

**Report to the Excellence in Ministry Panel  
of the  
Unitarian Universalist Association**

**Dr. Susan Gore  
21 March 2008**

**The purpose of this report is to provide insight into critical factors that underlie and support white Unitarian Universalist (UU) ministers in making anti-racism and anti-oppression (AR-AO) central to their ministry.**

### **Methodology**

Telephone interviews were conducted with 18 ministers identified by the UUA as white allies who are committed to anti-racism and anti-oppression. Participants represented a wide range of ministerial tenure and experience with AR-AO work, both within and beyond their UU responsibilities. All were exceptionally generous with their time and in the thoughtfulness with which they approached the interviews. (See appendix A for a list of participants).

Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to two hours plus follow-up conversations or emails, which included two sermons, an article on the impact of racial micro-aggressions and a book on coalition-building. The sermons and references are attached (Appendix B) since they relate directly to questions posed during the interviews. Those questions were:

1. What in your experience, your ministerial formation and development allowed you to claim an anti-racism and anti-oppression commitment as central to your ministry?
2. Once you claimed that identity, what helped you and what hindered you in living it out?
3. What are your growing edges in this work?
4. Looking back, what would have been most helpful in your formation experience around anti-racism work?

### **Notes on the Interviews**

George Lakoff argues persuasively that the language one chooses in asking a question or making a statement (how it's framed) significantly influences the

response<sup>1</sup>. Several ministers commented on their selection as “AR-AO allies.” “It’s hard to think of my stumbling efforts as ‘laying claim’.” Another stated, “I don’t think I have a choice given my life experiences and ministry.” And a third said, “Ally is an identity that must be claimed in the moment; it’s your behavior in each moment.” Almost half of those interviewed used the phrase “social justice” to describe their work as allies across boundaries of race, sex, class, disability and all other dimensions that differentiate dominant and non-dominant people.

One minister also pointed out there is a fundamental difference between seeking to promote excellence in ministry and excellence in ministers. The former, he suggested, is strongly influenced by a congregation’s history, composition, needs and goals independent of their minister. Excellence in ministers, on the other hand, focuses on ministerial formation and an individual’s ongoing evolution. Ministry and ministers mutually influence each other, of course.

The bullet points below are taken directly from interview responses.

Finally, several participants asked about the Excellence in Ministry initiative and how their responses would be used. Bill Sinkford’s response to these questions appears in Appendix B.

**1. What in your experience, your ministerial formation and development allowed you to claim an anti-racism and anti-oppression commitment as central to your ministry?**

***Parents who model “the ethical imperative of doing justice in the world” and/or childhood experiences that create personal awareness of inequities are fundamental.***

- “The images are indelible. I feel outrage even now when I talk about it.”
- “I am my mother’s and grandmother’s daughter.”
- “I really had no race awareness until I was ten.”
- “The two African-American players on my high school football team had to go to the back door of the restaurant we went to after the game.”

***There are many religious and professional entry points to AR-AO/social justice work.*** (Not everyone cited their religious or pre-ministerial professional background; some mentioned both. This list combines both dimensions.)

- Birthright UUs (5)
- Disciples of Christ (2)
- Catholic religious orders (2)

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<sup>1</sup> George Lakoff, Don’t Think of an Elephant! Know Your Values and Frame the Debate; The Essential Guide for Progressives. Chelsea Green Publishing: White River Junction, VT, 2004.

- Joined UUism as an adult (2)
- Mental illness/alcohol abuse professional (1)
- YWCA professional (1)
- Accessibilities professional (1)
- Lay involvement in UUism
- Actor (1)
- “The congregation put the imperative (on him).” (1)

***Adult mentors and role models are crucial to turning values into action.***

Forty role models were named, unsolicited, during interviews (Appendix C). Mentors instilled both a sense of urgency and determination to “keep showing up,” crystallized in this comment: “Marjorie’s (Bowens-Wheatley) death was another call. There’s not a minute to lose.”

More than one-third of those interviewed (6 of 17) also named music, singing and/or dance as integral to the formation of their AR-AO/social justice identity.

**2. Once you claimed that identity, what helped you and what hindered you in living it out?**

**“HELPS”**

***Personal relationships are the single most vital element to ongoing AR-AO work.***

- “Partners to be honest with, including when I need to vent.”
- “Congregants’ forbearance when I screwed up”
- “The graciousness of feminists and gays in teaching me”
- “There’s a circle of Black women who have watched my back since Day 1. I’ve never experienced anything like it.”

**Accountability to individuals and institutions reflects and reinforces the importance of relationships.**

- “Acknowledging the differences or disconnects as well as shared goals”
- “Interfaith and secular connections”
- “The requirement of AR-AO competence to be ordained by Meadville is *huge*.”

**“HINDERS”**

**The unconsciousness of inequity based on race as well as other things (white privilege), is the primary hindrance to AR-AO/social justice work.**

- “My whiteness and constant need for training/experience”
- “Denial of the class overlay to racism”
- “Black people shouldn’t have to explain it to us.”

- “Extremist conflict leaves no place for me to be part of dialogue, and I don’t want to be in debate.”
- “I’m not part of an oppressed group, so my commitment has an element of abstraction to it.”

**Institutional barriers are a close second to individual qualities hindering AR-AO work.**

- “UU AR-AO institutional memory is so short.”
- “We wouldn’t welcome a sexual bigot into seminary. But it seems we welcome students who are unconscious of white privilege and have no demonstrated witness of AR-AO leadership.”
- “Denominational inflexibility in some people around AR-AO hinders the work. If you’re not doing AR ‘my way,’ you’re not doing it right.”

**Personal and institutional efforts are often in tension.**

- “Excellence in ministry is not the same thing as excellence in ministers.”
- “Where do I get the time and money...?”
- “I was once told in anger, ‘I can’t understand the value a straight white male can bring to UUism. There’s so much we’re doing with feminism, civil rights, homophobia - that’s where prophetic voices are.’”

**3. What are your growing edges in this work?**

**Being an AR-AO ally is an ever-unfolding process that differs from person to person.**

- “Learning from my experiences as temporarily disabled”
- “Recognizing class issues among African-Americans”
- “Speaking at rallies”
- “Re-educating myself using primary sources”
- “Learning Spanish”
- “Youth advocacy work”
- “How do I keep going deeper in my understanding of AR-AO?”
- “Asking questions more gently”

**Congregational and institutional resistance to change requires constant “growth” that can be exhausting.**

- “Moral fatigue - the work is always there”
- “Making hospitality a religious mission”
- “Remembering to be engaged in the present -focused - while also holding the vision”

**Balancing competing priorities for time is an ongoing challenge.**

- “Living with competing claims for legitimacy is difficult to manage.”
- “Keeping up (with) language, events *and* running a church”
- “Our lives are very taut.”

**4. Looking back, what would have been most helpful in your formation experience around anti-racism work?**

**Theologically grounded institutional requirements that demonstrate an AR-AO commitment are fundamental.**

- “Someone making it very clear that *formation requires transformation*”
- “Alignment between liberal theology/UUism and a mandate to address disparities”
- “Classes in liberation theology, urban ministry, Black history”
- “It cannot be a program; it must be an identity.”
- “A clearer understanding of UU theology as it relates to the present, using a post-Modern lens”
- “You don’t get your certificate and you’re done – how do you let ministers know what a lifelong commitment looks like?”

**Direct ongoing contact with others doing AR-AO work is crucial.**

- “Formal mentorships and recognition that they are mutually enriching”
- “Having a shared experience of racism instead of private ones (e.g., watching the film *Amistad* in a mixed-race class)”
- “Covenant groups, UUA staff experiences, internships at the UUA”
- “Ongoing facilitated conversations”

**Cross-cultural experiences that are structured around an AR-AO framework can help shift commitments from abstraction to action.**

- “Cross-cultural immersion where we break it down and discuss our experiences “
- “More specific training in cultural misappropriation”
- “Fieldwork”
- “Urban ministry”
- “Our churches are part of the culture, not separate from it. That’s where change takes place.”
- “Including DRUUMM in the Excellence in Ministry conversations”

## Interpretation of Themes

People go into the ministry for many honorable reasons. The themes that emerged from these interviews relate to the following Excellence in Ministry concerns regarding AR-AO ministry:

1. How to identify ministerial candidates who are likely to make AR-AO central to their ministry?
2. How to increase support for and reduce barriers to becoming a white ally in AR-AO/social justice work?
3. How to support UU ministers who already have or may develop a commitment to AR-AO work?

### **1. How to identify ministerial candidates who are likely to make AR-AO central to their ministry?**

In financial markets, advisors are quick to warn, "Past performance may not predict future earnings." If you have to choose one thing, however, past performance *is* the most predictive of human behavior. Based on the self-reports of these white allies, ministerial candidates who have demonstrated awareness of white privilege, particularly those who have taken leadership in confronting it prior to entering seminary, are most likely to claim AR-AO work as central to their ministry.

The ministers who were interviewed also demonstrate high "emotional intelligence." Daniel Goleman describes people with a high EQ as possessing self-awareness, self-control, empathy, and the arts of listening, resolving conflicts and cooperation.<sup>2</sup> A variety of personality measures exist to assess these qualities.

### **2. How to increase support for and reduce barriers to becoming a white ally in AR-AO/social justice work?**

Awareness of race, class and other barriers to social justice is most often developed by direct contact *that is interpreted in terms of differential access to power and other resources*. Institutional requirements such as demonstrating AR-AO competence for graduation from Meadville-Lombard make a clear statement of the importance of that ministry. Additional suggestions from those who were interviewed include: cross-cultural immersion experiences, formal mentoring programs, peer consultations, spiritual direction groups, covenant

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<sup>2</sup> Goleman, Daniel. Emotional Intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ. New York: Bantam Books, 1995, xiv.

groups and including organizations like DRUUMM in ongoing facilitated conversations about AR-AO.

It is necessary to be able to candidly acknowledge the difficulties of transforming well-established personal and social structures. Potential allies also need assurance that missteps are inevitable but not fatal to one's congregation or career.

### **3. How to support UU ministers who already have or may develop a commitment to AR-AO work?**

The ability to internalize an AR-AO identity - rather than seeing AR-AO as a separate overlay onto existing work - is critical. It is also an identity that is constantly evolving. Support may take the form of education in dialogue and conflict resolution skills. Facilitating contact among white allies so they may ask questions and share experiences is highly rewarding to this group. Internet technology offers many time-efficient approaches such as group distribution lists, blogs and chat rooms. Periodic conference calls add a more personal dimension. Face-to-face encounters paid for by the UUA, denominational recognition and tangible career rewards reflect additional forms of support.

Perhaps most important, frequent reminders that they are bearing prophetic witness to UU values and are not alone in the struggle are fundamental to combating the "moral fatigue" cited by the white allies in this study.

### **Summary**

Participants in this interview process are passionate about their commitment to AR-AO/social justice ministry. In the midst of daily ministerial work, however, it is sometimes difficult for them to assess how they are doing. One ally noted, "Spirituality doesn't lend itself to benchmarking or milestone analysis." While that is true, changes in AR-AO consciousness and ministry are measurable over time at both the individual and institutional levels.

The themes and specific actions identified in this report provide a solid foundation for strategic planning to catalyze growth and ongoing success in AR-AO ministry across the UUA.

## APPENDIX A

### INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

Burton Carley  
Rob Eller-Isaacs  
Nina Grey  
Bob Hardies  
David Herndon  
James A. Hobart  
Kathy Huff  
Heather Janules  
Nancy Palmer Jones  
Kate Lore  
John Gibb Millspaugh  
Fred Muir  
Charlie Blustein Ortman  
Josh Pawelek  
Jeanne Pupke  
Jason Shelton  
Susan Suchocki-Brown  
Wendy von Zirpolo

## APPENDIX B

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

#### *This Work Will Break Your Heart*

Reverend Rob Eller-Isaacs  
Unity Church  
January 27, 2008

His unit came ashore at Anzio. They fought their way up the spine of Italy, taking tortured hill towns one by one. Within a few weeks every member of his platoon was dead. He was sent home wounded. The ship put in at Mobile. He headed home to Indiana on the train. Somewhere along the way the train stopped long enough for him to stretch his legs. On crutches and still in considerable pain he picked his way across the platform and over to the station. His throat was dry. He bent down to drink from the fountain and woke up in a pool of blood on the floor. The men who beat him didn't know or didn't care about the Silver Star pinned to his chest. They only saw a black man drinking from a fountain plainly labeled "for white's only."

The next night at home in Fort Wayne he told his mother that he wasn't sure he could live in America anymore. She told him about a new minister who had just come to town, a white man who, on the day he arrived, before he and his family had even begun to move in, had been seen downtown joining the NAACP. "He's a Unitarian, whatever that is," she said. "Maybe you should talk to him." He went over to see him the next day. They talked about the war. They talked about racism. They talked about his future and the future of the country. That minister arranged a college interview and then a scholarship. And though when he came home from college to visit he still sang tenor in the AME church of his childhood, that young black veteran began to going to church twice every Sunday, once for the music and again for a new transforming message.

Why do people change? Why do people actually change their lives? Everyone suffers but only the few and the brave choose consciously to change their lives. "Most men (and women) wrote Thoreau, "live lives of quiet desperation." We put up with it. It's just the way things are. We sigh and say "the more things change the more they stay the same." We can easily understand that truly desperate situations can force us to change. But

as a rule, we'd rather not. As the 20<sup>th</sup> century American poet, Paul Simon wrote:

*"We work our jobs, collect our pay, believe we're gliding down the highway when in fact we're slip sliding away."*

My friend Charles had no choice. He came back from the war burdened by his grief, decorated for his bravery in battle, only to find that the freedom his best friends had died for was still withheld from him at home.

But what of those of us who live in privilege and peace? Why-ever would we want to change our lives? We say we long for transformation. We say that's what the church is for. But for the most part we stand back from moments and from movements, which we know will change us. I don't suggest we should change just for the sake of change. But I have to believe that you and I can choose to change our lives not out of desperation but because we remember how it feels to live in harmony and hope. Sometimes memories of a better time or glimpses of a better way inspire us.

I am here to tell you I have lived in that fair land we love to sing about. As a child I lived in that Beloved Community. Since then I have been bound to serve a love that will not let me go. I've tried to escape it. I've tried to ignore it. God knows I could keep myself busy enough running around trying to address your many needs. I've felt the "temptation to step off the edge and fall weightless away from the world." But here I am with you, still in the struggle, still in the world, keeping cynicism and self-doubt at bay, hoping against hope to be counted still among the faithful.

Effective, transformational ministry takes place at the intersection of spiritual development and social progress. Some would have us choose one above the other. But the fact is they are utterly interdependent. Practice, prayer and praise in time make us increasingly aware of other people's lives. We come to feel what they feel. In Alice Walker's The Color Purple Shug testifies to her spiritual awakening. Shug says:

*"My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds. Then other people. But one day when I was sitting quiet and feeling like a motherless child, which I was, it come to me: the feeling of being part of everything, not separate at all. I knew that if I cut a tree, my arm would bleed."*

That sense of interconnectedness, that feeling of being a part of everything, call it merger, call it unity or spiritual reunion, is spoken of in every authentic scripture. It is, in fact the heart of every great tradition. Shug is describing the experience of the Holy. Spiritual heartbreak doesn't always begin with prayer and practice. Sometimes it works the other way as well. Some of us start out as activists. Some families expect it of their

children; some learn it in their churches, in scouts or in school. I grew up marching at my mother's side. Our children went with us to marches and rallies for civil rights, for gay liberation and for peace. Compassion is awakened when people get out there and march and sing and organize. Some choose life work that helps them feel that they're making a difference by putting their values to work in the world. Any way love leads you, love will break your heart. Any way love leads you will wake you up and help you know your neighbor's pain. Then what?

Just as Shug stepped away from the old white man god we have rejected the exclusive claim of Christianity. God plays no favorites. Salvation is for everyone. This openness has implications. In Leaves of Grass, a book conceived of as a new, New Testament for a free America, Walt Whitman wrote:

*This is the meal equally set, this the meat for natural hunger,  
It is for the wicked just the same as the righteous,  
I make appointments with all.  
I will not have a single person slighted or left away,  
The kept woman, sponger, thief are hereby invited,  
The heavy-lipped slave is invited, the venerealee in invited  
There shall be no difference between them and the rest.*

*This is the press of a bashful hand, this the float and odor of hair,  
This the touch of my lips to yours, this the murmur of yearning,  
This the far off depth and height reflecting my own face,  
This the thoughtful merge of myself and the outlet again.*

*Do you guess I have some intricate purpose?  
Well, I have, for the Fourth-month showers have, and the mica on  
the side of a rock has.  
Do you take it I would astonish?  
Does the daylight astonish? Does the early redstart  
twittering through the woods?  
Do I astonish more than they?  
This hour I tell things in confidence,  
I might not tell everybody, but I will tell you.  
My friends, I tell you in confidence that much as I would like to turn away,  
much as I would like to let you and myself off the hook, I'm captured by a  
love that will not let me go.*

In the wake of the war, just a few years after that troop ship came into the Port of Mobile, the Women's Alliance at the First Unitarian Church in

Chicago, took out an ad in the Daily News saying that they loved their church, that they were sick of prejudice and segregation, and that they would welcome people of all races to their congregation. How charming! How utterly naïve! How unlikely to succeed! But succeed it did.

Persons of color showed up at the church. Some had never known church life. Others had drifted from or been rejected by the churches of their childhoods. They came out of curiosity. They came because they had been invited. They stayed because the congregation was hospitable and because its leaders knew, even back then, that they had at least as much to learn from their new members, as they had to teach them. They also refrained from having their visitors gather in the parlor to talk about their experience of visiting the church. Instead those same women, the ones who had taken out the ad, invited their guests to dinner in their homes.

Ten years later a wonderful children's choir was established at the church. It was fully integrated across lines of race and class. It was equally committed to musical excellence and to social progress. I sang in that choir from the time I was seven years old until my voice changed. We sang at church and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. We sang with the Met and with the Lyric Opera. We sang at rallies and at marches. We sang in twenty languages. We sang with discipline, precision, great beauty and radiant joy. We moved through the world as both a literal and a figurative image of the Beloved Community. We were a living symbol, freedom carried high on wings of song, America's promise realized. And then we came of age and our parent's fears combined with other forces larger than ourselves tore us apart. I've been trying to get back there ever since.

This past week I was interviewed by a woman who has been hired by the Unitarian Universalist Association to tell them why some ministers are particularly committed to working for racial justice. I had been anonymously identified as an "ally," the term of art for white people who are reliably supportive of the anti-racism agenda. "Why are you the way you are? What made the difference for you?" she asked me. I told her about my childhood. I told her about the church and the choir. I told her about finding and losing good friends. I told her about, Dovie and Luther and Polly and Aki, about Joe Brewer and Ivy Beard and Mwalimu Imara, about Mark and Sophie and Marsh and Boona, real people, friends and grown-ups who put up with my discomfort around race, held me accountable to my own best intentions, loved me and told me the truth. There is no ideology, no philosophy, no theory, which will substitute for genuine relationships. Dreams die when they don't turn into promises.

“Why do you do this work when you know it will break your heart?” She asked me. I stopped to think about it. I’ve stopped to think about it a thousand times before. My voice broke with emotion as I said to her, “it isn’t ideology you know. It’s all about love. Love takes root and grows stronger in hearts broken open by love.” You know the images; a divided heart from which a lotus flower grows, a broken heart in which a tree has taken root. *“I knew that if I cut a tree my arm would bleed.”*

So pray with me for that naïve courage that carried the day, in years past. May we still be a place for wounded heroes to come home to, a place where faith and freedom flourish, a place where broken-hearts can learn compassion and organize their love to give the world the shape of justice.

May it be so and Amen.

### **Readings for January 27, 2008**

We have all looked at the deeds of others and said, “I could never do that.” That is not the point. Heroism is not necessarily about great dramatic deeds of daring. We are not called to imitate each other’s actions, nor to feel disempowered by our failure to be what we are not. We are called to be faithful, to follow our own inner leadings, in our own time, using the particular and special gifts that are unique to each one of us...

--Helen Steven, 2005

#### For the Sake of Strangers

No matter what the grief, its weight,  
we are obliged to carry it.  
We rise and gather momentum, the dull strength  
that pushes us through crowds.  
And then the young boy gives me directions  
so avidly. A woman holds the glass door open,  
Waits patiently for my empty body to pass through.

All day it continues, each kindness  
reaching toward another- a stranger  
singing to no one as I pass on the path, trees  
offering their blossoms, a retarded child  
who lifts his almond eyes and smiles.  
Somehow they always find me, seem even  
to be waiting, determined to keep me  
from myself, from the thing that calls to me  
as it must have once called to them-  
this temptation to step off the edge  
and fall weightless away from the world.

Dorianne Laux

I am comforted by words sent by a friend, based on the Talmud:  
“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world’s grief. Do  
justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not  
obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon  
it.”

--Charlie Clements, 2003

## RESURRECTING NOT THE PERSON, BUT THE PERSONALITY

By David Herndon

Easter

8 April 2007

First Unitarian Church

Pittsburgh, PA

### ANCIENT READING

Matthew 28:1-10

Now after the Sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulcher.

And behold there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it.

His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow.

And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men.

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

"He is not here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay."

"Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you."

So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.

Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."

### MODERN READING

"Rescuers Tell of Hero Who Put Others First"

By Phil Gailey

There was a hero, name unknown, in today's plane crash into the iced-over waters of the Potomac River.

To the rescuers in the helicopter, he was only a head in the water, a balding man, perhaps in his mid-50's, with a heavy mustache.

He was clinging with five others to the tail section of the Air Florida 737, the only part of the plane still afloat. The helicopter crew, Donald W. Usher and M. Eugene Windsor of the Federal Park Police, threw down a yellow ring life preserver attached to a rope.

"He could have gone on the first trip," said the pilot, Officer Usher. "We threw the ring to him first, but he passed it to somebody else," a man who was bleeding badly from a head injury.

"We went back five times, and each time he kept passing the ring to someone else, including three ladies who were hanging onto the tail section," Mr. Usher said. Finally, after making several trips and plucking everyone else from the water, the helicopter returned to pick up the man who had put the others first.

"We flew back out to get him but he was gone," Officer Usher said.

"We really want to know who he was. That gentleman put everyone else ahead of himself. He is the real hero of this whole thing," Mr. Usher continued. "There's no

doubt about it. You have to ask yourself the question: If you were in his situation, a hundred yards from shore and knowing that every minute you were closer to freezing to death, could you do it? I really don't think I could."

"I cried when I did not see him," Officer Windsor said, biting his lip and fighting back tears again as he told the story of the hero to reporters late tonight. "If I could have seen him under the water, I would have jumped in myself to try to pull him out, dead or alive."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Phil Gailey, "Rescuers Tell of Hero Who Put Others First," The New York Times, Thursday, January 14, 1982, p. B6.

Twenty-five years ago, on Easter Sunday in 1982, I visited the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. What I heard and saw and felt that morning made a deep impression on me. Later that afternoon, reflecting on my experience, I felt the first stirrings of a call to ministry, and that call grew stronger as I reflected further. That was Easter; by September I was a student at our Unitarian Universalist theological school in Chicago.

What was so powerful about that particular Sunday morning? First, it was unexpected. I was living in New Jersey at the time, and I had traveled to Washington, D.C., to attend the wedding of a high school friend. On Sunday, I wanted to go visit one of the wonderful museums in that city—the National Gallery, perhaps, or maybe one of the Smithsonian museums. But unfortunately none of the museums were open until the afternoon. What to do in the morning? Well, why not go to church? I did not realize that it was Easter; at the time, my focus did not include keeping track of holidays. Thus, I was not expecting the celebratory energy. I was not expecting the wonderful music. And I was not expecting such extraordinary preaching.

One thing I need to tell you about the All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C., is that the congregation was about half white and half African-American, or so it appeared to me. The All Souls Unitarian Church is located about a mile north of the White House, and once upon a time the surrounding neighborhoods were mostly white and the congregation was mostly white. By 1982, however, the surrounding neighborhoods included a substantial number of African-Americans, and so did the All Souls Unitarian Church.

One other thing I need to tell you about that church is that the minister was African-American. The Rev. David Eaton came from a Methodist background in the South. Later he concluded that theologically he was a Unitarian Universalist. When I heard him preach on that Easter Sunday twenty-five years ago, I was quite astonished. For he was delivering a fine Unitarian Universalist message, yet he was preaching with a style often associated with African-American ministers. And that leads me to the second reason why that particular Sunday was so powerful for me. David Eaton spoke about what he believed, not what he disbelieved. He offered a positive message, not a series of denials. Moreover, David Eaton was open to the richness of our theological heritage. Yes, he came to his message from a thoughtful, rational, scholarly perspective. But at the

same time he came to his message with deep appreciation for the emotional power of traditional symbols and stories. Twenty-five years later, I still vividly recall his language: with regard to Jesus, he affirmed not the resurrection of the person, but rather the personality.

The music carried forward this same approach: it was positive, and it was open to the richness of our theological heritage. The children's choir sang; the adult choir sang; and—surprise!—the gospel choir sang. Now maybe you have never imagined that a Unitarian Universalist church could have a gospel choir, but they did. In fact, as some of you may remember, the Jubilee Singers of the All Souls Unitarian Church came to sing here at the First Unitarian Church back in 1994 as part of our first Unitarian Universalist Folk Festival. The Jubilee Singers were started by Ysaye Barnwell, who has been a member of the All Souls Unitarian Church for many years. By 1982, however, Ysaye Barnwell was no longer conducting the Jubilee Singers, because she had moved on to establish the singing group called Sweet Honey in the Rock. This leads me to the third reason why that particular Sunday was so powerful for me. I was entranced by the multicultural experience I was witnessing. These folks were not just talking about working on the challenges of anti-racism. They were enjoying the fruits of that work.

Now I am a lifelong Unitarian Universalist, but I had never experienced our faith tradition in quite that way before. The energy, the positive message, the appreciation for our theological heritage, the institutional strength, the multiculturalism, the extraordinary music—all this was quite powerful for me, and I said to myself: If this is what Unitarian Universalism can be, then find me a dotted line to sign, for I want to be part of this.

The vision of Unitarian Universalism that I experienced that Easter morning twenty-five years ago is a vision that I have kept close to my heart ever since. I am glad to be serving an urban church, a church in a city. In my preaching I have attempted to present positive messages, to talk about what I believe, not what I disbelieve. I have remained open to our theological heritage, bringing to that heritage a critique grounded on reason and scholarship, but also bringing to that heritage a willingness to listen for messages that I can affirm, as well as messages that have challenged me to grow as I have come to understand them more deeply. Recognizing the importance of music in the life of a religious community, I have welcomed opportunities to strengthen and expand the role of music. All these aspects of my ministry over the years I trace straight back to what I experienced that one Sunday at the All Souls Unitarian Church.

I once wrote David Eaton a letter expressing my gratitude to him. He wrote back with a polite and happy reply, but I'm not sure he truly understood the depth of whatever it was that I brought with me from that particular Sunday, probably because much of what I brought back from that particular Sunday I already had with me when I entered the church building that morning. I had just not put it together. David Eaton once said that the task of ministry is to bring out the best in others, and surely that is what he accomplished with me. Yes, I received a great deal from my visit to the All Souls Unitarian Church—the music, the preaching, the energy, the multiculturalism—but in addition to that something already inside me was unlocked that morning, and thus the

vision of Unitarian Universalism that I experienced that day was a combination of what I saw and heard there plus what I already had with me inside, now unlocked and available in a new way.

Therefore while it was the right thing to do to write a letter of gratitude to David Eaton, my desire to give something back really transcends that mode of expression. At this point I believe that my desire to give something back can best be expressed by following through even further with the vision that I experienced that Sunday twenty-five years ago, a vision that has of course been deepened and strengthened over the years. I believe the time has come in the life of this congregation when we need to have a second minister on our staff. I am finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with the demands and the opportunities. No doubt I could find ways to be more effective and efficient. But not being one hundred and ten percent effective and one hundred and ten percent efficient is not the reason I cannot keep up the demands and opportunities of my position. In truth, this congregation has become large enough and busy enough and complex enough that we need a second minister on our staff.

Now here is the great challenge and the tremendous opportunity that I would like to set before this religious community this morning. Right now, approximately fifty African-American and Hispanic individuals are preparing to become Unitarian Universalist ministers. Right now, Unitarian Universalism has an historic opportunity to fulfill our dreams of promoting diversity, at least in our ministry, and perhaps also in our congregations, by taking extra care to ensure that these individuals have realistic opportunities to serve Unitarian Universalist congregations as they graduate from theological school over the next two or three or four years. The great challenge and the tremendous opportunity that I would like to set before this religious community this morning is creating a new ministry position here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh and then making the commitment to invite an African-American minister to join our staff.

While you reflect on that prospect, I would invite your attention to the second reading we heard this morning, the reading about the man who was on board that airplane that crashed into the bridge over the Potomac River. Time after time, this individual passed the life preserver thrown from the helicopter to other individuals who were also clinging precariously to the tail of the airplane in the cold water on that January morning. But then, on the final trip, the rescuers in the helicopter were not able to find this heroic man. He was gone.

I made a copy of the newspaper article which told this story. This was a very unusual thing for me to do, but this story made an unusually deep impression on me. This sad event took place in January 1982, a couple of months before I visited the All Souls Unitarian Church. I will not say that reading this story pushed me toward ministry, but perhaps in some way it prepared me for my experience that Easter morning. Surely the courageous act of loving self-sacrifice offered by the man in the water echoes the courage of Jesus on his final day. But when I read this story I responded at a much less spiritually articulate level: I think this story posed for me the question Mary Oliver poses

in her poem “The Summer Day” where she inquires: “Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?”

Perhaps my experience at the All Souls Unitarian Church some time later helped me answer that question for myself. But for this morning, I would like to pose this question to this religious community: Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life together as a religious community? Are we content with what we have achieved and what we are doing and who we are? Or can we imagine something even more remarkable?

This morning we celebrate Easter, and thus we encounter that troublesome and challenging word “resurrection.” Twenty-five years ago, I heard David Eaton distinguish between resurrecting the person of Jesus and resurrecting the personality of Jesus. What might it mean to resurrect the personality of Jesus? It seems to me that this would be something that happens inside: the personality of Jesus becomes resurrected, one might say, when we bring into our own lives the personal qualities that we may have appreciated about Jesus: personal qualities such as a willingness to include those who have been excluded, a willingness to act with courage and determination on behalf of justice, a willingness to make no human creation more important than concern for the well-being of other people.

More generally, however, resurrection means new life. And it seems to me that new life means more than the restoration of old life: the Easter story does not say that Jesus came back just as he was before and that everything went back to normal. Affirming the spirit of Easter, therefore, means being open to new life: that is, being open to life that is somehow larger or more significant or deeper or more meaningful than it was before. This is the challenge and opportunity I ask us to consider this morning with regard to making a commitment to inviting an African-American minister to join our staff here at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh. I am asking us to consider new life for our congregation, new life that is larger or more significant or deeper or more meaningful than it was before.

You do not need to remind me that creating a new ministerial position would require substantial financial resources. You do not need to remind me that creating a new ministerial position would call for changes in how we do things. You do not need to remind me that having an African-American minister on our staff might call for some adjustments in our congregational culture and identity.

And I do not need to remind you that the long history of racial injustice is one of two original sins of the United States, the other being the dispossession of the indigenous inhabitants of this land. I do not need to remind you that the continuing effects of that history of racial injustice constitute one of the most difficult challenges facing this nation even today. And I do not need to remind you that one of the most enduring hopes of Unitarian Universalism has been to make a positive contribution toward racial justice. With regard to financial resources, I can just about promise that our Unitarian Universalist sisters and brothers across the country would be willing to help us. I will be

able to say more about that in the near future.

For this morning, however, as we celebrate Easter and the promise of new life, I ask that we hold onto the hope that new life can go beyond the life that has been. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said: “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” May we be willing to take that first step in response to the challenges and opportunities that come to us in all parts of our lives.

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Martin Luther King, Jr., **Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?** NY: Harper and Row, 1967.

Sue, Derald Wing, Christina M. Capodilupo, Gina C. Torino, Jennifer M. Bucceri, Aisha M. B. Holder, Kevin L. Nadal, and Marla Esquilin. *Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life*. **American Psychologist**, May-June 2007, pp. 271-279.

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT QUESTIONS ABOUT THE REPORT

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**From:** Susan Gore [mailto:dr.susan.gore@sbcglobal.net]

**Sent:** Monday, February 11, 2008 2:32 PM

**To:** William Sinkford

**Subject:** Excellence in Ministry project - questions

As I have spoken with these good folks, I have been asked several questions that I hope you can answer for me:

*To whom is the report going (more specifically than the Excellence in Ministry Panel)?*

The project is funded by and part of the work of The Panel on Theological Education, a UUA Board committee that disburses funds from a trust for theological education which was set up by the Shelter Rock congregation in the 1980's. Your report, along with the reports from 7 other projects, will go to the Panel at its April meeting. Decisions about distribution will be made by the Panel, but it is my expectation that these reports will get wide distribution (UUA Board, UU Minister's Association at the very least).

*Will it be made public (or can interviewees get a copy)?*

Interviewees will, of course, get a copy.

*What next steps and timeline are anticipated at this point?*

Decisions about next steps will be made by the Panel, which is very much looking forward to engaging in that conversation.

## APPENDIX D

### ROLE MODELS NAMED BY INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

(in alphabetical order)

Michelle Bentley  
Helen Bishop  
Taquina Boston  
Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley  
John Buehrens  
Victor Carpenter  
James Cohen  
Denny Davidoff  
Danielle DiBona  
Robette Dias  
David Eaton  
Dovie and Luther  
DRUUMM  
Family members  
Bill Gardiner  
Tracey Robinson Harris  
Mel Hoover  
Mwalimu Imara  
Bill Jones  
Paula Cole Jones  
Yielbonzie Charles Johnson  
Keith Kron  
Susan Leslie  
Lola  
Art McDonald  
Rosemary Bray McNatt  
Christopher Moore  
Winnie Norman  
Clark Olsen  
Rebecca Parker  
Lindi Ramsden  
Mark Morrison-Reed  
Anita Farber-Roberts  
Bill Schulz  
Bill Sinkford  
Carleton Elliott Smith  
Thandeka  
Gwen Thomas  
Archene Turner  
Cornell West