

## **“Embracing All That is Colorful”**

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“What is at stake is nothing less than the future of our faith.”<sup>1</sup>

The words of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change are stark and powerful. The commission spent many months compiling and examining stories and data from folks all around our denomination, and came to recognize that for Unitarian Universalism to survive it must remain – or perhaps become again – relevant to and representative of the world in which we live.

Gone are the days when Unitarian Universalist congregations are able to sustain themselves as bastions of liberal, academic, societies of well-intentioned (mostly) white people. For us to be relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we must look like the world in which

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<sup>1</sup> UU Commission on Institutional Change, “Widening the Circle of Concern” Unitarian Universalist Association, Boston, 2020 p. 5

we exist – that is to say, more racially and economically diverse, and focus on the needs of that world: issues of racial and economic justice, needs for deep spiritual connection, and expansive enough that everyone feels welcome.

When we talk about the transformative work of spiritual communities committed to justice, our natural instinct is to invite people IN to our circle of community. Congregational leadership all over the country has been struggling with the challenge of attracting diverse membership to our UU congregations.

The commission's report, however, describes that as the wrong strategy aimed at an inappropriate target. Inviting those who are OUT to come IN is not going to work.

We must engage in what CB Beal refers to as PRE-EMPTIVE Radical Inclusion, with emphasis on pre-emptive. We need to not make room for people when they arrive, we need to make room for them before they even hear of us. We need to build our

spiritual communities in ways that communicate a clear commitment to inclusion before people come seeking it.

The commission observed: “We continue to attract a greater diversity of people and to retain a very small percentage of those who do not match the resourced, white, aging majority within our congregation.”

The world, the United States, is getting younger, browner, poorer, and less churched every year. Every generation born since 1965, whether they be named X, Y, Millennials, Z, or something else entirely, understands that they will not have a better, more comfortable life than their parents. This is not myth, this is not urban legend or pop culture. This is plain economics. Our communities must understand and internalize this reality and create spaces where that understanding is a given, not an exception.

“Who is my neighbor?” the lawyer in the synagogue asked Jesus.

He was not asking who lived next door, he was asking to whom he owed the obligation of loving respect commanded by scripture. "Love your neighbor as yourself," Jesus had told him. OK, well, who is my neighbor? Is that title limited to geographic proximity? Like the people in my neighborhood? Or in my gated community? My housing development? The cul-de-sac? Does my neighbor include the

The Samaritan in the story was understood in that time to be the social outcast, the unclean, perhaps of questionable parentage and suspicious integrity. The guy from the wrong side of the tracks, had there been trains in that age. He was the disposable one, used as an illustration in Jesus' story. Who was the abused man's neighbor? The outcast. The one who showed more compassion and kindness than the polite people who passed on the other side of the road so as to not have their senses offended by the sight of the beaten man in the ditch.

And Jesus was not instructing the lawyer to invite the Samaritan into his homeowner's association, he was instructing the man to

dismantle the HOA so that there was no barrier between the Samaritan and the love and comfort available to others.

Yes, that's what it meant. Jesus was talking about widening the circle of whom it was that the lawyer was obligated to treat kindly. Not inviting them in, but reaching out and opening up in such a way that the community of care, the community of love, enveloped those previously excluded.

I have been recently considering the demographics trends in the US and in our UU Congregations. I have a hunch that our faith is very near saturation of our current target market. There are no more moderate progressives seeking religious community. Those who are Christian have comfortably settled into Congregational, Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian congregations. Those who seek a different kind of enlightenment have largely found it in one kind of community or another. There simply are not great masses of progressive religious seekers waiting to wash up on the island of Unitarian Universalism.

The commission reported that diverse populations are finding us, but not staying. They dip their toe into the water, then hang back and see if the welcome is real. So far, most of them then drift away and do not return. We are not showing them that there is space for all of them to be here.

Those who exist at the edges of Unitarian Universalism are representative of the American demographic most likely to seek out a non-dogmatic faith experience: younger, browner, queerer, poorer, and more politically and socially radical. They are more likely to identify as queer, resist traditional gender roles, and to be in relationships that are polyamorous. They are more likely to be against violent extractive capitalism. They are more likely to rent than own their home. They are more likely to live in intentional co-housing arrangements to share resources and build community than at any time before. They are likely to support socialized health care, universal basic income, and a minimum wage that is not simply livable but thrive-able. They are more likely to have piercings and tattoos, brightly colored hair, and less likely to have

employer-provided health care or a retirement account. They are more likely to be part of the gig economy, working as adjunct faculty, consultants, contractors, and drive for uber on the weekends. This is the economic reality of great swaths of humans in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And we must widen our circle of concern to include that population. They are our neighbors. We are obligated to love them as we love ourselves. We are obligated to widen our circle of concern so that it includes them, instead of inviting them in and asking them to our space and adjust to our reality.

I encourage you to order the commission's report from the Unitarian Universalist Association's online bookstore. It is a comprehensive and unblinking examination of where we are as a denomination and the challenges before us. If we are to be who it is we claim to be, we have work yet to do.

To expand our circle of concern, we must expand our comfortable spaces to make ample and welcoming room for the more diverse

world that exists beyond our self—constructed identity. We must welcome and embrace those who are the many versions of humanity's colorful diversity, whether that color is on the skin, in the hair, or in the stripes of any number of flags, we must expand ourselves to include them all.