Small Group Ministry Program for

Darkening the Doorways Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism by Mark D. Morrison-Reed

This four-session program, developed with the assistance of several of the book's contributors, helps readers to explore, understand, and integrate *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism.* The book offers a historical review of the experience of African Americans in Unitarianism, Universalism, and Unitarian Universalism; it describes who these women and men were, why they found liberal religion compelling, how they were received by their Euro-American co-religionists and in their own community, and how the pervasive cultural attitudes over the past two hundred years kept the number of African-American Unitarian Universalists small. We mourn our some of our white religious ancestors' decisions because we inherit and live with the consequences. But as Sharon Dittmar points out, we have the opportunity to redeem them and our tradition. They cannot do this work, but we can.

Following the structure of the book, this program is divided into four sessions: "The Unitarians," "The Universalists," "The Empowerment Saga," and "Still Seeking a Way." While most of the questions focus on the book itself, some address the reader's own experience. In the context of a book discussion group, such personal sharings need to be accepted and honored rather than debated. Discussing issues of race and racism can be difficult because feelings of shame, anger, and despair are likely to emerge. In examining this history, we are not just dealing with facts and ideas but also with our regrets and hopes. Creating an environment—that is, a framework and process—in which one can safely express feelings as well as ideas is necessary. Without this framework and process, participants will be reticent to risk sharing their own often painful stories, and the conversation, while intellectually stimulating, will not help people process at the deeper level where lessons about race were first learned.

The structure of each of the four sessions, which are designed to run about two hours, is as follows: A chalice lighting and opening words remind us that this is ultimately a religious enterprise in which we are engaged. Assuming there will be some variation in attendance, each session then begins with introductions from both the leader and participants. The next part of the session gives each person an opportunity to share her or his reflections while the others listen deeply and without comment. Each participant always has the right to pass. There are two go-rounds for these reflections. In the first, participants choose an event or person from that week's section of the book that highlights a missed opportunity, loss, or rejection that speaks to what the participant mourns. In the second go-round, each person identifies something in that same section to celebrate. Following the second go-round, the leader names any themes that have emerged and asks if there are particular questions participants want to have addressed. Leaders can then add these questions to those provided at the end of each session. The leader then turns to the complete list of questions and chooses those most appropriate for each group and congregational situation. The first three sessions end with a final brief go-round that asks participants to name one thing they have learned, before the leader offers the closing words. The final session concludes by turning participants' thoughts toward the future and encouraging them to take action.

At the end of the four sessions outlined here, the leader will find a list of additional resources that can be used and/or referred to in preparation for and following the sessions.

THE UNITARIANS

Light Chalice

Opening Words

As we face a troubled and puzzled world, we too are troubled and puzzled. As our fond dreams remain unrealized and our bright hopes of yesterday wither in the bitter disappointments of today, our courage fails, our spirits droop, our faith trembles, and, frustrated, we bow our heads in despair.

Nevertheless, we come to God in this hour ...

As we pray for peace in our time, O God, may we ourselves be at peace with the world, with ourselves, and with Thee. May we know that without love there will never be peace. Teach us therefore to love.

Egbert Ethelred Brown (1875-1956)

Introduction

- Leader introduces herself or himself.
- Explain the program--time, date, format, intent (see introduction to this program). Respond to any questions participants may have.
- Ask each participant to give her or his name and to describe in one sentence why she or he is here.

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and, during this time, to recall an event or person from the section on Unitarianism that represents a missed opportunity, loss, or rejection that spoke to them in particular. Ask them to try to identify what it is that they mourn and why.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of the group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section on Unitarianism that we can now celebrate.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of the group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Sum up the themes you have heard emerge.

Discussion

Ask if there are questions participants want to make sure are addressed during this session. Add these questions to the ones provided here, and choose the questions most appropriate for your group.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the session, wind up the discussion.

Ask each participant to name something they learned or felt during this session that they will take with

them as they depart.

Remind participants that the next session is on Universalism (pp. 87-149).

Closing Words

Life is a precious gift of nature, to be lived at its best, to be enjoyed and wisely used.... Those who grapple courageously with the event of life will get more joy out of living. Those who so appreciate life and are living on the high plane are ready to die at any time. The death of the individual is the price we pay for being, but the eternal life stream flows on from generation to generation.

Lewis A. McGee (1893-1979)

Discussion Questions for "The Unitarians"

Introduction (pp. 3-6)

• In 1851 Theodore Parker preached, "I have in my church black men--fugitive slaves. They are the crown of my apostleship, the seal of my ministry. It becomes me to look after their bodies in order to 'save their souls.' This has brought us into the most intimate connection with the sin of slavery. I have been obliged to take my own parishioners into my house to keep them out of the clutches of the kidnapper.... Yes, I have had to arm myself. I have written my sermons with a pistol in my desk--loaded, with a cap on the nipple, and ready for action." He also wrote, "[I have] no doubt [that] the African race is greatly inferior to the Caucasian in general intellectual power, and also in that instinct for liberty which is strong in the Teutonic family." Can you reconcile his two positions?

A Cold Shoulder for William Jackson (pp. 7-17)

- New England saw a big increase in institutionalized racism through the first half of the nineteenth century--as did the whole United States. Yet in the Confederation period, during and immediately after the Revolutionary War, white New Englanders (and most of the Unitarians who rejected Jackson were New Englanders) applied revolutionary ideals of equality to all men. Why did they abandon their revolutionary ideals?
- New Bedford was racially enlightened enough, had a large enough black population, and was generally liberal enough to have supported a black Unitarian congregation through the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth century. If that had happened, how would the existence of a black Unitarian congregation have changed the history of U.S. Unitarianism? In the loss of that possibility, what did Unitarianism lose?

Francis Ellen Watkins Harper (pp. 18-23)

In an address delivered in 1891, Harper said, "What I ask of American Christianity is not to show us more creeds, but more of Christ; not more rites and ceremonies, but more religion glowing with love and replete with life" (p. 21). In Fannie Barrier Williams's 1893 speech at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, she similarly called for "more religion and less church ... less theology and more of human brotherhood, less declamation and more common sense and love for truth" (p. 33). What were Harper and Williams decrying, and what were they seeking? Do they apply to Unitarian Universalism as well as other religions?

Peter H. Clark (pp. 24-29)

• Why was having a mixed-race educational administration and teachers important to Clark? Why do you think the graduation rate of African-American students in Ohio declined in the absence of a diverse administration and faculty? Compare the situation in Ohio to that of Goodloe in Maryland and the Jordan Training and Normal School in Suffolk. What was similar and what was different?

Fannie Barrier Williams (pp. 30-36)

• Williams harshly criticized Christians who used the Bible to justify slavery and other ways to degrade blacks, male and female, and to prevent them from using their abilities for personal advancement. She was a strong advocate for the education of African Americans, equal opportunities for employment, nonsegregated housing, and voting rights for all women. How is the Bible still used today to discriminate against groups or individuals with regard to schools, jobs, advancement, housing, public office, marriage, and so on?

• As a child, Williams had many white friends. She first met racial oppression when she went South after the Civil War to teach in schools for blacks and discovered that "to be a colored woman is to be discredited, mistrusted, and often meanly hated" in white society. Later, in the North, discrimination also affected her, though she found her light skin to be an asset for acceptance. How far has white society come in erasing intolerance against black people and other ethnic groups? Does the shade of color still make a difference in acceptance, especially for women?

"Rev. Ethelred Brown Is Symbol of Radicalism in Pulpits in Harlem" (pp. 50-52)

• Egbert Ethelred Brown, Peter H. Clark (pp. 24-29), and Jeff Campbell (pp. 128-pp. 139) all ran for office as Socialists. Speculate about why they found Socialism attractive. William H.G. Carter (pp. 53-58) and David Eaton (pp. 189-199) also ran for office. Why were they attracted to politics?

William H.G. Carter (pp. 53-58)

• What were the differences between the Harlem Community Church (pp. 50-52) and the Unitarian Brotherhood Church in Cincinnati, and what is the significance of those differences?

The Candidacy of Eugene Sparrow (pp. 75-82)

- What was the major lost opportunity that the American Unitarian Association (AUA) experienced by not placing Eugene Sparrow in a parish? What, if anything, can you find to celebrate in the essay about Sparrow's life, the AUA, and the Detroit Unitarian Universalist Church?
- What do you think the AUA, or its successor, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), has learned since the Sparrow experience about placement of African-American ministers in congregations?
- If the dream of successfully settling African Americans as ministers in our congregations is to be fulfilled, what programs and/or initiatives are needed within our faith community to specifically attract African Americans to our ministry and successfully settle them in congregations?

THE UNIVERSALISTS

Light Chalice

Opening Words

The church is doing its greatest work through the school. Our membership is growing in a way that can not be seen now. But after many days we shall hope to see some of the fruit of our labor. The seed is being sown on good ground. Our only hope is among the young people. These we are reaching every day through the day school. The intellectual condition of the older people is not such as to take in our faith; the younger people can do it only as they are trained in the school. They can, and do, go out and tell what they have learned in the school. Here is the beginning of our church among the colored people.

Joseph F. Jordan (1863-1929)

Introduction

- Offer impressions from the first session.
- Ask each participant to give his or her name and in one sentence to offer one thing that stands out from the previous session.

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section on Universalism that represents a missed opportunity, loss, or rejection that spoke to them in particular. Ask them to try to identify what it is that they mourn and why.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of the group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section on Universalism when there was something that we can now celebrate.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Sum up the themes you have heard emerge.

Discussion

Ask if there are questions participants want to make sure get addressed during this session. Add these questions to the ones provided here, and choose the questions most appropriate for your group.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the session, wind up the discussion.

Ask each participant to name something they learned or felt during this session that they will take with them as they depart.

Remind them that the next session is on the Empowerment Saga (pp. 151-230).

Closing Words

I have no doubt but that this young man did this thing because he was in love rather than because he had a desire to solve a race problem. But that is love's unique way of solving problems. The love in the universe is mightier than the mind of human beings. The question arises, should we adjust our lives to meet the demands of our generation, or should we adjust them to meet the demands of eternity?

Letter to the Editor, *Christian Leader*, August 26, 1939

Discussion Questions for "The Universalists"

Thomas E. Wise (pp. 98-102)

• Part of the tension between Wise and the commission sent to review the Tidewater missions focused on educational philosophy. Don Speed Smith Goodloe (pp. 38-41) and Joseph F. Jordan (pp. 110, 117, and 342) also had to come to terms with the question of whether education should impart practical industrial skills or prepare the most talented. What is the significance of this debate, and how did these educators resolve it?

Joseph F. Jordan (pp. 107-115)

• Given the many hundreds of thousands of dollars the Universalist General Convention was able to raise for its Japanese Mission and for Armenian Relief, why was the amount contributed to the Suffolk Mission so meager? And what was the consequence of this lack of support?

Annie B. Willis (pp. 116-124)

• What is the difference in values between the Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Service Committee? What were the limitations of each?

"Affirmation of Social Principles" (pp. 125-127)

• In the 1940s, there seems to have been a shift in both Unitarian and Universalist attitudes with regard to race. What role did World War II play? Compare the AUA Race Resolution (pp. 59-63) and the Universalist Church of America (UCA) Social Principles. Discuss the similarities and differences.

Jeffrey W. Campbell and Marguerite Campbell Davis (pp. 128-139)

- How did Jeff Campbell's involvement in the Nashua congregation and later his decision to become a minister force the Universalists to live up to their espoused values? Today, where do we fall short of our values, and who is calling us to live up to them?
- Francis Davis and Marguerite Campbell were high school sweethearts. Did you ever date someone of a different race or ethnic group? If so, what were the responses of your family and friends? Have you had experience with mixed marriage? What do you think it felt like to be Marguerite and Francis and to have your marriage attacked in the denominational journal? Why were their marriage and that of Clarence Bertrand Thompson to Maravene Kennedy so controversial? What has changed?

Universalism's Theological Conundrum (pp. 140-149)

• Joseph F. Jordan believed that the young people being taught in the mission school were the most likely candidates to become Universalists. Why didn't it happen? Do you think the Universalist message that "God is Love" can speak to African Americans today? If so, why now and not *before*?

THE EMPOWERMENT SAGA

Light Chalice

Opening Words

Indeed, integration as defined in the 1960s was cultural suicide. African Americans could enter American society's big house provided they were willing to accept its stress on Western thought and institutions that embodied a myopic and limited view of the world while perpetuating the myth of civilization as a European monopoly. That is, African Americans could enter the big house provided they left their traditions and values parked at the door.

Alex Poinsett

Introduction

- Leader offers impressions from the previous session.
- Ask each participant to give his or her name and in one sentence to offer one thing that stands out from the previous session.

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section on Empowerment when there was a missed opportunity, loss, or crisis that spoke to them in particular. Ask them to try to identify what it is that they mourn and why.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of the group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section on Empowerment that we can now celebrate.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Sum up the themes you have heard emerge.

Discussion

Ask if there are questions participants want to make sure get addressed during this session. Add these questions to the ones provided here, and choose the questions most appropriate for your group.

Fifteen minutes before the end of the session, wind up the discussion.

Ask each participant to name something they learned or felt during this session that they will take with them as they depart.

Remind participants that the next session covers "Still Seeking a Way" and the "Afterword" (pp. 231-310).

Closing Words

Ask not what the world needs.

Ask what makes you come alive.

Then go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

Howard Thurman (1899-1981)

Discussion Questions for "The Empowerment Saga"

Introduction (pp. 153-159)

• In *Coming of the Black Man*, Ben Scott wrote, "In actual practice integration has not been understood by whites to mean loss of 'whiteness.' There has been the assumption that everyone would finally merge into the majority culture when he was 'ready' and if the majority could be induced to allow it. Whites who advocate integration do not expect a serious dislocation of their own identity." The development of the hymnal *Hymns for the Celebration of Life* is an example of this assumption. Have our assumptions changed?

"Racism for the UUA?" (pp. 173-175)

• Do you agree or disagree with Kenneth Clark when he writes, "I personally question the validity of pride based on color of skin whether white or black" (p. 174)? Did the phrase "Black is Beautiful" make sense in the particular context of the 1960s?

"Martin Luther King Jr." (pp. 178-181)

• What impact did Martin Luther King Jr.'s death have on your own life or the lives of those close to you? How and why?

The Black Affairs Council and Unitarian Universalists for Black and White Action (pp. 185-188)

• The UUA Commission on Race and Religion had ten members. Five were African-American, one Hispanic, and the other four Euro-Americans. The Black Affairs Council had eight members: five African Americans and three Euro-Americans. The Commission was appointed by the UUA Board, while BAC was elected by the membership of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. Why do you think BAWA and some others call BAC a separatist organization?

David Hilliard Eaton (pp. 189-199)

• Why did the congregation at All Souls Church in Washington DC succeed in becoming a model of inclusion and diversity during David Eaton's ministry?

"Blacks, Get Your Guns" (pp. 200-202)

• How would you feel after hearing this sermon? Given that the concepts of systemic oppression, white privilege, and antiracism were not part of the UU vocabulary or consciousness in 1969, how would you have addressed the issues Mwalimu Imara raised? And what would you have done?

The Black Humanist Fellowship of Liberation (pp. 203-214)

• What do you imagine that members of the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland were feeling when they voted to give the building and half the endowment away? What could they have done differently? Was the vision they had for a black UU congregation a possible one? Why, or why not?

The Empowerment Paradox (pp. 215-229)

• Had you heard of, or been involved in, the Empowerment Controversy? If so, what were you told, or what do you remember? Does this recounting change your perspective? If so, how? If not, why?

STILL SEEKING A WAY

Light Chalice

Opening Words

Why are we still talking about inclusivity and diversity when we have done so little to make them real? Why are we still looking pained about the lack of diversity in the denomination? Because diversity, inclusivity, is terribly hard, terribly uncomfortable, definitely unsettling, and often quite frustrating.

What I know about being inclusive-- crossing from culture to culture, learning the language of diversity-- is that it's the work of a lifetime. It's hard to accept people who are not like you, who don't talk the way you do, or believe the things you believe, or dress or vote as you do. It's even harder to appreciate them for the things about them that are not like you, to find them interesting and fun, to enjoy the learning that's part of the experience, and to acknowledge, finally, that you may have to agree to disagree.

The truth is this: If there is no justice, there will be no peace. We can read Thoreau and Emerson to one another, quote Rilke and Alice Walker and Howard Thurman, and think good and noble thoughts about ourselves. But if we cannot bring justice into the small circle of our own individual lives, we cannot hope to bring justice to the world. And if we do not bring justice to the world, none of us is safe and none of us will survive. Nothing that Unitarian Universalists need to do is more important than making justice real-- here, where we are. Hard as diversity is, it is our most important task.

Rosemary Bray McNatt

Introduction

- Offer impressions from the previous session.
- Ask each participant to give their name and in one sentence to offer one thing that stands out from the previous session.

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section "Still Seeking a Way" that represents a missed opportunity, loss, or crisis that spoke to them in particular. Ask them to try to identify what it is that they mourn and why.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Ask the participants to enter into three minutes of silence and to recall an event or person from the section "Still Seeking a Way" that we can now celebrate and build upon.

Silence

Sharing (Depending on the size of group, the leader may need to designate a time limit, such as two minutes per person.)

Sum up the themes you have heard emerge.

Discussion

Ask if there are questions participants want to make sure get addressed during this session. Add these questions to the ones provided here, and choose the questions most appropriate for your group.

Thirty minutes before the end of the session, wind up the discussion.

Read

We can't change the past, but we can learn from it and build on it.

We can't control the future, but we can shape it and enhance the possibilities for our children and grandchildren.

We can't discern in the present the fullness of our actions and their impact, but we can be pioneers in our time, exploring fully the crevices and cracks where knowledge and new insights might be found. We can explore our spectrum of relationships and confront our complacency and certainty about the way things are.

We can dare to face ourselves in our entirety,

to understand our pain,

to feel the tears,

to listen to our frustration and confusion, and

to discover new capacities and capabilities that will empower and transform us.

Melvin Hoover

Ask each participant to reflect for three minutes on their dream for Unitarian Universalism and what they will do to nudge their life and our faith tradition in that direction.

Thank everyone for participating.

Closing Words

If, recognizing the interdependence of all life,

we strive to build community,

the strength we gather will be our salvation.

If you are black and I am white,

IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If you are female and I am male,

IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If you are older and I am younger,

IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If you are liberal and I am conservative,

IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If you are straight and I am gay, IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If you are Christian and I am Jewish, IT WILL NOT MATTER.

If we join spirits as brothers and sisters, the pain of our aloneness will be lessened . . . and that does matter.

IN THIS SPIRIT, WE BUILD COMMUNITY AND MOVE TOWARD RESTORATION.

Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley

Discussion Questions for "Still Seeking a Way"

William Roland Jones (pp. 238-243)

• What "absolutes" does contemporary Unitarian Universalism unconsciously embrace? If we truly promote and live out "pluralism" rather than merely espouse it, what will be required of us?

The Sojourner Truth Congregation (pp. 245-258)

- In 1981, Yvonne Seon became the first African-American woman ever to be ordained into the UU ministry. How far has society come in erasing prejudice against women in general with regard to leadership in politics, business, and religious denominations? Could a black woman (or any woman) today be elected to the presidency of the Unitarian Universalist Association or of the United States? What more should all of us do to help accomplish a bias-free society? What more can our Unitarian Universalist denomination and church communities do?
- David Eaton warned Yvonne Seon that Unitarian Universalists would be suspicious of her "nonrational spirituality," while Bill Jones's religious humanism seems to fit in more comfortably with the UU mainstream. Can we be truly racially and culturally diverse while shunning Seon's "contemporary healing ministry" or other ministries and theologies that are more Christian in orientation?
- Change is difficult. The Sojourner Truth congregation, like the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland (pp. 207-211), experienced conflicting visions of what it meant to be diverse. Why are such conflicts, when different visions collide, so difficult to resolve?
- Diversity is a challenge. One challenge the Sojourner Truth congregation faced was when a member advertised in a gay publication without going through the congregation's board. It created anxiety among some members that the congregation was being "taken over." How does one deal with anxiety when a congregation begins to change, sometimes in unexpected ways?

"Affirming Beauty in Darkness" (pp. 259-263)

• List other examples of how *light/white* is used in contrast to *dark/black* in the English language as a metaphor for good and bad. What is the impact on our consciousness and attitudes when such a metaphor is pervasive in a culture? Can you think of other ways that language shapes consciousness?

"Pioneering Minister Is Helping Troubled Area" (pp. 268-271)

• Both the Third Unitarian Church of Chicago and the Unitarian Society of Cleveland found themselves in an economically distressed African-American community. Compare the congregations. Did the era make a difference? What are the similarities and differences, and what learnings can you draw from their experiences?

Reconciliation with the Carter Family (pp. 279-283)

• As the First Unitarian Church of Cincinnati moved toward Reconciliation Sunday, its members grew increasingly anxious. What fears and feelings fueled their anxiety? What was their minister's response? Anxiety can feel overwhelming when you do not have ways of naming or processing it. As you move ahead with the work of diversity and engage in conversations about race and ethnicity, what frameworks would you find helpful?

The First (pp. 284-296)

- Bill Sinkford reports that the question he was asked most frequently during his presidency was "How can we attract more people of color to our congregations?" He did not answer but rather suggested that the questioners reflect on where they choose to live, where their congregations are located, who their friends are, and who they invite to dinner before lamenting on the lack of diversity in our congregations. Consider your own life. What are your answers to these questions? Name one small way that you might live differently than you do that would bring more diversity into your life.
- What experiences leave you feeling, ultimately, hopeful about the future of Unitarian Universalism in regard to its diversity?

Afterword (pp. 297-310)

- The minister of a Unitarian Universalist congregation that claims to value diversity recounts that when they hired an African-American music director who was unfamiliar with UU music, some members were "insulted by his need to learn and angry when he played music they deemed too Christian. When he played the piano he would raise his hands in praise. Some members cringed and asked him to stop." This suggests that the observation that "we would settle for looking different rather than being different" (p. 306) is correct and, as Bill Jones says, "Our espoused principles are not our principles in practice" (p. 242). Why is this so? How do we meet this challenge?
- If we accept that religion always carries an expression of a particular culture—for example, Unitarianism in Transylvania, the Khasi Hills, or Uganda--could you imagine a cultural African-American UU congregation succeeding in your city? How would it change your community? How would it change your understanding of Unitarian Universalism?

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

"Personality not Pigmentation" by Jeffrey Campbell, *Christian Leader*, Feb. 24, 1940, pp. 180-183. Available at www.uua.org/companionresources (under *Darkening the Doorways*).

"The Black Humanist Fellowship," in the Tapestry of Faith Lifespan Curriculum. Available at www.uua.org/religiouseducation/curricula/tapestryfaith/resistancetransformation/workshop12/workshopplan/activities/182662.shtml.

"In Their Own Words: A Conversation with Participants in the Black Empowerment Movement Within the Unitarian Universalist Association, January 20, 2001." Edited by Alicia McNary Forsey, Starr King School for Ministry. Available at www.sksm.edu/research/publications/itow.pdf.