

Governance

“I just want to be personal tonight because I come from a Black people for four hundred years terrorized, traumatized, stigmatized, but the best of our tradition is what? Generating the love supreme of a John Coltrane, the love ethic of a Martin Luther King Jr., the love sensibility of a Frederick Douglass and an Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and in the music of a Stevie Wonder. What is it about these people that in the face of being terrorized, they continuously dish the love? That’s partly what Charleston is all about. Those folk don’t come from the sky. They come out of a tradition, fundamentally committed to love in the end, no matter what the situation is.”

—Dr. Cornel West, 2015 Ware Lecture

“In truth, the simple, transparent, potent idea of the free church has had to be, time and time and time again, reconceived, reconstructed in human imagination, from memories of the tradition so obscured, or twisted and bent out of shape over time, as to be—sometimes—almost gone from the world.”

—Rev. Alice Blair Wesley, 2000 Minns Lecture

Background and Trends

When we talk about governance, we are talking about power. When we talk about power combined with prejudice and the centering of the dominant group and their ways of being and doing, we are talking about oppression.

And we know this: our Association is paying the price for not having consistently addressed the structural oppression built into our systems. Our Association’s governance system, devised as part of a politicized compromise when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America consolidated, is complex. While in other times this might have been frustrating, in a time when congregationally based forms of religious life are growing more expensive and less attractive to new generations, this will hinder our faith’s ability to be agile. Simply filling the positions needed to make our governance system run has become more and more difficult in these conflictual times. A partially completed move toward regionalization has hindered the efficacy of our governance. As a result, we have an overly complex and confusing system that prioritizes checks and balances over shared work toward mission.

Agility, flexibility, and innovation, along with a clear focus on mission, will be an important aspect of faith-based organizations that hope to survive the rapidly changing religious landscape in the United States. [11] As we heard from the many who have abandoned our faith as lay or professional leaders because of our inability to articulate and implement a faith-based approach to our anti-oppression work, we are losing resources vital to the continuation of Unitarian Universalist communities.

Numerous studies have talked about the ways in which our Association’s structure has evolved, sometimes without intention, over time:

- “Leadership [within the Universalist Church of America] was geographically scattered, with inadequate communication, and often working with overlapping job descriptions and goals. Occasional efforts to centralize and streamline Universalist governance floundered on inadequate financial support or fear of concentrating authority in one person or group.... The decline of Universalism had alarmed many to the point of calls for greater central authority and responsibility.” [12]

- “The American Unitarian Association (AUA) had a modest bureaucratic organization that relied on central authority and control of its staff to accomplish its mission. In 1865, a national convention of Unitarian churches founded the National Conference of Unitarian and Other Christian Churches as a forum for consultation and denominational policy making. Over sixty years, the bureaucratic organization came to be recognized as the central ecclesiastical body as well, thereby establishing a strong center that benefited the denomination.” [13]
- “Excellence requires a system-wide commitment to continuing education and thoughtful training. At present, delegates and the congregations that authorize their attendance at GA have no requirements regarding preparation. There is no serious intent to understand the business coming before the plenary body, much less to debate the issues in a congregational setting.” [14]
- “Over the years, General Assemblies have assumed many more purposes than the conduct of Association business. There is little clarity or consensus about what constitutes the business of the Association, what policies carry out its purposes, and how a General Assembly directs and controls its affairs. It is questionable how well the delegate body represents and is accountable to member congregations.” [15]

This structure amplifies tensions and problems among groups and also allows issues such as the need for consistent anti-oppressive work to bounce from one body to another. The perception that we are having the same conversation over and over again may have validity because it can be difficult to resolve issues or make progress.

We were interested that a constellation of the submitted testimonies mentioned a need for Unitarian Universalists to study our polity again. Without explicit articulation, perhaps as part of the bylaws-mandated reviews, we have developed a mythology about how we are governed that claims the complete autonomy of both congregations and individuals within congregations. This is not what the Cambridge Platform, upon which our polity is based, states.

As one observer put it,

It seems like we as a denomination have to relearn the Cambridge Platform and understand that our congregational polity does not allow us to just do whatever we want. That there is a relationship between each congregation and the larger movement... and this idea that the UUA can't tell us what to do is bologna. We are in a voluntary relationship with each other and [the UUA] doesn't have to tell us what to do, but then maybe we shouldn't be a *UU* church anymore if we aren't willing to commit to things and work together.

And another:

We have to come to an understanding of the word polity. And our kind of clinging to the word polity [to mean] each congregation can do whatever it wants. They can call the ministers it wants and whatever.... There is such a hardcore individualism that even colors the way we think about polity, which is a little bit more about the individuals coming into and being accountable and in collaboration with the other individual congregations; that's actually what polity was supposed to do.

We are also past due for a restatement of what is “commonly believed among us” and that articulation should recognize both the interdependence that climate change has brought into stark relief and the need for continued work to repair the frictions and fractions amid the human family.

In an increasingly competitive nonprofit environment, the organizations that are going to thrive are those that have a clear sense of mission. The UUA defined its operational mission in 2018 and will engage in a wider mission and goals process pending this report. Critical to moving forth will be meaningful engagement with congregations.

In addition, volunteerism patterns are shifting with fewer people giving more hours. [16] Many congregations and other UU organizations at the Associational and other levels have encountered increased problems as younger volunteers are less likely to take on longer-term institutional commitments. This is problematic as they have more experience within settings that are multicultural or committed to those values and are critical to addressing the oppression within our systems.

Recommendations about UUA Bylaws, from VISIONS, Inc.

The consultants who reviewed the UUA Bylaws recommended attention to these areas:

1. Section C-13.4. Autonomy. Each district or region shall be autonomous and shall be controlled by its own member congregations to the extent consistent with the promotion of the welfare and interests of the Association as a whole and of its member congregations; How does UUA define ‘consistent with the welfare and interests of the Association’? Is this a place to emphasize that the welfare and interests are including a more explicit move towards dismantling systems of power and privilege?
2. Inclusion bylaw—how does the UUA interpret this? Might acknowledging inequity, white supremacy culture and addressing it be added here?
 1. If congregations do not adhere to the inclusion bylaw, what might be a consequence?
 3. Line 137—Associate membership consideration— board may adopt rules for this; is this an opportunity to be clear about what additional inclusion and equity should look like if wanting to be accepted?
 4. Additional option to include the following:
 1. One potential issue with adding diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) statements in the Bylaws is the possible need for changes to the Bylaws to be reported to an outside (state) state agency. While bylaws can be changed, it is likely that statements reflecting the evolving DEI issues and concerns will change more frequently. As a result, it may be more utilitarian to create a policy related to DEI, then refer to the separate policy from the bylaws. Such a reference could include:

The UUA and the Board are committed to incorporating the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the governance and operations of this corporation. These values are (or shall be) included in a DEI policy adopted by the Board (NEO Law Group. August 2018).

Professional Associations Lauded for Promising Practice, from VISIONS, Inc.

The VISIONS report lauded the language of inclusion in the LREDA and UUMA bylaws, which reflect a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens and commitment to countering oppression.

- **Liberal Religious Education Bylaws**—Note: Named in its preamble is the commitment to antiracism and there are several places accounting for the impact of structural ‘isms’; it might be consistent to add in its purpose section how the commitment to antiracism might

be manifest; for example, wouldn't accounting for structurally racist obstacles (recruiting and admission, needed changes in curriculum, etc.) that currently exist in the education process be considered furthering 'the interest of quality liberal religious education?' It also might be useful to explicitly state that LREDA is leading UUA in learning about and addressing the impact of white supremacy culture on the UUA as a whole and on the communities you serve.

- **Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association**—*The UUMA Guidelines* do not appear to have statements that reflect an intention/commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion or an anti-oppression approach; focus group data spoke to the significant need for addressing white supremacy culture and developing an anti-oppression lens in a more active way by many in the UUA, the need for this being addressed in practice and in language is important.

The Bylaws and Constitution of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association did have relevant language and additions that covered anti-oppression intention and practices:

- **ARTICLE 1—MISSION AND VISION, Section 1:**
The mission of the UUMA is to nurture excellence in ministry through collegiality, continuing education and collaboration and shared commitment to antiracist, anti-oppressive, multicultural practice.

While the *UUA Governance Manual* document *Global Governance Commitment (Government Process): UUA Governance Manual Section Three* is more general and does not have language that reflects an equity lens nor connects to anti-oppression intentionality and commitment, the sub-document *UUA G 1.0 Ends for the UUA: Governance Manual Section* clearly and adequately covers it.

Restructuring the Moderator and President Positions, by the Commission on Governance

The following is from "The Final Report of the Commission on Governance of the Unitarian Universalist Association" (April 24, 1993).

Viewed historically, the most dramatic departure we could take in altering our governance would be to alter greatly the role of the President; removing from that position the direct implementation of program, and combining the position with the role of moderator. It would be dramatic because the Unitarian model of a strong Presidency has dominated the 20 th century like no other aspect of our governance.

What impact would such a change have on the Board? The advocates of the combined President/Moderator role proposed in 1990 have argued that such an approach would create a hired staff leader and program implementer who was more directly accountable to the Board; that would free up the new elected President/Moderator position to concentrate on vision, Board leadership, policy-making, and public roles.

The Commission on Governance Recommendations

- *Recommendation 1:* Combining the President and Moderator into a single elected office, President.
- *Recommendation 2:* Board-appointed Executive Director to be the chief executive officer, directly accountable to the Board of Trustees.
- *Recommendation 4:* A new Standing Presidential Nominating Committee

- *Recommendation 6:* The Board elects its own chair through a suitable process of its own design.
- *Recommendation 10:* Current “working groups” of the Board periodically and systematically evaluated.

All recommendations from the Final Report of the UUA’s Commission on Governance warrant consideration and can be accessed as a PDF included in the [UUA Board of Trustees October 2014 Packet](#)

We Are Not Alone in This Work

- [*Presbyterian Church \(USA\) Committee on Racism, Truth, and Reconciliation*](#)

The Special Committee on Racism Truth and Reconciliation was created by the 222nd General Assembly (2016) as a special commission and reconstituted as a special committee by the 223rd General Assembly (2018).

Despite the commitment of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) to dismantle racism, racism still exists even within the church’s own structures. This is not for the lack of policies, reports, strategies, anti-racism training, cultural proficiency workshops, and actions to disrupt white supremacy culture. The work and struggle against the sin of racism must continue so that we can be faithful to God’s intention for the church and for humanity.

- [*The Episcopal Church*](#)

The Context

- Rooted in The Jesus Movement: The ongoing community of people centered on following Jesus into loving, liberating, life-giving relationship with God (evangelism), with each other (reconciliation), and with creation (environmental stewardship);
- Called forth by General Convention Resolution C019 (Establish Response to Systemic Injustice);
- • Crafted by the leaders of the House of Bishops and House of Deputies— Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, House of Deputies President Gay Clark Jennings, House of Bishops Vice President Mary Gray Reeves and (now former Vice President) Dean Wolfe, and House of Deputies Vice President Byron Rushing and Secretary Michael Barlowe—with staff and many partners;
- Frames a multi-year journey as part of a long-term, multi-generation commitment
- Moves beyond the United States and beyond black and white, to consider racism in many nations, among many races, ethnicities and cultures;
- Deploys \$2 million allocated by General Convention, along with other resources
- Designed to support, complement, and amplify local, diocesan, provincial and network efforts.

The Long-Term Commitment

Becoming Beloved Community represents not so much a set of programs as a journey, a set of interrelated commitments around which Episcopalians may organize our many efforts to respond to racial injustice and grow a community of reconcilers, justice-makers, and healers. The labyrinth may be an even more useful image for engaging the vision. On the road toward reconciliation and healing, we move around corners and double back into quadrants we have visited before, each time discovering new revelation and challenge.

- [Disciples of Christ Reconciliation Ministry](#)

We seek to become an anti-racist, multi-cultural region that is a fully inclusive, transformed church, where racial and cultural differences are seen as assets. Reconciliation Ministry is a ministry of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Its aim is the formation of leadership to facilitate the long-term process of collective identity transformation within the Disciples community. Although its ministry focuses on the eradication of systemic racism, it is clear that this task cannot be accomplished without the transformation of individual lives and the fostering of dialogue among people. The mission of Reconciliation is to nurture the wholeness of the church by dismantling systemic racism and other oppressive structures toward becoming a church that demonstrates true community, deep Christian spirituality, and passion for justice. This ministry is accomplished through organizing, education, and advocacy.

The Mid-America Region Anti-Racism/Pro-Reconciliation (AR/PR) Team was formed in 1999. The team has led presentations and workshops at congregations throughout the Region including Assemblies, Elder Institutes, regional youth events, African American Convocation, Racial Justice summits, regional board meetings and in congregations!

The team's first Regional Training event was held in April 2006. There, a large number of those who attended formed their own area interest groups that have contributed to our Regional Training model. Mid-America presently offers AR/PR 1.0 which focuses on naming and educating on systemic racism and inequities, AR/PR 2.0 which takes next steps in organizing and activism, and soon AR/PR 3.0 which will focus on Intersectionality.

Informal Structures Privilege Those in Power

The Commission on Institutional Change published this blog post on April 25, 2019.

In our work as the Commission on Institutional Change, we have found that an area in need of analysis is that of over-reliance on informal structures to carry out governance work, whether at the local, regional, or denominational level. Informal structures rely on social relationships and thus tend to privilege people from the dominant culture in a community or organization. In the interest of not being "bureaucratic," we leave structures informal because "we all know and trust one another."

Informal structures also sometimes bypass adopted procedures, ratified policies, and accepted governance agreements. Personal relationships are central to the work of organizations yet should not be used instead of sound governance structures. When informal structures are prioritized, the end result is that those in power benefit from decision-making processes and arrangements that not only benefit their perspectives but also are taken to be normal practices.

As we seek to add more and diverse voices into leadership among us, reliance on informal structures can mean that new people cannot figure out how to contribute. If the way to get something done is to know the "right" people, then this can perpetuate a narrower circle of leadership.

Informal structures create opportunities for hurt, discrimination, incomplete recounting of institutional history, and can result in selective institutional memory. They fall short of our commitments to justice, equity, and compassion among us as well as our commitment to

democratic processes. When used as the predominant way of operating, informal structures undermine the mission, goals, and work of organizations.

They also create difficulties when working toward transformation because they are taken to be part of the system in and of themselves; thus, they are not seen for what they really are, shortcuts to right governance. One sign of an informal structure can be when someone says the process or policy is not written down because “that is the way we have always done it.”

Sometimes organizations have policies written however that are not followed, replaced instead by informal agreements. When problems arise due to these informal structures, the first instinct of folks involved in and responsible for the concerns and conflicts is most often to call for a change of policies and structures, instead of addressing their own sidestepping of agreements, which opened the path to the problems they face. In many cases, an analysis of whether or not policies and procedures in place were actually followed is warranted before calling for their suspension and revision.

Our point here is not to suggest that having governance based on written policies and more formal decision making is a panacea. Policies need to be tended to, regularly reviewed, and revised and modified in consideration of an organization’s evolving goals, mission, strategy, and stakeholders.

Structures are necessary ingredients of an organization’s life. Whether we operate within a local organization, a congregation, or our work unfolds within a larger institution at one of the various ways to be engaged in denominational level work, our work takes place within structures. Structures set parameters for the work to be done within institutions. Organizational structures delineate the particular arrangements of authority and act as guides for how decisions are made.

In addition, structures determine the flow of information and power between the various levels of management. It is important that an organization has clearly defined objectives as well as strategies to meet those objectives. The particular structures that give shape to the institution’s work flow out of its stated objectives and strategies.

Recommendation

The Board of Trustees and the president of the Association should articulate clear goals, plans, and measures toward a liberatory Unitarian Universalism for our times.

Our conversations, convenings, and input from more than a thousand Unitarian Universalists suggest that Unitarian Universalism must address the systemic racism within its system. The vast majority of those who responded to our call cannot live our faith without a commitment to multicultural and anti-bias practices now common in most corporate, governmental, and nonprofit workplaces. In a tradition with a first Principle affirming the inherent worth and dignity of all people, we have not articulated this explicitly as part of a statement and goals for a Unitarian Universalism that would liberate all from the weight of oppressive behaviors and structures. The Unitarian Universalist Association is required to reexamine Article 2, which states what is commonly believed among us, every decade. In 2018, the UUA Board initiated this process, but it has not been completed.

Oppressive systems and practices limit all, though the burden is borne disproportionately by those seen as less capable or important to the system because of biased impressions. Unitarian Universalism will be freed of this burden if we are able to clearly say that our goal is to create a

Unitarian Universalism that can welcome the questions, gifts, and talents of all who are attracted by this faith tradition. The recommendations in this report create the framework for a plan that, if combined with measurable outcomes, could provide the architecture for a path forward.

Clear and accountable goals are the objective. As one focus group participant put it,

Younger generations of ministers are here, and it's not only our... biological age, but we're coming into ministry now and we've been in other careers and fields, and there's this desire to make us more accountable to congregations, to each other, and to the larger movement.

- **Action:** Review the regional system to see which regions are working well and address those that are not, as this structure is critical to efforts to spread best practices of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **Action:** Complete the Article II review as mandated by the UUA bylaws with the call for diversity, equity, and inclusion as a lens used.
- **Action:** Adopt an implementation plan toward the areas of this report with annual targets and outcomes through 2025, with an annual review of progress toward these goals, with these goals reported at General Assembly and to the congregations.
- **Action:** Articulate the tools for power analysis that enable leaders to understand and rebalance power at all levels of Unitarian Universalism. Build on the existing work of the Unitarian Universalist Association's Board of Trustees and develop a methodology that can be used at all levels of Unitarian Universalism.

Fifth Principle Project

In our research, we frequently heard the call for reform of our largest governing body, the General Assembly, particularly in regard to the unequal access to decision making that our current structure perpetuates. The Fifth Principle Task Force Report to the UUA Board of Trustees in December 2009 lays out in detail many of the challenges and potential remedies to this issue. The Task Force reports,

We have focused our meetings and this report on governance, because it is at once the primary purpose of GA and is dramatically broken. Four points buttress this contention of brokenness: GA is not really democratic in that delegates are neither representative of their congregations, other than being members, nor are they accountable to them; without subsidization of delegates, GA is economically discriminatory, and therefore generationally discriminatory; as long as GA continues as an annual event, its cost is a heavy burden to the Association and the member congregations; the GA process is not in alignment with the Board's embrace of policy governance.

The report continues,

The future of our UU movement can ill-afford to continue the ways of faux democracy and unaccountable representation that have characterized Associational governance, including the content and process of General Assembly. The Task Force believes that the status quo for General Assembly is not an option. We believe our recommendations lay out a vision for effective governance that reflects core values of our liberal faith and the imperative for bringing the leadership of member congregations and our Association together in mutually accountable relationship around matters of greatest importance to the present and future vitality of our UU movement.

The report recommends a fully sponsored, biennial delegate assembly and details the values that informed its recommendation: economic accessibility and sustainability; empowered delegates authorized to represent congregations; excellence in governance; excellence in shared leadership and ministry; multigenerational participation and decision making; and awareness and inclusiveness of antiracism/antiracist/ multicultural concerns (AR/AO/MC).

We would place particular emphasis on economic accessibility, multi-generational participation, and decision making, as well as awareness and inclusiveness of AR/AO/MC concerns as being vital to all potential governance reforms of the Association. We recommend that the Board of Trustees revisit the findings of the Fifth Principle Task Force as part of a broader governance reform agenda. You can read the [Fifth Principle Task Force report \(PDF\)](#).

Nominating Committees as Agents of Change

In the effort to bring about the Beloved Community, we often err on the side of the individual as the primary agent of change over and against systemic change. Motivated by the belief that if we, as individuals, are not racist, sexist, ableist, homophobic, biphobic, or transphobic and are willing to recognize the ways in which the accumulation of privilege for some depends on the marginalization of others, then the work of dismantling white supremacy culture is well under way.

Open hearts and minds, loving kindness, faithful fellowship, and our commitment as individual Unitarian Universalists to promote and affirm our inherent worth and dignity are indeed invaluable. Yet individual efforts do not guarantee the Beloved Community. For this, we need hard and committed work that engages the individual as well as soberly addressing the institutional dimensions of the work.

We need to keep in mind that individual Unitarian Universalists do not operate in a vacuum, but rather in institutional and cultural contexts. Our cultural context provides us with unconscious learning about who is valued and who should be heard, and undoing these is key to our survival and ability to welcome and be inclusive in our faith.

Just as institutional well-being can provide for the structure that supports our best intentions, dysfunction in our institutional structure can leave Unitarian Universalism unable to accomplish its transformational ministry in the world. Institutional structural well-being is also imperative in order to accomplish any task that requires a commitment over time—and unlearning a preference for white, male, heteronormative, cisnormative, ableist leadership is a change that requires a commitment over the long haul. Without these, new forms of leadership cannot thrive.

Our commitment to growth, learning, and institutional change requires a commitment to leadership development and support. Many of our institutional structures will be challenged to set clear goals and cast an expansive path as we journey toward the Unitarian Universalism of the future.

While many of our congregations and institutions may choose to experiment with new and different organizational structures, some basic mechanisms help ensure that institutions may always need to organize themselves in order to get things done. These mechanisms require regular maintenance to ensure their efficiency and to promote shared leadership. Key among these are mechanisms for leadership development and conscious cultivation through key structures such as nominating committees.

Nominating committees play a key role at all levels: in congregations, in the Association, and in Unitarian Universalist professional associations, camps, and conference centers. These committees determine whom we call into leadership and how they understand their commitments to work toward justice and equity. These are fundamental areas of concern during this time. We need to capture the learnings of our recent history and use them to carry our movement forward. We cannot afford another failed opportunity to transform who we currently are into the arc of who we need to be as a faith community.

When a Unitarian Universalist community has taken on the task of developing language, long-term goals, and a justice and equity informed mission, it is important not to lose momentum. It's easier to stay the course when we guide people into leadership who share the commitment to institutional change and are well supported in this goal.

Nominating committee members themselves should understand that their assignment to bring forward qualified candidates for leadership roles in our congregations and institutions means that they must commit to challenging systems of oppression with the choices that they make. They should see themselves as a part of the process of change making. If we wish for leaders who can help design more equitable systems, nominating committees should choose committee members with clear training, experience, and background in counter-oppression work and ministry. There should also be an effort to create onboarding practices that identify, develop, and equip potential nominating committee members to promote progressive organizational structures.

Informed and committed nominating committees can lay the groundwork to desegregate congregational leadership by expanding leadership diversity in historically marginalized areas like age, race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and ethnicity. They can prepare members of our institutions and congregations to lead into the future by making it clear what particular education and experiences are required for Unitarian Universalist leadership, and by engaging leaders in conversations that lead to a shared systemic common analysis of Unitarian Universalist culture.

This expansion should not come about by tokenism. Sustainable and transformative change will come with transparency, open processes, understanding of roles and responsibilities, training and support, evaluations and assessments, required programs and experiences to prepare for leadership, time for study and reflection, and goal setting.

Our Unitarian Universalist belief in democracy is not based on a belief in “political democracy” alone. Our understanding of democracy is articulated in our theological belief that our congregations are places where all are entitled to be informed about and take part in governance and where we are each able to use our reason and our conscience to make decisions to support our community of faith. Furthermore, our understanding of democracy will be strengthened by the embrace of equity models in our living together. Who should lead Unitarian Universalism into its future? Maybe it should be you?

Ten years ago, a task force prepared a report for the UUA Board of Trustees about this. We would encourage all of you to read the [Fifth Principle Task Force report \(PDF\)](#).

Recommendation

Governance within the Association needs streamlining, as outdated and duplicative structures exist. The unnecessary complexity of the current Unitarian Universalist

governance structures is biased toward the more privileged, who have the time and resources for extensive volunteerism.

In contrast to local and regional groups, which often operate too informally, there are too many Unitarian Universalist organizations with overly complicated leadership structures, which makes needed change difficult and slow. The UUA has too many organizations with disparate leadership, which makes the kind of change needed difficult and slow. Consolidation of the many organizational structures would allow leaders to lead with the sort of agility needed in these times of rapid change. An assessment of the number of committees and groups should be conducted as well as an assessment of the number of bodies with independent boards, as all of this results in fragmentation. The separate elections of a president and a moderator, for example, have allowed difficult issues such as work to build a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse Association to be passed around among different accountabilities.

Why does this hinder our attempts to be more equitable, inclusive, and diverse? Because each organization and structure can choose or not choose to invest in the anti-oppression work critical to meeting contemporary standards, and that makes service in the larger Unitarian Universalist frame a morass of aggressions and inconsistencies for leaders who are Black, Indigenous, people of color, or from other underrepresented groups. People of color and other marginalized people among us are often called to serve in a variety of capacities in the interest of diversity. Encountering different standards or a lack of multicultural competence in organizations promoting UU values is one of the leading reasons Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color leave Unitarian Universalism.

Many religious associations do not have separate governing boards for every kind of professional group, for the international justice arm, or for the local structures for justice or cluster work. All of these levels and separate organizations mean that each one of these organizations is a separate set of decisions or nondecisions around anti-oppression work. The result is that Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other marginalized peoples can experience harm at a variety of levels if a particular entity has not yet committed attention and resources to more intentional practices. Any ongoing working agreement with affiliate organizations should include a commitment to prevent racial harm.

In addition, in an era of scarce dollars for the work of our faith, we have outdated structures that can be retooled to focus more sharply on what is needed today. A more pertinent—and painful—example for the purposes of the Commission’s work is the Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee (JTWTC), which was put into place as part of the anti-oppression work of the 1990s and has continued on though the funding for training and other accountability measures once built into Associational practices are long unfunded.

Though the JTWTC has continued to attract dedicated proponents of anti-oppression work, its role is no longer clear. This is a waste of the talents and time of very dedicated people.

Collaborative effort could be more efficient and effective. A model for this is the Common Code of Ethics, which is currently being discussed among the professional associations.

In other areas we have huge gaps. A tragic and indefensible fact is that we have not reinstated a national youth leadership program or young adult program. While leadership and spiritual development programs for these groups do exist on a smaller scale, no national umbrella or unified programmatic approach for UUA youth or young adult programs has existed for more than ten years. These programs have been critical to supporting youth and young adults of color

and to building the anti-oppression skills of white youth. Youth and young adults are already more expert than older members of our community on what it means to live in an increasingly diverse and multicultural world, and their leadership is essential to our continued work.

- **Action:** Reexamine the current governance structure and identify changes that will allow a more agile and flexible structure that can meet the challenges of a rapidly changing religious landscape. The review should include a reexamination of the recommendations around the roles of the president and the moderator that were contained in the 1993 report by the Commission on Governance, chaired by Rev. Dr. Wayne Arnason.
- **Action:** Form an alliance of UU organizations, including professional associations and affiliated groups, committed to creating equitable, inclusive, and diverse practices to allow learning, collaboration, and development of a common set of standards.
- **Action:** Establish covenantal agreements with affiliate organizations that also understand the need for accountability, adaptability, collaboration, faith grounding, and continued education toward equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- **Action:** Repurpose the resources of the JTWTC toward the anti-oppression goals of this report. (The JTWTC should not be disbanded *until* a new structure is approved.)
- **Action:** Provide an expanded opportunity for youth and young adult leadership development and programming at the Associational level, with a grounding in equity, inclusion, and diversity and responsive to the challenges these generations face today.

Recommendation

Misconceptions about the nature of our congregational polity should be addressed as they are used to empower individual ministers and lay leaders to maintain a stagnant and exclusionary status quo.

Most institutional forms of Unitarian Universalism are congregational, which means emphasis is on a white-dominated culture and institutional practices. These can be seen as the only right way of being together and do not allow space for those from other experiences to lend their leadership and gifts. Those who would call us to more fully live into a liberatory faith are often cited as troubled or troublesome.

Relationships within our faith communities should be respectful and supportive rather than grounded in a culture of critique and a bias toward gadflies and outliers. Too often we make decisions based on what generates the least conflict within the majority culture, and what allows conformity to continue. Tools for encouraging constructive conflict and understanding that our living tradition requires us to always be living into new ways of being are important.

- **Action:** Promote a more accurate understanding about what congregational polity is, especially its covenantal nature and its relationship with our belief in the inherent worth and dignity of people and their ability to participate in decision making through a values frame.
- **Action:** Audit leadership experiences, including online spaces tooled for accessibility across income levels, and make strategies for equity, inclusion, and diversity a part of these, as well as accurate information about the covenantal nature of congregational polity. Make practical education in anti-oppression work part of all UUA regional gatherings.
- **Action:** Incorporate principles of covenant into anti-oppression work across all UU organizations.

Take-aways

- While at the local and regional level, our structures can be too informal, perpetuating a club-like mentality of leadership, our overly complex governance system makes change difficult.
- Change, agility, and innovation are needed for Unitarian Universalism to survive.
- Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color encounter ignorance and aggression in many Unitarian Universalist organizations, and the lack of a common commitment to anti-oppression and multicultural work makes such service hazardous.
- We have a history of disbanding bodies and then not reinstating them, as happened with our continental youth and young adult programs. We must address this need.
- We need a congregational polity that serves us rather than blocks progress.
- We need covenantal understandings among all affiliated Unitarian Universalist organizations about the need for equality, inclusion, and diversity initiatives.
- We need to refocus the resources we have on critical areas of leadership that lead to more inclusive and equitable practices.

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.