, cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender differences, but it sometimes feels like there is an expectation that we should ignore the life experience and skills of everyone who happens to be white in order to get there. I get the reasons for the Black Lives Matter movement, but I also am aware that even white male privilege does not guarantee our lives are perfect or easy. Many if not most persons of color have had some things much harder than I have had. I've only been pulled over a couple of times for having a headlight or a taillight out on an old car in a rich neighborhood. I would like to believe that there is room for everyone in Unitarian Universalism, and that leadership is not a zero-sum game. I don't have a good answer for the challenge of hiring more persons of color for top leadership positions in a movement that is mostly white. I don't believe that pushing qualified liberal clergy out of the way just because they are white is the best course of action.

I would like to see us do even more to encourage persons of color to enter the UU Ministry, but even that does not insure that they will want to seek leadership positions at the UUA or that they have the skills, temperament, and experience to be successful in such positions. Personally, I would like to see anyone hired for the Regional Lead positions have about 10 years of Ministry experience before being considered, but that's just me. I think most UU Congregations today would consider men, women, LGBTQ persons and persons of color pretty much equally, so I don't think it will be that hard for anyone to gain the years of ministry experience as long as they are able to afford a seminary education, which can of course be a roadblock to some even with readily available financial aid.

The real conclusion to this sermon won't come until I see what happens at General Assembly, but let me try to tie this together at least for now. Without help from the Unitarian Association, this congregation might not have started, and certainly wouldn't have had the string of ministers who have served here. The UUA hasn't always provided as much help as we might have wanted, but it usually has tried when asked. At the moment, the UUA is tied up in a battle over leadership which may or may not help it to be more inclusive. General Assembly will be interesting this year, with a new female white clergy person almost certain to be elected President. Under our Congregational Polity, we will mostly be shielded from whatever happens at General Assembly. I may bring back a new UU Statement of Conscience on Escalating Inequality for us to consider. When I get back, I will let you know if I have come to believe we ought to work harder to support the UUA! Until then, Peace, Love, and Hope!

Shalom, Salaam, Blessed Be, Namaste, and Amen!