

By Norma Poinsett

Here we are in the city that hosted our 1968 General Assembly. Some of you recall the fire storm that raged across America back then. It was a storm fueled by the mass beatings and jailings of black students in the South as they bravely staged lunch-counter sit-ins and freedom rides, or risked their lives for "integrated education" and voter registration.

These courageous kids dramatized the widespread plight of Blacks in 1968 when 40.9% of us lived in poverty compared with 11.9% of whites. Some 7% of us were unemployed or under-employed compared with 3% of whites. Our family income was only 58% that of whites.

Therefore, I was not shocked by the angry black rebellion which finally ignited the UUA in 1968, echoing dramatic events in the larger society. For example, President Lyndon Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders had warned: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white-separate and unequal." Perhaps, more accurately, the commission could have reminded the nation that it had never in its history been one society. The commission blamed mounting urban riots on "white racism" and urged massive aid to the black community.

This was only part of the social ambiance that triggered a rash of black caucuses around the nation, including the rise of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) in 1967. It emerged out of an emergency call for Unitarian Universalists to respond relevantly to mounting urban rebellions. Stressing the words "empowerment" and "self-determination," we argued that black people should take charge of affairs affecting black people. We argued that only we could determine what our values should be and what was good for our communities. We were experts on our chaotic condition, we contended, because we faced racism daily both north and south.

The Black Caucus urged the UUA to establish a Black Affairs Council (BAC) and called for increased Black representation on all of the UUA'S policy-making boards and committees. We also urged the UUA to commit \$250,000 a year to BAC for four years to fund community and economic development projects in Black America.

Out of the ensuing debate came Fullbac, a white group which teamed with us to secure full funding for BAC. Concurrently, a more conventional, integrationist oriented group called BAWA (black and white action) emerged to compete with BUUC.

The black empowerment conflict reached a fever pitch at the 1968 General Assembly in the Renaissance Hotel here in Cleveland when delegates voted an unprecedented 836 to 326 to form and fund BAC. They also voted not to give BAWA funding or affiliate status. However, when the 1969 GA in Boston proposed to allocate a quarter million to BAC and \$50,000 to BAWA, BAC insisted that either the UUA should or should not support Black empowerment. Once again, the delegates voted to fund BAC solely. Even so, the Cleveland GA vote to fund BAC for four years was modified by a UUA board ruling that BAC appropriations would have to be re-affirmed annually. When delegates in Boston were unable to reinstate the Cleveland GA'S intent, BUUC walked out, followed later by Fullbac and other BUUC supporters.

By 1971, not only BAC but Fullbac and BAWA ceased to function. Hence, an estimated 1,000, disappointed African Americans left the UUA. I remained--not because I disagreed with them--but to continue addressing covert and overt racism within the UUA. At Cleveland, I remember lifting up Beacon Press which had been ignored at a mini-assembly discourse on "communications and publications". After all, Beacon had been a major source of books on social justice and human relations at my high school and college libraries in my native Mississippi.

To enhance such consciousness raising, I served on many committees. Among them was the UUA Racial Justice Curriculum Committee to remedy a lack of materials about Blacks in the UUA'S Religious Education dept.

My Commission on Appraisal work included research for the book entitled *Empowerment--One Denomination's Quest for Social Justice*. When the "Black Concerns Working Group" formed in 1985, I challenged the UUA'S tiny allocation of \$5,000 to the group to eradicate racism within the Association.

Similar consciousness raising underscores my service on the boards of trustees of the UUA, the UU Service Committee and the Meadville/Lombard Theological School. For a very long time, now, I have been swamped by my UUA work. I refuse to abandon it, however, because I believe the UUA is truly committed to the worth and dignity of all persons, strives for justice, equity and compassion in human affairs, encourages spiritual growth, and envisions a world community with peace, liberty and justice for all.

I spoke up at my first GA in this city 33 years ago. today, I am still here! taking a stand and standing.

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