

HOW WIDE IS OUR CIRCLE?

Minister's Reflections by Rev. Dr. Ed Piper
 Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Waynesboro (VA)
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Two weeks ago Jody Grogan, Angela Hankinson and her daughter Imani, and I attended the Thomas Jefferson District annual anti-racism conference in Richmond, which was titled “Building the World We Want – **From Just Us to Justice.**” One important part of this conference was learning more about how subtle but pervasive racial stereotypes continue to influence our judgments about other people, in spite of the advances we have made toward equality. During the current period of economic hardship for many Americans, the climate of competition for scarce jobs has placed everyone on high alert. Add to that the pervasive climate of fear of terrorism and the hostility toward immigrants. Frankly, I am concerned that we are raising a whole new generation of American children whose default outlook on people who are somehow “other” is one of fear and mistrust.

As religious liberals, we Unitarian Universalists seek to raise our children to accept others who are different. And yet, nearly twenty years after the UUA General Assembly set a goal of becoming a multiracial and multicultural faith tradition, we remain remarkably **un-diverse**. We preach a theology that emphasizes inclusiveness, but we foster a climate that may exclude those who don't fit in. Two recent issues of *UU World* magazine have wrestled with this issue. Writing in the Spring 2010 issue, Paul Rasor asked, “Do we reflect the pluralistic and multicultural reality of our time, or have we fatally linked our brand of religious liberalism to a culture that is disappearing?” Rosemary Bray McNatt, who is an African-American minister serving a UU congregation in New York City, observed that “race and ethnicity have stood in during our conversations for something more ineffable, more complex, more edgy than we are willing to discuss. We are speaking as well about matters of culture—Unitarian Universalist culture.”

Is there such a thing as “UU culture”? Writing in the Summer 2010 issue of *UU World*, James Kubal-Komoto says that “the predominant culture one discovers in most UU congregations is affected by six demographic factors:

1. Education: We have the highest average level of education of any religious tradition, with many of us having graduate degrees.
2. Class: Because of our education, we are predominantly members of the professional middle class.
3. Occupation: We predominantly have jobs that are not related to for-profit activity, which is highly correlated with political liberalism.
4. Ethnicity: We are not only predominantly white, but have predominantly northern European roots.
5. Age: We are predominantly middle-aged and older.
6. Gender: We are predominantly female.

Kubal-Komoto concludes, “Until we understand who we really are demographically and understand how our predominant culture makes some people feel welcome and some people feel unwelcome in our congregations, we will utterly fail in our efforts to become more welcoming to all who seek a liberal religious home within Unitarian Universalism.” [James Kubal-Komoto, “Our Narrow Niche,” *UU World*, Summer 2010, pp. 30-31]

I do not share his pessimism about our future. However, there are some changes that we need to be willing to make—as individuals, as a congregation, and as a denomination—if we are to become the multicultural faith movement we aspire to be. As Marilyn Sewell puts it bluntly, “Unitarian Universalists should be commended for wanting to create churches where culture and class don’t separate and divide. But it does a disservice to all when well-meaning progressives underestimate the very real obstacles we are up against. We’re very long on the ‘should’ and very short on the ‘how.’ [*UU World*, Summer 2010, p. 33]

Let me offer an example of how **not** to promote interracial understanding. During the 1990s the UUA sponsored a series of anti-racism workshops and trainings called Journey Toward Wholeness. They hired an organization called Crossroads Ministries to lead many of these training sessions. The heart of the process was based on a Christian model of salvation:

confession of sin followed by redemption and reconciliation. The “sin” in this case was white racism/white privilege. This approach turned out to be poorly suited for white liberal UUs. Even though white privilege is hard-wired into American history, UUs have a notoriously difficult time confessing “sin” as individuals. Many of the participants in these trainings refused to acknowledge their personal responsibility for white racism. Eventually, the arrangement with Crossroads Ministries was terminated. A program intended to increase racial sensitivity had in many cases the opposite effect. [see Leslie Takahashi Morris et al., *The Arc of the Universe Is Long: Unitarian Universalists, Anti-Racism, and the Journey from Calgary*]

So what **does** work to improve multicultural awareness? Marilyn Sewell, the recently retired minister of the large UU congregation in Portland, Oregon, has this suggestion: “Racial and cultural integration comes when people actually get to know one another, and the built-in fear of “the other” is dissipated through experience. It will come, as it has already, *when people are brought together by institutional necessity*, as in our armed forces, in sports, in integrated schools where young people learn and play together. In these settings, people find themselves engaged in common tasks where they encounter more than surface skin color and unfamiliar traditions, settings where they can observe their common humanity.” [*UU World*, Summer 2010, p. 33]

Shared experience pursuing shared goals. That’s one of the reasons why our Fellowship’s involvement in community service programs is so important—not just because we are helping to meet a community need, but because we are gaining exposure to other cultures, other classes, and other faith traditions. Let me share a personal experience, based on our Fellowship’s involvement with the Disciples Kitchen program at Second Presbyterian Church here in Waynesboro. I volunteered to serve as the person who greets and registers the people who come for a donated meal. They include white folks, African-Americans, and Hispanics—some of whom do not speak English. I was frankly embarrassed that I didn’t even know enough Spanish to ask them their names. To me, this was a sign of my disrespect for their language and culture—a denial in a way of their inherent worth and dignity. So for my birthday in August, I asked Renee to give me the Rosetta Stone program for Spanish Level 1, and I am determined to learn enough Spanish to exchange greetings and basic information with Spanish speakers.

Another way to broaden our multicultural horizons is through our Sunday services. The hymnbook we are using today contains music from many different religious and cultural traditions. Singing these songs for the first time can be awkward, especially when I am the one who is trying to lead you! I understand that some of our members would prefer to sing hymns that are familiar. We are very fortunate that our pianists, musicians, and choir singers represent a variety of musical styles and traditions. Hopefully, we will be able to balance the “old” and “new” elements in our Sunday services so that they will appeal to a wider spectrum of potential members from non-European cultural backgrounds, especially those from younger generations who embody America’s multicultural future.

Our commitment to become a genuinely multiracial, multicultural religious community is, in Paul Rasor’s words, “hampered by a liberal ambivalence around the issue of community. One of the issues at work here is the human tendency to want community on our own terms, a community of people ‘like us.’ But for liberals, additional difficulties emerge out of the tension inherent in our tradition. Liberals want to create a strong and inclusive community, but we often want to do it without giving up anything, without letting down the barriers we erect around ourselves in the name of individual autonomy. We wade into the waters of community up to our knees, but we’re afraid to let go of the dock and plunge in with our whole bodies.” [*Faith Without Certainty*, p. 178]

In her essay on UU culture, Cynthia Adcock expresses concern about a form of what she calls “‘UU triumphalism,’ the belief that our religion is the best, and that collectively we ourselves are the best human beings, the most rational, open-minded, and devoted to the pursuit of objective truth. Maybe so. But we are desperately needy for deep contact with people whose hearts have learned humility and equality. In the struggle to become multicultural, these are the values that will see us through the difficult times. They are values one cannot learn without suffering—no matter one’s skin color or other kind of identity. Are UUs open-minded enough to acknowledge our suffering?” [*UU World*, Summer 2010, p. 35]

In a sermon at the 2009 General Assembly, the Rev. Abhi Janamachi offered this challenge to all UUs: “We are called to create holy communities where strangers are not only welcome but where all are enjoined to do the work of healing and transformation by wrestling with **the strangers within themselves.**” [*UU World*, Fall 2009, p. 1] Each of us embodies a mix of different cultures and religious traditions. We begin the encounter with the **external** “Other” who is beyond our comfort zone by acknowledging the **internal** “Other” who dwells within each of us—also beyond our comfort zone. Let me close with the words of Vivian Pomeroy:

Forbid that we should use our little idea of goodness as a spear to wound those who are different;

Forbid that we should feel superior to others when we are only more shielded;

And may we encourage the secret struggle of every person.