

Rev. José Ballester, Liaison – Journey Towards Wholeness Transformation Committee
Spring 2010

Current membership -- José Ballester, *Board Liaison* ; Taquiena Boston, *President's Representative*; Helen Boxwill; Connie Brown; Natalie Fenimore; Janice Marie Johnson, *Co-chair*; Scott McNeill; Michael Sallwasser, *Co-chair*; Arthur Tackman; Wendy von Zirpolo; Tracy Ahlquist, *Staff Support*

...the General Assembly requests that the UUA Board of Trustees establish a committee to monitor and assess our transformation as an anti-racist, multi-cultural institution, and that the Board of Trustees shall report annually to the General Assembly specifically on the programs and resources dedicated to assisting our congregations in carrying out the objectives of this resolution.

--1997 Business Resolution *Toward an Anti-Racist Unitarian Universalist Association*

The Journey Toward Wholeness Transformation Committee's charge is to monitor and assess the work of the Association toward becoming a genuinely anti-racist, anti-oppressive, multicultural institution.

The Journey Towards Wholeness Transformation Committee (JTWTC) continues to monitor and assess the various components of the Unitarian Universalist Association in its efforts to become an anti-racist, anti-oppressive multicultural institution and is currently assessing two UUA Committees: the *Nominating Committee* and the UUA Board's *Committee on Committees*. As part of that assessment, we have contracted Susan Gore to interview approximately 25 members (some past and some present) of those committees. Specifically those members were asked the following questions:

1. Personal background (identity, length of term, other positions, etc).
2. How were you oriented to the work and culture of the committee?
3. How do you understand the mission of the committee and how that relates to anti-racism, anti-oppression, multiculturalism (AR/AO/MC)?
4. Describe a time when you feel the committee was successful in identifying & placing leadership that advanced the goal of having a diversity of social group identities in UUism and/or the larger world. What were the things that made that success possible?
5. Describe a time when you think the committee failed in advancing that goal. What did that failure entail? What would have helped?
6. What kind of institutional support (i.e. policies, guidelines, resources, training, etc.) would be required to increase your committee's success in advancing that goal?
7. What internal or external processes do you see as necessary to be put in place to monitor your committee's effectiveness in advancing that goal?
8. On a personal level, tell us about your own commitment to AR/AO/MC. How do you see that commitment either enhanced/challenged/affirmed/or something other than those choices by your work with the committee?

The results of these interviews will be reported to the UUA Board of Trustees at its October 2010 meeting at the earliest. However some preliminary statistics may be shared by the JTWTC during its 2010 General Assembly workshop.

The JTWTC has held regularly monthly teleconference calls and gathered for its Spring committee meeting in Boston, March 11-13, 2010. In addition to its usual business the committee met with UUA president, the Rev. Peter Morales and had invited the Rev. Dr. Jack Mendelsohn, to share his religious odyssey.

In our conversations with Rev. Morales it was noted that it can sometimes be really difficult to measure what's important in terms of cultural shifts—especially when we're talking about incremental shifts. We need to use both hard objective measures as well as softer ones to try and get a handle on whether shifts are happening or not. How much accountability is the JTWTC's, and how much is the staff's? There's potential there for either nobody to be addressing particular concerns, or two separate bodies to be addressing them. It's always important to have an outside assessment, because you need to know that you're going where you need to; but a bad assessment is worse than no assessment. Institutions make decisions all the time on surveys that are filled out by a small percentage of a given population, assuming that those responses are representative.

Accessibility

Recently the UUA Accessibilities Committee was sun-setted and its monitoring and assessing component was given to the JTWTC. The original charge to the Accessibilities Committee was:

The Accessibilities Committee is a committee of the UUA Board that provides information helpful to the Board in a continued assessment and evaluation of how current policies (or lack thereof) impact the ability of our congregations to meet the needs of people living with disabilities. Meeting the needs of people living with disabilities in this context includes:

- The removal of barriers to participation to involvement in congregational life, including, but not limited to, leadership, fellowship, social action, religious education and worship.
- Congregational advocacy on local and national levels in regard to issues concerning the lives of people living with disabilities.
- Association-wide commitment to increased accessibility of gatherings of Unitarian Universalists (i.e. General Assembly, District meetings, trainings, associate and affiliate organizations, etc.)

The Accessibilities Committee (AC) provides strategic planning, oversight, and support to our congregations to fulfill our commitment to the removal of all barriers - attitudinal, physical, and programmatic - that prevent the full participation of persons with disabilities in the life of our Association.

1. Advise the Board and staff on the development of a strategic plan towards implementation of the recommendations of the Accessibilities Task Force, ensuring

that information and resources reflect current understanding and efforts of disability communities.

2. Monitor and assess progress in implementing the recommendations and report on this progress annually to the Board of Trustees at its April meeting.
3. Advocate regarding disability issues in the UUA, and help create a climate of support, care and affirmation for people with disabilities.

It was noted that some of the people who are members of *Equal Access* are extremely distressed that help will not be forthcoming in the way that it has been in the old structure—namely, if John Doe in Chicago has an accessibility issue, if he goes to the UUA for help, whom can he contact now that the *Office of Accessibility Concerns* has been eliminated? People are concerned about where to go to get help on an individual level, rather than the leadership piece. Congregations also call looking for help, not just individuals. It is understood that there will be a new office/position in the consultancy with people who will be able to respond to those requests. People will be referred to the new office; to the extent that's possible, individual members of *Equal Access* have expertise in a certain area and will be able to recommend experts on various issues. *Equal Access* was built with the idea of having a right relations group that could assist people who had difficulties with their congregations vis-à-vis accessibility. Good Offices training needs to include information around accessibility; if there were a right relations group within *Equal Access*, those people could assist in those trainings.

Levels of Accessibility Response

As previously noted, there are certain levels of Accessibility Response as outlined by the Rhode Island State Council of Churches:

Level 1 – Person with disability enters and the congregation realizes they need to do something. When the person leaves and does not return there is no need for urgency.

Level 2 – Congregation makes changes that appear to be adequate but they are not.

- Ramps are too steep or not easily accessible
- Lifts require someone with a key
- Electronic aides cease to function
- Large print books cannot be found

Level 3 – Congregation is aware of the inadequate response of Level 2 and supplements with volunteer involvement

Level 4 – Congregation retrofits facility and acquires proper aides

Level 5 – Congregation builds new or purchases proper facility

When Rev. Mendelsohn was scheduled to meet with the JTWTC we noted some deficiencies in the UUA facilities at Pickett and Elliott Houses. While the entrance ramp is of the proper grade and leads to an accessible entry, the entrance to the ramp has a chain with a sign stating that the way is to private property. While the chain is easily unclapsed and reclapsed it is difficult if an individual is in a wheel chair or a scooter.

The transition from Elliott House to Pickett House requires the use of a lift from the kitchen, down the steps to the living room/parlor.

In order to use the lift, a key is required. Initially the committee was informed that we needed to request the key 24 hours prior to the time the lift would be needed. Fortunately the staff at P&E were able to locate the key in time to accommodate Rev. Mendelsohn.

Given this experience, as well as the situation on the first floor of 25 Beacon Street, I wonder if a thorough assessment of the UUA's facilities might not be warranted.