

**History Happened Here**  
**Unitarian Universalist Church of Flint**

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Part of our interim time together is to examine the congregation's history, celebrating its successes and coming to grips with memories that challenge and prick us still. We've done just that in bits and pieces over this church year. When I arrived here, I read your published church histories, interviewed long-term members and reviewed the church archives. I thought I had a pretty good handle on the 81 years of history that happened here at Unitarian Universalist Church of Flint.

So imagine my surprise when my ministerial colleague, Mark Morrison-Reed reminded me that Flint *almost* called the first African American Unitarian minister to serve this congregation back in 1957. I must admit to feeling chagrined when Rev. Morrison-Reed mentioned this fact because I had read his book, "Black Pioneers in a White Denomination" but I had failed to remember the details of this history as I started my ministry here. So, I pulled out my copy of the book and I dug around in the archives here, and as I did so, I realized that I needed to tell you about this story, this story so long buried that it does not show up in your published histories and barely shows up in the archives. But, just as the lonely Manzanar cemetery and the almost forgotten sites of civil rights violations in the South are there, if we intentionally look at them and for them, historical evidence does exist and calls out to be noticed, witnessed and honored.

In November 1956, Rev. John Hanley Morgan left this pulpit to serve a church in Indiana. This congregation invited various people to fill the pulpit in the following months. One of those preachers was Rev. Lewis McGee, a Unitarian minister with impressive credentials as founder of the liberal interracial Free Religious Fellowship in Chicago and a national leader in the American Humanist Association. And, he just happened to be African-American.

Some members of the congregation were really impressed with Rev. McGee and asked the board if he could be invited to candidate for the settled minister position. Keep in mind that back-in-the-day, interim ministry had not yet been fully developed and the search process was much looser, based a lot on who you knew and who recommended you for a position.

The board agreed and Rev. McGee came for a full candidating week in April 1957, a week that went well according to accounts. But, on the day of the vote, there was a spirited and lengthy debate in the congregational meeting about counting absentee ballots which ultimately were *not* counted in the vote. It is not clear from the record how many absentee

votes were in play. The congregation voted 34 yes and 31 no. This split vote was not a strong call so Rev. McGee declined to accept it.

So, what happened that this congregation did not call Rev. McGee after what appeared to be a great candidating week? First, a bit of context is important to understand the congregation, the city of Flint and our nation in 1957. This congregation was in turmoil in 1957 from three fronts. First, they were adrift without a minister for several months, so they were experiencing understandable stress from trying to fill the pulpit and deal with the reality of managing the congregation on their own.

Second, this was a federated congregation, a combination of Congregational and Unitarian churches. 1956 into 1957 saw the national denominations of the Congregational Church and the Evangelical and Reformed Church deep in conversation together about joining forces. The vote to merge came on June 25, 1957 and the United Church of Christ was born. Here in Flint in this congregation, the move to create the United Church of Christ was troubling to the Unitarian congregants, many of whom were concerned about what they perceived as an authoritarian structure and a credal belief system. I imagine this strong undercurrent of controversy surely made for some interesting coffee hours. The Congregationalists left this congregation within months and joined forces with the American Baptists, forming the church that would be called Woodside. The only physical trace of our Congregationalist members is the china downstairs which proudly proclaims Congregational Church of Flint.

And then, to top it off, the church was facing another challenge during 1957. A capital campaign was underway to move from the Clifford Street location to buy land from Mr. Ballenger and build a new church out here in Flint Township. This campaign was in full swing—a time of high hopes and challenges that accompany any time a congregation decides to change its location and invest a lot of energy and money to make it happen.

So this congregation was a bit riled up over their identity, their location and their leadership with no minister in sight. And, it was firmly planted in the city of Flint which was definitely experiencing the struggles of the civil rights movement, with conflicts over African American voter suppression in the 1954 mayoral race and Genesee County's decision to uphold a policy where black teachers could not teach in all white schools. The city was still reeling from the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, an incident that sparked a public rally in solidarity. And charges of homegrown Flint police brutality were coming to the attention of City Hall as well. The 1950s reality for college educated African American engineers who arrived in Flint with hopes of management jobs at GM was to be shown to the foundry door with no hope of upward mobility. And this was a segregated town with no blacks allowed west of Saginaw Street. Black neighborhoods were bursting at the seams because people kept arriving from the South to work in the GM land of milk and honey. There simply wasn't enough "black" housing available—where could these people go to live? Tensions ran high with white neighborhoods up in arms. Crosses were burned around town. So, as you can see, Flint was also in an uproar, an uproar largely based on racism,

reflective of a struggling nation where that year federal troops were sent in to accompany black students into a white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas.

And in the midst of all this tension and drama, in walks Rev. Lewis McGee as the candidate for settled minister of the fractured Unitarian Church of Flint. Gosh and golly, Rev. McGee was a brave man to even show up for candidating week in the midst of all this conflict. But Rev. McGee was a courageous soul, an out-of-the-box thinker and a fervent committed humanist Unitarian so he was up for it.

Let me tell you a little about Rev. McGee. He grew up in the African Methodist Episcopal church where his father was the minister. He himself grew up to be a minister serving a small AME church in Cleveland where he also worked as letter carrier to make ends meet. One of the items that he regularly delivered was the Christian Register, the magazine of the Unitarians. In 1920, he decided to read the magazine before he delivered it and he found that he agreed with the Unitarian writers. He kept the magazine a few days and then apologized to the woman who held the subscription, admitting that he had read it several times. She invited him to her Unitarian church and he discovered that he was indeed a Unitarian, a testament to the power of inviting people to church!

He liked it so much that he decided to become a Unitarian minister, a dream that would chart the course of the rest of his life as he pioneered his way as a leader in this overwhelmingly white liberal denomination. What a bold choice for this ardent liberal black minister! By the time he arrived in Flint for candidating week, he had founded and led the Free Religious Fellowship, an intentionally interracial Unitarian congregation in Chicago. He had served on the national board of the American Humanist Association for many years and was then serving in an important field staff role. He was well respected, well spoken and well seasoned in life and ministry. He was up for a new and different challenge and had hoped Flint might work out. There is so much more to say about this highly accomplished man who aspired to this pulpit but I will leave it to you to discover more about him on your own.

So why did the vote go down here? What happened that this church did not call him when he was clearly well qualified, especially since this congregation had at least five black families attending at that time and many members were involved in civil rights work? Mark Morrison-Reed's book cites a variety of factors including a sense that proper procedure hadn't been followed in setting up his candidacy, that conservative Congregationalists came out of the woodwork to vote against a humanist or expressed concerns that someone like McGee might be a Communist. McGee himself recollected that he "might not have been cautious enough in speaking my mind on a local hot potato issue. May be a blessing in disguise."

My own research in the Flint archives included notes from an interview with Ron Warner, a church leader from that era. Mr. Warner remembered someone saying "I didn't think the community was ready at that point. We had a lot more work to do. We didn't even have the fair housing ordinance passed. We were a struggling congregation...who could keep

us together?” As I searched through the archives, I found precious little about Lewis McGee’s failed candidacy and yet what I did find said it quite clearly—the community was afraid or concerned or simply not prepared to have a black minister. Race *was* a factor here. And, clearly the congregation was already struggling with so much. Perhaps adding the struggle of dealing with the racism and prejudice within the congregation was too tall an order for a group of people already torn apart by so much else in the congregation and the wider Flint community.

So, history happened here. This congregation almost called a black minister in the midst of the Civil Rights era. But it didn’t. And it’s too bad. I have a sense of what this congregation missed by not making that bold choice. I reflect on the impressive leadership of Rev. David Eaton, an African American minister who served the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC in the 1970s and transformed it into a truly interracial congregation, embodying a new beloved community that led the way in local social justice efforts that made a real difference. That could have been Flint, but it wasn’t.

You may be sitting there wondering, why is she bringing all this up now? Because history *did* happen here and it is important for us to remember it, just as it is important to remember Manzanar and Emmett Till. German feminist theologian Dorothy Soelle once said “I am responsible for the house I did not build but in which I live.” In what sense are we responsible today for the actions taken by this congregation in 1957? We talk a good game as Unitarian Universalists—we have been passing racial equality resolutions since the 1940s and we sing and pray about racial equality regularly in our worship. But what of our values *in practice*, how do we really live into them as Unitarian Universalist institutions?

I had an illuminating conversation with Mark Morrison-Reed as I prepared for this sermon. He observed that the individual actions of individual congregations and entities within our faith over time added up to systemic racism. Churches chose to relocate away from black population centers in the central cities (sound familiar?), religious education materials failed to even show black people let alone acknowledge their contributions, hymnals did not reflect a full range of music and, yes, black ministers were not settled in many of our congregations. There was no overt racist agenda going on but the unconscious march of white privilege, adding up to racism over the decades. Morrison-Reed further observed that this is not particularly surprising, after all we did not even have the language or concept of white privilege in the past. It is neither good nor bad, but simply a historical reality.

But we live in a deeply interconnected and interdependent world, connections that go back in time and call out to us in the present, call out with a plea for serious reflection, a plea for acknowledgement, a plea for redemption. What would it mean to seriously reflect, acknowledge and redeem this congregation’s ancestors from 1957 in their decision which no doubt was largely rooted in racism? After all, they went on to call Rev. Karel Boterman, just out of seminary, on July 2, 1957. Rev. Boterman was white.

I have a few suggestions for your consideration as we wrap up our interim year together. First, I would suggest getting to know your history and learning more about Rev. McGee. Claim this history and own it. Do not let it get covered over by sage brush and the sands of time. You might even really want to delve into Rev. McGee's life story. I noticed with much dismay that his biography is not yet included in the wonderful on-line resource called the Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biographies. Perhaps someone from Flint could do the honors and write his biography for this important UU resource.

I also note that when a person's name is memorialized in the naming of a room or a building, their memory lives on in a very tangible way. People do stop and ask, who was that person? What would it be like for this congregation to name a room after Rev. Lewis McGee? What conversations, insights and deeper understandings might emerge from such a choice over the years to come? If you are intrigued by this idea, I have a recommendation. How about naming the Overflow Room as the Lewis McGee Room? After all, I must admit that overflow evokes sewage treatment plants whenever I hear it. I sense it would be a richly rewarding choice to re-name that particular room.

And I have one more suggestion, one inspired by the actions of First Unitarian Church in Cincinnati. What would it be like to invite the descendants of Rev. McGee here to Flint to acknowledge the past and offer reconciliation as people of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with our more nuanced and ever unfolding understandings of what it means to walk your talk? The Cincinnati church found their journey to be profoundly rewarding as they connected with the descendants of Rev. W.H.G. Carter, a black Unitarian minister who sought to create a black Unitarian church with a strong urban social justice mission. Rev. Carter's work was ignored and scorned by the white Unitarian congregations in the 1920s and 30s. But First Unitarian acknowledged its history and redeemed its own ancestors in the process. So, what would it be like for you to do that here?

History *did* happen here. You *are* responsible for this house which you did not build but in which you live. How will you live into the future in a way that does justice to the past and honors our most dearly held values? I wish you strength, courage and commitment for the journey, if you choose to go there. Blessed be.