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A Preliminary Report on Class in the Unitarian Universalist Association

Commission on Appraisal

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Preface and Acknowledgments

In recent years, the Commission on Appraisal has studied and reported on a four-year cycle: choosing a topic, reading and deliberating, conducting interviews and hearings, interacting with a broad range of Unitarian Universalists and others, and finally writing and rewriting a report to bring our thoughts and recommendations to our Association.

This time around, a few months after choosing to study the effects of class in our Association, we encountered some fairly significant disruptions. First, we learned that the UUA Board of Trustees was considering bylaw amendments that would eliminate the Commission, and we engaged with the Board to create an alternative proposal that would result in a smaller Commission, more deeply engaged with the Board and other leadership, reporting yearly, and working with a somewhat different charge.

Over the course of the second year, we downsized the Commission to six members, to make better use of limited resources and to move to a more effective size for the work we do.

Finally, with our attention back on our study topic, and facing a transition to a new Commission that would need time to find a new way to work, we affirmed our commitment to examining the topic of class and agreed to deliver a preliminary report to this year's General Assembly.

This report is by no means finished. It reflects the results of about half a year of study after choosing our topic, a few conversations with Unitarian Universalists, a little reading, and an extremely abbreviated writing schedule. We are presenting it not as a complete work that is ready for publication, but rather as a summary of what we've learned so far, a list of many questions that remain to be answered, some thoughts on actions that we can take based on what we know now, and some recommendations for further study that might be undertaken to pursue this topic, either by the future Commission on Appraisal or by some other body.

We have benefited from the experience of others who have worked in this area for many years, in particular the group UU Class Conversations.¹ We owe a debt of thanks to Rev. Dorothy Emerson, Betsy Leondar-Wright, and Suzanne Zilber, Ph.D., for helping

us understand how class impacts our congregations and our Association. We deeply appreciate the participation of attendees at our workshop at the 2014 General Assembly, and the generosity of Harlan Limpert and Tim Brennan in talking with us about the UUA staff perspective. Of course the Commission itself is solely responsible for any errors or limitations of understanding that you find in this report.

When we chose this topic, we did so with a determination that we would not study class without engaging people from identity groups such as DRUUMM, Interweave, EqUUal Access, young adults, youth, and other historically marginalized groups. We realize that there has been a fear that studying class might be a distraction from our focus on the many other identity-based oppressions that are experienced in our society and in our Association; but we also believe that intersecting oppressions based on class and other identities need to be understood more fully. We regret that our intention to explore this topic with this broader audience could not be carried out in this shortened time frame.

We also regret that we could not engage more fully with the most class-privileged among us. We recognize that to build beloved community, we need to include all of us in the struggle to create change.

This report was largely written by the current Commissioners, but it was greatly influenced by the work of the others who served on the Commission in the last two years: Rev. Lucy Bunch, Rev. John Cullinan, Rev. Lynne Garner, and Rev. Myriam Renaud.

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Introduction

Who are we? We're all middle class, right? Comfortable, well educated, prosperous? Do we have enough to make ends meet? For now, for later? Are we secure? Can we be more resourceful to make things better for all people?

Even for the class-privileged among us, these are uncomfortable conversations. Class is deeply personal, and we live in a society that seems rigged to keep most of us insecure and nervous. Class affects us as individuals, as congregations, and as an Association.

While Unitarian Universalist culture is dominated by white professional middle-class culture, there are significant numbers of UUs from working-class and poor backgrounds. Working-class and poor UUs report significant painful experiences of shame, exclusion, and invisibility in our congregations and Association. While work is being done to help congregations become more class-inclusive, there is a further need for ministry and healing with working-class and poor UUs. Unitarian Universalism has an opportunity to support its people through tackling class inequalities in our communities.

Class plays itself out in congregational and Associational life in real time. If we can understand the true impact of class at all levels of our Association, we may get a clearer image of who we are, understand whether we are truly living our Principles and core values, and determine how our actions might more closely reflect our values.

Most congregations and religious leaders struggle to make ends meet, wrestle with dwindling pledges, and worry about attracting potential members with discretionary income that can support and sustain new ministries. These concerns are found throughout our Association and are all affected by class.

This study topic is much broader than socio-economic status. Examining class means considering how we, as an Association, envision and execute ministries that are transformative. The topic reveals questions about who holds power and how it is held. Ultimately, the topic affects our mission in the world: how we stand on the side of love, create and spread beauty and dignity, and transform the world into the beloved community that we dream of.



Class can manifest in fear, shame, and invisibility, results of a nasty history with capital and the Protestant work ethic. It is present in our worship and in our meeting rooms:

- *Shame for not having money:* When we tell ourselves that Unitarian Universalists are all financially comfortable or wealthy, we render many among us invisible. We deny people who are newly, temporarily, or perpetually financially vulnerable space in which to speak about their lives and struggles. Indeed, folks who come from working-class and poor backgrounds, or who are currently working-class or living in poverty, report many types of classist encounters, both large and small, within Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.
- *Shame for having money:* Discussions about those who are potential large donors are often hushed and surreptitious. Can we lovingly call into relationship those with class privilege so that we can do justice work and transform our world and our Association? How do we avoid demonizing wealthy people in the process of doing work around class, so that they stay with us and remain generous within our congregations?
- *Shame for being in debt:* Are there ways that UUs encourage class privilege, invisibility, and shame by making debt only a matter of personal failure or mismanagement? Is there a cultural ethos at work that doesn't let us really talk about predatory credit card practices, immense medical costs that are unfairly imposed, or the false choice between charity and education (when building community might be a superior third option). How strongly does the pressure on the middle class to hold onto what they have (in the form of homes, college educations, and other advantages) affect our ability to be in community and to spiritually nurture ourselves?

There is a perception that Unitarian Universalists are predominantly middle class or professional class; but conversations in congregations, at General Assembly, and in social media indicate that there is more class diversity than we might expect. This cannot be overstressed. Unitarian Universalist congregations have members practicing a variety of professions and in a variety of management positions, retirees on fixed incomes, young adults in an uncertain job market, working parents, and well-educated individuals working in poorly paid careers, all of whom may be middle class. But they are probably not all the same sort of middle class.

We have many members who are working class. UU Class Conversations workshop facilitators reported that when they asked people to get into groups by class backgrounds, using a variety of indicators, they usually had a solid group of working-class folks, and often so many that the group needed to be split into two to be small enough for conversation. Even when grouping by current class, there are still significant numbers of lower-middle-class and working-class participants, as well as some working poor. By contrast, they reported that the very poor and the very rich do not appear to be as prevalent in our congregations, though they are still present in smaller numbers.

We on the Commission seek a future in which people are more connected to their full humanity through their faith, rather than fragmented from each other and parts of themselves. We imagine and actively seek to create futures in which all are able to live full, nourished lives.

We disagree about what that future would look like. Some members of the Commission believe that true class equity requires creating an economic system that rejects the capitalist model. These Commissioners seek the transformation of Unitarian Universalist class structures (and the resulting structural inequalities) through mutual exchange, redistribution of resources, and cooperation. They would like us to create a world in which people are inspired to explore alternatives to capitalist modes of accessing, claiming, and sharing resources in our communities and congregations. Other Commissioners believe that social classes are an inevitable part of human society, and that abolishing capitalism is not necessary for all people to live physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy lives. These Commissioners believe that our faith is big enough to hold all socio-economic classes. Indeed, it needs them all. They feel that we should focus on building bridges between the classes and creating beloved community with all the classes that make up the Association. These Commissioners also feel that Unitarian Universalism has some work to do to be relevant and helpful to those who struggle to meet basic daily needs.

We know that it is not only the Commission that wrestles with these questions. We know that Unitarian Universalists more broadly have deep disagreements about the role of capitalism in the vision of a world community of peace, liberty, and justice, which we have collectively covenanted to affirm and promote. When we begin to dig into questions of class and classism, these differences in our visions for our society and the world quickly become apparent.

We believe that there is work that can be shared by people who hold different views on the ultimate goal. There is much work to be done on inclusion and welcome. There is work to be done on ways to support people in the struggles of daily living. That work can be shared across these lines of difference. There is work to be done on ministering to working-class and poor UUs, and on making space for the ministry of working-class and poor UUs. It is our hope that the work to make space for the ministry and leadership of a more class-diverse membership in our congregations will enable conversations about our ultimate vision that rely on the leadership and witness of those most affected by current class inequalities.

Definitions

Class is a complicated topic, and the definitions and ideas used to describe class vary greatly. At its core, class is about power relative to income, wealth, and position in society. Class affects our capacity to minister to Unitarian Universalists and the world.

Class has historical, social, geographic, cultural, psychological, and institutional dimensions. Class is linked to individual, family, and group experiences in society. For instance, people's economic position may have less to do with their lifetime earned income than with the history of their inherited wealth and the property held by their families and communities.

Class affects the way we socialize, celebrate, eat, speak, and spend our time, even if we do not see these things as part of class position. When we enter a Unitarian Universalist congregation or community, these aspects of our lives enter with us, along with the experiences, assumptions, and resources linked to them.

Class creates and provides the structure for inequalities that have had long-lasting effects on the health, well-being, and life outcomes of many people, with disproportionate impact on people of color and historically marginalized communities. The inequalities created by class lead to class struggles, in which the protection and expansion of accumulated wealth is opposed to the fulfillment of all people's basic needs.

Despite our Principles and history of work for social and economic justice, Unitarian Universalism is deeply rooted in class and class struggles. For some Unitarian

Universalists, class remains an invisible category or dimension of congregational and Associational life; for UUs who are working class or poor, class cannot be ignored because it more obviously constructs daily realities and interactions in community. Like positions in other systems of oppression, such as racism and sexism, powerful class positions in society often bring the privilege of not seeing class difference or failing to notice the widespread causes of class inequalities.

Of course, class is not all of our story. Classism is linked with other systems of oppression observed and experienced in the UUA, so understanding class struggle within our movement helps us understand its intersections with other forms of struggle. This understanding might free us to fulfill our mission with more clarity and compassion.

Many scholars and leaders have attempted to define class categories that help us to talk about groups of people according to class difference. We on the Commission use terminology and definitions from the work of Betsy Leondar-Wright, as described in her two books, *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists* and *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*. Leondar-Wright sees divisions into four broad class categories: low income or poor, working class, professional middle class, and owning class. These descriptions come from www.classmatters.org.

“Low income” and “poor” refer to people who chronically can’t get sufficient income to cover all their basic needs. Signs that someone might belong to this class can include: substandard housing or homelessness; longtime use of public benefits such as welfare or charity; chronic unmet needs for health care, food, or other necessities; and frequent involuntary moves, chaos, and disruption of life.

“Working class” refers to those who experience some or all of the following class indicators: little or no college education, and in particular no degree from a four-year college; low or negative net worth (assets minus debts); rental housing, or one non-luxury home long saved for and lived in for decades; occupations involving physical work; and little control in the workplace.

“Professional middle class” refers to people who are college educated, salaried professionals and managers, and to their family members. Signs that someone might belong to the professional middle class can include: a four-year college degree, especially from a private or residential school, sometimes from a professional school;

secure homeownership, often with several moves up to bigger houses in a lifetime; more control over the hours and methods of work than working-class people, and control over others' work; and more economic security than working-class people (although that difference is eroding), but no way to pay bills without working.

“Owning class” refers to people with enough income from assets that they don’t have to work to pay basic bills. A subset of the owning class have positions of power or vast wealth that puts them in the ruling class, those who make decisions about major institutions that shape our society. Signs that someone might belong to the owning class can include: education at elite private schools and colleges; large inheritances; luxuries and international travel; and ownership of multiple homes. People who live modestly on investment income are also owning class.

Within this basic structure, there are some nuances. First of all, the middle class also includes the lower middle class, those who are somewhat more prosperous and secure than working-class families. They might nonetheless share many working-class characteristics, such as lack of a four-year college degree, less control over their work, or fewer assets than those in the professional middle class. The middle class also includes the upper middle class, who share many class indicators with the owning class, such as elite educations and luxury travel, but who cannot afford not to work.

Leondar-Wright also talks about people whose class positions change over the course of their lives. “Straddlers” are people whose class position improves throughout their lives. “Downwardly mobile” people are those whose class position is lower than it used to be or than their parents’ was. This group includes those who choose a lower class lifestyle despite access to resources that would permit a higher one.

Intersectionality

As Unitarian Universalists who share a respect for the dignity of every person, we strive to see individuals as whole (holy) beings, rather than as a collection of identities. We also envision a beloved community in which all forms of oppression are uprooted and all are truly free. Differences among individuals, including class differences, are often socially or culturally defined as either positive and dominant or negative and dominated. These forms of difference and the values placed upon them converge to shape people’s daily experiences and social position. Also, they are entrenched in relationships among

people and in the institutions that structure those relationships, such as laws, schools, hospitals, and congregations. In a faith tradition which appreciates each person's unique world perspective and seeks to create a healthier society for all, it is useful to have an approach that can capture these complexities.

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term "intersectionality" to describe the multiple axes of oppression as they are experienced. For example, a person of color may experience class and class struggle differently from a white person of a similar class position, because of the ways in which racism and classism flow into each other to create multiple forms of advantage and disadvantage. Because of the interlocking of race and class, it is impossible to fully disentangle racism from classism in describing one's experience. The same is true of the intersections of other forms of oppression, such as homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and ableism.

As a starting point for understanding oppression, intersectionality relates to both social position (a person's role in a community or society) and social relationships (the ways in which we interact with each other). Crenshaw compares intersectionality to a traffic accident to help explain how these multiple dimensions impact individuals and society:

Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in an intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. . . . But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.²

In the United States, black feminism and womanism have played a foundational role in articulating intersectionality for linked struggles against injustices. Since before Sojourner Truth, black women have critiqued the white feminist movement for attempting to represent all women's concerns without also representing concerns about racism and classism that intimately affected their experiences as black women. Groups of women, led by women of color, have played integral roles in social justice organizing that has had broad impact on support and policies related to education, health, and poverty, among other issues. An intersectional lens is helpful in describing classism in a



way that acknowledges the fullness of human experience and the important role of power in society. It also helps to identify strategies of resistance to classism that do not futilely attempt to divorce class struggle from the concerns of people of color and people who identify as BGLTQ (bisexual, gay, lesbian, transgender, or queer), among other marginalized groups. Likewise, movements for various forms of social justice, such as queer liberation and racial justice, can benefit from the particular skills and resources born from working-class struggles.

For Unitarian Universalists to fully address class and classism, we need to focus beyond poverty and economic status. These conditions do not exist in isolation. They are intrinsically linked to the relative power of groups within a system to accumulate, maintain, and control resources in society. Class-based power shapes the ways in which different groups have access to resources according to their income, property, or education. However, access to such resources may also be obtained or denied through other forms of systemic power, or a combination of them. For instance, United States fair housing laws were designed to make the sale, rental, and financing of property more accessible to people of color, immigrants, religious minorities, and women, and therefore more equitable across all of U.S. society. Adequate access to housing is a form of class-based power, but at a systemic level, it has been obtained or denied through racism, xenophobia, and sexism. Advocacy efforts to create and enforce fair housing laws have historically been organized by groups affected by these linked oppressions, not just an amalgam of families who cannot afford a home. Intersectionality as a framework for justice helps us look “upstream” at the forces and conditions that create class differences and inequalities.

Intersectionality in Unitarian Universalism

Intersectionality is good news for Unitarian Universalist social justice ministry, both institutionally and in the world: as we seek to build the beloved community, we do not seek to erase one form of oppression at a time. Instead, we hope to root out all forms of oppression as we identify them. In doing so, we affirm the full range of human experience, worth, and dignity.

Using an intersectional lens to resist classism in Unitarian Universalism requires us to look not just at the class positions of our members, but also at the class structures that define relationships among our members and with society at large. An intersectionality framework guides our attention to a variety of context-specific areas in which Unitarian



Universalist culture, governance, and worship affect the ways in which forms of difference interact with each other.³ It offers a series of questions that we can use to address what is going on in specific situations related to class in Unitarian Universalism.

In her May 2015 article in *UU World*, Taquiena Boston, UUA Director of Multicultural Growth and Witness, describes an intersectional ethos that grounds UU anti-oppression and multiculturalism work and infuses it into every aspect of Unitarian Universalist life. She says, “Our work today is rooted in the understanding that systemic racism intersects with every current UU witness and advocacy priority, from climate change to escalating inequality, from immigration reform to LGBTQ equity, from reproductive justice to voting rights.”⁴

Class and Identity

We are better off considering class with awareness of various oppressions that we observe and participate in as a faith community. We can then be intentional about ensuring accessibility to our congregations and our Association for those who are not at the table. We need to engage as many of our members as possible, including children and youth, so that they, too, can think about who is not yet at the table and who has perhaps been sent away.

Class is an issue closely related to identity. It is a category that depicts who we are as a group, as people, and as a movement. Class affects the rules that we establish and follow, as well as our understanding of rules. As a societal notion, class speaks to who can be expected to belong to our congregations and who is not expected to join. Once people join a congregation, classist attitudes can create a ranking system that influences their involvement and leadership capacity. People with more class stature often feel more entitled to hold leadership positions and make decisions that affect the whole community. They may even view themselves as more deserving of position and power than those of lower classes. Eventually, class permeates all the dynamics of mission, accountability, responsibility, and power throughout our movement.

Affluent religious organizations, such as the Unitarian Universalist Association, are typically reluctant to admit that class affects their work at all. Instead, they tend to operate on the assumption that there is class parity among their members. Thus, their ministries are often geared to helping those beyond their own doors, not those within

their walls. Another consequence of this reluctance is that those of working-class and poor backgrounds and identities within religious institutions become invisible. They may not be represented at the table when those of middle- and upper-class backgrounds and identities come together.

The result is a *de facto* denial of classism within the institution. This is especially significant because class in the United States is closely tied to race. In Unitarian Universalism, the underrepresentation or invisibility of lower socio-economic classes means that people of color will automatically be underrepresented in the Association's mission in the world. Any discussion of class must necessarily include a discussion of race and its impact on the Association's vision and mission.

Furthermore, since class has to do with social ranking, the more our congregations consist of middle- and upper-class individuals and families, the less they will consist of people of color, who in the United States tend to be lower and working class. In turn, our ministries will focus on primarily white middle- and upper-class issues and concerns, and will embrace mostly the same types of worship and outreach, to the exclusion of people of color. By the same token, our ministries will, in similar proportion, disregard the voices in the American diaspora that are important for us to hear and integrate into our unified voice. Ignoring these classes of people is likely to result in a certain deafness to important voices right in our midst.

This affects our ecclesiology, how we organize ourselves as a religious community. While many of our congregations have a minister's discretionary fund, often used to help those experiencing temporary hardship make ends meet, our congregations largely lack the structures of social and economic support. Those who seek not only spiritual fulfillment in their religious community, but also these other sorts of fulfillment, are not finding it in our congregations. As a result, we don't have members expressing the need for these structures, and we come to perpetuate a class monoculture. We perhaps have lessons to learn from the historic traditions of black and immigrant churches that see religious community as meaning not merely Sunday morning, but a network of mutual support.

Additional concerns that arise under the banner of class include education level, vocation and profession, family composition, access to media and information that influence who participates in society, access to transportation, perceptions of who is

welcome or not, and—probably most important in our context—the theologies and philosophies that we hold up as primary and include in our statements of faith.

Race and Ethnicity

One way to look at the intersections of class with other identities is to look at statistics on income, education, rates of poverty, and other class indicators, and how these factors vary with others such as race, gender, and immigration status. When we look at census data from 2013, we find a clear difference in median annual household income by race and ethnicity: \$55,257 for whites, \$34,598 for blacks, and \$40,963 for Hispanics of any race. There is also a gender difference; the median annual income of full-time, year-round workers is \$50,033 for men and \$39,157 for women. And the rate of poverty among blacks and Hispanics, non-citizens, and those with disabilities is significantly higher than average.⁵

Income is not the only indicator of class. We can also look at disparities in education. We see gender, race, and ethnicity differences here, too. Among men ages 25 to 29 in 2014, 32% of white men had a bachelor's degree, compared with 19% of black men and 12% of Hispanic men. Women in general were more likely to have completed a bachelor's degree, and there are differences by race and ethnicity among women as well. In the same age group, 38% of white women, 23% of black women, and 18% of Hispanic women had bachelor's degrees.⁶

Educational attainment is higher among Hispanics born in the United States than among Hispanic immigrants. In 2008 and 2009, about 20% of people ages 25 and older who had been born in the United States to immigrant Hispanic mothers had at least a bachelor's degree, and about another 30% had some college experience, though not a bachelor's degree. Among Hispanic immigrants of the same age, only about 11% had a bachelor's degree, and about another 13% had some college experience.⁷

Using statistics such as these, we can see the effects of systemic oppression as they play out across the households of the United States. Individual households may buck these trends. Certainly there are many poor white households, and there are rich households of color. However, the overview provided by the census shows us that there are intersections between class indicators and other identities and oppressions.

Assumptions about who might be interested in the Unitarian Universalist message can be seen as generalizations based on trends in the larger society. For example, a statement that people of color would not be interested in our message, when unpacked, might contain an assumption that people of color are likely to come from poor or working-class backgrounds. Unitarian Universalists of color report that they may need to highlight or defend their level of education to prove that they belong in our congregations. Mark Morrison-Reed explores this argument in the context of making our faith more welcoming for well-educated middle-class people of color:

“The issue is increasingly one of class and not race,” Morrison-Reed argues. Religions are always bound to culture and class, and Unitarian Universalism has been shaped by its upper-middle-class, liberal, North American values. The reason we don’t have many Afro-Americans is the same reason we don’t have many working-class or poor members. “Look at the average UU education level, 17.2 years, which is almost a master’s degree,” he says. “There are simply not that many Afro-Americans in that demographic.” But, he predicts, as the number of highly educated and middle-class people of color increases in the general population at large, more will be drawn to Unitarian Universalism, as long as we are welcoming to them.⁸

Other accounts of the experience of people of color in our congregations mention other types of marginalization:

- Being expected to represent their race or ethnicity.
- Being asked to be on every committee or group that feels a need to be more diverse, leading to burnout.
- Being expected to confront, process, and explain racist attitudes, behaviors, or systems for the benefit of white people, instead of white people being responsible for their own education and consciousness raising around race and ethnicity.

These kinds of expectations around identity can also have class implications. For example, they ask people of color to invest a great deal of time, energy, and other resources in congregational life. Whether or not such investments include financial ones, they are significant and have effects in other areas of life. In addition, because people are often expected to at least partially fund their own participation in UU

activities, there is often a direct financial burden too. An increase in commitments leads to more financial expectations, and even small gestures add up when participation is increased. (Of course, the gestures that are expected from leadership are not always small.)



History and Trends

To appreciate the impact of class in our Association, we need to understand our history and the trends that affect our movement into the future.

History

In the early history of Unitarians and Universalists, a clear distinction between the two existed in theology, culture, and style, which had class implications. Mark Harris outlines the class cultures of both movements in detail in his book *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*. He says, “Unitarian beliefs offered few constraints on worldly success.”⁹ Education and intellectualism were central to Unitarian faith, as was reason as a primary tool for interpreting scripture. Indeed, Unitarians had a history of attitudes of personal superiority and discomfort with lower classes and those with less education. The best example of this in Unitarian history is Unitarian involvement in the eugenics movement, which was based on the idea that it was possible to produce a superior human community by manipulating reproduction, including by forcibly sterilizing those deemed less than desirable. Judgments about genetic inferiority and superiority were based on such factors as class, poverty, race, mental or physical illness, and disability, along with other criteria.

Universalism, by contrast, was a more class-diverse movement. This is not to say that there were not some very wealthy Universalists, because there certainly were. However, “central to the Universalist gospel is an egalitarian, classless idea of salvation.”¹⁰ The love of God for all human beings without exception was always central to the Universalist message, as was a corollary that Olympia Brown phrased as “If God so loved us, we ought also to love each other.”

Universalists were also known for a more accessible and emotional worship and teaching style, which was associated with a less elite class of people. Many of the stories told about Reverend Hosea Ballou, “Brother Ballou,” illustrate this style.

One such story involves a concerned father who came to Brother Ballou anxious about his son, who had developed the habit of drinking and carousing every night. The father

was afraid that God would send his son to hell for such behavior. Ballou suggested that that night they go to the bar where the son usually went and build a bonfire in the alley next to the building. When the son emerged, they would catch him and throw him in the fire. The father was horrified at the idea of inflicting such pain on his son, whom he loved dearly. Ballou said that God loved the father's son no less and would be just as horrified at the idea of throwing him into the fires of eternal damnation.

These are sweeping generalizations, of course, and there are exceptions on both sides.

In 2005, current Commissioner Erica Baron, who was then beginning her studies at Andover Newton Theological School, did a small series of interviews of Unitarian Universalists from working-class and poor backgrounds about their experiences of class in Unitarian Universalist congregations. All five interviewees reported significant experiences of classism in their experience of Unitarian Universalism. This was troubling, but not unexpected. What stands out most in Baron's work are the conversations she had with Unitarian Universalists from middle- and upper-class backgrounds about the project. The most common response she got when she told these folks what she was doing was fear that, in becoming welcoming to people from a variety of class backgrounds, Unitarian Universalism would lose something precious and essential. Usually, the thing that people were afraid of losing was a depth of intellectual engagement. The second most common response was some variation on "But we don't have anything to offer them."

These two common responses both point to a sense that there is a gulf between Unitarian Universalism on the one hand and working-class and poor people on the other. They assume that working-class and poor people are not interested in engaging with ideas, or are incapable of doing so. And they imply that the middle- and upper-class people Baron discussed her work with failed to entertain the idea that people in challenging economic situations might want to share and grow their spiritual lives with Unitarian Universalists.

These responses also assume that Unitarian Universalism necessarily appeals only to an elite group within American society. Baron found these responses as deeply troubling as the stories of classism she heard from her interviewees. Classism seemed so deeply ingrained in Unitarian Universalist culture that the job of creating a more class-inclusive culture and community seemed hugely daunting.

During Baron's 2005 study, one Commissioner heard stories of UU congregations that have laudably diverse membership, and that embrace this diversity in empowering ways. Visits to two congregations were arranged, including an interview with one of the ministers. All the congregations that were mentioned in these conversations were historically Universalist. Historically, Universalism has been less elitist and more populist than Unitarianism, and it has had a broader cross-class appeal. Our Universalist values of love and inclusion may provide a useful and hopeful guide as we pursue this path.

The United States financial crisis in 2007-2008 caused economic difficulties for many jobholders and homeowners and their families in UU congregations. It also affected Association and congregational budgets, staffing, and programs. The experiences of shame and fear appeared more palpable at a moment of such great recession and change. In Geneva, Illinois, Rev. Dr. Lindsay Bates said that the financial crisis shaped how congregation leaders followed up with congregants who had pledged money to the congregation but could no longer contribute at that level: "We try to track that so people who start to have trouble don't just drop out because they can't pay their pledge. We want to make sure they understand we want them for themselves, not their checkbook."¹¹

Rev. Rob Hardies, of All Souls in Washington, D.C., said he witnessed some members with "survivor guilt" as their families escaped the onslaught of new hardships: "What a strange thing that money can make us ashamed if we have too little of it and ashamed if we have too much of it."¹² While religious leaders tightened congregational and Association budgets, some congregations formed employment support groups, held coaching sessions, and conducted résumé workshops to help their members grapple with new and unexpected financial challenges.

Trends

In the decade since that project, much has changed in the Unitarian Universalist landscape, as a result of hard work by countless people. Over those ten years, the idea of creating a Unitarian Universalist Association that is more welcoming to people from a variety of class backgrounds, and in which working-class and poor UUs experience less classism, gained significant steam. Several key milestones help to illustrate this journey.

In 2012, just before the deadline to submit proposed Congregational Study/Action Issues (CSAIs) to the UUA Commission on Social Witness, a group of UUs decided to submit a proposal to make class and classism the next CSAI. This proposal was rather last-minute and was in competition with several other proposals that had far more formal organizing work behind them. Nevertheless, the class proposal came in second in a fairly close vote at that year's General Assembly.

In June 2013, a group of Unitarian Universalists, sponsored by First Parish in Framingham, Massachusetts, received a grant from the UU Funding Program to begin offering workshops on class issues in UU congregations and organizations. The group chose the name UU Class Conversations to describe their goal of providing a context for UUs to begin to talk about class. At the 2014 General Assembly, "Escalating Inequality," the proposal that had the most to do with class and classism, was chosen as the new CSAI. At the same General Assembly, a workshop offered by UU Class Conversations drew a crowd two or three times as large as the space it was assigned could hold. Interest was so high that people filled all the chairs and all the available standing room, spilled out into the hall, and stayed despite the uncomfortable crowding.

Greater inclusion of working-class and poor UUs, including ministers, and ministry across class divisions is timely. It is time to stop the harm that classism is doing to those among us. Because the class landscape around us is changing, addressing class in our Association is urgent.

The generations who make up today's youth and young adults (the "Millennials" and the following generation) are not expected to earn as much as their parents. And their immediate elders, Generation X, are also not experiencing the material success of the Baby Boom generation. The buying power of working-class wages has long been stagnant, and middle-class salaries are stagnating too.

Demographic, economic, and environmental trends all predict that the current generations are likely to face less economic prosperity and more struggles to meet basic needs than previous generations.

Increasingly, we have the sense that we are facing a shrinking economic pie:

There is now more intense competition for a dwindling number of jobs, a smaller share of total income, and ever more limited public services. Native-born

Americans are threatened by new immigrants; private sector workers are resentful of public employees; non-unionized workers are threatened by the unionized; middle-class Americans are competing with the poor. Rather than feel that we're all in it together, we increasingly have the sense that each of us is on his or her own.¹³

A globalized economy, changing working conditions, and persistent unemployment with little upward movement in wages are just a few of the factors that promote economic insecurity among established middle-class workers and families. These trends seem likely to continue and intensify among younger workers.

Full-time workers who put in decades with a company can now find themselves without a job overnight—with no parachute, no help finding another job, and no health insurance. More than 20 percent of the American workforce is now “contingent”—temporary workers, contractors, independent consultants—with no security at all. Most families face the mounting risk of receiving giant hospital bills yet having no way to pay them.¹⁴

The Generational Economic Cliff

These trends cannot help but affect our congregations. The recently settled minister at a midsized, decently endowed Midwestern congregation sat down to calculate the change to expect in member giving as the Boomers die out and the GenXers and Millennials come to predominate. His conclusion: It will take four members of the Millennial generation to equal the giving power of one Boomer. To put this another way, members of the newer generation can't belong to our congregations in the same economic way as our older generations, given the class realities they face.

This raises the question: how will we respond? How will we find ways to minister to those who are facing economic hardship and struggling to meet basic needs? How will we find ways to accept the insights, experiences, and ministries of the poor, the working-class, and the struggling children of our middle-class members as they become adults? The world is changing. How will we be relevant as it does?

Theology of Class

Our work is a work of faith and must be grounded in theology. Our faith claims many sources that can contribute to a working theology of class. Our theology must be resonant with Unitarian Universalism and in keeping with our tradition, and what we present here should be viewed as a work in progress. Because this is a preliminary report, the theological ideas that follow may provide more questions than answers.

In our theological reflections on class we remind ourselves that, as a religious movement, we exist not simply to build the particular institutions of our congregations and the UUA, but to build greater institutions of beloved community. The pursuit of that imperative demands that we offer a theological response to class and classism that moves us toward that vision of a better world of justice and peace.

Listening for a Theology

UUs are at our best when we work inclusively and thoughtfully for liberation, working with the people directly involved with and affected by injustice, rather than imposing our theologies and methods on others. “We” and “they” become “all of us.” We are at our best when we don’t separate our theology from our social justice and our work as a people of faith.

Wisdom from Liberation Theology

As Unitarian Universalists, we can look to many places for a theology. One of those is liberation theology, which emerged from the black Protestant and Latin American Catholic traditions in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There are two offerings from liberation theology that we wish to hold up. One of these is the belief in a “preferential option for the poor,” meaning that God chooses sides, and chooses to side with the less privileged. One way that we live out this belief—regardless of our position on theism—is through our “Standing on the Side of Love” campaign and initiatives.

We can also live out this belief by calling attention to the central scripture of the liberation theology tradition, Luke 4.18, which reads, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me, to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free.” These words spoken by Jesus get to the heart of beloved community, justice ministry, and class. Jesus’ call is our call. At the core of his mission was breaking down class barriers: serving those at the bottom of the class structure who are in deep need of love, those who need a level playing field to survive, rather than continuing to give preference to the prosperous.

In her definition of the preferential option for the poor, Ada María Isasi-Díaz wrote that it is based on the fact that “the poor . . . can see and understand what the rich and privileged cannot. It is not that the poor and oppressed are morally superior or that they can see better. . . . Because their point of view is not distorted by power and riches, they can see differently.”¹⁵ The liberation theologian José Míguez Bonino wrote, “Because the poor suffer the weight of alienation, they can conceive a different project of hope and provide dynamism to a new way of organizing human life for all.”¹⁶

As leaders and allies, we need to have loving conversations with middle- and owning-class UUs that emphasize including poor people’s views in our work and ministries. Giving priority to those who are most affected by poverty and oppression emphasizes our *responsibility* in our “free and responsible search for truth and meaning.” A unified voice that includes all classes of people lifts up everyone.

In giving preference to the voices of the poor, we recognize that the voices of the upper and owning classes are by far the dominant ones in our society, culture, and institutions. We believe a Unitarian Universalist theology would call on us to prioritize the voices that are least heard. While all voices must be included, we recognize that not all voices carry the institutional weight of power. It is here that we must listen.

Another powerful offering from this deep tradition is its firm connection to the conditions of life in the here and now. Liberation theology holds that any claims about God, the spirit, doctrine, or sacred texts must prove themselves by *resulting in justice and mercy at this point in history*. Theological truth must incarnate a more just world, or it isn’t true.

Theology Is Praxis

Our theology must be reflected in our actual practice and not be limited to theory. It must be praxis: action in the world accompanied by theological reflection.

If we take the voices of the poor and working class seriously, we will interpret our Principles and our promises to one another on those terms. We need to *lift up* and *act up* in community; we need to expand our theology on the ground. We are living in devastating times, and are also surrounded by great beauty and creative possibility. Capitalism benefits fewer and fewer people. Grace Lee Boggs, a 99-year-old Chinese-American elder in the civil rights movement and an activist-mentor in Detroit, wrote from hospice: “A revolution that is based on the people exercising their creativity in the midst of devastation is one of the great historical contributions of humankind.” Our UU theologies often skirt the issue, but we must speak out against capitalism from a theology rooted in love, interdependence, grace, and conscience. Almost every Principle speaks toward alternatives to capitalism, but do we act upon these alternatives? Or even name them?

Capitalism in the Context of Unitarian

Universalist Sources

Unitarian Universalism draws from many sources, and while we honor all of them, we developed as a particular form of Christianity. We have multiplied our holy books and expanded our list of prophets, but we still reflect the original source from which we came. So, what does Jesus tell us about living together, the value of acquiring material wealth, and the importance of sharing? Jesus preached consistently that his followers needed to care for the widow and orphan. He overturned the tables of the money changers that polluted the temple. And he told his disciples (to their great surprise) that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Clearly, Jesus did not place a high value on material objects. Rather, his primary goal was taking care of people and leading them into a faith community that shared resources as they worshipped God.

Speaking from a Christian perspective, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King argued that capitalism no longer serves us:

I imagine you already know that I am much more socialistic in my economic theory than capitalistic. . . . [Capitalism] started out with a noble and high motive . . . but like most human systems it fell victim to the very thing it was revolting against. So today capitalism has out-lived its usefulness.¹⁷

Christianity grew from Judaism and inherited some of its customs and practices. The religion of the Hebrews saw no particular value in being poor, but Judaic law does command that the poor are to be respected and protected. The poor were not different from the rich; rather they were to be regarded as brothers and sisters. The custom of leaving some grains in a harvested field to be gleaned by poor people was considered virtuous. Jubilee years, in which slaves and prisoners would be freed and debts would be forgiven, were commanded by the Torah, though the evidence that they were observed is scant.¹⁸

Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is an Abrahamic faith. One of its five pillars, required of every Muslim, is *zakat*, or charity. Many verses in the Qu'ran speak of its value and lay out how it is to be practiced. For instance:

Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask [for help], and for freeing slaves; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakah.¹⁹

Poverty is not considered desirable in Islamic culture; but the admonitions to care for those less wealthy are many and specific, defining what percentage of one's wealth is to be set aside for charity and requiring that *zakat* be distributed yearly.

Although Unitarian Universalism did not arise from Buddhist traditions, many of our members are now exploring their riches. One of Buddhism's goals is to achieve non-attachment, and loving wealth and material items may lead to fearing their loss and craving ever more of them. Wealth, however, is not intrinsically evil, and provides the wealthy with an opportunity to practice generosity. "Buddhism also advocates compassionate giving to the poor and the sick as a virtue in its own right. According to

one account, the Buddha walked thirty miles to teach a poor person, and first made sure he was fed before focusing on spiritual matters.”²⁰

In Hinduism, generosity and hospitality are highly regarded and there is a traditional mandate for the state (or king) to feed the poor. Although India, a largely Hindu nation, has been dominated by the caste system, with its highly structured divisions between haves and have-nots, indifference to wealth is praiseworthy in Hinduism, and its renunciation, at a stage of life when family responsibilities have been completed, is highly regarded.²¹ Mahatma Gandhi declared that the greatest good of all “can only be realized in the classless, stateless democracy.”²²

Humanism is a strong contributor to our shared theological landscape. The visionary humanists who crafted and signed the Humanist Manifesto in 1933 included the following statement:

FOURTEENTH: The humanists are firmly convinced that existing acquisitive and profit-motivated society has shown itself to be inadequate and that a radical change in methods, controls, and motives must be instituted. A socialized and cooperative economic order must be established to the end that the equitable distribution of the means of life be possible. The goal of humanism is a free and universal society in which people voluntarily and intelligently cooperate for the common good. Humanists demand a shared life in a shared world.²³

The work and vision of the humanists who signed this document guided the development of much of Unitarian thought in the middle and latter parts of the 20th century. Much of what many of us believe to be the right way to live in this world is due to their work.

Whether we name ourselves humanist or theist, mystic or naturist, we draw on all of our sources for guidance. Still, we do not always agree on the lessons we draw from their teachings within Unitarian Universalism and within the Commission on Appraisal.

One of the Sources of our living tradition is “earth-centered traditions.” This is a very broad grouping that includes many different threads. Many of the traditions in this grouping teach through the use of story, and many include stories about interactions between rich and poor. One such story comes to us from Greek mythology. Hospitality was a sacred duty in ancient Greece, and the story tells of how the gods Zeus and

Hermes decided to test the hospitality and piety of human beings. They disguised themselves as beggars and begin traveling from household to household, asking for hospitality. At every house, they were rudely turned away—until they came to the house of Baucis and Philemon, a pious couple, who invited them in and began to serve them from their modest kitchen. Baucis and Philemon had no idea their guests were gods until they noticed that the dishes on the table kept refilling themselves, as did the wine goblets. Zeus and Hermes then showed the couple their true identity. Zeus declared he would honor them for their hospitality by building his temple on the site of their home and making them his priest and priestess. The gods also asked what reward the couple would ask. They asked that at the end of their lives, they might die together at the same time, so that neither would have to live without the other. And so it was. They served in the temple of Zeus faithfully and joyfully until the end of their days, when they were turned into intertwining trees, an oak and a linden.

Besides pointing out that the gods favor those who are generous to the less fortunate, this story has an interesting theological detail. The reward for meeting those in need with compassion and hospitality is to be made the priest and priestess of the ruler of the gods. This story thus connects the qualification to serve as clergy and the willingness to offer generous hospitality. In our current religious communities, we Unitarian Universalists might consider what we ask of our leaders, both lay and ordained, and whether that includes generosity, compassion, and hospitality across lines of class.

The Social Gospel Tradition

A major part of Unitarian and Universalist religious history is the Social Gospel era. The Social Gospel held that our focus should be not on the saving of individual souls, but on social salvation. In the words of UU minister John Haynes Holmes, “The church will care not so much for . . . emancipating [people] from what we call sin, as for emancipating them from the conditions of life and labour which make sin inevitable.”²⁴ It was widely held in this tradition that a class-stratified society was exactly such a condition, and that only by dismantling classes would we have a just and peaceful society.

Unitarianism and Universalism

Do our beliefs and values support our class positions? In *Elite*, Mark W. Harris argued that historically, the Universalist goal of collective salvation demanded greater class inclusion.²⁵ Unitarian beliefs offered fewer constraints on worldly success than did those of mainstream Christian churches, and emphasized self-consciousness, personal salvation, and financial security.

“Mainstream” UU moral theologies are those that are most commonly named and lifted up, but not necessarily those that are essential to a UU theology of class. Myriam Renaud, in an article published in the *Journal of Liberal Religion*, spells this out in a helpful way. She writes,

Prophetic voices among us may fail to persuade the majority of the rightness of their position. A democratic process may, as it has in the past, merely lead to some of the more notable moral lapses evident in the history of Unitarians, Universalists, and Unitarian Universalists. At various times, our religious communities have failed to denounce slavery, the inequality of women, discrimination against GLBT people, economic disparities, etc. Such lapses, in hindsight, shock us. However, when slavery, the unequal status of women, etc., constituted the status quo of the times, we found ourselves unable to critique standard practices and failed to question the accepted moral framework.²⁶

Some, like Rev. Dan Harper, have asked if UUs claim a preferential option for the poor.²⁷ In a blog entry, Harper concluded that we do not. Rather, Unitarian Universalists tend to be “more concerned with how we can make our lives better, than we are in how we can enjoy the rewards of the afterlife. To my mind, this has pushed us into a kind of prosperity spirituality: Join our congregation because your life will be better due to improved mental and emotional health—join our congregation and do social justice to others which will make you feel better about yourself.” Care and comfort of our members has theological importance and meaning. It is healthy for people involved in social justice work to find it warming and joyful. That emerges from our theology of interdependence: my happiness is wrapped up in yours.

Unless we learn to value the gifts brought by people who are less prosperous, such as the wisdom learned from having to prioritize how resources are expended, we run the risk of condescending to those people. Living on the edge teaches frugality, valuing

resources, and the joy that can be found in low- or no-cost activities. It can also teach generosity of spirit, as people learn to share their gifts and choose wisely with whom to share them. Our lives will be better only if we include the gifts of all our people. Only then can we aspire to the collective salvation of the community.

There is a famous story about William Ellery Channing awakening to the separation between what the preacher declaimed on Sunday morning and the reality of his family's life. As a boy, he once attended church with his father and listened to the minister regale the congregation with a "hellfire and damnation" sermon, complete with colorful imagery of the tortures of hell and the likelihood that many there present would experience them. Riding home with his father, he was terrified by the future that might await them both. However, his father was cheerful, whistling as he guided the horses home. Gradually Channing learned that the spiritual lessons taught in church on Sunday were left at the church. Life at home proceeded peacefully.²⁸

Many of Channing's descendants in our UU congregations also compartmentalize. The lessons we are taught remain in church as we leave, and fail to influence our lives. We may care for "our" homeless person, but fail to explore why, in the wealthiest country in the world, we have homelessness at all. We may sponsor scholarships for third-world children, but fail to address the problems of the education system in our own country. Generosity toward others is admirable; however, we need to go beyond feel-good social justice. We need to address the class issues present and growing in our material world as well as our congregations.

Hyper-Individualism

Our liberal theology developed in the wake of the Enlightenment, when philosophers lifted up the value of the individual. The significance of this timing is reflected in our first Principle, which affirms the worth and dignity of every person. It is reflected further in our commitment to democratic processes. As a faith, we have been successful in lifting up the importance of every person. As a society, we also value individuality.

However, our last two Principles call us back into relationship with the world community and the natural world. Psychologists now tell us that we become fully human only in relationship. Those of us who have been socialized into hyper-individuality find it difficult to imagine the "other" as fully human, whether it is race, class, gender, or some other

characteristic that separates us from the other person. As Unitarian Universalists we must resist the lure of our current culture that denigrates people as less worthy because they have little material wealth. Instead, we would do well to develop our Universalist emphasis on collective salvation.

What Is Our Theology of Class?

In a world in which class stratification and inequality are often apparent, we as Unitarian Universalists need to describe a theology that helps people live loving and meaningful lives in a climate of economic struggle. This theology can encourage people to challenge the system that supports class inequality. It is an exciting challenge.

Classes are defined by inequality. Without inequality, there are no classes. Therefore, in saying that we need to challenge a system that supports class inequality, we are sidestepping what actually needs to be done. This fact confronts us again in the question “What is our vision and hope for the future?” Do we work for less inequality in a continuing class society? Or do we acknowledge that classes are inequitable by definition, and need to be abolished? What would a classless society look like?

The UU minister and social ethicist James Luther Adams offered a powerful critique to liberal theology. After studying the ineffective liberal response to the rise of Nazism, he endeavored to build a backbone in our theological tradition that could stand up to the threat of Fascism. In the context of our discussion, such a backbone must be capable of responding to the fact that in our society one “can’t be a millionaire unless a million people aren’t.”²⁹ What is our theological response to that? Moreover, how do we respond to reports such as that from Oxfam in January of 2015, which claims that the richest 1% of people in the world will own more than the other 99% by 2016?³⁰

Our Theology of Covenants

We are a covenantal people. This is central to our religious identity. That means that rather than center ourselves and our communities around creeds of belief, we center them around the promises we make to one another. The Jewish theologian Martin Buber said that we are the “promise-making, promise-keeping, promise-breaking,

promise-renewing animals.” This commitment to process rather than a deterministic focus is how we seek to become “more fully human,” in Adams’s words.

What do we mean by covenants? What kinds of promises are they? First off, they are not simply two-way promises between individuals or within a community. They are three-way promises between individuals or community *and with that which is greater*. What we define as “that which is greater” varies among us UUUs; it could be God, the spirit of life, or the vision of beloved community, among many other possibilities. The point is that covenants aren’t just about us. Another characteristic of covenants is that we enter into them knowing full well that we will, at times, fall out of them. We will let down others in our commitments, and we will ourselves be let down. This is what makes covenants human promises of faith.

James Luther Adams described covenantal relationships as free, voluntary, mutual, and non-coercive. First, they must be free in that we must be free enough in our lives to enter into them. This is not the case in many areas of our lives, but there are spaces—such as in our families and religious communities—in which it is. Second, they must be voluntarily entered into. Third, they are mutual relationships: not exchanges such as monetary transactions or trades, but promises made in the spirit of gift and mutuality. Last, these relationships are non-coercive: no one is forced to act within them.

The question becomes: if we are a covenantal people, and regard this quality of relationship as ideal, what is our vision for the world? Can we dream of a world that is made up wholly of covenantal relationships such as these? If not, can we dream of a world in which more of our relationships are covenantal? What would this mean for the class-dominated nature of our society, where many or even most of our relationships are capital relationships entered into from necessity or desperation, rather than human relationships springing from free will and inspiration?

A final question about covenants is how they might pertain to our humanness and what a class system does to our collective humanity. As noted above, all the major religions of the world identify the ultra-rich as putting themselves outside of or above the rest of us. A way we might say it is that the ultra-rich, such as the roughly 1800 billionaires of the world,³¹ are not capable of covenantal relationships. Their enormous wealth places them so far outside of the human experience that they lose the ability to relate. This is why rock stars, famous actors, and other celebrities are often described as “out of touch.” The separation caused by great wealth or fame crushes the spirit, and those

with such riches can only reenter the realm of humanity inhabited by the rest of us through a massive restructuring of their social position.

Our Theology of Democracy

The UU minister and early humanist Curtis Reese described Unitarian Universalism as “the religion of democracy.” From our ecclesiological history of congregations making their own decisions and electing their own leaders down to our fifth Principle (use of the democratic process), we can show this to be true. Yet we rarely recognize, as we speak of democracy, how few of our social institutions are actually democratic. If we can assert that democracy is a *process*, after which sometimes occurs a vote, we see even fewer instances. The place where democracy is most notably absent is in the economy. We might be able to “vote with our dollars,” but the process of deciding how to use the resources of our commonwealth is far from democratic. What does it mean to the religion of democracy when the entire basis of a class society is not democratic?

What Is Our Theology’s Prophetic Vision?

What does class look like in the beloved community?

In our responses to this question, we must know the difference between liberation and assimilation; we must remain creatively maladjusted. Our goal isn’t to make systems of oppression inclusive of more people!

Twenty-first-century society and all the devastating consequences of neglect, greed, and degradation of our humanity beg us as Unitarian Universalists to take leaps, not gradual steps, toward the moral theology of the poor and working class. If we are to have a collective theological outlook of wholeness and live as our best selves, we need to go to the theologies operating among the poor and working-class peoples’ movements of today (in Ferguson, Detroit, Oakland, Baltimore, and elsewhere). We cannot bring these theologies to us by hospitality, self-reflection, or illusory inclusivity across constructed class categories. These theologies are not new and they are not new to Unitarian Universalism; we just have to remember the moments in our history when we were more actively involved in theologies that contributed to class liberation.

We believe in the ability of all to creatively participate in this process of eliminating poverty and exploitation.

Our social position of high education and low giving offers an opportunity. We give in small amounts, perhaps because we know that the conventional solutions that our money will go to *don't work*. But our response is to give little and focus on our individual spiritual fulfillment. The opportunity we have is to engage our privilege of high education to develop new, unconventional solutions and pour our resources into them.

The Congregationalist tradition from which we emerged has been developing the ecclesiology of congregational polity since the 1500s. Making decisions semi-democratically and electing leaders were radical acts in that time, acts that rejected the authority of the state over free congregations. Theologians from Theodore Parker to James Luther Adams have described these free congregations as having formed the basis for American democracy. Revolutionaries of the time could point to them as working examples of what could be, asking why all of society didn't resemble them. And thus the monarchy was rejected and an attempt at a "more perfect union" was made.

This inspiring history can be an example for us. If we are to follow its lead, we can begin to see ourselves as modeling the world that we wish to live in. We can start by recognizing how class affects our attempts at standing on the side of love.

An Alternative View

God's anger in the Old Testament can be understood as an expression of some straightforward sociological theology. A society dominated and exploited by a greedy 1% will not for long be a thriving society. That was true in the eighth century BCE and it is true now.

Still, the prophets could have benefited from better communication skills. Most of us are not inspired, but exasperated and put off, by nagging guilt trips. "You mostly white, selfish, self-centered, hypocritical UUs have done this and that and this wrong! You have utterly failed to do this and that and this. You should've done this and that and this decades ago!"

At the same time, we liberals are prone to slip into spirit-killing, unproductive blame games when we take up topics like class, classism, and its intersection with other oppressions.

We could come at these issues positively. What wonderful people, who now tend not to join us, might we draw into covenant with us if we could make slight, or moderate, or radical changes in our congregational culture? Which changes would be simple, and which difficult? Who predicts that these changes would help? Do we have congregations that have already started down these paths? How could more of us learn from them?

Some of us think that capitalism is fatally flawed, and should be replaced with another economic model. Some of us think that society can be made more egalitarian by tweaking or modifying capitalism, such as by incorporating socialist elements into it, providing for more control over large corporations, and electing progressive leaders. We encourage more conversation among the different viewpoints. Drawing on our theological roots will help us as we undertake these conversations.



Class and Congregations

Congregations are central to Unitarian Universalism. Our congregations are self-governing, and our Association is an association of congregations. If Unitarian Universalists are middle class, it is because our congregations are middle class.

But the assumption of being middle class is self-fulfilling. It leads our congregations to the suburbs in search of our “natural” audience. It leads us to distrust “urban” congregations and keep careful watch on how our resources are spent in supporting those congregations. It causes us to welcome those with the “right” education, the “right” taste in music, the “right” politics, the “right” ability to provide financial support, the “right” theology, the “right” degree of skepticism and cynicism.

Often working-class visitors do not return to our congregations:

From age 20 to 51 I did not attend any UU church. Part of the reason was because I assumed I would now be out of place due to income and education.³²

Even when working-class people become members of our congregations, they may not call attention to their background or circumstances, preferring to blend in with the dominant culture or to use the professional culture of a UU congregation as a way up the class ladder.

When I was 12 years old my father decided to join the Unitarian Church in Framingham. I was active in the church school and the youth group at First Parish. Looking back I see that my parents were trying to move up the class ladder and one way to do that was to become Unitarian Universalists. More than that they wanted their children to have a more expansive life and more economic opportunities than they had. One way to make this happen was to take us to the UU church. . . . As a person with working class roots serving in congregations with so many educated upper class people, I have often felt as though I am class “passing.” There are times when I do not feel comfortable working with UUs from a more privileged class background.³³

For poor or working-class UUs, engaging with a congregation can be problematic. Even reaching a UU congregation can require a major effort if a person does not have a car,



has to work on weekends, or has to navigate neighborhoods that are more welcoming to suburbanites than people of color or people with limited resources. We do sometimes have members who travel to our congregations on buses; but those members can find it difficult to stay engaged.

Participating in leadership can be even more problematic for people with limited resources. Taking a leadership role in a congregation often comes with an expectation of leadership in pledging, donating toward incidental expenses such as holiday gifts for staff, and bearing the cost of attending trainings or workshops.

People of limited resources who offer their labor in lieu of limited financial resources may hear that volunteering is all well and good, but a financial contribution is also expected, and sometimes required. And when the time comes to thank members, gratitude for financial contributions is likely to be more enthusiastic than thanks for volunteer efforts.

Power and respect in congregations often go to those who have resources: money, education, leisure, and social capital.

Democratic processes in congregations can revolve around finance, parliamentary procedure, and majority rule rather than mission and consensus. Congregational polity, while offering self-governance, can also become a tyranny of the majority class.

Classism in Unitarian Universalist Congregations

Do our congregations have a class identity? Do we expect certain levels of income, wealth, education, dress, and decorum? Who is in the room? Who is left out? How does class identity influence power in congregations? Who benefits from our congregations, and in what ways?

Class issues surface in many congregational contexts. Perhaps most central is the assumption that UUs are upper middle class: financially comfortable, highly educated, articulate, independent, socially responsible, liberal, and tending toward humanist theology. These stereotypes may apply to some extent, but they are not universal, as

we've mentioned. Who among us "passes" as middle class or is marginalized by the assumption of middle-class identity? Who is ignored when they do not accept the whole upper-middle-class package, cannot participate fully, or do not fit unstated cultural norms of conversation, dress, or behavior?

The answers to these questions provide insight into how class assumptions affect participation in congregational life.

Experiences of Classism in Unitarian Universalist Congregations

Forums for sharing experiences of class tensions have emerged in social media and in congregational workshops. These shared experiences help illustrate the pain of some of our members, or might-have-been members.

At the General Assembly workshop given by UU Class Conversations in 2014, participants expressed concerns and frustrations about classism in congregational life. Classism was apparent in such things as an assumption of literacy in workshops, training, and worship; an assumption of an ability to pay for things like workshops and General Assembly; an assumption of car ownership; a travelogue of expensive summer vacations in the course of Water Communion; and conversations with newcomers that begin with the question "Where did you go to college?"

One participant in this workshop described a congregational event related to the pledge campaign, in which the people who had given the most (in dollars, not percentage of income) were served by the other members of the congregation.

At a forum at the same General Assembly, a participant spoke of the need to analyze the conflation of education with economic class. Advanced degrees do not guarantee middle-class income, and lower- or working-class origins do not guarantee limited education. In another congregation many members met for brunch at a yuppie restaurant that another speaker in this forum could neither afford nor appreciate.

There are many, many other such stories of the small and large, overt and subtle, instances of classism experienced in UU congregations. The pain of these members calls us to address this issue in our congregational life.

Basic Introductory Work

If we are to address classism within our congregations, the first thing we need to do is to educate our people about both class issues in our culture, and how they manifest in our congregations.

This is the area where the most resources are currently being developed and offered. UU Class Conversations offers online resources and a full-day workshop, “Organizing for Change: Addressing Classism in Your Faith Community,” conducted by trained facilitators. Workshops have been offered in several regions of the UUA and more are being scheduled for next year. Their workshop at General Assembly in 2014 drew about three times as many participants as there were chairs. It is a testament to the power of the work done by UU Class Conversations, as well as the desire among UUs to address class issues, that no one left the overcrowded room, and in fact, people stood outside to listen.

Suzanne Zilber is field-testing a curriculum for UU congregations called “Class Conscious: Class and Classism in UU Life.” This curriculum includes four modules for a total of eight hours of training. Two commissioners used this curriculum in their congregations and found it valuable.

Intercultural Sensitivity: Where Are We, Really?

Several groups within Unitarian Universalism have started to use the Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) to help us understand how we prepare people for deep work engaging with cultural differences. At the most basic level, the DMIS says that there is a continuum of development in the area of intercultural sensitivity and intercultural competence. Most adult Unitarian Universalists (and most adult people, for that matter) are in a stage called “minimization,” in which they minimize cultural



differences and stress cultural similarities. It is particularly difficult to get people in this stage to answer questions about ways that their organization or congregation is biased toward or against certain expressions of class culture, because they do not engage with cultural differences and see them as not entirely real. We believe this is one of the reasons that the groups struggled so much with questions that require an understanding of different class cultures.

The next two stages, “acceptance” and “adaptation,” are stages in which people can perceive cultural differences as real, and can respond with non-judgmental curiosity or can shift perspective and behavior into another cultural framework. It is at these stages that people can appreciate the details of the ways cultures differ, and can learn to create environments that allow cultural diversity to really flower. Organizations in adaptation can make decisions about which cultural frameworks will be used in which situations for specific goals.

Before Unitarian Universalists can create congregations that can adapt to class culture differences, they need help developing an awareness of cultural differences in general as real and significant, but not threatening.

The Commission on Appraisal recommends that the DMIS and its accompanying materials be made available to UU congregations in ways that will support work toward congregational engagement with cultural differences of many kinds.

But We Have to Fund the Budget: Asking For, Using, and Giving Away Money

Class in congregational life is not just about culture, of course. It is also about money. Along with engaging class culture differences, examining how money affects our congregations is vital work. Undertaking this self-examination can help UU congregations become welcoming and affirming places for people from a variety of class experiences.

This area of work includes looking at the ways congregations discuss finances, ask for contributions, execute their budgets, and charge for congregational activities, among other things. When people with low incomes or limited opportunity for discretionary

spending describe experiences of pain in UU congregations, very often they include something on the above list. For example, the Facebook group for working-class UUs includes lots of discussion of the Sunday offering, the annual pledge campaign, and similar aspects of congregational life.

The Commission on Appraisal recommends that congregational staff be encouraged to develop new ways of asking for money that recognize the diversity of classes within our congregations and the realities of our changed economy. To do so, they will need to seek meaningful, sustained input and engagement from working-class and poor UUs.

We also need to focus more on how we spend our money. Are we simply maintaining a comfortable place for intelligent sermons and socializing with people like ourselves? Or do our resources make a difference in our communities? Plate sharing has become a fairly common way of engaging more closely with local communities; but congregations often fear it as a diversion of much-needed funds away from the congregation's own survival.

Budgeting for mission can engage congregants who have the resources to be generous when there is a sense that their money is well spent, that it really makes a difference in people's lives. Without that sense of mission, giving can become a transactional calculation that measures what is received rather than an investment in the future.

Creating Liberative Congregations

Ultimately, we would like to see our congregations transformed into communities that are experienced as liberating by all those within them, in regard to class struggles as well as other forms of struggle against oppression. If we are actually interested in liberation, we'll need to be clear about what that truly means. Solidarity demands that we take on a share of the risks that are faced by oppressed people. We might need to think of ourselves not as allies, who express support but take no action, but as accomplices, who work alongside oppressed people.

This is our vision for what congregational life would look like if we can transform congregations into liberative communities. We have a language and a theological grounding that can help us build community among Unitarian Universalists in ways that address the daily needs of people's lives. Our work against classism, economic

inequality, and class awareness unhinges (or seeks to unhinge) many systems of oppression. People are more connected to their full humanity through their faith, rather than disjointed from each other and parts of themselves. We imagine and actively seek to create futures in which all are able to live full, nourished lives. Unitarian Universalists crave collaborative justice making at local, regional, national, and global levels that deconstructs normalized categories, builds up structures of responsibility and accountability, and enables us to experience joy, laughter, and love in creative, transgressive ways. We rest—really rest—like we’ve never rested before.

Ministry with Working-Class and Poor UUs

An assumption of middle-class identity in our congregations affects our theology and our social justice perspective.

Imagine, for example, what a Unitarian Universalist congregation composed of union activists and working-class members might look like. Would we spend our Sundays debating whether we use the words “God” and “worship” too often? Or might we be more concerned with promoting a living wage, providing a supportive environment for working families, and nurturing both body and spirit?

Ministry with the poor in the Philippines looks very different from ministry with middle-class congregations in the United States. The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Philippines (UUCP) was founded by Rev. Toribio Quimada during the 1950s as a Universalist church. Its primary outreach has always been to poor farmers in the island of Negros, in the central part of the country. Rev. Quimada’s social justice ministry focused on getting legal deeds for those who had worked the land for many generations without proper protection or proof of ownership. His solidarity with the poor earned the ire of the Filipino government, and as a result of his courageous work he became a martyr for our faith in 1987. His daughter, Rev. Rebecca Quimada, is now the President of the UUCP and carries on the legacy of standing on the side of love with the poor, marginalized, and oppressed throughout the Philippines.³⁴

Today the UUCP comprises 27 congregations in Negros and two in Metro Manila. Almost all of these small congregations are located in poor communities, and most of the congregants are farmers or construction workers. Most of the ministers are bi-

vocational, working alongside their congregants in the rice fields in Negros, needing outside income to support themselves and their ministries.

One of the favorite hymns in the UUCP Hymnal is entitled “Creators of a New Reality.” The chorus says, “Together we have felt the fire, struggling with the poor.”³⁵ These words encapsulate the ongoing reality of Unitarian Universalists in the Philippines: not members of the upper middle class helping the poor, but those who are poor themselves, struggling to make ends meet and to live out their faith, keeping the spirit of their founder alive by being in solidarity with one another.

Working in Local Communities: Living What We Have Learned

If our efforts at class inclusiveness within our congregations and Association succeed in creating more economically diverse and inclusive environments but fail to address the larger structures of class in our society, we will be stopping short of the full implications of this work. Our Principles call us to work for justice, equity, and compassion in human relations and a world community of peace, liberty, and justice for all. We live in a society that treats the poor and working class with contempt rather than compassion, that is eroding the support structure for the most vulnerable in a context of soaring inequality. If we take class inclusion seriously, we also need to take class justice seriously.

A number of Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities are experimenting with models that both address the concrete needs of their low-income members and work for a fairer world. For example, Sacred Fire Unitarian Universalist in Carrboro, North Carolina, is functioning on a mutual aid model and is expanding into other areas of the country. In Boston, a group of UU young adults purchased a house they named the Lucy Stone Cooperative. They seek to grow a diverse community centered on justice. They lift up the core values of sustainability, spiritual practice, and social change.

We believe that there are other models to lift up, and even more to develop, if we are to model a culture of class inclusivity. Work to identify these models and ways in which others could learn from them would be time well spent.

Historical, social, and theological awareness of the building of spiritual depth among our people can help us combat “compassion fatigue.” People of color have also coined the term “white people fatigue” to describe the exhaustion that comes from being around predominantly white groups who expect recognition for supporting people who have no choice but to live in a system dominated by white privilege.

Theological attitudes can undergird social justice work, building the beloved community on the streets in our work for a just society. How do notions of vocation play out for UUs who need to sustain themselves in social justice work that’s never completed? What do we need as part of those notions to ground our work? Do they need amending? Should UUs adopt a different orientation to social justice?



Class in Our Association

Class status affects access to our national movement. The culture of the Unitarian Universalist Association takes professional-class status as the norm, and this affects the ways in which our national leadership and staff interact with each other and with congregations.

Some effects of class structures and assumptions are obvious or widely accepted. Others may be invisible, and still others can best be described as open questions.

Class issues can come into play in all of the initiatives by which we seek to transform our Association:

- We are a small movement with grand ideas about changing the world. General Assembly and our Association issue proclamations; but we are nagged by a sense that we are not growing the way we think we should, not engaging with the world in the way we want.
- There is a disconnect between Associational social justice and the focus within congregations. Our diverse theologies do not provide a strong enough underpinning to motivate our mission. We have difficulty balancing serving ourselves and serving the world.
- Are there new models of ministry that will allow us to better engage with the world and make a difference? Who are we really serving now? How well? How well are we as individuals being fed by the social justice work we feel called to do?
- How do alternative congregational models get the funding they need to start and be sustained? When do we let a lack of funds become a reason to doubt a new idea's ability to succeed, rather than becoming generous stewards of change? Why do we have such trouble engaging and valuing potential large donors, involving them openly in an authentic way so that they can use their privilege for great new things?

At the Associational level, we necessarily consider the systems, processes, and objects that facilitate change, the physical structures and organizational players that implement our vision. We have to identify snags, outdated practices, and ineffective mechanisms.

For example, when we fund things like alternative congregational models, how does the money actually move? And why is that important? What would be the effect of changing the way those processes happen? When we try to implement vision, mission, and alternative models, what barriers and pitfalls deter broader UU social change at the level of local implementation? How do we track the missteps taken or experiments done in the implementation process? What infrastructures would give us more freedom to create and experiment?

Participation and Access

Class affects how congregations and others participate in our Association.

We suspect that most congregational delegates to General Assembly pay their own way and are selected as delegates on the basis of their ability to do so. This practice was questioned in the report of a 2009 task force on the Fifth Principle.³⁶ The tendency for delegates to be those with significant financial resources has been modified slightly by the recent option of remote electronic participation and voting, by the availability of scholarships for congregational presidents, and by an emphasis on delegates representing congregational positions rather than making individual decisions on behalf of their congregations. These are fairly new initiatives and have not yet allowed congregations more true representation in our Association.

Other factors maintain the status quo. Their greater leisure time, higher educational levels, and other class markers make it likely that professional classes will make up a greater proportion of regional, district, and national gatherings than of congregations.

Who Leads?

What class identities are represented in our leadership?

Higher class status provides more opportunities to participate as a leader in our movement. Our leaders tend to have management skills, leisure time, and higher



educational levels. Mostly we consider these skills to be prerequisites for leadership positions, and we spend little time on cultivating them. We seek diversity, but take few steps to ensure that diverse participation will be nurtured or successful. This is true in congregations, especially for lay leadership, and carries over into our national movement.

Our Ends and Our Sources

The UUA Governance Manual defines Ends for our Association. In the Policy Governance model, which the UUA follows, Ends are intended to describe the transformation that the institution strives to create in the world. We believe it is worthwhile to examine how the Association’s governance model impacts or defines class institutionally. The following table explores how the Ends statements in the Governance Manual reflect our class assumptions.³⁷

End statement	Commentary
<p>Global End</p> <p>A healthy Unitarian Universalist community that is alive with transforming power, moving our communities and the world toward more love, justice, and peace in a manner which assures institutional sustainability.</p>	<p>The Global End identifies a goal of “moving our communities and the world toward more love, justice, and peace.” The addition of “in a manner which assures institutional sustainability” identifies institutional sustainability as part of a primary goal rather than a means to an end. Including institutional sustainability with the Ends muddies the water, and runs the danger of putting the continuation of the institution at the same level of importance as the transformations we seek to create.</p>
<p>1.1 Congregations and communities are covenanted, accountable, healthy, and mission driven.</p>	<p>The word “accountable” has financial overtones.</p>

<p>1.2 Congregations and communities are better able to achieve their missions and to spread awareness of Unitarian Universalist ideals and principles through their participation in covenanted networks of Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.</p>	<p>This End calls on congregations and communities to act together in covenanted networks (which are not always in evidence between richer and poorer congregations).</p>
<p>1.3 Congregations and communities are intentionally inclusive, multigenerational and multicultural.</p>	<p>This End is silent on class inclusion.</p>
<p>1.4 Congregations and communities engage in partnerships to counter systems of power, privilege, and oppression.</p>	<p>This End provides class perspective. Setting it alongside End 1.3, we might conclude that power, privilege, and oppression are external issues, and not also issues in our congregations.</p>
<p>1.5 Congregations and communities have and use Unitarian Universalist Association resources to deepen the spiritual and religious exploration by people in their communities, to enhance the ministry of their members and to improve their operations.</p>	<p>Does this End indicate that our resources should benefit ourselves?</p>
<p>1.6 There is an increase in the number of people served by Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.</p>	<p>Ends 1.6 and 1.7 speak to institutional health. It's not clear whether these Ends are emphasizing congregational mission or gaining more members for UU congregations.</p>
<p>1.7 There is an increase in the number of Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.</p>	
<p>1.8 There is an increase in the number of inspired ordained and lay religious leaders equipped to effectively start and sustain new Unitarian Universalist congregations and communities.</p>	<p>End 1.8 expands on institutional growth. In addition to increasing the number of leaders, might we want to also increase the diversity of our leadership?</p>

<p>1.9 Unitarian Universalist institutions are healthy, vital, collaborative partners invested in the future of Unitarian Universalism, its principles and theologies.</p>	<p>End 1.9 again mentions institutions. Notice the absence of people in this statement, and the emphasis on abstract ideas.</p>
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Sources of Authority and Accountability

The Commission on Appraisal has drawn on the Sources of Authority and Accountability in Section 3 of the UUA Governance Manual.³⁸ These sources have been identified by the Board as the people and entities to which the Board and the UUA are accountable and which they exist to serve. They are:

- Our member congregations
- Current and future generations of Unitarian Universalists
- The heritage, traditions, and ideals of Unitarian Universalism
- The vision of Beloved Community
- The Spirit of life, love, and the holy

These sources emphasize the theological basis for our work. The last two ask us to look beyond our congregations. We serve congregations, but we also serve children and youth. We maintain our history, but build for generations yet unborn. We are shaped by leaders and staff, by ministers and religious education professionals, by musicians, by theological schools. We serve people in our congregations, but we are also answerable to our communities, to interfaith partners, to higher ideals, and to people who will never enter our doors.

Several of these sources have class implications. As we've noted elsewhere, current and future generations of UUs need congregational and associational systems that can help them navigate class structures that are becoming more unequal, and daily lives marked by more financial stress than their parents experienced. The best of our traditions and ideals and our vision of beloved community call us to active, engaged

solidarity with those experiencing class struggle both within and outside our congregations.

Class and the Institutional Perspective

Associational structures and processes can reinforce class advantages or (to some degree) change class dynamics. Because we are an Association of congregations, tension also occurs between national recommendations and congregational practices. For example:

- The Association recommends fair compensation practices and equal access to benefits across different job categories; but congregations can choose to follow or ignore those recommendations.
- Associational resources related to finances tend to focus on funding principles such as creating a culture of generosity. The emphasis is on greater support for institutions, and especially on financial support for the Association, rather than on support for members facing financial challenges.
- Institutional focus receives more emphasis than an overarching sense of mission.
- Funding flows according to professional-class priorities. This is true even when funding is intended for social justice work.
- UU investment strategies and stockholder activism are directed to address class justice and social justice issues. While significant, these initiatives could benefit from greater congregational participation.

We need structures and processes that intentionally create opportunities for class inclusion and class equality.

Funding Processes (The Draperies of Class)

Associational funding decisions are not transparent. Members of UU congregations and volunteers on UU bodies other than the Board often don't know the basis for decisions, how priorities are set when funds are scarce, or what information UU committees and

other groups might supply to make sure that funding decisions are aligned with Board and staff expectations.

This statement is based on the direct lived experience of the Commission on Appraisal, but we believe that it is also true of other volunteer commissions and committees of the Association.

The lack of transparency in funding decisions permits a narrative of hierarchical control and personal conflict that is not helpful to the Association. It also means that those with class privilege, in the form of inside knowledge and connections, can more easily navigate opaque processes.

Our Best and Brightest in the Trenches

How can elites, and especially our leadership, participate in class liberation?

As a movement, we struggle with the value that we place on ministerial expertise and theological education as compared to other types of education, other levels of education, and other lived experiences. We have heard from lay people who feel that ministerial authority is in itself a status that confers class privilege, and that can require some class privilege to obtain. It is common to hear ministers complain that their special expertise is disregarded or that their authority is questioned, that lay people assert the primacy of their own theological views without having a complete framework.

We need to acknowledge that both points of view have value. Systematic theological education brings perspective and a broader understanding of religious thinking; but lay people also have valuable experience, knowledge, and perspectives. For both ministers and lay people, lived experience offers a particularity and concreteness that can be missing from more academic treatments, and that is especially important in deconstructing class dynamics. Too often, debate about the relationships and relative position of ministers, theologians, and lay people places far too much emphasis on abstract ideas, and far too little on lived experiences.

More importantly, neither abstract ideas nor concrete experience can have complete value without interacting with the other.

Isasi-Díaz addresses the role of academically trained theologians:

If the community as a whole does theology, what is the task of those of us who have called ourselves theologians? I believe there is no way of averting this identity crisis once the . . . privilege of the poor is recognized and theology is understood as a praxis. The only way for academically trained theologians to resolve their dilemma is to participate fully in a community of struggle and to do theology as members of that community. The gifts of the academically trained theologian will not be wasted. The community needs some of its members to be enablers and facilitators during the reflective moment of the praxis. . . . Those who are trained academically can enable the community to understand that its daily struggle for existence is not separate from its religious understandings, sentiments and beliefs. They can record what the community is saying so the community can benefit from it in the future, so that it may be shared with other communities of struggle, and so that one day those voices may be an intrinsic element of the societal norm.³⁹

The challenge for Unitarian Universalists in living out this vision is to create congregations and other UU communities that really are “communities of struggle,” communities that include in their leadership those most vulnerable in our society. Once we do, we can work together—people of different classes, lay people, ministers, and academics—to do the work of liberation.

Who Are We, Really?

Who are we, really? What are our demographics? And why do we not want to share or know this?

We take for granted that many among us are upper middle class, highly educated, and financially comfortable. Much of the Association’s messaging around finances and other matters tends to speak from this assumption. But in fact, we don’t have a very clear picture of our demographics either at the congregational level or across congregations.

A recent *UU World* survey offers some demographic data, but may not give an accurate demographic picture of Unitarian Universalism.⁴⁰ Respondents were self-selected for an online survey instrument, and the invitation to participate stated that the goal of the

survey was to help the staff of *UU World* craft their print and online content. The use of self-selected samples is already problematic. Those with higher incomes are more likely to have access to the Internet. Finally, since the invitation to participate in the survey did not mention that its goal was to obtain accurate demographics of the Association, readers who had no strong opinions about the magazine or website would have been unlikely to participate, while they might have wanted to be counted in a demographic study.

How We Do Business

How are class assumptions embodied in how we do Association business and relate to each other?

We can see the following problematic patterns, growing out of class assumptions, in our governance and management practices:

- Consolidation of authority into a clearly hierarchical system
- Primacy of abstract ideas over concrete human realities
- An assumption of privilege and entitlement
- A tendency to control the conversation
- An unwillingness to share in-progress thinking
- A tendency to reach a conclusion prior to seeking input

Authority, Power, and Class

How can we distinguish between class-hierarchical ways of relating to each other and clear lines of authority in our institutions? Where does class privilege begin and good governance end (or vice versa)?

Without clear lines of authority, power gravitates to the privileged. But clarifying lines of authority can also consolidate and reinforce existing structures of privilege and power.

Making a commitment to class justice demands that we strengthen our commitment to hearing all voices, to recognizing class concerns in organizational structures, and to intentionally building class-inclusive institutions.

Reconciliation

One person who spoke with the Commission refused to take any effort at class inclusion seriously unless it included acknowledgment of the long history and continuing practice of classism and class oppression in which Unitarian Universalist individuals and institutions have been complicit (for example, Unitarian involvement in the eugenics movement) and some effort at reconciliation. While only one person said this explicitly, we heard a lot of frustration and pain from working-class and poor UUs, and we feel that some efforts at healing and reconciliation are needed.



Recommendations and Resources

Recommendations

Board of Trustees

- Ensure that this study is continued by the newly restructured Commission of Appraisal or some other entity.
- Ensure that that entity engages deeply with people of color and historically marginalized communities in doing so.
- Draw up a Business Resolution for a future GA that will include acknowledgment of complicity with class oppression, apology to those hurt by these actions, and commitment to reconciliation and class liberation in the future. This effort will be worse than nothing unless it is engaged in with seriousness and depth.
- Revise the Ends of the Association to more clearly articulate transformations related to class and classism.
- Create structures and processes that intentionally create opportunities for class inclusion and class equality at the Associational level.
- Endorse continued funding for UU Class Conversations and for the creation and distribution of other such introductory materials and opportunities.

UUA Staff

- Initiate a sustained project to create class-inclusive materials for congregational fundraising and conversations about money. This project is worthy of funding and staff support. It should be led by UUs from working-class and poor backgrounds,

and should also solicit the experiences and advice of people from middle-class and wealthy backgrounds.

- Create a collection of worship materials related to class on WorshipWeb, especially materials generated by UUs from working-class and poor backgrounds.
- Create a program similar to Breakthrough Congregations to recognize congregations that are doing significant work in creating liberatory forms of community and worship.
- Make the DMIS and its accompanying materials available to UU congregations in ways that will support work toward congregational engagement with cultural differences of many kinds.

Congregations

- Engage in a study of class and classism in the congregational setting, using existing resources.

Resources

The resources listed here include ones that were used in the preparation of this report and that would be useful to others who are studying class in our Association.

Curricula and Workshops

- *Class Conscious: Class and Classism in UU Life*, by Suzanne Zilber.⁴¹
- *Organizing for Change: Addressing Classism in Your Faith Community*. Workshops offered by UU Class Conversations and led by trained facilitators.⁴²

Websites

- www.UUClassConversations.org: UUs telling their class stories, videos and webinars (coming in the fall of 2015), and information about UU Class Conversations workshops.

Films

- *People Like Us*, a PBS documentary.

Books

- *Beyond Outrage: What Has Gone Wrong with Our Economy and Our Democracy, and How to Fix It*, by Robert Reich (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).
- *Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists*, by Betsy Leondar-Wright (Gabriola Island, British Columbia: New Society Publishers, 2005).
- *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, by Mark Harris (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011).
- *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*, by Betsy Leondar-Wright (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press / ILR Press, 2014).
- *Religion, Theology, and Class: Fresh Engagements after Long Silence*, edited by Joerg Rieger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).
- *Towards Collective Liberation: Anti-Racist Organizing, Feminist Praxis, and Movement Building Strategy*, by Chris Crass (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2013).

Questions for Further Conversations about Class

We have had far too few conversations about class. The following questions could be included in future conversations exploring the subject of class in our Association.

- Where does our mission in the world come from?
- How well are individuals being fed by the work we do?

- What is the value of studying class?
- How can we support the needs of congregations and individuals?
- Who is not in the room?
- In what ways is class status an identity, and in what ways does it function differently than other types of identities?
- What does success look like?
- How would alternative models of ministry be funded?
- Can new ministries be made sustainable?
- How do funding models affect who can participate?
- How might traditional congregations and new ministries enrich each other?
- How do financial concerns impact underserved communities and groups?
- How do financial concerns vary by race and gender?
- Where is the resistance to change?
- What is our personal investment?
- How can we increase our personal reserves?
- Do we have shared values?
- What parts of our institutions rely on privileged class structures?
- What economic challenges exist in our various communities?
- How much independence do we have?
- How do we enact things we find valuable?
- How do we structure and employ our various types of capital?

- How does the Protestant work ethic inform our spirituality?
- Who are we really in terms of class? Who is invisible?
- How can we lovingly engage those who have class privilege?
- How do debt and financial hardship inform our attitudes toward congregations and individuals?
- What political and societal trends produce and reinforce norms around money and class?
- How does justice work relate to attitudes toward capital and class?
- How do we fund work in congregations?
- What are the generational dimensions of work, debt, standard of living, and class?
- How can we replace the donation levels of the Boomers? Should we?
- How do generational shifts affect our congregations financially?
- How does aging affect our personal relationships to capital and class?
- What social and economic supports do our congregations provide?
- How does our Association support large-scale charitable agencies?
- How does class awareness affect your faith practice?
- How does class location limit access to faith?
- What does it feel like to be at an intersection of class and other identities?
- How has music in church affected and spoken to you, or not?
- What responsibility do the 1% have to the rest of us?
- What complicity do we have in the perpetuation of this system?

- Why is the concentration of wealth in a tiny fraction of the world's population unsustainable ethically? Economically?
- What does the system of inequality do to the wealthy?
- How do we get rid of this system?
- What do UUs think about the 1%?
- What do we think about the top 20%?
- How much money would the rich have to give away to repair the damage caused by making it?

Recommendations for Further Study and Action

As noted previously, this report is incomplete and preliminary. We believe that further study is necessary to complete this work.

More Conversations

The Commission on Appraisal (or some other group completing this study) needs to have more conversations with Unitarian Universalists of all kinds, especially working-class and poor UUs. We need deeper conversations with people of color, people who identify as BGLTQ, immigrants, and members of other historically marginalized groups, to explore the intersections of oppressions based on class and on other identities.

We also need more conversations with class-privileged UUs, UUA leadership and staff, and UUs of the middle and professional classes.

We need a deeper understanding of how class affects people and institutions across the entire range of UU experience.

Better Data

We don't have good demographic data to use in investigating congregational membership and national participation. We need to obtain and evaluate reliable demographic information. We cannot address class issues without understanding our demographics. Pew Research Center studies may be helpful in this regard.

We need to get a clearer picture of the people in our congregations, to dispel the myth of a uniform middle-class identity. The assumption of middle-class identity makes working-class UUs invisible. It leads to exclusionary behavior in our programming, to exclusionary messaging in our resource materials, to exclusionary theologies that favor middle- and upper-class experiences. We cannot serve all classes without knowing who is among us.

Governance and Management

At the Associational level, we need to continue to examine the Ends that guide our governance, to more clearly articulate needed transformations that are related to class and classism.

Work needs to be done to make the Association's budgeting process more transparent and open to feedback. For example, none of the class workshops at this year's GA are funded. What categories of workshop themes are funded more consistently? We could ask similar questions about other funding priorities within the UUA and about other funding bodies in addition to the UUA.

Reconciliation

The Commission on Appraisal recommends that a Business Resolution be drawn up for a future General Assembly. This Business Resolution would include acknowledgment of complicity with class oppression, apology to those hurt by these actions, and commitment to reconciliation and class liberation in the future. This effort will be worse than nothing unless it is engaged in with seriousness and depth.

Social Justice

When we look at class indicators for people of color, it can be argued that the impact of racism today is greater than it was in 1965. Legislation and reform did not and will not create the transformation that we're seeking.



We claim to reject “pie in the sky when you die,” but we don’t manage to talk about bread and butter in the here and now! How might we benefit by looking at structures within working-class religious communities, such as the black church and immigrant churches?

Can social justice be a growth strategy?

Growth

Is it the goal of congregations to grow by attracting people, or is it their charge to fulfill a mission in the community? What are the risks of each priority?

How do we limit access to our community through a culture of “professionalism” in our congregations?

Analysis

In a world defined by class, we must have an analysis of power. A lack of such analysis promotes ineffective methods of social intervention. We need a better understanding of money, capital, debt, and the growth of markets, as well as a deeper understanding of class distinctions.

The middle and upper middle classes are attached to, identify with, and give allegiance to the rich and powerful. This attachment is a product of the mythology of the American Dream. We want to achieve success, and we are willing to do nearly anything to hold onto what we have. That means we have been and remain more Reformers than Revolutionaries.

To what degree are the professional classes the middle management of the status quo, with UUs often acting as gatekeepers? How might we transform our roles within larger systems? What benefits might we gain by claiming our identity as the religious movement with the highest *per capita* income and the most Ph.D.s, but the lowest pledging percentage?

Unitarians have historically had access to power. We were the powerful, or had their ear, in our early days. But now?

How do we deal with the fact that while many UUs are upper middle class, we actually have very little power in society? What wealth we do have among us, while significantly greater *per capita* than that of other religious traditions, is dwarfed by that of the 1%.

Is it okay to shame the rich (depending on what they do with their wealth)?

Fund Raising and Use of Resources

We must quickly begin funding our Association through a percentage of each congregation's budget instead of a charge per member. We need to address the emphasis on growth in numbers and the "members cost us money" mindset.

What do we fund?

What is the theology behind passing the plate?

What is our response to the statement "There isn't any money in the ministry"?

Culture

What is our class culture? Is it our habit of slavishly following models, best practices, and abstract rules? Is it our practice of coming to meetings and joining committees?

Our ecclesiastical structures mirror the institutional structures that the majority of our members know best. That means that we look like universities and, increasingly, like nonprofits.

We should recognize the power of storytelling, and find a story from each Source that speaks to class.

Generational Change

We have to wake up to class issues and realize that our class-structured congregations will die, and that younger people are building new ones. Our existing institutions have to direct money to alternative forms of gathering, or they will be left behind.

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