

Growing our Diversity: Association Sunday 2009

the Rev. Edmund Robinson

the Rev. Gene Pickett

Unitarian Universalist Meeting House

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Association Sunday gives us a chance to reflect on the meaning of our association with other Unitarian Universalist congregations in the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations. Association Sunday is being observed in UU Churches all across the country, most of them on this day. Seventeen of our fellow congregations in the Ballou Channing District, including Falmouth, Brewster, and Martha's Vineyard, are observing Association Sunday. But there are certainly no more than a tiny handful of the congregations observing this occasion have the resource that this Meeting House has. We are indeed blessed to have among us a former President of the UUA, and I have asked Gene Pickett to come forward and share a few words about the Unitarian Universalist Association from his unique perspective.

Gene Pickett.: Edmund has asked me to say a few words about our Unitarian Universalist Association from the perspective of a former President. I was President of the UUA from 1979 to 1985. As you may or may not know, the headquarters of our Association are located in a handsome building next to the State House on Beacon Hill in Boston.

The purpose of the Association is to provide resources and services that strengthen and enrich our congregations--such as developing religious education materials for children and adults, providing the process and offering advice for selecting a minister, and many other services that congregations cannot develop for themselves.

The opportunity to serve as President was a rich and satisfying experience for me and for Helen. I am grateful not only for the experience of serving as President but also for the influence that Unitarian Universalism has had on my life.

This movement has influenced, enriched, and blessed me in ways far beyond measure. From the time I discovered Unitarianism at the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., to the present, it has been this movement and this Association that have given purpose and form to my life and work.

During my early and teenage years, a small Methodist church in rural Maryland was the center of my religious and social life. It was a source of acceptance and recognition and provided a steadying influence in the face of my insecurities and uncertainties. But my faith from those years did not withstand the shock of college and my newfound knowledge and greatly-broadened perspective.

My years in the Navy during World War II weakened still further my orthodox faith. I missed it very much.

My discovery of Unitarianism was one of the most important experiences of my life. Here was a church where I could explore religious insights and questions of meaning in an accepting and open atmosphere. Here I could express my doubts and uncertainties while belonging to a worshiping and caring community. Here I found a religious approach that respected my rational nature while accepting my need for an emotional base for my faith, that encouraged me to act on my own values in the larger world.

It was this most astounding discovery that motivated me to go to theological school and then into the ministry. It was this openness, respect, and caring that sustained me through my ministries with three congregations and then the UUA Presidency.

My years as President made me deeply aware of how much we need one another on both a personal and an institutional level. It is only as we recognize our mutuality, honor our diversity, and reconcile our difference with respectful honesty that we can build a strong and vital religious community. Being part of and nurturing such a religious community is what ministry is to me.

Because of the strong strand of individualism that has always been part of Unitarian Universalism, our local congregations frequently do not identify with the larger movement and tend to become extraordinarily parochial. I am convinced that, unless we have a shared vision of our movement which points beyond our local church or fellowship, unless we have a sense of being part of something greater than ourselves, we will be little more than a collection of isolated congregations. The UUA is what binds us together. It is the vehicle for transmitting the values and ideals of our liberal religious faith from one generation to the next.

I am also convinced that our faith has something important to say to our world. It has emerged

over centuries and represents one of the proudest religious traditions in the western world. This tradition has promoted a diversity of beliefs, but we are united in our faith that each one of us can make a difference in the world. And, I also am convinced that many people would find this religious approach attractive if they knew about it. It is with the help of the Association that we can make our Unitarian Universalist faith more visible and more available. And it is only with our personal commitment and financial support that the Association can effectively achieve its purpose of helping us.

Edmund: Thank you Gene. I want to underscore what Gene said about a lot of local congregations being parochial. On this spit of sand out in the middle of the ocean, it is easy to be oblivious of the larger entity of which we are a part. We are 80 miles from UUA headquarters – how many have ever visited 25 Beacon St? How many of us have ever attended General Assembly? How many of us have served on a committee of the UUA? Or of the Ballou Channing District, which is a division of the UUA? The Ballou Channing Fall conference was held yesterday in our backyard, at First Parish Brewster. Some came from southern Rhode Island and Providence, Middleborough and Norwell. There were two of us in attendance from the Meeting House. Yes, we are parochial.

And that is a result of our organization; it is fundamental to who we are as a religion that the basic unit is the congregation. No king, pope or bishop can create a UU church, dissolve one, or assign one a minister; the Association is a grouping of congregations. The Association is a secondary reality; the congregation is primary.

Yet the Association often plays a crucial role, particularly at times of crisis or transition. Those who served on the Search Committee relied heavily on the UUA's council in conducting the process. The UUA serves as a repository of wisdom, of the best practices of the congregations. The UUA at its best also articulates a national vision.

The theme of this year's Association Sunday is Growing Our Diversity. How many of you know what I mean when I say Anti Anti Em? No it's not about the Wizard of Oz. In 1997, the General Assembly of the UUA adopted a resolution which says in part¹:
"THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that the 1997 General Assembly urges Unitarian Universalists to examine carefully their own conscious and unconscious racism as participants in a racist society, and the effect that racism has on all our lives, regardless of color.

"BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the General Assembly urges the Unitarian Universalist

¹<http://www.uua.org/socialjustice/socialjustice/statements/14244.shtml>

Association, its congregations, and community organizations to develop an ongoing process for the comprehensive institutionalization of anti-racism and multi-culturalism, understanding that whether or not a group becomes multi-racial, there is always the opportunity to become anti-racist.”

Much water has passed over the dam since 1997, and for the past eight years the UUA has been led by an African American President, who was replaced this summer by a Latino President. Yet the UUA is still officially committed to becoming anti-racist, anti-oppressive and multicultural, known familiarly around 25 Beacon St. as anti anti em.

There are many of you who will react negatively to this description, and there is part of me that does too. In the first place, it sounds so politically correct; it sounds like liberal bureaucracy run amok; we bristle with the suggestion that someone in the national headquarters should tell us how to think. To me, a more cogent critique is that it is one more example of negative thinking, of UUs saying what they are not rather than what they are, or more precisely of saying what we don't want to be rather than what we do want to be.

And yet if we think about it, our core values certainly call us to be anti-racist. We certainly aren't pro-racist. And I hope we don't kid ourselves that the election of an African-American President has solved problems of racism, either in the nation or in our tiny religious movement. We know there is institutional racism abroad in the society and that it persists in our own churches and organizational structure despite the good efforts of many of us.

Just how deeply rooted racism is in our psyches was brought home to me by an article in Newsweek one of you brought me a couple of weeks ago, with the title, “Is Your Baby a Racist?²” It described studies done on kindergartners. The first finding of the study was that white parents were very reluctant to talk to their children about race, and the reason commonly given for this was that they wanted their children to be color blind and didn't want to emphasize racial differences. The second and more important finding was that where parents did *not* talk to the children about race, the children developed negative racial ideas, even when they were exposed to kids from other backgrounds in the schools and even when they had watched multicultural videos such as Sesame Street. Only those kids whose parents talked to them about race did not develop negative stereotypes.

We are a long way from being kids in this church, but what I take from this Newsweek piece is that racism doesn't go away on its own; it recedes only when we are willing to talk about it and confront it.

²<http://www.newsweek.com/id/214989>

Color-blindness is a noble ideal; expressed perhaps best in Dr. King's phrase that he wanted his children to grow up in a world where they are judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. We know that race is a social construct, with no scientific validity; why not act on that? Because the social construct still has a lot of teeth. I once asked Cornel West, the great race scholar, if we would have races in heaven, and he said "yes, because my blackness is part of who I am." It is hypocritical for whites to profess color blindness as an ideal, for our privilege consists in an exemption from daily awareness of our own race, a luxury which a person of color does not have.

Thandeka, our most prominent African-American theologian, used to challenge her white audiences to do a mental exercise: for 24 hours, in everything you say, when you refer to a person whom society would define as white, use the adjective "white" before the name. I recently went to South Carolina to see my white mother and my white brothers and sister, my white neighbor Andy came to see me yesterday. Nobody I know has ever taken Thandeka up on this challenge; it would be too hard.

And we may not be willing to do it here, but I'm glad to say we are willing to talk about race in this church. We talked about it last week by presenting the powerful play "Meridian Summer," and thanks to our hard-working social action committee for bringing it here. That play, for those who didn't attend, was a fictional treatment of a white Mississippi family and their black domestic worker and the black civil rights worker who got murdered. The racial attitudes of the white southerners rang true to my ears, and I lived through that era in the south. I recognized both the defensiveness of the whites and the anguished ambivalence of the blacks. Our own Eric Riley gave a spot-on portrayal of the one historical person in the play, James Chaney, the eventual murder victim, a young man from the community who had gotten swept up in work for the Congress of Racial Equality, and had transformed his own attitudes, deciding to resist the general racism of the society instead of going along with it. At the beginning of the play, he urges Althea, the other black character, to show some backbone, but she is too fearful of losing her job working for the prominent white family. In the course of the play, she is transformed. What I found surprising was Eric's admission in the talk-back, that though he had Southern ancestors, he had never himself been in the south. This just shows what a consummate actor he is – he got inside his character so well through an act of imagination.

We have many opinions about race within our movement, which is not surprising since we have many opinions about most things. Thandeka has publicly disagreed with the UUA's Journey Toward Wholeness in the last ten years. I heard Mark Morrison-Reed, one of our most prominent ministers of color, give a talk at General Assembly last June called "the Perversity of Diversity" in which he urged that we set aside lecturing and guilt trips on race because they are

not working. He had a four-point prescription³:

1. Lighten up; our fear of making mistakes, of saying the wrong thing and offending someone prevents us from forming authentic relationships.
2. Know who we are. We can only attract those who are like us. By knowing who we are, and being authentic to who we are, we will be able to attract more people who are like us across ethnic and racial lines.
3. Appreciate the diversity that's already within us. The more we can do this, the more we would attract others to join us. Let's affirm and celebrate with joy the diversity we already have.
4. Understand how we are caught in a conundrum—we have a perversity to our call for diversity. We want to change, but not too much, and we want to stay in our comfort zone. We settle for looking different rather than being different. Change will come whether we want it or not, simply because the society around us is changing.

I commend this approach. My own take is that I would rather talk about what we are *for* rather than what we are *against*. We are *for* building a world that is just and in which the inherent worth and dignity of every person is respected. Jesus called this the kingdom of God or, better translated, God's realm. Many of us prefer to follow the usage of the philosopher Josiah Royce and of Martin Luther King, Jr. and call it the Beloved Community.

One of the finest things the Association has done lately is that former President Sinkford and the senior UUA staff last year drafted this vision statement for the Association which I used as a chalice lighting:

³<http://www.uua.org/events/generalassembly/2009/ga2009/144176.shtml>

With humility and courage born of our history, we are called as Unitarian Universalists to build the Beloved Community where all souls are welcome as blessings, and the human family lives whole and reconciled⁴.

Living that vision will not depend on how many people of color choose to join our ranks, either nationally or here at the Meeting House. Somebody once called Sunday morning the most segregated hour in America – we have done a better job of desegregating our schools, jobs and police forces than our churches. And here in Chatham, we have a very white community. The census figures indicate that African Americans make up less than 3% of the year-round population of this town. By contrast, the population of Harwich, according to the 2000 census, is 12.3 % African American⁵.

Diversity whether in race, ethnicity, sex, sexual preference, abilities or age, is a desirable thing. To welcome all people is to live out our First Principle. We are all enriched and enlarged from associating with people who are not like us. But the way to get there is not to fret about numbers. In my view, racism is primarily a spiritual illness, and we take pains to examine it, to question our own deep-seated attitudes and our complicity in institutional racism, not out of a desire to see arbitrary numbers of people of color walk through our doors, but because opposition to racism is part of who we are, part of our commitment to justice, to building the Beloved Community.

At the level of the Association, we are taking some concrete action to try to reach out to communities of color. Three specific recipients have been chosen for the funds we raise here today.

1. Expand the Building the World We Dream About curriculum and associated resources and training.
2. Support congregations that are working to create a Unitarian Universalism that is racially, culturally, and economically diverse; a part of this support will be in the form of grants.
3. Enable UU congregations and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in the areas of spiritual development, racial/cultural identity development, and leadership development.

I know that many of us have limited financial resources, and these are tough times. But it would be great if a congregation in one of the whitest communities in the nation could send in

⁴<http://www.uua.org/spirituallife/worshipweb/chalichelightings/submissions/142754.shtml>

⁵<http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/popInfo.php?locIndex=2972>

a strong contribution to the effort of growing the racial diversity of the UU movement. I suggest a contribution of at least \$50 apiece. I myself am putting a check in the envelope for \$200. If you don't have a checkbook with you, you can come to the office during office hours and give the envelope to Melissa, or swipe your debit or credit card. If you use a check today, please make the check out to UUA, put Association Sunday on the "for" line, and put it in the collection plate. It will be counted separately from the rest of the collection. And let me emphasize that this is not in lieu of the regular collection: please put in the collection bag what you would normally put in.

This movement has a proud history of opposing racism. "Meridian Summer," the play presented here last week, was about 1964, a pivotal time in the struggle against racism. The following year, a white Unitarian Clergyman named James Reeb was killed in Selma, Alabama by a group of club-wielding men.

My colleague Clark Olsen was with James Reeb that day, and here is what he had to say about it recently⁶:

"I was with James Reeb and Orloff Miller when we were attacked in Selma, Alabama in 1965 following the horrifying events of "Bloody Sunday." Six days after the attack, President Johnson called on Congress to pass Voting Rights legislation. Forty-three years later, due to that law, we have elected our first African-American president.

From the yellow roses President and Mrs. Johnson sent to the Birmingham hospital while Jim lay dying, from the Johnson archives which reveal that the President had 57 phone calls concerning Jim that week of the attack on us, and from his reference to Jim's death in his speech to Congress – we know that Jim Reeb's tragic death was a major influence on President Johnson and on the American people in the drive for Voting Rights legislation...

Clark Olsen's conclusion serves as a fitting wrap-up of these reflections on diversity:

"Selma has taught me that, with no guarantees for success, our seemingly minor decisions can make a difference. Somewhere in the process of Creation, love and justice connect us all."

It is a worthy movement of which we are a part, and I urge you to be as generous as you can in supporting it.

Amen.

⁶Sermon at the Living Tradition service honoring those who had been in the ministry 50 years, printed in UUMA News, Vol 43, Issue 1, September 2009 p.7

Reading

—[We are]...A place where new conversations about money, race, and God in America can commence. With this new beginning, loyalties need no longer be skin-deep. Here God's broken humanity can be healed. Difference will be affirmed as the grace of human engagement. The term person of color will now refer to every human being. Dare we dream of such a day? Yes. Let the church say Amen..

~ Excerpt from *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*, by Thandeka, copyright © 2001. Reprinted by permission of The Continuum International Publishing Group