

The Hunger for Diversity

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota

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A study was done of our membership in a few years ago.

Our religious backgrounds are diverse. We have in our membership people who were raised Protestant, people who were raised Roman Catholic, people raised Jewish, and people raised Buddhist. In this congregation, about 20 percent of us were born into Universalist or Unitarian families.

Our standards of living are diverse. Twelve percent of our members have incomes of less than \$25,000 a year. Twenty-seven percent have incomes of \$25,000 to \$50,000. Thirty-six percent have incomes between \$50,000 and \$100,000. Twenty-five percent of the congregation has family incomes of over \$100,000 a year.

Our ages are diverse. One percent of our adults are between the ages of twenty and thirty-five. Nine percent of us are between the ages of thirty-six and fifty-five. Thirty-eight percent of us are between 56 and 69. Thirty-one percent are in their seventies. Twenty percent of the congregation is over the age of eighty. In addition, about 50 children and youth participate our religious education program.

Our politics are diverse. We have Democrats and Republicans, Socialists and Libertarians. We have members who served in various branches of the military and at least one pacifist.

In this congregation, we have a mixture of ethnic backgrounds, a mixture of sexual orientations, a mixture of male and female leadership, a diversity of professions, and a mixture of vegetarians and meat eaters. We do not condemn anyone because of age, sex, race, nationality, or mental health. Moreover, I have no power to excommunicate.

Yet there are limits to our diversity. Although pride ourselves in our openness and tolerance, every choice of inclusion involves an act of exclusion. We exclude:

- Those who want creeds as part of their religious experience.
- Those who oppose divorce.
- Those who want a communion of bread and wine.
- Those who oppose the ordination of women.
- Those who feel that homosexuality is a sin.
- Those who like traditional church architecture.
- Those who are threatened by theological debates.

- Those who do not enjoy intellectual sermons.
- Those who want to smoke a cigarette during coffee hour.
- Those persons who do not speak English.

Obviously, we are not inclusive. In a diverse world, churches that try to be all things to all people will be nothing to anyone. If this congregation is to play a meaningful role in our culture, we must take positions on issues. This will inevitably exclude people who do not agree with us.

However, if there is one group that we do not want to exclude, it is A persons of color.@ I use the phrase "Persons of color" to include not only the descendants of slaves, who ancestors were forced to come to America, but also many others:

- People who have come from the Caribbean, particularly Jamaica.
- People who have recently come from Africa.
- People who identify as Hispanic or Latino/a.
- People who come from India or Asia.

The phrase "people of color" is awkward. Almost all of us have pigmentation in our skin, and what I am really saying is that we want people with many shades of skin color in our church. My language today is messy. I will also use the phrase African American to refer to people with darker shades of skin color, knowing that all our ancestors originally came from Africa.

Unitarian Universalists have a deep hunger for our church to be a place where persons of different skin pigmentation can develop lasting relationships and overcome centuries of division. In this congregation, we have at least nine wonderful members who have inherited darker skin pigmentation. We are very happy they are part of our community. We would like more. In all five churches that I have served as a minister, people have asked me "How can we attract more African Americans?"

To answer this question, it is important to understand the place of the black church in American life. Two African American researchers, Paulette Moore Hines and Nancy Boyd-Franklin, have studied the role of the black church. They write that a strong spiritual orientation was a major aspect of life for Blacks in Africa and in the United States during the slavery era. Highly emotional religious services were of great importance in dealing with oppression during the years of slavery. Spirituals contained hidden messages about times and places of escape and a language of resistance. Outlets for the expression of feelings about humiliation, pain, and anger were few. Music and the emotional celebration of the story of Jesus = suffering followed by his liberation, provided slaves with a means of expressing these feelings. Spirituals such as "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" convey these sentiments. The highly emotional church services conducted during slavery, today still provide a ritual of great value to black Americans.

In modern times, churches continue to serve important functions for members of the African-American community. The National Baptist Convention and the African Methodist Episcopal Church are now the largest African-American religious organizations in the United States. In

Black churches, an African-American family finds a complete support system, including the minister, deacons, deaconesses, and other church members. Many churches also include social activities for the entire family. There are often special groups for youth, young adults, single parents, men, women, and couples. Many activities such as dinners and trips sponsored by the church, various choirs, and Sunday school provide a social life for the entire family. Congregates also organize health promotion classes, day-care centers, health fairs, economic development initiatives, tutoring programs, and support groups for the unemployed, and for alcohol and drug abuse.

Because of centuries of discrimination, many persons who are born with darker skin color have few outlets for their leadership and creative talents. The Black church has provided a forum for their expression. For example, the father of the family might hold a low status job as a custodian or a cab driver. However, at church he might serve as a member of the Board of Trustees. A mother who works as a hospital aid during the week may be the lead singer in the church choir on Sunday. The black church is important to black families both as a source of support and as a place to learn leadership skills.

African-American researcher Elaine Pinderhughes points out that the values taught in white churches, including Unitarian Universalist churches have fundamental differences from the values of African American culture.

The ethnic roots of the Unitarian and Universalist Churches are from England. We preserve and maintain British culture. We emphasize individualism, independence, autonomy, achievement, progress, youth, the future, efficiency and planning. The writing of a mission statement, which is a common activity of a Unitarian Universalist Church, is a typical task of British American culture. In addition, on Sunday nights many of us watch Downton Abbey.

Our roots in British American culture are why we sometimes attract persons of color raised in one of the British Islands of the Caribbean. A Jamaican named Egbert Ethelred Brown was ordained a Unitarian minister in 1912. My friend and colleague the Rev. Archene Turner, ordained in 2007, comes from the Caribbean and went to school in England.

In contrast, the values taught in American black churches, stress collectivity, sharing, affiliation, respect for authority, belief in spirituality, and respect for the elderly and the past.

If we desire to recruit blacks to Unitarian Universalism, without in anyway changing our British American religious culture, we are racist. In essence, we are saying to African Americans:

- Leave the black church, which stresses collectivity, and join ours, which stresses individualism.
- Leave the black church, which stresses sharing, and join ours, which stresses autonomy.
- Leave the black church, which stresses deference for authority, and joins ours, which stresses the absence of a hierarchy.

- Leave the black church, which stresses emotion and spirituality, and join ours, which stresses thinking and reason.
- Leave the black church, which stresses respect for the elderly and the past, and join ours, which stresses progress and future achievements.

It comes back to the question of what we can control. We do not have control over whether or not African Americans join our church. All we control is our own behavior. Instead of wringing our hands because African Americans are not joining us in large numbers, we can focus our attention on learning from the richness of African-American culture.

All my life the contributions of African Americans have enriched me.

At West High School in Phoenix, a young Unitarian Universalist woman became the first black person to befriend me. When she was a baby in 1952, her father, a Tuskegee Airman, funded a lawsuit against school segregation of the all white Phoenix Union High School.

In seminary, a young black man taught me that the style of preaching found in black churches was radically different from the manuscripts I carefully prepared for Unitarian Universalist congregations. "Your content is fine," he told me. "But can't you put more emotion in your delivery?"

In my first church in Lexington, Kentucky, there was no money for music. A black woman, a member of the church and a professor at the university, agreed to volunteer to play the piano each week so we could sing hymns. She said to me, "I grew up in a Baptist church in Detroit. I know you cannot have church without music."

In New Bedford, Massachusetts, I met Jim Toatley. He had attended the first March on Washington in 1963. In 1983, for the 20th anniversary of the March he walked to what was then the new Vietnam War Memorial to see the names of friends he had served with in Vietnam.

While serving as a minister in Evanston, Illinois, I met the African-American Unitarian Universalist minister Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, who was serving as co-minister of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Toronto. Today Mark lives in Canada and teaches at our Chicago seminary. While wanting diversity in our church, Mark says to Unitarian Universalists, trying to recruit blacks because of our own feelings of moral inadequacy is unreliable and the results are tragic. On the other hand, to see the richness in human diversity and to be excited by its possibilities is quite different.

In Bethesda, Maryland, I met Marcella McGee, wife of the Reverend Lewis McGee. Lewis a minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, married Marcella in 1945, and he was installed as a Unitarian minister at an interracial church in Chicago in 1948. In 1961, Reverend McGee became the first black minister to serve a white Unitarian Universalist congregation. He continued to bring the African-American perspective to Unitarian Universalism, serving several of our churches until his death in 1979. When I was a minister in Bethesda, Maryland, I was honored to serve as minister to Marcella and to participate in her memorial service.

In 1996, I talked with African-American minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, Rev. Dan Aldridge. We talked about the desire of white Unitarian Universalists in the Washington D.C. area to build an African-American congregation in Prince George's County, Maryland. "Roger," he said, "If you do two things, you can be successful. First, the music must be in the African-American tradition, not the European tradition. Second, to attract a large number of African Americans to a Unitarian Universalist congregation the worship must be liberal Christian, not Humanist."

I remember Dan Aldridge when people ask, how can we attract more persons of color to our congregation? I think Dan was correct. We can do so by including more spirituals, spirituals such as "Ezekiel's Wheel" and "The Storm is Passing Over." There are six spirituals and one gospel song in our gray hymnal. As a minister who has been around a long time, left to myself I tend to pick my own favorites from the hymnal, but I do welcome suggestions. Such change, however, is not easy. People have strong opinions about music.

As to moving from a liberal religious humanist congregation to a liberal Christian congregation, to attract African Americans, this seems unlikely. In Sarasota, in a county filled with Christian churches, we provide a safe, stable community for religious humanists. When I included the word humanist in a sermon title last fall, we saw a significant increase in attendance that Sunday. Our religious humanism is a strong part of our educated British American cultural identity.

However, in future years liberal Christianity may not be the only way to bring more people of color into our church. The number of African Americans with college educations is steadily increasing. The number of Hispanics with college degrees is increasing. This may result in more people of color seeking us out. Perhaps, as the number of persons of color with undergraduate and graduate degrees increases, the diversity of our membership will increase.

We cannot build a community that is all things to all people. We cannot include complete variety, nor can we appeal to every constituency. On the other hand, we can try to see and learn from the richness in human diversity.

Today on the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., let us renew our commitment to learn about the traditions and values of African Americans. Then "we can speed up that day when all God's children, black and white, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

This sermon was inspired by a sermon called "Beyond Diversity," by David Rankin, given June 5, 1994, at Fountain Street Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and by the book ETHNICITY AND FAMILY THERAPY, edited by Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano, and Nydia Garcia-Preto, Third Edition 2005.