

Notes from Widening the Circle of Concern, session 2 - Theology (2) 3.3.21

Participants (18): Rev. Kent, Treva Burger, Devery Howerton, Andrea Barsevick, Lois Murphy, Linda Bernstein, Gerry Whalen, Sharon Mafuru, Margaret Thompson, Andrea Parry, Lee Meinicke, Elaine Hills, Eric Foster, Sarah Frazier, Lisa Dutton, Barbara Dowdall, Shobhi Kanal, Nancy Anderson

Chalice Lighting

Check In

Rev. Kent has participated in this session with a minister's group and said that many UU congregations are engaged in this same work. He shared his insights regarding UU theology:

Historically UU theology derives from two traditions with names deriving from theological belief systems. Unitarianism proclaimed the oneness of God. By the time of the Transcendentalists this theology identified the divinity in all living beings. Universalism proclaimed that all soul would go to heaven. Next generations would broaden this belief to universal love and salvation are available to all people during this life and in the afterlife. By the turn of the 20th century our religion began making room for humanists and atheists who did not believe in God, but more frequently highlighted love, courage and hope as religious dynamics.

Today, UU theology often involves articulating what you believe to be true and important and dedicating yourself to bringing those values to life. For example we proclaim "the inherent dignity and worth of all people." A liberating UU theology dedicates us to affirming and promoting way of life the bolster this principle.

We can ask, "what is sacred and holy for me?" As UU's our collective, liberating theology invites us to ask how we can live, in covenant with others, in ways that connects with, protects and amplifies the sacred and holy?

Discussion: The group discussed the following three recommendations, the actions listed under each, and chose actions that could be implemented by USG. The group decided that several of the actions were more appropriately implemented by the UUA and did not apply to USG; these actions are not listed below.

1. Re-engaging with our theological legacy and its use today will both ground our efforts to welcome all who are drawn to our faith and provide resources for resilience for Unitarian Universalists in these difficult times.

The group decided that the following two actions could be implemented within USG.

- **Action:** Center the theological work of Black scholars, Indigenous scholars, and scholars of color, both professional and lay, whose knowledge is resonant for our times.

This action could be implemented by including theological work as described above in our services. A "white audit" a few years ago looked at the diversity in everything at USG, e.g. books, pictures, music and noted that we need to be more inclusive. We should keep track of what we are putting in front of ourselves and keep changing it up. The term "center" was discussed, as a concern was expressed that it might mean the exclusive use of the work of Black and other marginalized theologians. "Center" was defined to mean to incorporate this

type of knowledge and materials among others, and to also include the voices of LGBTQ people and people in poverty. A question was raised as to how we can center the voices we haven't heard before we define our theology; theology needs to come first. The phrase "whose knowledge is resonant for our times" was highlighted as important pointing to the Side with Love UUA service as giving us contemporary interpretations of lived experiences today by UUs we don't yet know. For many years USG had a shared pulpit with preachers from various faith traditions that gave us exposure to a variety of thoughts. Including the theological component of music in this action is important. We could learn more about the Indigenous people who lived on the land where USG now stands.

- **Action:** Provide more resources for lay leaders who wish to engage in theological conversation.

It was noted that past trainings for CSD teachers was quite beneficial, but can be resource-intensive.

2. Reinterpretation of our theological legacies in these times should be liberatory and articulate our commitment to affirming and welcoming those who have been marginalized in our larger society and within our communities and organizations.

The group thought that the three actions listed under this recommendation were directed toward the UUA and did not directly apply to USG. However, parts of the first action may be applicable as discussed below.

- **Action:** Resource multigenerational efforts within Black/Indigenous/people of color communities to develop rituals of healing and other worship materials to be used in congregations, regions, and national gatherings.

We need to avoid cultural appropriation. It seems that USG is already doing some of this by including such things as a Kwanza service, Diwali celebration, etc. It was pointed out that USG has been blessed to have had many leaders of color including our most recent past and current intern ministers. We also need to acknowledge the harm that's been done at USG and work on healing.

3. *Acknowledgment of anti-oppression work as a theological mandate is essential. We need to resurrect, research, document, and teach the words of Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ individuals, women, and others who have been largely lost though their presence has been with us throughout history.* We call on individual white Unitarian Universalists to engage in deep spiritual discernment, including engagement with our need to examine the dominant white-centered culture of our congregations.

The group thought that the actions listed under this recommendation applied to the UUA and not directly to USG. It was noted that we need to reclaim the voices that have been lost in the past, that they are not always contemporary. Standards need be developed at the UUA level and rolled out to congregations. USG should have an ongoing commitment for our leaders to do anti-oppression and inclusivity training.

Check Out

It was decided that the group would address the fourth recommendation concerning the covenantal nature of our faith at the next meeting. A suggestion was made that we create an ongoing list of actions for USG, but not commit to anything right away as there may be overlap

or synergy with actions identified later under other topics. Strong support was not expressed for offering identity-based groups to process the Sunday Side with Love service, but most participants were open to the idea. It was suggested that participants in this group review and discuss the Side with Love service as a group.

Closing Words