

The Commission On Institutional Change 2017-2020 Part I: An Origin Story

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Summary

Changing attitudes toward race and racial justice from the early days of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in the 1960s to the present were extremely important influences on the work of the Commission On Institutional Change. The seeds of the current attitudes toward racial justice and racial identity in the UUA were planted during the *Black Empowerment Controversy* in the 1960s. They sprouted in educational initiatives and group structures including the *Journey Toward Wholeness* in the 1990s and early 2000s. They were watered in segregated group structures including the *Allies for Racial Equity* with only white UUs as members; the Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries with only Black, Indigenous, and People Of Color UUs as members; and later Black Lives UU with only black members. Those seeds finally bore fruit in the work of the Commission on Institutional Change, 2017-20.

Background and Context for the emergence of the Commission On Institutional Change.

The most significant racial justice involvement of the UUA came when Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. called Rev. Homer Jack, Chair of the UUA Commission on Religion and Race, in March of 1965 asking for help. The call came after “Bloody Sunday” when Alabama State Troopers attacked people marching for Voting Rights as they crossed the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Over 350 UU ministers and lay people including the entire UU national board answered the call and participated in the successful march from Selma to Montgomery two weeks later. Two of the three people killed by white segregationists while involved with the march were UUs: Rev. James Reeb and Ms. Viola Liuzzo. The nationwide publicity that came from their killing played a key role in the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

The Civil Rights Movement’s approach to racial justice followed a pattern. Specific discriminatory laws and institutional policies were identified. Coalitions of Protestants and Catholics, labor movements and political parties, blacks and whites, were assembled to advocate for change. While personal identity factors varied greatly, a common commitment to racial justice and focus on discriminatory laws and practices held them together.

Other groups, most notably the Black Nationalists and White Christians who supported segregation, had very different approaches to racial justice. Black nationalists chose to build power by organizing around racial identity and resisting any white influence or collaboration. In the book *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism*, UU Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed explains in elaborate detail how the Black Unitarian Universalists for Radical Reform and the Black Action Council, both Black Power oriented UU groups, played an oversized role in segregating UUA approaches to racial justice in 1966-69.

White Christians who supported segregation held that the only valid approach to overcoming racism was personal, namely, advocating for White People to stop being racist. Directly addressing discriminatory laws and policies was not part of the picture. Other white leaders who wanted good outcomes for racial justice, notably Rev. Joseph Barndt, founder of the Crossroads Ministries, similarly focused on the personal by advocating that racial justice could be achieved by changing white people’s consciousness.

Crossroads Ministries trained many UUs in the early 1990s. This approach led to the formation of the *Journey Toward Wholeness Initiative*, an active UUA ministry from 1997 into the early 21st Century. The workshops the *Journey* offered to congregations focused on the need to overcome white racism considering all the horrible things white people have done to black people in American history. The prescribed path for positive change involved confessions of personal involvement and convincing as many other white UUs as possible to acknowledge their own benefitting from White Privilege and racism. This focus on personal change to overcome racism continued into the early 21st Century with the formation of additional ministries including the Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (all Black, Indigenous and People of Color); the Allies for Racial Equity (all white); and Black Lives UU (all black). It did not become dominant in the UUA until there was a major shakeup of leadership in 2017.

In early 2017, controversy erupted over the hiring of a white Lead Minister for the Southern Region of the UUA. Another candidate, a Latina religious education professional, claimed she had been told she was qualified for the job and should have been hired. Accusations that this was just one more example of White Supremacy Culture grew to the point that Peter Morales, the first Latino President of the UUA, resigned under pressure in April. The three temporary co-presidents that served from April through June and the UUA Board joined in declaring that the Unitarian Universalist Association was “swimming in a sea of white supremacy.”

The Commission On Institutional Change

The *Commission On Institutional Change* was appointed at GA 2017 to address this crisis. Their Report, “*Widening The Circle Of Concern*”¹ (WCC), was presented at GA 2020.

The Commission was charged “to conduct an audit of the power structures and analyze systemic racism and white supremacy culture within the Unitarian Universalist Association.” (WCC, p. xvii) The subsequent research study, conducted over the next three years, asked UUs who are Black people, Indigenous people, and People Of Color (BIPOC) the following two questions.

- In what ways have you or your group or community been hurt by current racist and culturally biased attitudes and practices within Unitarian Universalism?
- In what ways have we, as a faith community, been living outside of our values and commitments?” (WCC, p. xxiv)

No questions were asked about positive experiences or experiences in general. Based on the responses of 1,100 participants in the study out of approximately 19,000 BIPOC UUs,² the report states that “The vast majority of people of color and others from identities marginalized within Unitarian Universalism had experienced discriminatory and oppressive incidents or cultures within Unitarian Universalist circles.” (WCC, p. xxv).

Recommendations

In keeping with the charge to support “long-term cultural and institutional change that redeems the essential promise and ideals of Unitarian Universalism” (WCC, p. xvii), the Commission made 36 recommendations in the areas of Theology, Governance, Congregations and Committees, Hospitality and Inclusion, Living Our Values in the World, Religious Professionals, Educating for Liberation, Innovations and Risk-Taking, Restoration and Reparations, and Accountability and Resources.³

Subsequent Action

The Article II Study Commission convened in the fall of 2020.⁴ The Commission was charged to “review Article II of the UUA Bylaws, and propose any revisions that will enable our UUA, our member congregations, and our covenanted communities to be a relevant and powerful force for spiritual and moral growth, healing, and justice.” The charge elaborated that “Proposed changes should articulate core UU theological values. The Board believes that one core theological value, shared widely among UUs, is love.”⁵ A preliminary draft of the Revisions to Article II received a majority vote at GA 2023. The Final Proposed Revision was released in October of 2023.⁶ It needs a 2/3 affirmative vote at GA 2024 to replace the current Article II that includes the Seven Principles.

¹ “*Widening The Circle Of Concern*,” the 223 page final report of the UUA Commission on Institutional Change, June, 2020, is available at https://www.uua.org/files/pdf/w/widening_the_circle-text_with_covers.pdf.

² The number 19,000 is based 158,186 members of UU churches in 2014 given in the UUA website <https://www.uua.org/data/demographics/uua-statistics>; and 12% of UUs identifying as non-white in a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center shown in the website <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-denomination/unitarian/> Note that the estimate is not precise. The margin of error is +/-8 percentage points. This footnote is borrowed from [REVIEW OF THE CLAIM THAT BLACK PEOPLE, INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND PEOPLE OF COLOR ARE HARMED IN UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST ORGANIZATIONS THAT IS MADE IN THE REPORT “WIDENING THE CIRCLE OF CONCERN” by Allan Palley, 5 April, 2021.](#)

³ Scattered throughout the text and summarized on pages 171-187 of the report.

⁴ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/timeline>

⁵ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/charge>

⁶ <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>