

Plowing Up the Ground for Racial Diversity in the UUA*

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“Those who profess to favor freedom, and yet deprecate agitation, are people who want crops without plowing up the ground” - Frederick Douglas

When I came to First Church 13 years ago, as a young minister, many people thought lots of young people would immediately come. They did not start coming until 6 years after I began. And I attribute their arrival more to our capital campaign than anything else. When our former Music Director, Kenny Smith, an African American man started at First Unitarian 7 years ago, many people thought our congregation would immediately begin to attract more people of color. Today we have no more people of color than when Kenny began.

For the purposes of this sermon “people of color” mostly refers to African Americans. Demographically speaking, Cincinnati has not yet had large numbers of Asian, Native American, African, Southeast Asian, and Latino/Latina immigrants or residents. However, that is changing in Cincinnati, particularly with more Latino/Latina immigrants coming to our city, and will change more and more in the coming decades due to the growing racial diversity within America. We do, however, have a large population of African Americans, and an African American middle class. We also have a growing population of multiracial families in Cincinnati, and certainly within our congregation. At First Church, our children are more racially diverse than our adults. According to 2010 Census data, multiracial families are increasing much faster than expected in America, so we can expect this trend to continue.

Kenny’s tenure here contrasts differently with Pauline Warfield Lewis, an African American woman who was Director of Religious Education at First Unitarian Church from 1957 – 1967. While Mrs. Warfield Lewis was here there was an increase in membership among people of color, largely African Americans. Mrs. Warfield Lewis came four years after our first African American member from the 20th century signed the membership book, Carol Hull, in 1953. Mrs. Warfield Lewis was an attractive figure to then new members such as George and Ruby Malone and young Bill Sinkford and his mother. She was also well respected by white members and students such as Lucille Blocksom and Shelley Jackson Denham. Her tenure also coincided with the “high water mark” of African American attendance in our UUA congregation, the 1960’s, when America was undergoing desegregation and enormous racial changes.

This cultural climate, as well as her tenure of ten years (Kenny was here for five years) accounts for our ability to draw in more people of color during the 1960’s. During her tenure we also had positive factors that we have continued to have, even in the last ten years, a progressive minister, a socially active congregation, and an urban location. These last three factors, however, were not enough to racially diversify our congregation in the past decade. Racial diversity within our

congregation and faith is a much more difficult puzzle to assemble than many people understand – we can't produce a successful crop without plowing up the ground.

Initial data from our recent congregational survey indicates that our members value racial diversity and are looking for more of it. This is a good start, and it lives our values. People devoted to the inherent worth and dignity of every person, justice, equity and compassion in human relations and acceptance of one another, are likely candidates to value diversity. The problem is that we have not had enough open discussions about the challenges of racial diversity. A closer examination of UU history lifts up the challenges of racial diversity within our faith in excruciating detail.

I was reminded of these challenges two years ago when the Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed asked me to write an essay for his upcoming book, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*. In particular he asked me to write an essay about our initial reconciliation service at First Unitarian Church with the family of the Reverend W. H. G. Carter. My essay will be in his book, to be published in a month.

Morrison-Reed has a deep interest in our congregation, because First Church has a long history of racial diversity and struggle. Along with my essay there will be an essay by former UUA President, the Reverend William Sinkford, about his beginnings in Unitarian Universalism in this congregation. There will be an essay by local ministerial candidate Bruce Beisner and our own member, Walter Herz, about the Reverend W. H. G. Carter. And Beisner has also written an essay on Peter Clark, the first African American (that we know of) who joined our congregation in 1868. Clark (as in Clark Montessori Junior and Senior High School) was a pioneering Cincinnati educator, politician, and abolitionist. Clark, who kept dual membership at First Church and in an AME congregation, pioneered African American education in Cincinnati and mobilized African American voters within the state of Ohio.

In 1866 Clark became principal of Gaines High School, the first African American high school in our city. Clark began as a Republican but became disenchanted with the party and their neglect of African Americans. In the early 1880's he changed his affiliation to Democrat and campaigned for George Hoadly, another member of First Unitarian Church, who successfully became Governor of Ohio. Shortly after becoming Governor, Hoadly enacted much needed civil rights legislation within our state. Hoadly must have been positively influenced by his personal and political relationship with Clark.

Ultimately Clark was undone by politics and his professional opinions. After Hoadly passed civil rights legislation, the Ohio legislature began to consider integrating schools. Clark thought this was a terrible idea, which alienated him from the African American community. This was Clark's concern, without African American schools with African American teachers; African American students would be neglected and subjected to discrimination. Integration passed and sadly, Clark's fears also came to pass. We desegregated schools without culturally desegregating society. I want to come back to this point because it weighs heavily in the story of Unitarian Universalism as well. When the Republicans came back to power Clark lost his position as principal at Gaines. Soon after he left Cincinnati, his birthplace, and died in obscurity in St. Louis, Missouri.

Morrison-Reed's book also contains essays on the Black Empowerment Controversy within the UUA. At the 1969 General Assembly in Boston there were disagreements on funding two UUA committees, one committee that favored black autonomy and power and one committee that

avored integration. When the funding of the committee favoring black autonomy and power was cut in half (I should also mention that the UUA was facing a devastating financial crisis at the time), half the delegates walked out.

The walkout was bitter. One person there told me that good Unitarian Universalists who generally affirm the inherent worth and dignity of one another, spit on each other. I am eagerly looking forward to this essay in Morrison-Reed's book, because over 40 years later, I still have trouble finding someone who was present who will openly talk about what happened. It was a bitter, bitter moment and it led to an exodus of African Americans from our faith and congregation, and they have never returned. We have less African American members today in our faith and congregation, than we did in 1968.

There are other essays in his book, including one by the Reverend Dr. Yvonne Seon, the first Unitarian Universalist woman ordained into ministry. This will be a companion book to Morrison-Reed's first book, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. Thirty years separate the publication of these books. It is interesting to see how little has changed when so much effort has been made at the denominational level to increase the racial diversity within our congregations and ministry.

In 2007, then UUA President William Sinkford shared his deep concern about diversity in our denomination with the UUA Board of Trustees. He noted that out of 2,180 ministers in fellowship, only 49 were people of color. Of these, only 31 were serving congregations. Four years later, in 2011, there are 54 ministers of color in fellowship and 34 ministers of color serving congregations. The UUA has spent thousands of dollars in the last decade recruiting and training people of color for ministry in our congregations. In 2007 there were 50 persons of color preparing for ministry. That is the good news. The bad news is as Sinkford put it "too few congregations are prepared to call them."

I don't have accurate numbers of how many persons of color have left our ministry, but anecdotally, the numbers are large. I have one colleague I worked with, a person of color, who felt utterly tokenized and isolated in the two mostly white, wealthy Unitarian Universalist congregations she served. She has since left the ministry.

The issue of congregational preparedness is a big one, similar to the issue that Clark had with segregating schools. He feared that African American students would not be successfully integrated. He was correct. When faced with integration, America re-segregated, until the forced desegregation of the 1960's and 1970's. And still, our society continues to re-segregate – whites move to the suburbs and minorities largely remain in the city or other African American neighborhoods like Forest Park. Our member, historian Dr. Fritz Casey-Leininger, will tell you that very few Cincinnati neighborhoods are segregated and economically stable. At the moment only two come to my mind, both within the city limits, Northside and Pleasant Ridge.

It reminds me of how rocky Kenny's first two years were here at First Unitarian Church. Kenny was unfamiliar with our UU music. Some members were insulted by his need to learn – angry when he played music that was deemed too Christian. When Kenny played the piano he would raise his hand in praise. Members cringed and asked him to stop. I would guess that our experience was typical for a congregation that had not prepared to add a person of color in a significant staff role. We expected a crop without plowing the ground. But we did mostly weather that storm together, and Kenny remained here until he wanted to pursue a career in New York City.

The most recent issue of *UU World* has an interesting article by the Reverend Mark Harris about class in Unitarian Universalism. It is an excerpt from his recently published book entitled, *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. I cannot wait to read this book, and hope to have a book group and preach about. Because here is another issue: it is not just cultural differences when it comes to race, it can also be class differences. Note that we, and most Unitarian Universalist congregations, are peopled by educated people of financial means.

According to a 1987 UUA survey of African Americans in our faith, demographically, our African American members fit this profile, often being more educated and affluent than their white peers in our congregations. However, within America as a whole, African Americans tend to be less educated than UU's with less access to financial resources. In an article on a UU congregation attempting to become more multicultural, Seattle journalist Jerry Large explains a challenge by noting that unlike members of blue-collar and ethnic communities, UUs are "not people who seek deliverance, but people who have the wherewithal to deliver."

I am regularly reminded of this reality by my husband, Earl. His family has been an eye-opener for me on white poverty, the working class, and Appalachian culture. There are many wonderful things about his family and culture, particularly loyalty, but it is common for family members to not be able to pay for a new set of teeth, to have a car repossessed, or not graduate from high. Note that our congregation does not contain many people from the working class professions; health aides, truck drivers, janitors, waitresses, and construction workers. As Mark Morrison-Reed notes "liberal religion needs working class realism." The problem with inherited privilege of any kind is that it is hard to see when you have it, and have always had it. With so many of us coming from backgrounds with wherewithal, we do not know nor fully understand those who are unlike us, regardless of color.

One of our challenges at First Church is that we are not located in a middle class African American neighborhood, but in a poor African American neighborhood, one of the poorest in the city. Here are two recent stories of cultural clash, part racial, part economic, part religious, all having to do with the Avondale Clergy. This week I sat through a presentation set up by the Avondale Clergy on the Boy Scouts, who have a long and very successful history in the black community. At the end of the presentation I privately told the presenter that I like the Boy Scouts and am so grateful for what they do in many communities, but I do not think First Church would want to participate because of the Boy Scouts stance on homosexuality, which is troubling.

Last year the Avondale Clergy began a big initiative to work with the Cincinnati Initiative to Reduce Violence and go door to door with street workers on Saturdays to talk to the residents. A big part of what they do is share information on non violent options, and share the Gospel and prayer. OK, we are not exactly going to sign up for that one either because we are not Christian and the thought of being evangelical makes us queasy. Two great opportunities to mingle with our neighbors and get to meet congregants (and even in African American Avondale churches, most members come from outside Avondale), and for a variety of reasons we cannot partake like them. Plowing the ground is hard work.

The UUA Website contains the following working draft definition of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism means nurturing a religious community where people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures see their cultural identities reflected and affirmed in every aspect of congregational life—worship, fellowship, leadership, governance, religious education, social justice, etc. Multiculturalism means that we create religious homes where encounters between people of different cultural identities intersect with Unitarian Universalism to create a fully inclusive community where, in the words of a vision statement adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA) Leadership Council, “all people are welcomed as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled.”

This would take some MAJOR plowing, but it is doable if it is the will of the members of this congregation. I would like for us to explore if this is your will. It is something I am deeply interested in because it lives our values and principles and it positively transforms the world—that is big. Life is short. Let’s go big. Given the challenges though, I think we need to resolve and clarify our governance questions first, take a breath, and if the congregation is interested and willing to be challenged, and deepen self awareness, take this up.

There are some great potentials to turn the world around here. We could intentionally try to recruit a person of color for an intern or minister (for whenever Annie or I leave). But as we learned from Kenny, you don’t hire someone and figure it out, you plan in advance. A person of color in a major staff role would influence our culture, challenge us to be multicultural, and if we are transformed as a congregation, help us to attract more diversity.

I should also note that our current staff has diversity in age, gender, and sexual orientation, but not currently race, and this is played out in our denomination as a whole. I also want to let you know that I have served on 4-5 hiring committees in the last 3 years at First Church. Committees normally see 4 applicants. Of the 15-20 applicants to First Church in the past 3 years that I have met, only one that I can think of was a person of color. We offered that person the job, and that person did not choose to take the job. Again, plowing is hard work.

But the UUA can help us if First Church decides to make it so (and again, I hope you do – we are a good match for this program because we are an urban congregation doing successful social justice ministry). There is a program called the Diversity of Ministry Team (DOMT) that helps to recruit, educate, support, and retain ministers of color. In 2005 the Davies Memorial Church settled the Reverend John T. Crestwell (who has since moved to another UU congregation), an African American UU minister. Here is how they did it. For three years Crestwell partnered with the outgoing minister, eventually taking his place (a bit unusual as a settlement practice).

To prepare for this transition the congregation (located in an African American neighborhood), created a proposal for diversity, applied for District grants, received institutional support and coaching from the UUA, conducted and continued to conduct anti-racism audits, worked with a consultant, and heavily marketed the arrival of Crestwell in areas and publications predominated by African Americans. The congregation grew from 100 to 150 members, with 37% of their members self-identifying as persons of color.

Three years ago First Parish in Cambridge, Massachusetts a staid, white, congregation historically peopled by Boston area professors and the like decided to do the same thing, realizing they were not ministering to many of the people geographically closest to them. The congregation made a

commitment to DOMT and in the last 18 months settled its first Latina minister. Members say they feel a deeper love.

Think how we could learn and grow. We would do this for ourselves more than anyone else. As we are we do not have all we need know to be spiritually, religiously, and ethically transformed. We do not have all we need to fully live our values and principles. But we can still become a place where all people are welcomed as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled.

*Sources for this sermon include:

From www.uuworld.org: Christopher Walter, “Sinkford Outlines Plan for More Diverse Ministry” (February 6, 2007).

From www.uua.org: Diversity of Ministry Initiative, “Davies Memorial Unitarian Universalist Church: Uniting Faith, Growth, Diversity, and Justice.”

Jerry Large, "Faith in the Mix – Rainier Valley Unitarian Church Finds That With Worshippers' Different Styles And Needs, It's Hard To Get Everyone In The Same Multicultural Pew" in the *Seattle Times* (December 13, 1998).

Mark Morrison-Reed, *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination: Third Edition* (originally published 1984).