

Congregations and Communities

“Indeed our survival and liberation depend upon our recognition of the truth when it is spoken and lived by the people. If we cannot recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth. To know the truth is to appropriate it, for it is not mainly reflection and theory. Truth is divine action entering our lives and creating the human action of liberation.”
—attributed to James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*

“Church is a place where you get to practice what it means to be human.”
—attributed to James Luther Adams

“When your rage is choking you, it is best to say nothing.”
—Octavia E. Butler, *Fledgling*

Background and Trends

Many of our congregations are in trouble, with dwindling membership, participation, and financial contributions. A factor that contributes to this decline is our inability to address issues of inclusion, equity, and diversity. We start this section with two assertions: first, that real-time, face-to-face congregations matter, even with all the challenges to maintain them and in a time when “church-going” is less valued by many in younger generations. [17] Though we see how much can be accomplished virtually, we also see the value of face-to-face experiences, which are much more accessible, especially for those with limited technological skills and financial resources. And second, that we will also need to support alternative and often virtual communities in order to ensure the survival of communal associations, especially for younger Unitarian Universalists of color and those living in areas where less mainstream identities are less common.

As one of our first actions, the Commission on Institutional Change called upon the newly elected UUA president, Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, to release an analysis of the decline of the number of congregations over the past decade.

This analysis served to underscore the importance of large-scale systemic change to ensure the survival of our faith tradition. An annual report of these numbers and the trends they mask (toward growth in certain regions or in congregations of a certain size) can help Unitarian Universalist leaders prevent us from going through the devolution experienced by mainstream and evangelical communities.

Reports continue to indicate that multicultural congregations are on the rise and that progressive-minded working-age adults expect the basic practices of equity, inclusion, and diversity that many of our congregations currently lack. [18]

And the testimonials collected show that congregations may not know about the experiences that people of color have within their walls because Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color have experienced a lack of safety when honest. Consider these excerpts from submitted testimony:

- “In a city that is predominantly people of color, your church did not have any speakers of color in 2017 (other than you). Your church had no interfaith or interracial services with actual Black people honoring Dr. King or Black History Month in 2017. For January (2018), instead of a service honoring Dr. King, your white minister will have a series of sermons on “other forms of discrimination.” You try to get the church to at least have guest musicians of color from time to time, but instead, an all-white band is hired without any suggestion to them to diversify on occasion.... Your church Board does not have a person of color or even someone from a multiracial family. The all-white Board is selected by an all-white nominating committee, which in turn selects the all-white Board, year after year. While at least two other UU churches in town display a Black Lives Matter banner, your church does not have plans or any timeline about openly or even meekly or subtly expressing solidarity with thousands of people of color who drive past your church every day. When the Social Justice Committee raises the issue, they are told that the congregation needs to be eased into it over an indefinite period of time.”
- “I wish more of my people looked like me. For that reason, I fear that I may always feel a little bit like an outsider. I will explain it to you in the following way. It is quite obvious to me that the UU setting is a sanctuary for gay, lesbian, transgender, and bisexual people. It is not as obvious that it is for people of color.”
- “I am an African-American woman who has been a UU for over 30 years, much of it spent in leadership positions at the congregational, district, regional, and national levels. What is recounted here are instances of microaggressions at the local, regional, and national levels. Some examples: (1) The number of times white people clutched their purses closer when I sat next to them at General Assembly. (2) A retired UU professional who asked my advice about what I thought of a skit about *Driving Miss Daisy* as part of the entertainment for our stewardship campaign kickoff event. (The campaign’s theme was “Driving The Dream.”) (3) I have played a major role in our church’s annual auction for several years. During the entertainment portion of three auctions: a) a church leader played *Jump Jim Crow* on a banjo, along with other members of her family. When challenged she justified her actions on the basis of historical accuracy. I had to press the minister to intervene and mediate between us. b) During the bidding on a vacation in Puerto Rico, a member inquired about the capacity and another member shouted out—it was Puerto Rico, so there could be 22 to a room. c) At an auction themed around the 60s, there was no mention of Motown or any traditional aspect of black culture. (I was invited to participate in a parody of Aretha Franklin. The white singer asked to take the lead had the good sense to beg off.) 5) At my very first meeting of a now dissolved district board, a minister made a joke about 4/5 of a person. No one challenged him. During another district gathering involving a tour, a member of the host congregation who was acting as a docent asked me if I’d ever tried wearing a yoke that was being displayed. I left the premises. The professional leader spoke with the person, who cried. All of the other members of the gathering said nothing. 6) On my first visit to a Sunday Service at my church of nineteen years, I was met on the front deck by a member asking if she could help me. What she obviously meant was that I must be in the wrong place. I continue as a member of both a brick and mortar church and the CLF. I’m determined to sit at the table, and not below the salt! But, O, how I need the healing spaces provided by BLUU and other explicitly black or POC spaces to heal from these events. I could go on...”

Our Association needs to develop and support leadership that brings needed change, but more often than not, it is not easy for congregational leaders who wish to participate in efforts to make our congregations more diverse, inclusive, and equitable. Not only are these leaders asked to take on change—never popular among established groups—around one of the most tricky subjects in United States culture, racial tensions, but we have also asked them to do it without the 44Commission on Institutional Change consistent support of our Association. This is important because of the way our expectations are changing, as this focus group participant shared:

We've gone from focusing on diversity, just trying to get diverse people into the congregation, to inclusion, which is to find ways to, you know, welcome and include diverse people in our congregation, to a greater understanding: that it's not enough to welcome people into our playgrounds, our congregation. We need to focus on racial equity and really, really seek out the voices of those who have not been present in our congregation, people from marginalized groups, especially in terms of race, and really begin to co-create with people from those marginalized groups to create a new kind of culture.

Rev. Dr. Gordon McKeeman, who served as president of Starr King School for the Ministry, was fond of pointing out to ministerial interns and student ministers that congregations are conservative by nature. Institutions, he would observe, exist to preserve traditions and customs. Institutional change, therefore, is inherently problematic. How can we invest in change to ensure more of our vital congregations survive? Our research suggests several areas for focus:

The culture of many congregations is not keeping pace with the expectations of new generations for anti-oppression practices. We believe that for Unitarian Universalism to survive as a faith movement, we must have reform at the congregational level. This will be some of our hardest work. Those who have long been entrenched in our congregations believe that this kind of work is not useful, is simply a form of political correctness, or is not of value for them. Longtime congregational leaders may not see the patterns of white privilege, institutional racism, and other oppressions that can be present in our congregations—and they may not see the ways that a changing world is asking that Unitarian Universalism be accountable to all the diversity of people in our congregations and communities.

It is urgent that we recognize that those among the newer generations and marginalized identities represented in Unitarian Universalism have begun to lose hope that our congregations will ever choose to change. These communities and individuals are therefore less willing to continue to give of their time, energy, resources, and emotional labor in order to do the work of teaching and leading for internal justice at the congregational level.

Because of the historical expansion of UU religious expression, followed by the eventual neglect of theological work within the UUA in the twentieth century, our congregations often have the characteristics of elite social clubs rather than of religious institutions. As a religious institution—and not a social club—we are bound in covenant to a set of beliefs and aspirations. Our inclusive, pluralist Principles allow individuals to find their own paths to truth within our Unitarian Universalist frame, yet often individuals do not see that our faith community is held together by a set of common, communal values. When individualism is not in balance with communal good, individualism can become toxic to our religious community. If we wish to

preserve Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist traditions, our conversations and research suggest that our congregations must center themselves in the communal and covenantal and not primarily the comfort and familiarity of the social club. This change must be accomplished with some speed and agility.

This example from submitted testimony illustrates the tensions:

We have begun engaging in a process of visioning for our congregation. And one of the first actions [was] we gave everyone an... opportunity to write or draw or something, some part of where they hoped our congregation would go. And then people were given little blue stickers, two little dots, so that they could attach the dots to the things that they liked.... So one of the things that I wrote in that process was that I would like the congregation to commit itself to antiracism. And a lot of people wrote that they wanted to see the congregation become more diverse, and there were a lot of blue dots next to becoming more diverse. There were no blue dots next to becoming antiracist. Or maybe I said ending white supremacy culture.... How are we going to become more diverse, assuming that diverse means racially diverse, unless we commit ourselves to acting against racism? So it seems to me there's a disconnect there, and that might be a way of expressing that disconnect and therefore the struggle so that it's easier for someone to say, "Yeah, I want to diversify as long as I don't have to actually do anything to change myself, as long as the congregation doesn't have to change." And I suspect that's kind of a struggle that a lot of people are going through.

Unitarian Universalist Association member congregations must act both as independent bodies and in coordination, covenant, and communion with other congregations. The UUA serves a central role as the facilitator of this communion. Miscommunication, distrust, or lack of understanding between the congregations and the UUA inhibits needed growth and transformation in our faith. Congregations are disconnected from the issues and resources of the Association. Many leaders told us that their congregation did not feel connected to the Association or aware of what is happening. The extent of this disconnect was amplified by the events in Spring 2017, when a hiring decision was challenged and a series of high-profile resignations occurred. Many people in the congregations were puzzled and had no context or little awareness of what was happening with the Association.

Concerns about how the UUA communicates with congregations and UU leaders were frequently voiced in our work. Communications from the Association have historically been funneled through a very narrow spectrum of congregational positions—predominantly presidents and ministers—and may not get communicated to all members of a congregation by a minister or Board president. While we applaud the efforts of President Susan Frederick-Gray's administration to improve this, continued effort should be placed in developing these vital channels.

This small number of leaders—ministers or Board presidents—can determine what information about the Association is passed on to congregations, and they can decide what Association initiatives for change to ask congregations to engage.

Associational work to prepare congregations for today's needs can be ignored or invisible. Though technology allows for more open-sourced resources, the lack of effective official channels means that issues continue to be tried in the court of social media, causing polarization and the development and spread of much false news.

Since the last Associational effort to enhance cultural competency and reduce oppressive practices (known as the Journey Toward Wholeness) was defunded, congregations and communities that wish to participate in efforts toward inclusion, equity, and diversity often do so on their own. Curated resources and sharing of models happens infrequently and ineffectively. Tools available are often costly and inaccessible. Those engaged in this work do have curated resources and support the sharing but operate without any UUA support.

Does the justice work of your congregation incorporate learning around anti-oppression or multicultural work? 623 responses:

- Yes: 67.3%
- No: 18.6%
- I Don't Know: 14.1%

Congregations lack a covenantal understanding with one another and with the Association, which is critical to the effectiveness of congregational polity. Congregational leaders may use the idea of congregational polity to maintain an organizational independence that discourages them from joining with other congregations in the work of equity and justice.

Congregations may not see a duty toward the Association as a whole, especially when the Association is acting as a change agent. Therefore, a change process driven from the Association to the congregations may be doomed to fail because of the emphasis on congregational autonomy.

The Association and the congregations themselves have become overly dependent on the need for overwhelming consent of all members, or at least all current acknowledged and vocal congregational leaders, before beginning to undertake any faith work. However, we must recognize that congregational polity calls for our Association and congregations to heed all voices, including new members and minority members, as sources of wisdom, direction, and faithfulness.

In addition, we misinterpret what congregational polity means. So often we talk about congregational polity and covenant as structures of organization and management for our movement, as if they are only our business model. However, our polity and covenantal agreements enable us to come together in ways that honor the sacredness of our gathered communities. They speak to who we are and how we are to be when we are together. Congregational polity says that each of us, as individuals, makes up the shared body that is our

community of faith. Each of us is an equal and needed partner in our living tradition. Each of us is responsible and accountable for the future of our faith.

This misinterpretation has led to a culture of critique, which makes change processes tedious and often unwieldy.

Regional staff are often the gatekeepers and the bridgers between and among congregations. Regional staff are often the first responders when conflict erupts over differences. A lack of multicultural skills in regional staff and others, such as professional good officers, has inflamed and exacerbated many of the conflicts that were described to us.

We know from focus groups that many congregations are working to address matters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants also talked about the need for ongoing learning communities.

As one focus group participant shared,

We're lifting up sources of music where we might have stolen some things. Our religious education is interweaving antiracism literature and teachings through all of the grades. And the Membership Committee is looking at specific activities and trying to ask screening questions about what could we do better. And just a month ago, our Stewardship Committee finally eliminated the \$100-a-year donation, or you have to sign a waiver clause, in order to be a member in our congregation, which feels much more equitable. So these questions are starting to pop up in the different nooks and crannies of the church, where we are looking at how we're doing things structurally.

Has your community experienced an incident of tension around race or other forms of oppression? 621 responses:

- Yes: 56.4%
- No: 20.9%
- I Don't Know: 22.7%

Congregations need promising practices, including resources on caucusing to support oppressed and marginalized groups. The VISIONS report identified the importance of caucuses during this time of moving toward a more inclusive Unitarian Universalism, recommending that congregations and other groups within the UUA engage in supporting caucus groups for support and continued growth; these can be facilitated at the start to give participants an idea of how the groups should run to promote learning and growth; this process would also provide the opportunity for greater clarity around the use of these groups—i.e., making sure that both personal and systemic work can occur through the process in these groups:

1. How white members can do their own work; building humility, learning, working with each other around the impact of racism on their group and their responsibility to themselves for being accountable for that learning as well as to communities of color; also, to developing their own ideas for how to address racism at the interpersonal and institutional levels—“we need affinity groups for all groups to work well and support ourselves as well as each other.”
2. Working within the people of color community for healing and collaboration across people of color groups (i.e., Indigenous and black, black and Latinx, the challenges that exist within the African Diaspora etc.); and for their own accountability within group and how they could and would support each other as they discuss addressing interpersonal and institutional challenges. [19]

As we work toward a congregational model that can serve generations with new practices around diversity and equity, we will need other community models to complement and support what is available in congregations. In a time in which people do not enter religious communities easily or instinctively, we believe we need to have congregations more focused on promoting and providing opportunities to live our values.

“There is a power in the Assembly that can be harnessed which is not just free range,” observed Rev. Kimberly Hampton at the 2019 Harper-Jordan Symposium sponsored by BLUU. “There really is something that happens when people can look one another in the eye or have an ‘amen’ corner or get corrected by the elders.... There is a lived and living theology that comes from the shared experience.”

Congregational Polity, by Rev. Dr. Natalie Fenimore

The Unitarian Universalist commitment to congregational religious governance goes back to the Cambridge Platform of 1648. The signers of the Platform created self-governing churches (without bishops), gathered in the spirit of love and inspired by the example of community they found in the Christian Bible. Church governance was important because it could reflect societal organization and theological aspirations.

On the individual level, our congregationalism gives authority and responsibility to each member of our congregations and communities—and it is a proclamation of their worth and dignity. It says, “You are needed, you are valuable, you are central to the process of making a Unitarian Universalist community. There is nothing unless you make it.”

The power of the individual member of our congregational and covenanted community is best held with humility. We are asked to recognize that our power is shared with other individuals and with those called as partners in leadership within our communities. This is the dance of congregationalism—sharing leadership, recognizing when individuals are best in position to lead or to move back, and making space for new ideas, change, and transformation.

Congregationalism asks us to struggle as individuals and a body in order to determine the future of our faith. And while Unitarian Universalists value democracy, it is best not seen as democracy

in the purely political sense. This is not about winning by vote alone but rather as honoring the voices of all—and listening to the call of conscience.

We are also called to be in partnership with our ministers. The Cambridge Platform puts it this way: “The minister has no controlling power over the church,” and also, “The connection between a pastor is too sacred and important to be dissolved upon trifling mistakes on either side.”

Indeed, congregational ministry cannot be evaluated as an administrative, management role alone. A minister is not essentially equivalent to a corporate CEO. Congregational ministry encompasses a deep and meaningful relationship with the congregation that calls them to leadership. The minister does not take the ministry from the people; they amplify and help to clarify the potential for ministry and mission that lives in the congregation as a whole.

Our congregationalist ancestors balanced the relationships of authority and responsibility between individual church members, between the congregation and the ministers, and between each other. They recognized the tug between autonomy and fellowship that is inherent in our polity as we do it today.

Walking Together

As Conrad Wright writes in *Walking Together: Polity and Participation in Unitarian Universalist Churches*,

For us there exists, as there did not exist for our ancestors, a regularly constituted agency for common action. We call it the Unitarian Universalist Association. Sometimes, perhaps when we are tired and exasperated, we think of it as a distant bureaucracy, and berate it as though it was something alien that has somehow been saddled on us. Sometimes, in a more reasonable mood, we recognize that it is there to serve us, not merely with things like hymn books and religious education materials, but also with established and responsible agencies for the very same consultation among churches the Cambridge Platform insisted was a necessary aspect of the fellowship of churches. But the UUA is something more than an agency to serve us; in some respects it is actually ourselves, and provides an organ through which we may state from time to time the consensus that prevails among us, so that the waywardness of particular churches may, if necessary, be rebuked, though not coerced, by opinion of the whole. This is one of the things that the fellowship of the churches means: that the local church, while it is free to make its own decisions, is bound to make its decisions responsibly, with a decent respect for the considered judgment of the whole.

Rev. Dr. Susan Frederick-Gray, the UUA’s president, has called the UUA the “embodiment of covenant... life-giving, life-affirming, and justice-centered.”

Again, our polity can reflect our theological desire to model an egalitarian and just way of living. It is a challenge we are called to meet; our very commitment to Unitarian Universalism makes this struggle, this dance, inherent. It is what Rev. Victoria Safford has called our “declaration of interdependence.”

Again, Conrad Wright:

Can two walk together except they be agreed? Yes and no. How much diversity a church can tolerate without losing its sense of direction is a delicate question, not to be decided by abstract analysis. But consensus does not have to mean conformity; diversity need not mean surrender to the arrogance of those who insist that tolerance means that others must tolerate them, no matter how rigid and dogmatic they may be. There is much ground between extremes. That is where we belong, seeking a straight way for ourselves, our children and our children's children.

The First Parish of Malden, Massachusetts: A Case Study

The First Parish of Malden, gathered in 1648, found that the congregation was losing members. Instead of continuing as it was, the congregation made a commitment to welcome younger and more diverse leadership and is now a thriving congregation with a young adult focus. Here are some of its identity documents:

Mission Statement

Worship is what we do when we gather together, take risks for justice, embrace difference, and give back.

Worship is what we do.

This is what it looks like.

Vision Statement

We, the people of First Parish, are a welcoming mid-size congregation that brings its love beyond the walls of our church. We share our worship and gathering space with neighbors and allies for progressive change. We are challenged by our Unitarian Universalist Principles and committed to justice and compassion for all, on Sunday and every day.

Covenant of the Members

We, the members of the First Parish, covenant in friendship to create together a community of respect, equality, openness, trust, and compassion.

We pledge ourselves:

- to hospitality—extending a warm welcome to all and caring for each other in times of need
- to understanding—fostering an atmosphere of acceptance based in goodwill
- to spiritual growth—honoring the spiritual and religious journey of each person
- to sharing—openly and respectfully offering our views, seeking others' views, listening attentively, and honoring our differences as we honor that which we share

- to participation—supporting the church through our presence and the many diverse gifts we bring

Our covenant, founded in the seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism, calls us:

- to deal with disagreements constructively and to communicate with each other in a direct, caring, and responsible manner
- to express gratitude and support to all who volunteer their time and talents in support of the church
- to call each other lovingly back into the circle of covenant when necessary
- to live our values within the church and throughout our wider community, bringing the best of each to the other.

Recommended Congregational Practices to Increase Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity

- Appoint someone to be a liaison to the UUA. While many congregations may have trouble supporting a full “denominational affairs” committee, a point person can monitor and make sure leaders and publications have a representative.
- Ensure that lifespan religious educators are focused on building understanding about equity and inclusion. This includes providing significant opportunities for cross-cultural immersion through partnership and also use of videos, films, and other online resources.
- Do basic hospitality role-playing and education each year for those involved with membership and greeting activities, including greeting, membership, ushering, worship planning, refreshment serving, etc.
- Put money in your budget for education around anti-oppression practices every year. The amount can be small—\$500 to \$1,500 to participate in a curriculum, pay a speaker’s fee, or get a group subscription to an online course.
- Add a line item for scholarships to General Assembly, and make them available to those who most need to connect around identity—Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, LGBTQ folx, and young adults and youth.
- Form justice partnerships with organizations led by those most affected by the issues, and follow their lead. This is especially important when working with organizations across lines of race and class.

Recommendation

Covenant and commitment, not comfort, should be the binding fabrics of UU congregations and other communities.

Our faith communities are not just available for those who fit in most easily or who make so much trouble no one is willing to challenge them. New generations have even more discomfort with, and lack of tolerance for, this sort of culture and consider it toxic.

Our covenant calls us to hold urgent and dear Unitarian Universalism’s aspirations to building the Beloved Community with diversity, inclusion, equity, compassionate justice, and an acknowledgment of our interdependence with other forms of life. We have bound ourselves

together in faithful discernment, not just by structure but in our learning and living. Our common ministry must lead us forward toward transformation and liberation. We are called to travel this path together because together we are more.

In a world in which people have less and less time for volunteer activities and it is harder and harder to get people to attend, leadership education efforts should be focused on deepening a sense of how we live our values and core skills that equip people to manage change, conflict, traumatic events, and generational differences. Work to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity should be incorporated in these efforts.

- **Action:** Prioritize workshops on covenants of right relationship and curate models of covenants for congregations and communities of different sizes and demographic profiles.
- **Action:** Equip leadership development efforts at the Associational or regional level with information on how to facilitate needed conflict and how to promote racial equity.

Recommendation

The UUA Board and the president and administration should continue to prioritize efforts to create communications channels and strengthen regions, clusters, and other structures in which congregations can live into true congregational polity, the lack of which has exacerbated conflicts and created unnecessary distractions from mission.

Currently there is no easy way for the leaders from the national structures to effectively communicate with a broader range of Unitarian Universalism. Maintaining congregational connections is also challenging because of changing patterns of communication in the social media and multimedia world. Investment in this area is critical to any kind of ongoing systemic change.

Regional meetings allow people who will not generally travel to a national conference to have access to the greater resources of our faith. This enables people of color and other marginalized Unitarian Universalists to meet others like them who may also be just one needle in a haystack of more affluent white cisgender Unitarian Universalists.

- **Action:** Continue to develop new channels for communication with congregational leaders, including enhanced or regular virtual convenings for those interested in learning best practices in diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- **Action:** Work to make regional gatherings and structures possible and to regularize them across the country so that there is some consistency and they can be used to provide a common framework for anti-oppression work and other needed changes.
- **Action:** Send an annual communication to all congregations about the number of congregations, with membership data, including the number of congregations with fewer than thirty people, as this is the number of people required to charter a congregation today. Also include the number of intentional and alternative communities serving those historically unable to thrive in our mainstream congregations, such as people of color, LGBTQ people, and young adults.

Congregational Audits

Congregations with an interest in incorporating practices aimed at increasing equity, inclusion, and diversity more fully into all their work have conducted racial audits. Unity Church-Unitarian in St. Paul, Minnesota, has not only done an audit; they have continued to make an annual report on their work to do this ([these reports are available online](#)).

Here is what Unity Church-Unitarian leaders wrote about their audit:

The purpose of the institutional audit is to research an institution's identity in relationship to racism. The Antiracism Team examined Unity Church from the time of its earliest formation to the current day in order to provide a thorough, thoughtful analysis of the church's institutional response to race. The audit will be a guide as the church moves forward in the process of becoming an intentionally antiracist institution.

The audit is also an invitation to the congregation to participate in work that is extremely vital for the... future of Unity Church and Unitarian Universalists everywhere. We believe that we can create a church that is not only antiracist in word, but has genuine acceptance, respect, and love for all people as a recognizable part of its identity.

The audit report concluded,

We must have the will and determination to undertake what may at times be very painful work. We want to create a religious institution that is known throughout the neighborhood, the city, and beyond, as a place of loving, welcoming, joyous Unitarian Universalists who are not afraid to live out their values. Can we imagine a day when Unity's bell peals and the whole neighborhood takes comfort, knowing what that ringing symbolizes?

For congregations with less financial and staff resources, a simpler practice can be used. Here is the racism audit tool used by the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church in Walnut Creek, California:

Questions for Multiculturalism Audit

- On a scale of 1 to 10, how important to the work of your committee is working to help MDUUC become exuberantly multicultural? (Where 1 is least important and 10 is most.)
- What policies and practices promote multiculturalism and eliminate racial bias within your group? (For Board and bylaws as well.)
- How are your members chosen? How are your members equipped to learn to respect and honor racial and cultural diversity?
- How are the voices of those historically marginalized not represented in discussions and decisions?
- How do leaders within your group show that they value diversity on an ongoing basis?
- How is anti-bias education built into your group's yearly cycle?
- What stories or anecdotes illustrate how your group engages in practices that counter these practices of white-normed culture: perfectionism, defensiveness, valuing quantity

over quality, worship of the written word, conflict avoidance, paternalism, either/ or thinking, power hoarding, paternalism, false sense of urgency, assuming a right to comfort, and individualism. [20]

Recommendation

The UUA Board should look at the best way to provide ongoing active governance for congregations as the current annual General Assembly system is too costly and cumbersome for many to participate, as this disproportionately affects people of color.

The testimony we collected caused us to conclude that gatherings at the regional level are more important than annual gatherings of the General Assembly, an increasingly expensive and elite gathering. Growth of community at the regional level for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color would help maintain representation of these groups at the congregational level, except where the aggression and oppression are most pronounced. We need to look at the cost of having our governance centered in a financially inaccessible General Assembly. We are also concerned about GA's carbon footprint, even taking offsets into consideration. And in the context of dwindling resources and the search for a new funding model, we believe it is essential to bring these conversations and resources about oppression and other Associational issues closer to the congregations and allow leaders to learn together.

- **Action:** Make caucusing for people of color standard, and offer administrative support at regional and cluster events to allow more space, contact, and support for those who are often “the only one” at the congregational level.
- **Action:** Fully implement the regional system, making space for clusters of congregations interested in equity to form.
- **Action:** Convene General Assembly as a biennial gathering and on the off years, set and keep a schedule of regional meetings, with these meetings occurring at least biennially and perhaps more frequently by teleconference.
- **Action:** Ensure that regional/district staff are fully trained and demonstrate multicultural, antiracist, and anti-oppression competency to act as a resource for congregations and lay leaders in their antiracism work. Continuing education work in anti-oppression techniques should also be required.
- **Action:** Explore providing delegate status to members of alternate covenantal communities serving those less welcomed by current congregational cultures.

Recommendation

Development of a common frame of anti-oppression training and multicultural competency is needed for all regional staff, those trained to advocate for UU professionals during times of conflict, and regional boards and entities to help prevent injury and wrongdoing.

During the 1990s and into the early 2000s, the UUA's antiracism work was centered around the model proposed by Crossroads Ministry. The learning, opposed by many who did not see its relevance, was criticized for being not grounded in Unitarian Universalist theology. Though the organization has long had UU leaders (and in fact has been headed by Robette Dias, a former

staff member of the UUA), the idea that Unitarian Universalists should look at their own racism (with racism defined as “prejudice plus power”) caused enough controversy that the Crossroads model was abandoned. During the time when the Crossroads model was in use through a series of UUA resources known as the Journey Toward Wholeness, those engaged in these efforts had a common frame of reference, a vocabulary that could be used, and assessment tools based on a model of change.

The Commission’s research reveals that today we can barely speak to each other across generations and socio-economic location. Terms such as *white supremacy culture* have dramatically different meanings across generations. In today’s world, it is easy to stay in our comfort zones, with communities and communication channels designed to reinforce our opinions, so that we have less and less common language among us, and that is true for us as Unitarian Universalists as well. We must enter into some negotiation to understand that while we may not use the same words to describe the issues, we must have a shared commitment to the work of building a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive faith.

Congregations that wish to undertake anti-oppression measures at this time do so largely on their own. In some cases, congregational leaders are unaware of existing resources and, in other cases, no resources are available to them in the Association. Because different resources will be needed by different groups in different communities at different times and under different circumstances, perhaps the best use of our Association’s funds would be to continue to curate the best resources that are out there and to regularly allow congregations to know that the resources have been updated.

Congregations interested in becoming more equitable, inclusive, and diverse should be connected in a virtual learning network and should be provided information about how to work with leaders who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color in respectful rather than in tokenizing ways, and how to be mission-focused in their work.

- **Action:** Begin a “Promising Practices” program to recognize congregations that have made progress in becoming more equitable, inclusive, and diverse.
- **Action:** Identify and curate anti-oppression resources that are appropriate for congregations of different sizes, geographies, etc.
- **Action:** Create methods of interaction between congregations to promote sharing of learning and promising models for equity, inclusion, and diversity work as well as models for accountable justice work. Ensure that all regional staff are trained in this work to be able to seed best practices.

Take-aways

- Congregations that choose to engage to increase equity, inclusion, and diversity are leading the way into the future.
- Too often congregations must do this challenging work by themselves when learning communities would be easy to form.

- Curated resources, learning circles, and funding to develop needed tools should be a priority for UUA-led efforts under the leadership of the Liberal Religious Educators Association.
- Anti-oppression tools as well as conflict facilitation are essential to leadership development efforts, and leadership development is needed in the complex and often conflictual context of leadership today.
- None of this can be accomplished without better communication between the Unitarian Universalist Association and the congregations it serves.
- Regional gatherings could touch more Unitarian Universalists and help provide a common frame of reference.
- Regional staff should provide a consistent structure for work on diversity, equity, and inclusion.