

“The Black Empowerment Controversy”
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Black History Month

During the late 60s and early 70s, a series of painful events occurred in our denomination which led to the departure of hundreds of African American UUs. It was a tumultuous and complex time in our denomination, a time filled with hurt and anger; a time during which wounds were inflicted that still have not healed. It was an important time in our denomination’s involvement in the struggle for racial justice.

In October of 1967, a meeting was called by the UUA’s Committee on Religion and Race, the “Emergency Conference on Unitarian Universalist Response to Black Rebellion.” We have to imagine the dramatic and unsettling events that were going on during the Civil Rights Movement and the intense feelings that were being stirred up across the country. The March, 1965 marches on Selma and Montgomery had led to violent clashes between civilians and police. Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb and UU civil rights worker Viola Liuzzo were murdered by white supremacists.

In August of ‘65, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act. That same month, riots broke out in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles after a traffic stop that turned ugly. Tens of thousands of people were involved, four thousand arrested, over a thousand injured and over 30 killed. Racial unrest continued and reached a flashpoint again in Newark, New Jersey during the summer of 1967, once again sparked by a traffic incident. Over 25 African Americans were killed, 750 injured and 1000 arrested.

For those of us who were not people of color living through these times, it’s very hard to truly understand the level of frustration that millions of black Americans were feeling. There was talk of change, and some things were changing, but too many aspects of life for too many African Americans were still the same –the police brutality, the institutional racism and the poverty it bred. “How long?” asked Dr. Martin Luther King. Meaning, how long will it take before people, black

and white, can live together in peace and harmony? “Not long!” he proclaimed. But for so many black Americans, “not long” was “too long.”

It was into this atmosphere that the emergency conference had been called. A hundred thirty-five or so Unitarian Universalist delegates, including 37 African Americans, gathered at the Biltmore Hotel in New York City. Everyone there wanted to respond as UUs in the “right” way. But what was the right way?

Early on, a group of 30 African Americans, some of whom were involved in the Black Power movement, decided to meet on their own. Black Power was a movement to go beyond desegregation to dismantle the institution of racism. The goal was to bring black people together to form a political force and to end economic exploitation. Black Power was a concept that was widely misunderstood by the white majority. Just as “Black Lives Matter” means “Black Lives Matter as Much as White Lives Do,” “Black Power” meant “Equal Power for Blacks.”

The group took on the name Black UU Caucus and drew up and presented to the conference a list of “non-negotiable” demands, which they wanted to present to the UUA:

- Establish a Black Affairs Council, to be elected by the Black UU Caucus, which would focus on black self-determination
- Fund the Black Affairs Council with \$250,000 a year for 4 years, a total of one million dollars
- Grant the Black Affairs Council sole authority over the use of the funds

In order to create a society of equals, the Black UU Caucus understood that African Americans needed work together –without the interference of the white perspective. They also understood that gaining power in this case would require money. This group of 30 felt that with the solid financial backing of the UUA, they could make a significant difference in the lives of black Americans.

Wanting to do the right thing, the Emergency Conference delegates, 90% of whom were white, accepted the recommendation by a 2/3 majority. Some of the African Americans at the conference left feeling energized and excited. One member of the group said that it was the first time she had gathered with more

than a handful of black UUs, which thrilled her so much she was persuaded to support the quest for black empowerment.

The caucus didn't speak for all black delegates, however. Cornelius McDougald refused to join, saying he was unwilling to "submit to intimidation by blacks or whites." Maude Jenkins, a retired physician, said she was so upset by the demands of the Black Caucus that it took her months to recuperate.

The UUA board responded to the demands by voting to reorganize the Commission on Religion and Race. But it voted not to form a Black Affairs Council. And it refused to grant the request for a million dollars over 4 years. The Black UU Caucus members were bitterly disappointed and called upon UU congregations to withdraw financial support of the UUA.

That winter, February 1968, a National Conference of Black Unitarian Universalists met in Chicago. Two hundred seven delegates represented 600 black UUs. The conference established the Black Affairs Council with six black and three white members.

Although the Black UU Caucus and the Black Affairs Council again called for financial support, the UUA board at its March meeting instead formed the UUA Fund for Racial Justice and the Commission for Action on Race. Black Caucus leader Hayward Henry felt betrayed, and accused the Board of taking a "traditional racist and paternalistic approach to black problems."

A few weeks later, on April 4th, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated. In May, the UU General Assembly began in Cleveland. Perhaps not surprisingly, the delegates voted to meet the Black UU Caucus's demands for a million dollars to fund the Black Affairs Council.

In June, the UUA administration and Board discovered that all of the UUA's unrestricted funds had already been spent, and that in fact, it lacked adequate funds to continue its current operations. They made major cutbacks and the administration and the Board agreed to keep their promise to fund the Black Affairs Council over four years. BUT, the funding agreement would have to be reaffirmed each year at General Assembly. Also, an additional \$50,000 each year

would go to a second UU group, Black and White Action, a group of pro-integrationists.

The Black UU Caucus saw broken promises and felt the sting of paternalism.

At the next General Assembly, held in Boston in July 1969, members of the Black UU Caucus and Black Affairs Council demanded that the issue of funding the two groups be moved from the end of the agenda to the beginning. During the contentious debate, a Black UU Caucus member took the microphone and hid it under his jacket, and then the Caucus walked out. Vice-chair of the Black Affairs Council, white minister Jack Mendelssohn, challenged the assembly, and he and 400 members walked out, calling themselves "The Moral Caucus."

UUA president Dana Greely convinced them to return the following day. The delegates reaffirmed the Black Affairs Council funding of \$250,000, and Black and White Action received no funding.

In January of 1970, the UUA Board voted to extend the payments to the Black Affairs Council over five years instead of four, because money was so tight. The Black Affairs Council then disaffiliated from the UUA. They did get some outside funding, but because of internal disagreements, the Council and the Black UU Caucus split. Two organizations claiming to be the Black Affairs Council emerged. Litigation followed. Soon, both the Black Affairs Council and Black and White Action ceased to function. Following the controversy, an estimated over 1000 African American UUs left the denomination.

After all this time, there still hasn't been much movement toward reconciliation. African American UU minister Mark Morrison-Reed says, "They all claim the high moral ground...All sides felt victimized and misunderstood. Integrationists felt they were being asked to repudiate their... long-term commitment to equality. Also, they were shocked that there was no longer room to hold a different opinion and follow another path, and still be in fellowship. Institutionalists felt they were staving off ruin and preserving the democratic process. The Black Affairs Council and its supporters felt as though whites were unwilling to put justice first or to trust African Americans with power."

It is past time to honor the passion, fervor and commitment of all who were involved –and to thank them for caring so deeply. The events set in motion by the black rebellion traumatized but also transformed some and educated us all. (Reed)

These events in our history happened because society was forcing change upon religious liberals and change is difficult. They happened because middle-class black UUs needed to redirect their priorities –and for some, this meant leaving. Says Reed, “These were all good people torn by competing loyalties and conflicting values, some of which ran counter to their deepest traditions of polity and individualism. It happened because of institutional immaturity, fear and hubris. It happened because it had to happen.”

And what are we, Unitarian Universalists in 2016, to learn from the controversy? How are we called to move forward in our quest for racial justice?

One of the most important lessons we can learn from studying this part of our history is how much work white UUs still have to do in understanding their own whiteness, and the privileges that are accorded with that whiteness. White UUs still have a long way to go to understand what it means to live as a black person in our society.

People of color in the UUA are now represented significantly, but African American UUs are still an extreme minority in most of our congregations. As Rosemary Bray McNatt has said, “Diversity is terribly hard and terribly uncomfortable.” Very few African Americans want to come into a predominantly white congregation, even a liberal one, knowing that they will still have to be on guard. Prepared as usual in the white world to hear the unconscious slights and microaggressions that permeate an African American’s white encounters. All of us here who are white must do our own terribly hard and terribly uncomfortable work of becoming conscious of our own thoughtless words and actions that reflect a racist society. It takes faith and it takes courage.

As McNatt says, “Hard as diversity is, it is our most important task.” Let us honor the passion and commitment of all who were involved in the Black Empowerment Controversy and let them know, it was worth it.