

## **Widening the Circle working group meeting, April 7, 2021**

**Present:** Andrea Barsevick, Treva Burger, facilitators.

Sarah Frazier, Barbara Dowdall, Lisa Dutton, Gale Gibbons, Eric Foster, Carla Campbell, Nancy Anderson, Jim Salom, Dev Howerton, Lee Meinicke, Linda Bernstein, Lois Murphy, Latifah Griffin-Rogers, Margaret Thompson, Ryan Hurd, Sharon Mafuru, Tonika Berkley.

### **I. What stayed with you from prior discussions?**

- This being a covenantal community – relationship is central
- These recommendations will result in changing/enhancing our organization's culture; culture change is a slow process
- We look good in writing, we spell out a covenant of right relations – how can we put this in action, change it to a verb?
- Not sure I understand “covenant”; I know the importance of centering Black and POC theology.
- Importance of including contemporary theological thinking, not just theology from our older history
- How can we continue discussion in theology through ASD programs? There's a lot of interest in theology now. There are both older and newer curricula available, e.g. “Images of the Divine” program.
- Maybe we can use language that is less vague, namby-pamby, and commits us to action, to not being bystanders.
- The 8<sup>th</sup> Principle is the one with action words, glad USG has adopted it
- The Widening the Circle work is acting on the 8<sup>th</sup> Principle.
- White people don't even realize the harm their words do. Regardless of your intent, you have to be accountable for impact.
- Agree on using action language. Working with POWER and Germantown Mutual Aid Fund, which USG has donated to, is action, is very spiritually satisfying.
- Search for truth and meaning as not simply individual pursuit, need to do it as a community.
- Pulling together social justice and spiritual work, our faith requires action
- Need to pull conversations back to our central anti-oppression topic when we or others veer off into more comfortable side topics

### **II. Discussion of Recommendation #4: Education about the covenantal nature of our faith will allow communities to support and nurture one another as the overall US climate becomes more hostile to and disinterested in a life of faith.**

#### **Question #1 At USG, are our USG covenantal documents (attached) tied sufficiently to our commitment to do anti-oppression work (suggested action 1)**

- Paula Cole-Jones described a congregation making posters restating each of the UU Principles in action language
- I was astonished to see [in reviewing the covenantal documents] all the things I'd committed to – I had no idea, probably lots of others don't either.
- It's important that we know what we're committing to when we join USG
- For me, “covenant” means agreement – what I've signed up for

- I didn't know we had a covenant of right relations
- The Quakers have rigorously trained "noticers" – people whose role is to pay attention during meetings and programs to how people say things, who speaks and who doesn't, what topics get talked about and what topics get left out, what statements didn't get followed up on by other participants, etc
- In the organization I work for we ask, regarding everything, "How does this help us become an active anti-racist organization?"
- When people join USG, they do get a session educating them on the covenants, what our church promises to members and what individual members promise to the USG community. But mission statement and some other documents are more recent additions.
- Much language in our documents isn't active – it seems to describe a more internal process
- The congregation did vote to adopt these covenants. But the documents need to be updated and engaged with more
- We don't do continuing programs for committee chairs and other leaders to engage with these covenants in an ongoing way after people join USG. For example, the item that says we should be grateful for volunteers and thank them – sometimes people act as though they forget we're volunteers
- I'm struck by how the [first] 7 principles are individualistic. Someone could embrace these 7 principles and still be unaware of when they are misjudging others who believe they are acting in good faith as UUs. Oftentimes, people committing micro-aggressions are totally unaware. Particularly longer-time members of our community who base their understanding on their own experiences and don't understand how different others' experiences are as they walk through the world . . . this relates to thinking about why we need the 8<sup>th</sup> principle
- The covenant of right relations actually has many action statements
- Yes, it's wonderfully actionable at the individual level – for resolving conflicts. I'd like to see this Widening the Circle process lead to actionable items at a systemic level, in hiring, policy, healing rituals

**Question #2 What kind of resources would help us at USG address disruptions and microaggressions that occur in our anti-oppression work (suggested action 2)?**

- Noticers [described above]
- Actionable statements in our covenant documents
- We need to come to some understanding, as a community, of what these words mean. We don't want to create a situation where people are afraid to speak because there will be a "jury" deciding that what they say is disruptive
- The Committee on Ministry (COM) is available to help mediate patterns of conflict or problematic behavior
- We need to be careful about calling people "disruptive" because in the past that word has been used to silence people of color
- To clarify my earlier statement [re: the meaning of "microaggression" and "disruption"] – if a person of color tells me I've said something hurtful, I absolutely need to apologize
- The UUA provides training on these matters

- There are different levels of seriousness [of microaggressions] We do need to be able to address conflicts in real time at the moment [instead of relying on formal processes like the COM for all issues]
- Using wording at the beginning of each meeting that says in effect, my experiences are limited, I'm going to say things that don't land well, please tell me when I do
- After [a General Assembly-GA- where these issues were salient], exercises were created to help people recognize the kinds of words and behavior that can cause hurt. Playacting/role-playing can help
- The Avatars in the Widening the Circle document are great examples, everyone should read them for better understanding of these topics
- Agree on the need to resolve conflicts in real time; if there are patterns of behavior and speech that persist after many attempts to resolve them directly, COM is a resource. We may need training in how to address things
- Incorporate the Avatars into worship services
- Consider situations where one person may observe interactions that involve hurt to another person. Situations where a person then doesn't come back [to our church]
- Should we have a more obvious, streamlined process for getting things to the COM?
- Training should include longtime church members who aren't in leadership, who think of themselves as dedicated UUs and don't know the impact of their words and behavior.
- Committee on Right Relations could help here
- All of the above is good, a both/and. Everyone must do it in order to tip us into the culture change we want.

### **Draft USG Theology action items:**

#### **Recommendation #1: Tracking what we're doing.**

- Template for worship service can include a column to note whether the materials used center marginalized people
- Tracking not only for worship services but for other activities as well
- Tracking will help us actively cast a wider net when we're looking for speakers
- Accountability goal: tracking and then improving
- I bristle at the word "marginalized" – it grates me hard, I don't feel marginalized [though I belong to a group we often categorize as such], but I don't know a better word
- My daughter and her wife do connect to the word "marginalized," they've said they don't find much in our services that speaks to them

#### **Recommendation #2: Rituals of healing**

- How do we avoid cultural appropriation when we're including rituals and resources from "marginalized" communities/traditions?
- Accusations of cultural appropriation often involve making assumptions about who people are based on how they look
- We are Universalists – I feel it's our duty to incorporate all traditions, and we need to make sure we're doing it in an authentic way

- Maybe we could send emails to the congregation with information and readings from diverse voices
- Soul Matters packets include diverse voices
- BLUU [Black Lives of UU] Box provides materials
- We have a document listing the sources of our living tradition [lists all of them] To talk about cultural appropriation given this background is very challenging
- When I heard that list [sources of our living tradition] I heard it through the lens of white supremacy – you could use it to exclude people, it’s pretty Eurocentric
- Many African Americans don’t know about UUism, we’re very rooted in our culture, if something doesn’t include that we won’t go for it . . . we need to incorporate liturgy, etc that includes – we’re not the people who exclude, we’re the people who include.
- I understand most of the discussion, but the goal as stated is implementing rituals of healing
- Maybe we need to re-write that goal, I don’t need rituals so much as wider representation
- Let’s refine the goal to define what cultural misappropriation is for USG.
- UUA provides information and guidelines about cultural misappropriation
- The group seemed to conclude we don’t need “rituals of healing” so much as worship and activities that draw on diverse voices and traditions in authentic and respectful ways.
- Many people agreed with a proposal to require all in church leadership to attend at least one anti-oppression educational program per year.

### **Check out**

A number of participants said they prefer staying in the large group to doing breakout groups

A couple of people said they were glad we took 3 months to dig into Theology, as it is a big, complex, core topic and it helped to reflect together and get on the same page. We may be able to spend 2 months on other topics, but it may be hard to tell till we get into a particular topic how long we’ll need.

Appreciation for the Treva’s and Andrea’s work behind the scenes to create and hold this space for us.

Finding these discussions very meaningful