

Interview with Jack Mendelsohn

For 41 years in the ministry I've been involved in what we generally call "civil rights." That's been a cause very dear to my heart for all those years. It was a natural progression, it seemed to me, from the victorious years of the civil rights movement into political empowerment—voting empowerment—particularly, access to public places, all of those victories of the civil rights movement. It was a natural step to go then into the kind of personal empowerment of black people themselves. It seemed to me that one of the most visible effects of the results of the civil rights era was that black people themselves sensed a whole new feeling about their own empowerment as people. And when we were confronted in our denomination by a group of black Unitarian Universalists, who said in effect to us, "Look, we are very much concerned about our own empowerment, and we want to be able to do that out of the context of our own history. We want to be able to bring this to you through our experience, not just from your experience." And so they created a caucus, the Black Caucus, and that was very jarring to a lot of the white members of the Unitarian Universalist churches and fellowships, but not to me. I hadn't any problem with that at all. In fact I welcomed it, because it seemed to me that that might make it possible for more of us who are white to be able genuinely to get some feeling for the world as it's seen through black eyes. And they would not always be filtered through the way we do things, the way we conduct our business, the way we handle matters, that we'd begin to see that there is a black experience and that it is represented in people's lives in the ways in which they express themselves. And so I was not offended.

I found it very hard to believe that so many of my white colleagues in the Unitarian Universalist ministry couldn't understand what was taking place in the lives of our black members and ministers, and couldn't tolerate it, couldn't have the patience to see it through, couldn't live with it, and so I felt a great deal of despair about our movement and an enormous sympathy for the black Unitarian Universalists who, it seemed to me, were trying so hard to affect a change in our lives that was truly significant for us. And so in the end, when crushed by a failure to have the UUA in General Assembly affirm the claims upon us of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, in despair they walked out of General Assembly in Boston in 1969. And I personally went after them. I begged them to stay to give me a chance to go back into the assembly and identify to them that they had a lot of support among us. And so I went back into the assembly and I announced that I was going to leave with them; I was going to leave this assembly—withdraw from the assembly with them. And that I invited anybody else who wanted to leave with me to come and assemble at Arlington Street Church, which was really just a block away, so that together, we could consider what to do next about what was happening in our denomination. And I think almost a half of all the white delegates walked out with me.

My life was marked from then on. I was the leader of the walk-out from the General Assembly. I was labeled a non-institutionalist—I put special interests over the institutional interests of the denomination, and all that kind of thing. And I've had to live with that for all these years. But because of what happened in Boston, I was invited, I think, almost directly on the basis of that, to be the minister of the First Unitarian Church in Chicago, which was the most genuinely multiracial church that we had. This was a church which, seeing the denomination fail in this field, was determined that it was not going to fail, that it was going to be the kind of church that the denomination ought to be: genuinely open to its constituency, black and white; unafraid of the real existence of black people, with a black experience and a black consciousness, and a set of black goals within their midst, not necessarily to be filtered through all

the other procedures that the white congregation was perhaps used to.

Mark Morrison-Reed: Now, what difference did it make for the denomination?

JM: Well, we've spent all the years since 1969 trying to recover, in my opinion, from our failure to appreciate what it really means to be a multiracial religious body. We failed. It took us ever so long to understand in any degree why we failed. And so we have moved along these many years now with a total loss of momentum in cultivating an inclusiveness to our movement that is racially inclusive, that is inclusive of different historical experiences, that is inclusive of different economic strata, different aspirations in life. We've remained constant as an overwhelmingly white, highly educated, middle-class denomination.

MM-R: How do you see the future?

JM: Well, I'm once again hopeful—I'm wary, having had the experience that I've had. But I see signs of hope. I see that among our leadership, we now have people who have a much better appreciation of history, who are much more open to the times in which they live relative to inclusiveness. And I see also some specific things happening. I see experiments being tried now, with different kinds of congregations which from the beginning are perfectly open to the idea that in this neighborhood you might have an all-black UU congregation or in that neighborhood you might have an all-hispanic UU congregation. And I see an interest now in the black members of the UU congregations coming together, reformulating objectives, standing up and being heard—something that didn't happen for a period of, oh, 15 years, really. And, I see more black candidates for our ministry, coming to our theological schools. So I'm beginning, once again, to get filled with hope.