

The Black Empowerment Controversy

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

By the Rev. CJ McGregor

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I was thinking this morning that I wish I didn't feel it was necessary to revisit what is known as The Black Empowerment Controversy, a stain on the fabric of Unitarian Universalism. Some say it is good to revisit the past, so you can change the future. Even more, though, I wish we weren't, as UU's and as a denomination, struggling again with black empowerment. Fellow UU Christina Rivera, Director of Administration and Finance for her UU congregation and a person of color, received an anonymous note in her office mailbox, a note from someone in her congregation. The note read, "quit your whining. It's always race with you. You have a job. Do it. We went into debt for you FT and now you're complaining. Your kids must be so proud at least they are just half maybe they are learning from their dad. You should be thankful and get to working."

You know this letter reminds me of the historical response to whites owning blacks in the south. That letter would have read like this (an actual quote), "We take very good care of our nword. We provide them with work in the cotton and tobacco fields during the day, and we provide them three meals per day, consisting of various parts of the chicken anatomy. Those that prove to be "good ole' nword" that day (by not stealing anything) get a slice of watermelon after we lock them all into their nword cages each night." This letter, like the one Christina received, asks the person of color to shut up, to be quiet, stop whining, feel lucky you have what we give you. This is why we revisit the Black Empowerment Controversy. Here we are again.

Each summer Unitarian Universalists from around the country get together for what we call our General Assembly, or GA for short. It's several days of workshops and gatherings and the official business meetings where congregational delegates vote on what the priorities of our Association will be. I digress. My first GA was in 2001 in Cleveland. We elected a new president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Bill Sinkford, an African-American man and the first president of color we'd ever had. It was very exciting. I felt very proud to be part of such a progressive faith tradition.

What I didn't know then is that Bill Sinkford and about a thousand other African-American UUs had left our movement over 30 years previously because they had been so bitterly disappointed by the outcome of what is known in Unitarian Universalist circles as the Black Empowerment Controversy. This is uncomfortable history. It's important that we know it, to better understand where we are now, and how we might move forward. Our Unitarian Universalist faith is not perfect, much as we might wish it to be. It's important for anyone to be able to look at the painful parts of their history, even the ugly stuff, without flinching, without needing the past to be perfect, but still be willing to work on getting it right now.

The story of the Empowerment Controversy began in 1965 when, responding to the terrible white-on-black violence in Selma, Alabama, Martin Luther King, Jr. called for clergy people of all faiths to come and march with him. Fully two-thirds of Unitarian Universalist ministers in active ministry, and the entire board of the Unitarian Universalist Association, dropped whatever they were doing and went to Selma to stand with Dr. King. Two Unitarians, the Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, were murdered by white racists during the week that followed. Despite the terrible pain and grief of those days, there was a sense among Unitarian Universalists that we were really standing on the side of justice. We were there when it counted most. We were willing to brave fear and violence to do what was right. And that was thrilling. I know we share these feelings today when we act on behalf of justice.

But, two years later, the civil rights movement had changed. The Black Power movement had begun. People were starting to say the old ideal of integration was no longer adequate unless and until black people had equal power to shape the social institutions that controlled so much of their lives. Then the riots started. In 1967 alone, 159 race riots broke out all over the country. In response, Unitarian Universalists convened in New York City for what they called an “Emergency Conference on the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion.” And for the first time, the black Unitarian Universalists who came to the conference decided to meet on their own, without any white people present. At that meeting, they formed a new organization, the Black UU Caucus. The group came up with a list of “non-negotiable demands” that they went on to present to the UUA Board of Trustees. They demanded that the Board recognize a new group to be called the Black Affairs Council, or BAC, whose members would be elected by the Black UU Caucus, and to fund the new group for four years at \$250,000 per year, which at that time was 12% of the UUA’s annual budget. The money was to be used to fund projects promoting self-determination in black communities around the United States. This was a huge shift, just about unheard-of in UU circles, both the insistence on racially segregated groups within the UUA and the language of non-negotiable demand.

The late Alex Poinsett was an editor at Ebony magazine and a member of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. This is how he remembers those days:

“While many of us had respected Martin Luther King’s nonviolent disobedience stance, we knew that his “integration” goal was rejected by many others. It had dawned on us that you could not integrate elephants and gophers because of the unequal power relationship, the unlevel playing field....”

This was only part of the social ambiance that triggered a rash of Black caucuses around the nation. Using the words “empowerment” and “self-determination,” we argued that Black people should take charge of affairs affecting Black people, that no longer could White people tell them what their values should be and what was good for their communities. Another black UU, Harold Wilson, was the first vice-president of BUUC. This is what he had to say about being a black UU in those days:

“Because we were such a small group, we felt lonely in the UU churches.... I had two or three Black people in my whole congregation when I was a minister. Amid all the things that were

happening in America, ...[a]s Black UUs, we had begun to understand that the issues were institutional. Some of us didn't give a damn what White people thought about us, but we wanted free access to their institutions—the schools and the churches and the industry....”

Meanwhile, other black UUs were profoundly uncomfortable with the idea of separate racial caucuses. Betty Seiden and other black UUs at the UU Church of Berkeley founded another group: Black and White Alternative, or BAWA. One black UU, Glover Barnes, remembers that he joined BAWA because BUUC, the Black UU Caucus, wouldn't let his white wife join. A lot of white UUs were very upset by what was happening too. Bette Sikes, a white UU who supported the Black Affairs Council, remembers that many white UUs, in her words, “could not bear that these people no longer wanted to meet with them.” Well, Bette, you might have started with stop saying “these people.”

But some white UUs believed in BAC and wanted to support it. Harold Wilson of BUUC remembers what it was like working with white allies:

“[T]he truth of the matter is, while everybody was talking about separatism, there was more honest, decent, wholesome relationship between Black people and White people than had ever appeared in the church before because we talked as peers and back and forth and out of our realities.”

In April 1968, a group for white allies convened to form what they called FULLBAC, short for “Full Funding of the Black Affairs Council.” During that first meeting of FULLBAC in Philadelphia, the group received the terrible news that Martin Luther King, Jr. had been assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. In that single moment, our country's heart was broken. I know all of you who were living then remember that day. You understand what it meant for our nation. For Unitarian Universalists, also, it was a turning point.

Up until then, UUs had been deeply divided about whether to support the Black Affairs Council. But now, at our 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland, delegates voted 72% in favor of allocating the full \$1 million over 4 years to BAC. After the unthinkable tragedy of Dr. King's death, this was a joyful, magnificent moment. Hope ran so high. It looked like, once again, UUs were really doing what was right. That first year, the Black Affairs Council actively began funding community development projects. Among the grant recipients was Maulana Karenga, who was working to introduce a new holiday called Kwanzaa.

But all was not well. During that same year, the UUA Board of Trustees was beginning to discover that our Association was in serious financial trouble. Expenses were far exceeding income. The Board was anxious. The Cleveland GA delegates had voted to fully fund the Black Affairs Council for four years. But now the Board decided that the BAC funding would have to be re-voted on each year. They also decided to propose to the General Assembly that BAWA, the less radical group of black and white UUs, should also be given \$50,000 in the next year, although BAC supporters seriously opposed this idea. So, predictably, BAC supporters were seriously unhappy and tensions were running very high when the July 1969 General Assembly began in Boston. The flashpoint came when the printed order of business came out showing that the issue of BAC and BAWA funding wouldn't be decided until late in the GA.

BAC supporters saw this as unacceptable— there was a sense that the majority-white UUA was going about business as usual and even subverting their efforts. At the GA, BAC and FULLBAC immediately called for the agenda to be reordered so the funding for BAC and BAWA would be voted on immediately. The vote fell short. Now the BAC president, Hayward Henry, stood up and told the delegates, “Unless the Assembly agrees to deal with these basic problems now and not next Wednesday, the microphones will be possessed and the business of this house will come to a halt.” Then, by prearrangement, BUUC members and members of the national youth group, LRY, commandeered each microphone and prevented anyone else from speaking.

The next day, a vote to change the business agenda fell short again. And then, in the wake of the failed vote, again by prearrangement, BAC supporters got up and walked out. They just left. Again—this was just unheard-of. Jack Mendelsohn is a white UU minister who remembers what happened next. He says, and I’m going to quote him at length:

“[W]hen the Blacks walked out, there was a recess called by Joe Fisher, the moderator, and I went to look for the Black delegates. I didn’t know where they’d gone. And I found them in a room of the Hotel Statler as it was called then, and they were saying goodbye to one another....This was a deeply, deeply sorrowful group of people who were going to leave. They were going to leave the General Assembly, they weren’t sure whether they weren’t going to leave the whole...movement.

I asked if I could have permission to speak, and I spoke to this group and said, “Let me go back into that assembly to demonstrate to you that you’re not alone in this. And would you just please stay around until I’ve had a chance to do that?” And so I went to Joe Fisher and Dana Greeley and said, “I’m asking for a point of personal privilege. Can I have just a few minutes?” And they gave it to me.

So I stood there in front of the General Assembly when it reconvened. I got the floor and I spoke, and I said, “This is a perfect example of Blacks again being told to go to the back of the bus. And that’s why they’ve left.” And I was hooted and booed, and when the tide died down a little, I said, “I’m going over to Arlington Street Church, because I can’t stay here and do business as usual anymore. And those who want to join me, I invite to come and join me....”

I got up, went down the stairs of the platform. One of my colleagues came up and spit in my face. I walked out and about three or four hundred other people walked out with me, and followed me the block and a half over to Arlington Street Church, where we assembled in the great auditorium.”

Almost all the youth went with him, by the way. There were hours and hours of speeches at Arlington Street as people tried to figure out what to do next. Finally, Dana Greeley, the UUA president, came over to Arlington Street. He cried as he addressed the crowd. He called them to come home and be part of the family again. Eventually they agreed to come back. A new vote was taken, and the delegates agreed to renew the funding for BAC.

Very briefly, it seemed like things would be OK again. Then the immensely popular and charismatic Dana Greeley was termed out as UUA president and a new president, Robert West,

was elected. Under Bob West's leadership, the UUA Board did a full financial review and got some very bad news. Dana Greeley had spent the UUA into a fiscal crisis. The budget Bob West inherited called for expenses of \$2.6 million and income of \$1.6 million, and Greeley's administration had spent all of the capital reserves. There was nothing left. So they had to make some serious, serious cuts. The only question was what. Every single district staff person was laid off— every single one, 50 people across the country— and that wasn't enough. Programs were slashed, and that wasn't enough.

So the Board decided they had to adjust the funding for the Black Affairs Council. Everyone knew this was on the table. A number of UU youth drove all the way from Chicago to Washington, DC to protest any cuts to the funding for BAC. But in the end the UUA Board voted to restructure the funding so BAC would get only \$200,000 that year— less than what the GA delegates had voted for. It turned out this was the straw that broke the camel's back. In those times, among those people, it was too much. For BAC supporters, it felt like just one more sign that black people within the UUA were not a priority. There was this incredible sense of disillusionment and disappointment. And black UUs started leaving our churches. Hundreds across the country left in the end. Joe Samples, a black UU from Detroit, remembers there had been 70 black members in his church at one time. After 1970, he and his wife were the only ones who stayed.

That's what happened. This is our history. For years, our UU communities were plagued with fear and aversion to talking about race. For years, our efforts to promote racial justice went underground, channeled into the safer code word of "urban ministry." Little by little we've gotten our courage back. This is a long story for another day. Suffice it to say, it's been hard, for everybody in our movement. But slowly we've learned that we really can talk about what happened—the hope, the resolve, the disappointments, the failures. We are still learning from the past, and learning that the past doesn't have to control us.

Looking back, the white UU minister David Parke says:

"I have never felt prouder of my church than I did on May the 26th in 1968 when our overwhelmingly White denomination said Yes to its militant Black minority. Yes, we said, we embrace you as Unitarian Universalists. Yes, we stand with you in your pain and rage as Black Americans. Yes, we accept your vision of a nation and a denomination led out of bondage by those having a direct experience of oppression. Yes, we trust you with the million dollars. Yes, we know what other programs will suffer, but we are willing to do with less because you have done with less for so long. When, I ask, have Unitarian Universalists, Black and White together, stood so tall? Not in my lifetime. Perhaps not ever."

This is our history. But this is also our present. An anonymous letter was received by a woman of color promoting racial justice in her congregation. The writer of the letter shamed her, told her to shut up and feel lucky she was getting what she was getting. Today, let us commit ourselves again. Let us commit ourselves to uncovering white supremacy that may silently live within each of us because of the culture we were raised in and the society we live in. Let us not be defensive, but curious. Let us do the work.

May it be so.