

Avatars

When we issued our invitation in the fall of 2017 for testimonies from those who had been injured by a culture privileging white people within Unitarian Universalism, we quickly learned that people were reluctant to share their stories. One reason was that religious professionals feared losing their jobs or their abilities to perform their jobs, as did those who identified as white allies. Another reason was that people of color, whether professional or lay, felt that they had told their stories again and again, reliving pain and traumatic experience to no end. Over and over we heard from people who said they were no longer willing to describe the pain they experienced because, after the initial shock and reaction took place, little changed. Some described this as a form of “trauma porn,” in which those in the majority culture got a voyeuristic look into the lives of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color; experienced deep emotions—and failed to act in any systematic way.

The fact that anonymity was required for people to feel comfortable sharing speaks to the extent of the racial divide and power imbalances. While we are using a limited number of direct quotes in this report to illustrate important points, we found a consistency of experiences. 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.

Religious professionals felt these aggressions and attacks on dignity most frequently and most strongly. Those who were white had a spectrum of experiences ranging from denial that any kind of racism existed within Unitarian Universalism (“we have a 0-percent occurrence”) to those who saw clear issues with equity, inclusion, and diversity and paid a large cost professionally and socially to name them. The vast majority of people were in the middle—vaguely aware, somewhat committed, and feeling unskilled.

This report is based on more than eighty hours of audio and video recordings and more than 650 pages of documents from more than 1,100 participants. Out of this material, we created five avatars to represent the themes we saw represented in strong and consistent patterns. The avatars are composites of the testimonies that were submitted and also those that came out of the focus groups we conducted in 2017 and 2018. These avatars allow us to amplify themes of the testimony without endangering individuals’ livelihood or community connection.

Lay Leader of Color Avatar

- Mallory Ramesh
- Board member of congregation
- age 35
- Indian
- queer
- social activist

I joined my local UU church after meeting some UUs at a Black Lives Matter rally after a local unarmed Black man was killed.

The UUs I met were members of a church in a nearby city, so I did some online research and picked my home church because they had information about becoming a Welcoming Congregation on their website.

After a couple of months of attending service and a book club, the minister asked me to join the Board. I thought this was kind of rushed. At the book club, I'd noticed that whenever any question about people of color came up, I was the one everybody turned to look at. I'm Indian. It was funny considering that my suggestion that we add pronouns to our nametags was dismissed by the woman heading the LGBTQ Council, even though I am also queer. I thought I could do some good as a Board member so I agreed. Despite reluctance by some established church leaders, we participated in the White Supremacy Teach-In, though even then, our involvement was limited to a single service and reflection.

At the following Board meeting, I inquired about how we planned to implement the recommendations from the Teach-in, adopting the eighth Principle and doing a church-wide racism audit. Our outgoing settled minister shut down the conversation and suggested it would be more appropriate to bring up the issue with our interim minister. When I did so at the following meeting, the interim minister said she wanted to wait until she'd gotten to know the congregation.

The next month, our interim said again that she wanted more time.

At the following meeting, the issue was pushed to the end of the agenda, and when another issue turned into a long discussion, the majority of the Board members decided it was too late to discuss anything else and voted to table the meeting.

Leading up to the next meeting, I wrote two emails to our Board secretary asking for the issue to be placed on the meeting agenda. Both emails were ignored before they finally responded to the third.

At the meeting, I decided to bring up my concerns with how the recommendations had been handled, especially considering that the adoption of a practice regarding environmental justice had passed easily and with no similar delays.

The Board secretary, a white woman, immediately centered herself and her own discomfort, framing the situation as an attack on herself by me. The issue was left unresolved at the end of the meeting. It was extremely uncomfortable for me.

During this period, my relationship with the Board members in question soured, and several church members engaged in a whisper campaign against me, seemingly targeting my social justice views, with one member joking that I had "issued a fatwa" against mentioning US presidents in sermons after I'd related complaints about an Independence Day reflection.

Unwilling to encounter this on Sunday mornings, I stopped attending. Though I finished my Board term,

I missed meetings. I dropped out of the book club and no longer attend anything at the congregation.

Minister of Color Avatar

- Doreanne Spotswood
- Black
- disabled
- femme

While I have experienced harm in various ways as a Black person within Unitarian Universalism, most of the harm done to me has been from UU ministers or seminarians despite their lofty declarations of collegiality.

During seminary, I was called a quota filler, was told it would be easier if I were not there.

I have spent several different chapter meetings listening to white colleagues compete with one another over the number of “African American” or Black members.

I was asked by a colleague during ministry days to park his car—he tried to hand his keys over even though I was wearing a GA badge and had known him for years. I was invited to preach at a colleague’s church and he put a fellow woman of color colleague’s picture on the front cover with my name.

For years, colleagues would ask if I was in preliminary fellowship. Why this is important I don’t know, but when I would say no, they looked at best surprised and at worst as if I were lying. On the day I received final (now full) fellowship, I was asked over and over if I were getting preliminary fellowship and one colleague loudly insisted I was in the wrong line and needed to gather with the ministers getting preliminary fellowship.

On at least two occasions, colleagues have argued that they know more about the experience of racism and oppression than I do as they marched with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, and one had worked with Nelson Mandela. Many colleagues have told me that I am being intimidating and that I should assume “good will.”

Many of the candidates for ministry used black and dark in negative ways. When I asked them what their theology of darkness was they said things like “the absence of God,” “evil,” and “sinful.” When I pressed them about the impact this might have on members of their congregation who identified as Black or brown, a white male colleague reprimanded me and defended this use of language and wouldn’t back down until a white female colleague affirmed what I was saying.

The objectification of female candidates and colleagues was also a regular feature of the Ministerial Fellowship Committee. Male panel members would describe women as attractive and young as if that had anything to do with their qualifications. To be female and of color is more than a double whammy.

Religious Professional of Color Avatar

- Jessie Anaya
- Afro-Latinx/Indigenous
- queer
- boomer

I came into Unitarian Universalism because I was queer. Sure, I no longer believed in the kind of God of the church where I was born. I probably would have stayed, for the music and the people and community if I hadn’t been a lesbian. That was non-negotiable.

When I came into my first UU congregation, someone asked me if I wouldn’t be more comfortable down the street at the Catholic church, and on my second visit, someone asked if they could touch my hair to see how it felt. The message, though, it spoke to me. About how we

all have worth and dignity. The service the next week was about racial justice and immigration and I wanted to come back. I have lived in a lot of places that were not too good at welcoming me (I was working as a sociology professor then), so I kept coming back and I brought my kids.

Pretty soon I was asked to be on the Membership Committee and then the Religious Education Committee and the Board. We had districts back then and I was asked to be on that Board as well.

At my first district meeting, someone brought up their concerns that the site we had chosen for our conference was in a “mixed” neighborhood and they wanted to be sure people would be safe. I lost it and we had to call in a consultant from the UUA staff who seemed like she had never been part of a conversation about race before. When she got nervous, she used the term *colored people* instead of people of color. A couple of the other Board members defended her, saying it was “just words.” I ended up taking over the session and facilitating the conversation. At the end, people understood a lot more about the experience of people of color in this nation, and by my next meeting, I was thinking that maybe I needed to be doing this for a living.

When a job working for the district opened up, I applied and got it. My bilingualism was sometimes welcomed, but my biculturalism and my ideas on how to accomplish the objectives within my responsibility were consistently unwelcome.

I had to visit a lot of churches. It was troubling the way that Black and African diaspora music is appropriated within UU churches, many times as a way to perform “multiculturalism.” Another disturbing thing is the way people of color are erased. For example, a church with three Black members might hear comments at congregational meetings such as “We are an all-white church.” And I cannot count the number of times I have objected when someone has said, “Well, we have no diversity in this room,” only to have the response be, “Oh I mean Black people, real people of color.”

I had a lot of background in meetings, organizational development, and all of that. One time I showed up to help a congregation deal with a problem with their finances and an older white man from the Finance Committee said, “We don’t need someone to talk to us about race relations, we need someone who understands numbers.” A younger Board member stepped in and called him in. However, that incident and so many other little jabs stuck with me.

My supervisor changed a couple of times and then we did away with districts. I went to seminary and made my way through a reading list that had only a few authors of color then. (My complaints and those of some of my classmates helped change the reading list.) I went into mega debt to get through. For my first cycle of candidating, I was asked to candidate in five different places but wasn’t offered a call. I had to go back to consulting and also take a temp job to wait until the next cycle. It was the same thing except I was called to a small congregation that had had three ministers in five years. They had no Board policies and made a stink when I tried to get them to put some in place. I lasted there for four years, working around the clock. When I left, I knew I had made it longer than any of the last three ministers—but I was beaten up. One of my kids was a teenager then and got so sick of seeing what they did to me that she quit the faith.

I took a job as an associate minister in a larger congregation. The senior minister has done some work and I can call her on her stuff when it comes up. Someday I might want to try to be the number one again, but the way Unitarian Universalists have to always resist all authority and the way they resisted my strong womanist style just wore out my last nerve.

I think, looking back over my decade of involvement with Unitarian Universalism, that I was too polite for too long. Some of my younger colleagues of color come in now and they are much more real. I get through my days, I do what I need to do, and sometimes I say what I want to say: “You sing songs without understanding the history, the pain and the faith that birthed them. You change the words without understanding how that distinctly changes the meaning of our songs.”

Yes, a lot has changed. In a lot more congregations, people wouldn't try to violate my body or touch me or try to send me to another church. And every day someone says something ignorant, truly ignorant, about someone who looks like my mama or my aunties or my kids. And that takes a toll, it really does.

Why do I stay? Because what we believe is what I believe and no color owns that. And because the young people coming in are fierce and I can't help but want to see where that goes....

White Accomplice Avatar

- Genevieve Mills
- white
- cisgender woman
- heterosexual

When I was in seminary in the late 1970s one of the requirements was to take a course in non-Western religion. I enrolled in a course on Native American spirituality and tradition. A leader advising the seminarians informed me that that was not going to meet the MFC requirement for a non-Western religion. I protested, saying that indeed it was non-Western, and he responded by implying that it was not a real religion. I was furious and voiced my objection yet he would not reconsider. It was one of the first times I started to realize how many people don't see their white supremacy/settler-colonial attitudes in action. Who was he to decide what is a “real” religion?

I joined my current UU congregation about ten years ago when I moved here for a new job. I've spent most of my career working with adolescents and had the chance to join an organization working on re-entry programs for youth offenders. My work gave me a close-up look at the vagaries and biases in the criminal justice system and I started to learn to identify systemic racism. I joined my congregation's Social Justice Committee after the shooting of Michael Brown and the uprising in Ferguson.

Michael Brown was the same age as many of my clients and his loss felt personal to me. At the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, I knew we needed to get more white people engaged in changing these systems.

I advocated for hanging a Black Lives Matter banner on our congregation's building when the call went out for congregations to support the movement with this action in early 2015. Our committee debated the idea for a few meetings and then we had to do congregational education before asking for a congregational vote. I was new to organizing work and found the gathering of signatures and conversations with my fellow congregants to be very informative about the range of views and level of understanding about racism in our country and our city. We had a lay service about white privilege in which three members shared their stories about the harm they had done to friends of color when they acted without acknowledging their privilege. It was very powerful and moving, so by the time the congregation voted there were only three dissenters.

So I was completely surprised—and bitterly disappointed—when the Board said they didn't want to participate in the White Supremacy Teach-In just two years later. Our Social Justice Committee was working with the religious education director and Worship

Committee to make it happen when we got shut down without a real explanation. We had gone together to the Board meeting as a courtesy to let them know about our plans because they didn't usually get engaged on matters of our Sunday services. The Board thought we had already done enough work and the framing of White Supremacy made them very uneasy. I was angry and sad and tired. We'd done so much educational work in the congregation and to be stopped in our tracks was tough, really tough. I have to admit I wasn't my best self when I called the Board in on their cowardice and lack of support for our justice work. I told them centering their comfort was not what we needed in this moment. But our group wasn't successful and we were one of the few congregations that didn't participate.

I found a congregation in a nearby town that did participate and went to their service. I've attended services there a few times since, and while I've kept up with my Social Justice Committee work, the lack of support and enthusiasm from leadership for the work has made me reconsider whether that congregation is still a good place for me. I need a community committed to justice inside and outside the congregation.

White Counter Narrative Avatar

- John E. Pickett
- cisgender man
- heterosexual

Greetings, Commissioners,

I am writing in response to the call for testimony about member experiences with racism.

I am copying Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray, as I have been in contact with her regarding my dismay at the direction our beloved Association is heading by adopting dangerous authoritarian ideas like critical race theory/critical race theology, rejecting logic, and promoting dangerous and disrespectful persons to leadership.

By way of introduction, I am a fourth-generation Unitarian, my family having begun in the faith at the church served by Rev. William Ellery Channing.

I am a retired county executive, councilman (during which time I passed an ordinance to rename a local road "Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard"), professor, former congregational president, and district leader. I have served in various other roles, including religious education chair and chair of the Social Action Committee.

During the sixties and seventies, I marched for racial justice and the student anti-war movement, risking jail time (as well as life and limb!) to speak up for my fellow Americans. I was a supporter of the Black Affairs Council and wrote a strong letter of disapproval to the moderator regarding the failure of leadership after the Black Empowerment Controversy.

I am proud to say that things have improved considerably, both in the world and within Unitarian Universalism. In my own life, I have seen many engineers, police officers, and elected officials who were not Caucasian males (a big change!), some of whom were even openly homosexual.

Currently, my primary physician, physical therapist, and home health aide are all Black. My daughter is a pilot, breaking out of traditional jobs for her gender. I have personally hired both men and women of color in various subordinate positions.

And I worked tirelessly to call our first openly gay director of religious education. Of course, more could be done. However, I believe it would be a great shame to destroy the excellent work so many have produced, as it seems your approach is insistent on doing.

Another troubling idea being pushed by the Commission is “cultural misappropriation.” Within our congregation, we’ve happily celebrated Day of the Dead and Juneteenth, and we regularly sing African-American Spirituals despite having no Black members in our choir (though I should add, we have *two* Black people in the congregation)! These should be seen as great strides toward learning and reconciliation, not demonized and barred by illiberal, fascist edicts from the UUA.

Am I not allowed to eat bagels because I have no Jewish ancestors? Can I not listen to Chopin if I am not Polish? Should we bar our African-Americans from attending our Fourth of July services?

The current direction of the UUA and groups like the Commission exacerbates divisions when we should be minimizing differences and focusing on unity. My minority friends and many who are black and gay want to be accepted as people, not seen as part of groups, or victims.

Reasonable people of color will not join a faith that stereotypes them with identity politics. Caucasians will not join a church where they are called “White Supremacists” like the KKK or Skinheads, and many will decide to leave. If that happens, the Association will collapse financially.

We must get our faith back in line with the principles of liberalism, democracy, and critical thought.