

## Religious Professional of Color Avatar

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

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

When I came into my first UU congregation, someone asked me if I wouldn't be more comfortable down the street at the Catholic church, and on my second visit, someone asked if they could touch my hair to see how it felt. The message, though, it spoke to me. About how we all have worth and dignity. The service the next week was about racial justice and immigration and I wanted to come back. I have lived in a lot of places that were not too good at welcoming me (I was working as a sociology professor then), so I kept coming back and I brought my kids.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Religious Professionals**

“We begin with the premise in all our work that the values of Unitarian Universalism cannot be realized in a system that is centered around one cultural expression. In fact, the centering of white culture and values has stymied the development of a full range of cultural expressions. In the Unitarian Universalist tradition, two “pillar” Principles invite us to covenant to affirm and promote the inherent worth and dignity of all people and to acknowledge the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part. Systems, policies, practices, and expressions of Unitarian Universalism that bias one racial or cultural group above others make a mockery of these two core values, and so we are called into efforts to name and change them as acts of witness to a fuller and more authentic expression of this faith.”

—Commission on Institutional Change, “Findings Related to the Southern Regional Lead Hiring Decision, Spring 2017”

“In a world in which diverse settings are increasingly the norm, religious professionals of color provide a very specific form of leadership in addition to the other professional skills that they bring. If properly supported, the hiring of a religious professional of color can be a turning point in a congregation's commitment to address bias and racism inherent in a white-centered system.”

—Commission on Institutional Change, “Findings Related to the Southern Regional Lead Hiring Decision, Spring 2017”

“No process exists for redress when damage due to institutional racism is done, whether that damage is done to people of color or white participants. Trial in the court of social media is not a workable alternative to a real process.”

—Commission on Institutional Change, “Findings Related to the Southern Regional Lead Hiring Decision, Spring 2017”

## **Background and Trends**

When the Commission on Institutional Change was appointed, we were asked to examine the events around the hiring of the Southern Regional Lead in Spring 2017. We prepared a report, which is found in Appendix I. While the specifics of that situation were complex and accounts varied, what clearly emerged were patterns of inequities and abusive conditions in which ministers who were Black, Indigenous, or people of color worked. Some of the broadest concerns are worth revisiting:

- Our system of credentialing is antiquated, very expensive, and emphasizes a narrow band of knowledge that does not validate lived experience, especially of those in marginalized identities.
- Religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color are more often in non-ministerial professional roles and need additional institutionalized systems of support for credentialing. The cost of education and training for ordained ministry and non-ordained religious professionals can be a barrier to entry or professional development for many.
- Religious professionals face difficult working conditions caused by a lack of resources, a culture that undervalues the work of religious professionals, and growing demands on paid staff as volunteer pools diminish. Religious professionals of color experience these conditions alongside aggressions, disregard for their authority, and outright discriminatory and racist conditions; this makes employment in UU settings threatening to life and well-being. Those who have marginalized identity may also face abusive situations outside of their work.
- A team approach should close the gap between ministers and other religious professionals. Recognizing the role of ordained clergy alongside religious educators, who educate the leaders of today and tomorrow; music professionals, who can illuminate the beauty and power of marginalized cultures in a way that changes hearts; and membership and administrative professionals, who are on the front lines of hospitality, is critical.
- Though employment of Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color (as well as employment of people with disabilities or LGBTQ people) is one of the best ways to further work toward equity, inclusion, and diversity, few settings within Unitarian Universalism offer a quality of employment that makes such employment viable for the long term.

Employment within our Unitarian Universalist institutions remains very difficult for people from oppressed groups, who experience toxic levels of stress as they encounter ignorance, bias, tokenism, and racism in their workplaces.

Consider some of these examples from testimony:

- “During the Fall 2017 OWL training, there was a conversation about identity and how we label people. One woman, a member of [a nearby] congregation, asked, ‘Is labeling like when Black people can call each other niggers but no one else can?’ And she turned to look at me. Other white ministers agreed, and I was put on the spot to defend my race. The facilitators, one white man and one woman of color, didn’t address it publicly. The woman facilitator later came to me and apologized for the interaction. For the remainder of the training, the woman who asked the question followed me around and tried to make me engage with her. On the last day of training, she addressed the group to say that she felt she was being disadvantaged and handicapped because some people were not wearing a name tag (I was the only one not wearing a name tag). I absolutely got nothing out of the training because I was so anxious and traumatized.”
- “I am white. My husband is Black. Our three children are biracial. In 2013, I was still fairly new to being a religious professional. When I saw the pictures of the view of [a UU retreat center], I knew I wanted to go. For the first time, I had the budget and a bit of extra money for the whole family to join me. I excitedly showed my husband. I had mapped out the driving route so he could see that it was drivable from the area where we live. He looked at me with a somber look and said very seriously, ‘I’m not driving with my white wife and biracial children through [that state].’ I’m sad to say, I told him he was being ridiculous, that in 2013 these things didn’t happen. Moments after this conversation, the news started sharing some new information about Trayvon Martin and I knew he was right. A road trip... was not safe for my family. He was willing to compromise though. He asked me to call the organizers and ask them if any Black people had attended the [program] in the past. So I did. The person I spoke to said that the only people of color she knew of who had ever attended were adopted children of white parents. That summer we did attend an RE week, the one in [a different state]. We were more familiar with that drive, and despite the fact that the city was over 90-percent white, we knew of another biracial family that would be attending. It became clear to me through that experience that the institutional structures of Unitarian Universalism would be a barrier for me and my family.”
- “When I participated in a music director search there, there were no best practices in place about equity. I was told, ‘Oh, this needs to remain confidential. Our conversations within the Search Committee are confidential, so they shouldn’t be brought to the Board.’ It’s this kind of maneuvering that I’m struggling with. And also as a member of the church with kids who attend. And the lack of, I guess, commitment that I’m seeing to racial justice really makes me question being a member of the church. And because I’m in the position that I’m in, I’m really seeing how we’re not putting our faith into action. We’re not following our Principles. So personally, that’s been a difficult struggle too.”
- “When we had our assistant minister of color, I was on the Board. I did employment discrimination law for years, and I... just saw such differential treatment going on with our assistant minister of color and I would try to bring that up at the Board.”

As we said in our November 2018 report on the Southern regional lead hiring controversies:

- First, we need to ensure that we reduce the barriers to entry that continue to make it hard for Black/African, Indigenous, people of color, and others marginalized in our wider society from lending their gifts as religious professionals.
- Second, we need to be sure that we do not ask people of color to exist in toxic work conditions.

- Third, we need to engender an atmosphere of continued learning and growth as the dialogue is ever evolving as those who have been silenced find their voices louder and stronger.

At the 2019 General Assembly, a bylaws change substituted the word *full* for *final* as the kind of fellowship ministers who have completed three years of evaluation receive. And yet, to make this meaningful, ongoing quality education on multiculturalism is needed. As one focus group participant put it, “Once those three

[preliminary fellowship] renewals occur, the minister never has to go to another workshop or GA ever again unless their congregation really wants to hold them to that.” In a world with so much change, ongoing learning should not be optional.

### **The Apprentice Track to Ordination, from The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Northern California/Nevada**

*The following is an adapted excerpt from the Training and Care Manual: Seminary and Apprentice Tracks for The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Northern California/Nevada. This is an example of an alternative approach to credentialing.*

#### **Seminary Track**

There are two educational tracks in preparation for ordination: an Apprentice Track and a Seminary Track. Candidates for Ordination are encouraged to follow the Seminary Track, unless they determine, in consultation with their Region, that their economic, vocational, or familial circumstances makes the Apprentice Track (centered around Competency-Based education) more appropriate. Those in the Seminary Track will demonstrate competency in the 16 areas of ministerial practice by securing a Master of Divinity degree or its equivalent from a theological school accredited by the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada or its equivalent.

#### **Apprentice Track**

Those in the Apprentice Track will demonstrate competency in the 16 areas of ministerial practice by completing a program of study of at least 250 contact hours approved by the Region in which they are under care.

#### **Commissioned Minister**

A Commissioned Minister is a person authorized or “commissioned” by the Region to offer a ministry in a particular place for a specified purpose and for a designated period. A “Commissioned Minister” replaces what was “Licensed Ministry.” In the CCNCN, T&C reviews and recommends to our region “commissions” for ministry.

#### **Recommendation**

**We need to *reduce the barriers to entry* for those who seek to serve as religious professionals. This is true for all people, but these barriers are especially damaging for Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other marginalized people, who tend**

**to have fewer financial resources due to historic and continuing patterns of discrimination.**  
[30]

Life experience should be considered as part of admissions criteria alongside academics; nontraditional students should be actively recruited and provided with scholarship funds. Other faith traditions have addressed this by developing less academic paths to religious professional credentialing.

- **Action:** Create alternative paths to religious leadership, including certification in spiritual direction, ministerial apprenticeship, and scholarship funding for credentialing in non-ministerial professions.
- **Action:** Allow for ordination at the Associational level rather than only in congregations, to honor the diversity of ministries that exist but may not be easily supported at the congregational level.
- **Action:** Continue the practice of reporting on diversity and inclusion in hiring at the UUA, and an annual report on the demographic data of employment at the congregational level, collected as part of the annual certification process, should be made to the Board of Trustees and the General Assembly each year as a benchmark for the willingness of congregations to engage directly with these issues in a national context that is increasingly diverse.
- **Action:** Maintain a database of all religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, and consider maintaining it for other identity groups struggling within our professions. Track time for completion of certification, pay levels, and length of tenure.

## **Recommendation**

**Improving the *quality of livelihood* for religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color should be an ongoing goal, recognizing the particular demands of serving a predominantly white Association and its congregations and communities.**

We need to recognize the essential role of religious educators, music professionals, and membership professionals in making congregational change and experiment with new forms of team ministries.

Reasons for employment or termination ought to be analyzed, integrated, and benchmarked according to best practices, including trauma-informed ways of following up with religious professionals who have been damaged by their work with our communities.

Our collection of testimonies points to the use of negotiated settlements and other closed processes to reduce the public outcry that can come from the firing of religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. (Negotiated settlements are private agreements, the details of which are not shared with the congregation or other staff members of the employing body.) When these include nondisclosure clauses, they can also keep our congregational misconduct a secret and allow it to be perpetuated.

Please see [Appendix I, the Commission on Institutional Change's Findings Related to the Southern Regional Lead Hiring Decision, Spring 2017.](#)

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In our initial report, we called for the establishment of a Rapid Response Team to intervene when employment disputes involve religious professionals of color. This team would be centrally coordinated and consist of trained individuals with different specialties so that team members could respond to concerns in their areas of expertise. Efforts to launch a Conflict Transformation Team are under way and are critical.

The Southern regional lead hiring decision brought ongoing concerns of religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color to the forefront—and in the years that have passed since these events, a number of religious professionals have shared that they were not able to get critical support from regional staff, which resulted in early termination of positions. The staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association, while they articulate it in theory, lack in practice a common framework for understanding systemic racism, sexism, heterosexuality, ableism, and other oppressions. Without this understanding, they cannot effectively aid religious professionals of color, who might be in need of support against congregations also wrestling with a different kind of leadership.

We continue to miss the opportunities to advance these inclusive and hospitable practices in our congregations during times of transition. The fact that we continue not to insist on diversity, equity, and inclusive approaches to interim ministries engenders forehead smacking among many as it is so clear that such times of change are opportunities that should not be missed.

And when congregations do engage religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, we should *expect* that some conflicts will arise and be prepared to deal with them. Key to this is having all likely participants in a time of conflict equipped with multicultural competency skills. That this is not the case was heard again and again in the submitted testimonies, as exemplified by this comment:

I almost wish there was some process within the UUA to seek help because, I mean, I know that was very tricky in our situation with our assistant minister of color because, I mean, we would have conversations on the Board, but I know none of that could be shared with anybody. And you know, there are people who say, well these are personnel issues. You know, we can't really talk about this as a congregation. And there were also some instances where we had some of the district people come in and I was just flabbergasted. I felt like they were compounding the problems.

Finally, much was submitted to us about the patterns of abuse that exist with some congregations or religious professionals. Congregations that have had practices contributing to failed employment for a religious professional of color should be identified in the search process. Black religious professionals, Indigenous religious professionals, and religious professionals of color feel strongly that congregational leadership that inflicts harm, and especially those who do so repeatedly, should be considered to be “misconducting” in the same way that professionals are. Ministers and other religious professionals who have had a failed relationship with a religious professional of color should be identified as part of the search process. Educational resources should be offered to them (perhaps at their cost), and this education should be required before

they are allowed to participate in the settlement system. We commend President Susan Frederick-Gray for making resources available for the beginning of the ministries for ministers of color and strongly recommend offering these to other religious professionals of color as well and further developing them with a more systemic than case-by-case approach.

- **Action:** Continue the investment in gatherings and professional development for religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Consider ways to maintain these by job type online every quarter as a way to provide more effective support.
- **Action:** Provide resources for those who struggle with the impacts of emotional and spiritual harm as a result of serving as religious professionals in Unitarian Universalist settings.
- **Action:** Codify that all interim ministers will have anti-oppression training based in experience and not just literature review and that multicultural competency will be part of accreditation as an interim minister. (For example, invest in strengthening the UUMA's Committee for Antiracism, Anti-oppression, and Multiculturalism.)
- **Action:** Implement the UUA Conflict Transformation Team, which can intervene when issues of racism or other forms of oppression are part of the narrative. This team needs to be consistently trained and available throughout the country now as religious professionals of color continue to face traumatic situations without needed support.
- **Action:** Refine and use consistent hiring and firing processes for UUA staff and promote models to recommend them to congregations seeking to hire religious professionals of color. Offer resources to ministers and other religious professionals of color when conflicts arise at the congregational level as well.
- **Action:** Identify resources to treat the trauma associated with encountering racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia as religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color.
- **Action:** Re-examine the compensation guidelines to look at the differential between ministry and other professional positions. While recognizing the higher costs of obtaining a master's in divinity, compared to other forms of credentialing for religious professionals, and differences in authority and responsibility, huge differentials should be addressed in this era of income inequality.
- **Action:** Maintain a list of congregations that have had unsuccessful ministries with religious professionals who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color or ministers with other identities marginalized among us. Identify congregations that allow lay leaders or religious professionals to misconduct repeatedly in a transparent fashion and as part of the search process and make this information available to those in search.
- **Action:** Continue the development of a Common Code of Ethics for all religious professionals and conduct training for congregational boards, personnel committees, and other leaders to spread understanding of best practices.

## **Recommendation**

***Lifelong learning is the standard for all religious professionals, and this learning should address generational and multicultural awareness.***

For some religious professionals, anti-oppression work is a core part of their preparation and of their ongoing continuing education. For others, it is seen as ancillary or even totally irrelevant. This creates a disconnect for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color and many

working-age Unitarian Universalists who have come to expect a basic level of multicultural dexterity.

As one focus group participant said,

I think we need to have it institutionalized that anyone who's working for the UUA should have substantial antiracism training, not just presume that because somebody went to seminary or whatever that they have that grounding. That should just be something that happens and that is ongoing.

Those who have received education of this type speak to the need for widespread education of others and say that all need ongoing continuing education because the dialogues evolve as more people who have been silenced find their voices.

- **Action:** Develop a fund to support the development of resources for ongoing education on anti-oppression practices and learning modules as part of the continuing education required for all ministerial candidates and ministers to combat white supremacy culture, racism, and other systemic oppressions as well as for other religious professionals.
- **Action:** Allocate resources to retool and update the Beyond Categorical Thinking program, which helps congregations assess their readiness for more diverse ministries. It has not been updated to reflect current issues and needed competencies.

### **Take-aways**

- Religious professionals of color are essential to a more equitable, inclusive, and diverse Unitarian Universalism.
- Team ministry among religious professionals will provide new models of professionalism that will bring in new ways of working and model better practices at the congregational level. Team ministry will give voice to religious professionals of color in non-ministerial positions.
- In order to ensure inclusivity, equity, and diversity within the body of religious professionals, we need to take specific steps to ensure the quality of livelihood for religious professionals who are Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other ministers from oppressed groups. It is not consistent with our values to harm, abuse, or damage the health and well-being of our employees.
- Lay leaders, congregations, or religious professionals with a history of aggression toward religious professionals from oppressed groups should be identified so that further damage will not be done.
- In this time of unprecedented change, lifelong learning for religious professionals should be the standard and consistent with the continuing education requirements for most professions.