
The Gathering (w.t.)

A Liberal e-Ministry Serving People of Color, Latinas and Latinos

A Concept Paper by the Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley
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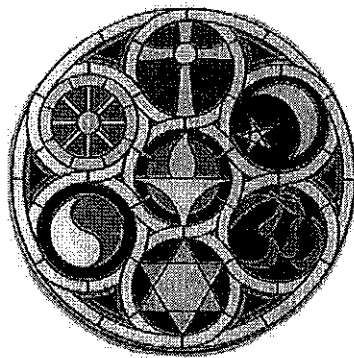


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Vision

At one level, the idea and vision for this project emerged from personal experience. At another level, this project represents a vision for a Unitarian Universalism that has been expressed by the larger multicultural community within our UU movement.

I remember writing a poem in the late 1980's in which the refrain was "I'm a lot like them." The term "them" referred to Unitarian Universalists. Of course, I already *was* a committed Unitarian Universalist, but having left my home church, All Souls Church in Washington, DC, to work for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in Boston, I found myself in a cultural abyss within my own religious community, in a place where the expression of our faith did not feed my soul. The church I had joined in Washington, DC for its theological freedom and its history of standing on the side of justice was as different as night and day, on a cultural level, compared to Boston area congregations.

By the early 1990's, when I was in seminary, I remember participating in a visioning and reflection session of the African American Unitarian Universalist Ministry (AAUUM). Members were asked to articulate why they were Unitarian Universalists, what kept them committed to our faith, and to express an ideal--what Unitarian Universalism might look like or feel like, for them to be more fully committed. Someone said "it would feel like we went to church on Sunday morning!" This was a testimonial that resonated deeply and caught fire throughout the room. "It would feel like we went to church!" was a confession that for many of us, there was something missing in our worship experiences and in our congregations.

It saddens me that my daughter--whose only religious experience has been in Unitarian Universalism--does not attend a UU church because she feels culturally alienated.

In addition to cultural expression, for me, one of the things that was missing in my worship experience and my congregational life was that fundamental concerns that gave my life meaning were not being addressed. I had left the church whose goal was to get me to heaven and joined the one that I thought would help me survive on earth. As a person from a working-class background, I had become a Unitarian Universalist not only for its theological freedom, but because it was a church with a

selected metropolitan markets (e.g., New York, Washington, DC, Chicago, Detroit, San Diego, Atlanta, and other urban areas), many Unitarian Universalist laity and religious professionals who do not represent the cultural majority say that while there is something compelling about Unitarian Universalism that keeps them committed to this faith, they often do not feel spiritually fulfilled. Some (including people in areas that are relatively isolated from cultural diversity) have joined the Church of the Larger Fellowship. Others occasionally attend non-UU congregations as a way to fill the void. Still others simply do not go to church or have left our movement altogether. In contrast to these patterns, self-created identity groups such as AAUUM (1988-1997), DRUUMM, the Asian Pacific Island Caucus (AP IC) LUUNA, Youth of Color Leadership Development conferences, and the MoC-LaLo (Ministers of Color/Latina and Latino) conference in Washington, D.C. earlier this year seem to have the greatest hope for spiritually affirming worship and community in our Unitarian Universalist movement.

Since the UU Black Empowerment controversy (1967-1982), conversations have taken place about the extent to which greater cultural affirmation is possible within existing congregations. We experienced the era of new congregations started by African American ministers and now know that while these congregations had value, most did not receive adequate support to survive, much less thrive. We are now in the era of creating new start congregations with membership in the 300 plus range. While the first of these congregations are still in the early stages, beyond leadership development and training, there is not a lot of evidence that these congregations will address the issues outlined in this document. In the past seven years, there have been many conversations about how to create alternatives to the existing void. Among them, expanding the programmatic elements of existing congregations and organizations, a radio ministry, a newsletter, a cyberministry, and other ways to reach Unitarian Universalists "of color" and Latina/o Unitarian Universalists as well as those who might join our faith were it more culturally affirming.

I am convinced that there are thousands of people from various ethnic and cultural identity groups, both in the U.S. and abroad, who are ready and waiting for a liberal religious alternative that can feed their spirit in ways that are culturally affirming. Imagine multicultural worship that utilizes the skills and experiences of some of our finest Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay people; that includes words and

images from a wide range of cultures; that celebrates with inspirational multi-cultural music--be it Salsa or Soca, Reggae or Merengue, Afro-Cuban or Calypso, Jazz or Indie, gospel or the Blues, poetry or spoken word ... whatever feeds the soul of a people.

Project Description

The Gathering is the working title of a future full-service intentional ministry of and by Unitarian Universalists and liberal religionists who find that existing congregations or other ministries do not meet their souls' deepest longings and need for social and cultural affirmation. Its marketing strategy will be designed to appeal to persons of African, Arab, Asian/Pacific Island, Native American, and Latina/o heritage.

While English is assumed as the primary language of this ministry, every attempt will be made to build a bilingual ministry that is accessible to Spanish speakers and encourage English speakers to grasp key concepts in the language and culture of our Spanish-speaking brothers and sisters. Sensitivity to emerging linguistic and cultural needs is a long-term goal.

This ministry is conceived as a Unitarian Universalist congregation: a membership-based not-for-profit religious organization. In addition to "regular" members, a subscription service would permit limited access to the web site and basic resources; and investors or sustainers who support the vision of this ministry may or may not be active members. In its initial phase, *The Gathering* is conceived as an Internet-based "virtual" community. However, because small group ministries are encouraged as a prominent feature, it is anticipated that a number of "house churches" may emerge in areas where eight or more members/subscribers reside. While this ministry will serve Unitarian Universalists who are already in our congregations, it is also designed to attract newcomers, a community of seekers who have been theologically and culturally alienated from mainstream institutional churches, who affirm multiculturalism, theologically inclusive pluralism, and are committed to justice-making as a foundation of human liberation.

For Unitarian Universalists, this project is conceived as a supplement rather than a substitute for active congregational participation by already committed Unitarian Universalists. For seekers, this project is conceived as a community of diverse people who wish to explore liberal approaches to spiritual and religious questions, to deepen connections with like-minded souls, to provide cultural affirmation, opportunities for continued growth, learning, and service to their communities.



Rationale for the Project

It is estimated that over the past twenty years, the target audience for this project represents no more than five percent of all Unitarian Universalists who are on the membership rolls of our congregations in the United States. While the number of children, youth, and young adults from non-mainstream racial/ethnic/cultural groups appears to be growing (many are biracial, multiracial or adopted by white families), the number of adults from these groups over the age of 35 has not increased significantly. And there is anecdotal evidence that retention within the target audience represents a continuing challenge. Even some long-time committed Unitarian Universalists express frustration that dominant culture interests, needs, and interpretations still dominate worship, religious education and other ministries in their congregational life and in Unitarian Universalism at-large resulting in a lack of spiritual groundedness and meaningful participation in congregational life. Others experience rapid burn-out resulting, in large measure, from being asked to serve in multiple capacities as one in a small number of persons from non-dominant cultural groups.

In order to grow Unitarian Universalism, we need to give voice to other perspectives. There is need for an intentional community that provides a community space where people on the cultural margins can reflect on religious questions (do theology) in ways that are informed by historical and cultural experiences that are both similar and different, thereby providing opportunities to deepen both their spiritual lives and their relationships.

This project imagines--and seeks to make real--what a community of liberal religionists might look like if it served the articulated needs of people who do not represent the cultural mainstream of our UU movement and in society at-large. As such, this project will create a sanctuary, a community space for multicultural Unitarian Universalists and liberal religionists where they can be authentic. It will provide an avenue for Unitarian Universalists at-large and the UUA to live into its faith and its commitment to become an anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural institution. Further, this project will demonstrate to seekers and newcomers that Unitarian Universalists are ever striving to reach what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King called "a beloved community," and that we offer seekers concrete ways to directly support our vision of a culturally inclusive, theologically pluralistic, and socially progressive community.

Religious reflection is not neutral, but subjective and particular ...

Proposed Ministries

Because *The Gathering* proposes to build a multicultural community, we cannot assume common understandings between us. Thus, this ministry will present opportunities to promote intercultural understanding and cultural criticism within and between constituent populations.

Every culture has its distinctive features. At the same time, though geographically dispersed, cultures have much in common. Recognizing that religious reflection is not neutral, but subjective and particular, these simultaneous cultural similarities and differences can be mutually reinforcing. This intercultural hermeneutic might come, for example, through storytelling which is a cultural norm in many of the target groups, though it has different uses and goals which are often combined. For some cultures, storytelling is a means to pass down the heritage and traditions from generation to generation. For some, it is a means to convey the nature and depth of our spiritual journeys. For some, storytelling--as well as narrative prayers--transmits the history and as such, it is a catalyst toward freedom and liberation. Another area of cultural similarity and difference within the target groups is reverence for our ancestors, honoring and paying tribute to both our elders and the dead--those who

did the hard work of laying the ground on which we stand, tilling the soil, planting the seeds. Another areas of cultural similarity and difference include respect for folkways and folk culture, and reverence for the earth that sustains us. And most apparent is an outward expression of feeling through music, dance and the arts as sources that sustain us even in times of strife. For some of us, time is circular or cyclical, not linear. And there is general agreement among us that we are "spiritual" beings. Arguably, these are among the unique philosophic tendencies, mores, and norms that seem to cut across African, Arabic, Asian, Latina/o, and Native American cultures. As such, these will be prominent and integrated into every aspect of this ministry.

Spiritual growth and development will be encouraged and supported through the following ministries offered via the Internet, telephone, e-mail, list-serves, blogs, and occasionally, in person:

- On-line newsletter, (initially weekly, but ultimately daily) including devotionals: meditations, reflections, poetry, inspirational quotes, short essays, music from constituent cultures; historical notes from different cultures; a segment that honors the contributions of the elders and ancestors who made our place in history possible; announcements; letters [from members/subscribers about this ministry]; links and referrals to the UUA, DRUJMM/APIC, Hispanic Minister's Caucus, Identity-Based Ministries and other constituent organizations; links to selected news stories affecting constituent communities, key resources and selected blogs. Periodic special segment, downloadable via Pod-cast or streaming audio, featuring for example interviews with a "person of interest" to the constituency (e.g., poets, musicians, community activists, ministers or liberal theologians); a speech by a public figure; producer's commentary on a particular event; or a first-hand account of spiritual journeys.
- Weekly Worship: a 30-minute worship service--including music; meditation/prayer; audio stories; announcements and honoring of life transitions, joys and sorrows of the community; reflection and/or homily offered by ministers of color and Latina/o ministers or lay persons; and when the subject or perspective is deemed particularly relevant to constituency groups, reflections/sermons by ministers the from racial/ethnic mainstream. Worship services

available via both streaming video and audio podcasting. It is hoped that the worship service will eventually become a 60-minute production.

- Small group Ministry/Covenant Groups/Identity Groups: Small group ministry will be strongly encouraged from the start of this project. Beyond opportunities for personal devotion, information, or the exchange of ideas, this ministry is grounded in relationality--real human interaction. Unlike racial group caucuses, *The Gathering* will support small group ministries within and across traditional identity groups. As such, this will require input from members/subscribers to determine themes and interests. Some may be based on identity (theological, ethnic/cultural, gender, age, or sexual orientation), while others may be based on broader interests (e.g., issues that arise in the majority culture--community or congregation; moving from liberal to liberation; the culture wars; parenting in majority cultures; grief and loss). Still other groups may be current events or book discussion groups, which would provide an intersection with religious education. Care will be taken in selecting and training volunteer facilitators. We will explore which technical format options--whether it would be more feasible for such groups to communicate via list-serves, closed blogs, real-time moderated conversations or chat rooms.
- Lifespan Religious Education: Following a period of research and consultation, references and links will be provided for existing opportunities for on-line adult religious education. It is expected that most such opportunities will be introductions to Unitarian Universalism (i.e., history, philosophy, theology, and polity), and adaptation of courses such as "Building Your Own Theology." The goal of this ministry is to offer courses that are particularly relevant to members/subscribers and the core constituency for children, youth, and adults. While there are some existing resources that might be developed or adapted into a curriculum (e.g., "Weaving the Fabric of Diversity"), we will survey members to determine how this project can best meet felt religious education needs. Initially, the focus of *The Gathering's* ministry of religious education will be existing materials for older adults. Religious education for children and youth is, however, seen as critical. Materials that will enhance and support the lives and aspirations of constituent children and youth, parents and families will be a priority.

- Rites of Passage and Pastoral Care:

This ministry will serve as a consultation and referral service for ordained ministers, religious professionals, and those in the helping professions who companion members on life's journeys--through the joyous times (e.g., partnering) with culturally-relevant resources



appropriate for services of union or marriage, child dedications, coming of age, and bridging ceremonies, as well as the difficult times (e.g., alienation, loss, sickness and death). This ministry will be a telephone companion ministry, and where possible, support will be provided in person.

- Justice Making: As an approach to systemic change, encourage a variety of social justice methodologies at the state and local level, including participation in congregational social justice work, links to the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, the UUA's Washington Office of Advocacy and Witness, the Interfaith Alliance, and other interfaith groups engaged in progressive social justice work; provide support and issue clarification for activists (e.g. deepening understanding of the relationship between social justice and spiritual or religious life); provide a forum for discussion of strategies for social change, including UUA resolutions and advocacy within the UU movement; support activists in reflection, self-care and pastoral care.

Staffing and Organizational Structure

This project is the brainchild of Rev. Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley whose ethnic heritage background is multicultural--Afro-Caribbean and Southern U.S., Cherokee and Irish and whose family members who live across the globe and speak many languages. Yet, Rev. Bowens-Wheatley does not "own" this ministry, which is seen as a collaborative effort serving a diverse constituency with many and varied interests and needs. Every attempt will be made to provide forums for input and feedback from all who wish to support this ministry.

Professionally, Rev. Bowens-Wheatley's background includes more than 10 years as a Parish Minister and a Minister of Religious Education. She has served congregations, worked as an Extension Minister at the district level consulting with congregations on diversity and multiculturalism, as Adult Programs Director for the UUA, including significant work in the area of anti-racism and anti-oppression. Prior to entering the ministry, Rev. Bowens-Wheatley spent several years in the diplomatic community, three years in Unitarian Universalist-based philanthropy, and seven years as an award-winning public television producer and writer--skills that will serve her well in executing this project.



In the conceptual phase, Rev. Bowens-Wheatley will collaborate with colleagues to assure that a wide range of viewpoints is garnered and that the needs of all constituent groups are being addressed.

A Board of Trustees will be established to (a) chart out the anticipated stages of development--from start-up to the initial covenanting "virtual" meeting and launching of the ministry and beyond; (b) determine a governance structure; and (c) to develop a budget and a structure for fiscal accountability.

The Gathering will be a membership-based organization that anticipates applying to the UUA as a new congregation. While membership will ultimately sustain this ministry, investors are needed to for the start-up phase. In its first six months (June through November 2005), the newly-constituted Church of the Younger Fellowship (CYF) has been able to attract 212 members. Within the first year of this ministry after start-up, it is anticipated that *The Gathering* can attract more than 500 members and more than 1,000 people who agree to be investors so that this ministry can be sustained. While *The Gathering* has some programmatic similarities with the Church of the Larger Fellowship, this concept paper outlines a project that is independent and programmatically self-determined by the people it serves--its members. Such independence will also encourage independent thinking about the technical aspects of this project.

Next Steps

It is anticipated that the conceptual phase of this project will take six to twelve month, and that once the project has a sound fiscal plan , another eighteen months will be needed to gain enough traction to assess its sustainability.

Immediate future steps would include the following:

1. Engage (a) a technical expert to more definitively determine technical and budgetary feasibility, and (b) an administrator with strong fiscal and management skills.
2. Circulate this concept paper (perhaps via a closed blog) among key constituents and invite feedback and discussion. Constituents will include, but not necessarily be limited to DRUUMM (including Asian-Pacific Island Caucus and *La Familia Global*, and Unitarian Universalists for Indigenous Affairs); the Hispanic Minister's Group, LUUNA, UUA Identity-Based Ministries Staff Group, UUMA Committee for Anti-Racism, Anti-Oppression, and Multiculturalism, and the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Team, and those attending the next MoC LaLo conference), and determine other constituents or stakeholders whose response to this concept is needed and desired. This will offer opportunities for further development of a proposal and have implications for the project itself.
3. Schedule meetings with staff and board of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, as well as the UUA's staff groups in Identity Based Ministry and Ministry and Professional.
4. Determine levels of support for this ministry and revise concept as needed;
5. Solicit feedback, and develop a proposal based on feedback;
6. Constitute an advisory committee whose tasks include the following:
 - make recommendations for a governance and staffing structure;
 - membership/subscriber development strategy;
 - consider a marketing plan;
 - develop a budget and funding strategies.
7. Develop a draft mission statement and marketing strategy;
8. Seek funding for Phase I (first three years) of the project;
9. Begin to gather existing audio and video resources;

10. Develop a long-term strategy, including projections of sustainability over a five year period.

Budget items and costs for this project have not yet been determined. Such will require assessing existing technical capacities. A very preliminary list of fiscal considerations includes, but is not limited to the following:

- Engaging the services of a web designer
- Domain name, e-mail account set-up
- Web hosting / server rental
- Audio and video editing equipment (analog and digital)
- Telephone lines
- Investigation of copyright law vis-a-vis reading and/or web-based publishing of music, poetry, and other copyrighted materials
- Initial Staffing: Minister/Executive Producer, Technical Manager, Administrator, Writers/Editors; Membership & Marketing staff.

In Conclusion

If Unitarian Universalism is to grow in a way that is anywhere near consistent with demographic realities of our nation, attention must be given to supporting new congregations and community space that address the spiritual and cultural longings of committed Unitarian Universalists and other liberal seekers who fall outside the demographic and cultural mainstream.

An electronic ministry is not for everyone within the target constituency. Different personalities have different needs. Some will need a human connection and will continue to seek to have their needs met within their church community or other ways they have found. For others however, *The Gathering*, can be a place of refuge, a place of peace, a place of spiritual renewal.

There are more Americans, particularly people of color, today who do not claim a religious affiliation than at any time in recent history. Many say they would be interested in a religious community very much like Unitarian Universalism, a faith that honors their culture, their heritage, and accepts them for who they are without prejudice. Unitarian Universalism is growing slowly. While mainline religions are losing membership, we can take pride in slow growth. The question on the table is *how* we will

grow: will we grow with sameness (our current demographic) or will we grow with racial and ethnic diversity which has proven to be one of the most difficult kinds of diversity. We have already proven that self-created identity groups such as AAUUM (1988-1997), DRUUMM, the Asian Pacific Island Caucus (AP IC) LUUNA, Youth of Color Leadership Development conferences, and the MoC-LaLo (Ministers of Color/Latina and Latino) conference in Washington, D.C. earlier this year have the greatest hope for spiritually affirming worship and community in our Unitarian Universalist movement. This project is an opportunity to continue growth among a very specific constituency that we have heretofore had difficulty attracting and/or retaining. While we cannot know for sure what implications this ministry will have for the numerical growth of Unitarian Universalism, it *can* contribute to the spiritual and maturational growth of our movement, and may in fact, help existing local congregations to better serve those who will join *The Gathering*.

Attention will be given to how to meet needs beyond a cybercommunity--for example, how to give maximum support to in-person small group ministries that emerge in local communities; to plan meetings and conferences at the regional and national level; and how ministers of color, Latina/o ministers can minister to constituents with some financial support

Religious absolutism, bigotry, hatred, and violence are growing faster, drowning out voices of tolerance, civility, and peace. Now is the time to break our spiritual silence. Now is the time to overcome our reticence. It's time to share with others the treasure of Unitarian Universalism we have found here.

Now is the time to provide an alternative community for religious liberals who are emboldened by the rich history and heritage of Unitarian Universalism, and need to express their faith in a way that is different from the UU demographic mainstream. Now is the time as Latina/s become the largest non-European ethnic group in the United States, as middle-class East Indians gain greater footing in every sector of the U.S. economy, as more than 50 percent of the African American mainstream are now considered to be firmly middle class, as there is more and more respect for the ancient wisdom of Native American traditions, even as this community struggle for social and economic parity. Now is the time, given that new technologies have become more accessible, as Internet-based spiritual communities have emerged (many of them evangelical or mainstream Christian), as more and more youth and

young adults connect to the world through technology, and as we have experienced some success in marketing Unitarian Universalism (Uncommon Denomination) to new constituents. Accepting the challenge of *The Gathering* will help the Unitarian Universalist movement to put its faith into action and move a step closer toward building a "beloved community." Not accepting this challenge will lead Unitarian Universalism to the fringes of the fast growing ethnic communities in the United States.

Now is the time. Ashe!