

## **WHERE GOETH THE UUA?**

A funny thing happened as I was planning to go to the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly this year. Actually, as most of you have already heard from me, there were about 10 weeks of chaos at the UUA as President Peter Morales, and then several other key leaders resigned over disagreements about hiring one more white male clergyperson to a key leadership position. As you may remember, Peter resigned only ten weeks short of finishing his 8 years as President, so we were already set up to elect the first female President of the UUA from among 3 white clergy women who have been running for the last several months. In the interim the UUA Board of Trustees chose three persons of color to lead until the election, former UUA President Rev. William Sinkford, Rev. Sophia Bettancourt, and Professor Leon Spencer. The interim leaders did an admirable job dealing with the leadership crisis, uncovering some additional problems, and setting in place corrective measures and a group to study issues of race and hiring over a longer term in the UUA.

The interim co-Presidents spoke several times both at Ministry Days and during General Assembly, bringing a calming influence while also calling for more accountability and intentionality in moving the UUA forward toward greater inclusiveness. Issues of racial justice dominated this General Assembly, but the feeling tone was much more positive than I had feared and expected. There was also a significant effort to encourage everyone to listen to each other around the wounds that racial injustice has caused.

As I expected whites, and especially white males were challenged over our complicity in allowing racial injustice to continue and around the benefits of white male privilege, but I did come to understand a little more why blacks are calling all whites racists and accusing us of supporting a white supremacist system. I still am uncomfortable with that accusation as leveled at liberals and moderates, but I do understand more of why blacks and some other persons of color feel they need to shock whites into action.

Bryan Stevenson, this year's Ware Lecturer and the author of *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, spoke eloquently about his own struggle to represent death row inmates and the injustices of the Justice System. He shared not just the facts, but some of the stories of poor and lower functioning blacks who were convicted without adequate representation and the struggle to find adequate resources to fund Public Defender programs. There are still too many injustices in our nation, too many racially based issues that most of us don't want to think about.

In our churches and the Unitarian Universalist Association, we still have a long way to go toward racial equity, acceptance, and inclusiveness. Too often we want persons of color to talk and believe just like we do, to fit into our model of how UUs should be the moment they first show up. And of course, many persons of color do fit in well with us, while others do not. One of the particular challenges in Unitarian Universalism for many persons of color is that while we say we welcome Christians and other theists, we really aren't all very open to much God language or talk about Jesus. The choice of music in many of our congregations continues to be dominated by compositions of old dead white guys. And while not all persons of color have the beat, a lot of us palefaces are rhythmically challenged. Many of us love both piano and organ music, but in many of our churches it would be unheard of to have a band or other kinds of instrumental music. I wonder whether adding a band to our worship experience might draw in a new and younger crowd?

After being elected the 9<sup>th</sup> President of the UUA, the Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray said, "This is a defining moment, and the stakes are very high... We have deep work to do within our association and our tradition, and critical work to do beyond the association." (UU World)

Throughout her campaign, which she launched in March 2016, Frederick-Gray championed the UUA as "a voice for love and justice." She promoted a three-point vision of a "spiritually vital" movement "grounded in relationships" and "organized for impact." She had served as lead minister of the congregation in Phoenix since 2008 and was a leader in the 2012 Justice General Assembly in

Phoenix that demonstrated against the inhumane practices of Maricopa County Sheriff Joe Arpaio. (UU World and uua.org)

One of my biggest concerns about the renewed effort to bring greater internal racial justice to the UUA, was that I feared it would distract from the larger conversation in our nation around the many injustices currently being promoted by Donald Trump. While I still have some concerns, I do understand that this Black Lives UU movement is a genuine movement of reform within the UUA with connections to Black Lives Matter and to the difficult historical struggle for reform within the UUA which resulted in the exodus of blacks in 1970 and the 1996 Journey Toward Wholeness program. The energy of Black Lives UU is focused on cleaning our own house, taking care of our persons of color, but also doing the outside work needed to transform our society.

One of my greatest frustrations with Unitarian Universalism is that even though we have the message, values, and principles of inclusiveness, acceptance, and interfaith collaboration, we do such a poor job of expressing them on the national, let alone international stage. A far greater percentage of the population was familiar with Unitarianism and Universalism during the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United States than are now. We may have had up to three times the membership numbers and many times the market share than we have now. In an era when our beliefs connect with millions of Cultural Creatives as Paul H. Ray described them a number of years ago, we continue to lose market share of the religiously interested!

We have the values to be the most religiously inclusive of any American tradition, but time and time again we stumble over our failure to live up to the values we espouse. We have the philosophical and theological framework to welcome in people from every religious background as well as from every class, race, and ethnicity, but we continue to treat Christians as inferior to Buddhists, Atheists, and Pagans while we practice the condescension of Boston Brahmins over those who graduated from inferior colleges, let alone the under-educated. While our minds may believe that we are welcoming to all, our noses respond more harshly to the unwashed, the working classes, and those who still believe things we now refer to as myths.

Personally I am somewhat torn between wanting a religious or philosophical community in which we all share many religious, ethical, and political values, and one which honors many different perspectives and is thus more effective in making a difference in the world. These are not mutually exclusive, but it seems at times that the sacrifices needed to create the latter community will limit the uniformity and cohesiveness of the former. I suppose that as I have become more agnostic over the years, I have become less tolerant of those who are absolutely certain God speaks and acts in their lives, and especially those who are waiting for God to take care of them. We tend to be a very humanistic movement, focusing on what we each can do to make a difference, rather than waiting for any God, Goddess higher power or force to do anything.

Unitarian Universalism is a generally hopeful tradition in which we believe that we can shape a better world by our efforts, even if it is a slow process. Though the Black Lives UU group has stirred things up, we remain an institution slow to enact change. It will take time to see how much the UUA will change and what new programs will be offered.

One of the things I have enjoyed most about General Assembly over the years has been the opportunity to see colleagues, friends, and former parishioners. At least in that regard, this GA was particularly rich. I saw people from my years in Rancho Palos Verdes and Little Rock, members of those congregations as well as colleagues from the districts in which they were located. The music was good, the ideas shared important, the exhibition hall always filled with new resources. Even the plenary sessions were interesting and packed with reports as well decisions requiring discussion and votes. Overall it turned out to be a pretty normal General Assembly by most measures.

GA 2017 passed a Statement of Conscience on Escalating Inequality which I expect to speak about later, but it did not consider any Actions of Immediate Witness. AIWs are statements of a more immediate nature and carry only the weight of the General Assembly that passes them. The UUA Board suspended consideration of AIWs in order to focus more on the racial justice matters that I have mentioned. Though the Actions of Immediate Witness do not generally

have much ongoing value, they could have afforded an opportunity to speak against the policies of the Trump administration, so at least one opportunity was missed to respond to the Health Care crisis and threats against Medicaid and Social Security, the pull-out from the Paris environmental agreement, renewal of regressive policies on low level drug offenses, international saber-rattling and threats, retreats on LGBTQ rights and other current matters.

We frequently mention the UU Principles, and over the next few weeks several speakers will be talking about the sources of our Living Tradition, but you may not be aware of these statements from the UUA Bylaws:

**Section C-2.2. Purposes.**

The Unitarian Universalist Association shall devote its resources to and exercise its corporate powers for religious, educational and humanitarian purposes. The primary purpose of the Association is to serve the needs of its member congregations, organize new congregations, extend and strengthen Unitarian Universalist institutions and implement its principles.

**Section C-2.3. Inclusion.**

Systems of power, privilege, and oppression have traditionally created barriers for persons and groups with particular identities, ages, abilities, and histories. We pledge to replace such barriers with ever-widening circles of solidarity and mutual respect. We strive to be an association of congregations that truly welcome all persons and commit to structuring congregational and associational life in ways that empower and enhance everyone's participation.

**Section C-2.4. Freedom of Belief.**

Nothing herein shall be deemed to infringe upon the individual freedom of belief which is inherent in the Universalist and Unitarian heritages or to conflict with any statement of purpose, covenant, or bond of union used by any congregation unless such is used as a creedal test.

**ARTICLE III Membership**

**Section C-3.1. Member Congregations.**

The Unitarian Universalist Association is a voluntary association of autonomous, self-governing member congregations, which have freely chosen to pursue common goals together.

These statements are not really surprising, but along with the Principles and Sources they help to point out that individuals and congregations are really only loosely held together in this association, and that even the Principles are not to be used as a creedal test.

The UU Association, to which we have not paid our full fair-share dues in several years, has only a weak claim on what we do here. And yet, without the UUA and its predecessor organizations, this congregation might not exist, and most of the ministers that have served this congregation over the last century might not have come here.

I have been angry about some things that have happened in the association, and particularly in regard to the UUA board, but I still see value in the association and I am hopeful that it will come to be a greater influence for good in the world. Where Goeth the UUA? Only the Universe Knoweth!

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