

# Accountability and Resources

Part of [Widening the Circle of Concern](#)

Widening the Circle of Concern: Accountability and Resources Audio Reading

“Racism is particularly alive and well in America. It is America’s original sin and, as it is institutionalized at all levels of society, its most persistent and intractable evil. Though racism inflicts massive suffering, few American theologians have even bothered to address white supremacy as a moral evil and as a radical contradiction of our humanity and religious identities.”

—James Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin”

“A theology of liberation is part of the work for a certain type of community, one in which freedom is possible, one always aware of the historical and material threats to the human sociality and existence that it values. Liberation theologians are not concerned with the essence of human being per se, but with the creation or maintenance of a specific form of human existence. In our work for communities of justice and peace, it is crucial that we remember how easily structures of [kinship] are obliterated.”

—Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity*

## Background and Trends

As noted earlier in this report, many people of color did not wish to share their individual experiences with the Commission because their stories had been told and retold to no avail. Many told of having not seen any change in the systems that had injured them, and of their frustration in and unwillingness to continue to support such systems.

To restate: our concern here has been with systemic change and so our interest in individual stories was to look for patterns that revealed where our systems held or reinforced bias. Continuing to do so and to develop systemic capacity to do so is important.

A growing awareness of the inequities based in disparities created by bias has led to calls for accountability, especially by members of newer generations. Without any outlet for the reporting and analysis of such incidents, ugly divisions will continue to arise.

Ongoing monitoring is needed to continue to track progress toward equity, inclusion, and diversity. Continued assessment should be rooted in dialogue with groups representing Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other people marginalized within Unitarian Universalism.

The abandonment of anti-oppression work and investment in younger leaders that occurred after 2005 left us ill-equipped to meet the rapid-fire changes of today. We need to have mechanisms that sustainably ensure inclusion and innovation despite efforts to resist change.

Active attention and deep commitment to long-term progressive structural change address the *satisfaction* and *guarantees of non-repetition* requirements of reparations as defined by the United Nations.

Structures critical to the development and promotion of Unitarian Universalism, including the UU Ministers Association, Liberal Religious Educators Association, Association for UU Music Ministries, Association of UU Administrators, and the UU Association of Membership Professionals should all be explicit about their need to be accountable and active in promoting system changes to combat oppression, racism, and white supremacy culture.

When we consider that full reparations require both cessation and guarantee, we understand that we need mechanisms to ensure that cessation is ongoing, and restitution is continued until satisfaction.

## “Bible Defense of Slavery,” by Frances Ellen Watkins Harper

*This poem was written on the eve of the Civil War. The author was both African Methodist Episcopal and Unitarian.*

Take sackcloth of the darkest dye,  
And shroud the pulpits round!  
Servants of Him that cannot lie,  
Sit mourning on the ground.

Let holy horror blanch each cheek,  
Pale every brow with fears;  
And rocks and stones, if ye could speak,  
Ye well might melt to tears!

Let sorrow breathe in every tone,  
In every strain ye raise;  
Insult not God's majestic throne  
With th' mockery of praise.

A “reverend” man, whose light should be  
The guide of age and youth,  
Brings to the shrine of Slavery  
The sacrifice of truth!

For the direst wrong by man imposed,  
Since Sodom's fearful cry,  
The word of life has been unclos'd,  
To give your God the lie.

Oh! When ye pray for heathen lands,  
And plead for their dark shores,  
Remember Slavery's cruel hands  
Make heathens at your doors.

## Recommendation

**Accountability should be embedded in the structure of the Boards of the Association and other key organizations, including all affiliated and professional organizations.**

For equity, inclusiveness, and diversity to flourish in our Association, a united commitment must be reflected in the identity documents of the Association and all affiliate organizations. The differing practices and levels of commitment from structural entity to structural entity within our Association is one of the ways

Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and members of other historically marginalized groups are injured over and over again.

Differences in commitments, structures, and practices among affiliate groups dilute and endanger these critical commitments. Professional groups are wrestling with these at differing levels and, when engaged in anti-oppressive work, can be critical levers for change. Other groups, such as camps and conference centers, when failing to adopt contemporary standards, impede our progress as an Association. The scope of our work did not allow for the full review of all these structures; however, the issue of discrepancies was well documented in the testimonies and conversations collected.

- **Action:** Include in the bylaws of the Unitarian Universalist Association **an explicit commitment to become anti-oppressive and equitable and to serve the full diversity of those who resonate with our theological tradition.**
- **Action:** Initiate a Board-driven process to develop such a statement and present it to the General Assembly of Congregations for inclusion in the bylaws of the UUA no later than 2022.
- **Action:** Request that all Unitarian Universalist–related organizations examine their commitment to equity, inclusion, and diversity work and include such a commitment in their bylaws.
- **Action:** Using the example of congregations who have already adopted such statements, develop a sample statement for inclusion in congregational bylaws.

## Recommendation

**Ongoing monitoring is needed to ensure that work to counter bias and oppression is not interrupted again.**

In the focus groups and other conversations as well as within the meetings of the Commission, sorrow was expressed about the time that has been lost because we did not maintain a continual commitment to anti-oppression practice. Had this been adapted and continued rather than stopped and disregarded during the last decade and a half, the explosive incidents and deep divisions that have affected our Association at a time when religious life itself is challenged in US society would not have occurred. Whether we will survive this leadership malfeasance is yet to be determined; what is clear is that we cannot afford to engage in it again. The following are actions we recommend for the UUA Board of Trustees and president.

- **Action:** Adopt goals by 2021, report progress on these goals at GA each year, and codify this requirement in the bylaws.
- **Action:** Provide annual report to the General Assembly of Congregations by the UUA president on goals and progress toward those goals of equity, inclusion, and diversity.

## Recommendation

**The UUA should establish an ongoing independent body to identify systemic changes and monitor accountability on work toward equity, inclusion, and diversity. This body should be based on representatives of groups of oppressed people and should have direct representation on the Association Board.**

One of the issues that we have had in Unitarian Universalism is that we have set up structures that are accountable to individuals rather than to representative groups, which undermines our democratic process. It also creates tremendous amounts of stress on those representatives, especially when they are from marginalized populations. A model that we should look at is the accountability group that was used for the Justice General Assembly in 2010. That group had representatives from a variety of identity-based groups, and those representatives met together to discuss issues of accountability.

Using identity-based groups is a good method because our larger Unitarian Universalist culture cannot support certain groups of individuals. People come together in these groups because of the marginalization they experience in our larger culture, and this is a good way to make sure that we are accountable to communities rather than to individuals.

- **Action:** Establish an independent body through a vote at General Assembly to consist of one representative and one alternate from identity-based groups, including DRUUMM, BLUU, TRUUsT, and EqUUal Access if they are willing to participate. Membership for this panel should be reviewed every two years to include all relevant groups and to make sure the groups that are included have membership lists and at least one membership meeting a year. In addition, the Nominating Committee should appoint two at-large members and the UUA Board of Trustees should appoint one member who will represent the group on the Board. This representative should be confirmed by a vote of the new body focused on accountability and systemic change.
- **Action:** Recognize accountable congregational partnerships for purposes of equity, inclusion, and diversity at the local congregational and community levels. Amplify practices that include long-term investments in relationships with and regular donations of financial resources to partners serving in communities that are under-resourced.
- **Action:** Provide a report to the Association annually at GA on a set of metrics to be submitted no later than the 2021 GA. Metrics could include the percentage of UUA employees who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color, or who hold other marginalized identities, the percentage of the budget that is devoted to our work on an annual basis, the number of complaints received around racial concerns, and the number of new intentional communities that have been created to support the values of new generations.

# Recommendation

**Those responsible for managing and negotiating in times of change and conflict should have training in anti-oppression work.**

At certain times in the life cycle of religious organizations, including times of conflict, biases, racism, and other -isms intensify. When tensions are high, people may not monitor themselves as carefully and systems that are inadequate to meet today's needs may show their flaws. For this reason, leaders who facilitate discussions at such times must have particular training in anti-oppressive practices. Professional associations have "good officers" trained to assist in times of conflict between religious professionals and congregations or among religious professionals. This training has not historically included training in anti-oppression work. Since a growing number of these incidents revolve around issues of demographic difference, this can no longer be optional.

Similarly, agreement on a common set of standards among all the professional organizations is also needed. These officers exist to maintain the highest standards of ethics and values during times of conflict, and such cannot be maintained without proficiency in anti-oppression work.

- **Action:** Identify best practices for inclusion, equity, and diversity for congregational nominating committees and make them available through all communications means and through leadership events.
- **Action:** Include training in anti-oppression practices as a standard part of interim minister training because of the opportunity to address issues of systemic bias during interim times.
- **Action:** Develop capacity within all good officer (and UUA regional staff) teams to lead and facilitate conversations around harm, injury, and conflict in anti-oppression practices.
- **Action:** Curate models of how to audit for oppressive practices at the congregational level.

## Take-Aways

- Accountability structures should be built into the bylaws and have direct representation on the Board of Trustees and should include accountability to representative groups.
- We may not survive the past decades' disruption of our commitment to anti-oppression work. We know we cannot afford to abandon it again because of its larger societal significance.
- Work to counter oppressive practice in our systems should be embedded in all levels of the UUA, including at the congregational and community levels.
- Regular reporting on our progress can keep us focused and on-track.
- All who facilitate conversations during times of conflict should be trained in anti-oppression and how to address systemic bias.

# Final Thoughts

Part of [Widening the Circle of Concern](#)

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In 1989, a report titled “We Have No Problem... Again,” from the Black Concerns Working Group, [39] included the following words:

That the white majority refusal to acknowledge and accept the firsthand knowledge that people of color, indigenous and other marginalized groups face within our frames is maddening to those who experience it over and over among us.

These words still resonate three decades later. This lack of regard and respect is what leads to an evolution from accusations of “racial bias” to “racism” to “white supremacy culture.”

In spite of the promise of our movement, we still need to address the bias and oppression within our systems to build resilience in our living tradition for the times we are in and strengthen it for future generations. Making these changes will allow us to stay relevant. Addressing these issues will allow us to live into the theology we profess. Furthermore, if we are committed to this work as central to our faith, we will create the conditions in which all who are attracted to the theological premises of our faith can thrive.

This form of creative, faithful engagement is *joyous* when it is done in a spirit of aspiration to deepening our spiritual commitments. It can also be heartbreaking. Much of that heartbreak comes from the fact that we spend most of our time talking about whether we have a problem... again. As a faith, we have struggled to engage this question decisively, putting into relief our investment in maintaining the structures that create and perpetuate unequal arrangements.

As a Commission, we do not believe that a single path exists that will work for every UU individual or group or evenly across the current fragmentation among Unitarian Universalists. We have offered here, in good faith, and in carrying out the charge we received during the 2017 General Assembly, our best synthesis of the ideas and recommendations developed from this collective work and the work and ideas of Black, Indigenous, and other people of color who have offered them to no response generation after generation. These ideas and recommendations are a distillation of many conversations, laments, arguments, written testimonials, focus group interviews, gatherings, reports, and institutional data that we have been privy to over these years of service as your Commission on Institutional Change. As our work comes to a conclusion, we feel confident that there is much wisdom within these pages that comes not from our perspectives as Commissioners but from the cumulative lived experiences and ideas that have been fermenting for many decades among us.

As we prepare to close, we would offer one further distillation of all of that is contained within these pages. We affirm that, ultimately, what we have been talking about for these years are basic commitments that grow out of our theological legacy. Retailored for our time, these are the commitments:

- **Hospitality**—the willingness to welcome all who would find solace, comfort, and inspiration in the values that we hold.
- **Common sense**—the idea that we can often just do things in a more simple and basic way that makes sense rather than make things unnecessarily convoluted.
- **Empathy**—the ability to perceive and care about another’s sore struggle even if it is not your own, recognizing that it is part of ours and that we are bound together through the interdependence that is part of our faith.
- **Compassion**—the ability to walk with another and to be caring toward that one as if they were ourself.
- **Self-awareness and mindfulness**—recognizing the power we have over one another, simply allowing ourselves to wake up to that, not to be shamed or made guilty, rather simply to allow ourselves to prepare our own hearts for transformation.
- **Continuity**—the recognition that we would not be having these conversations in 2020 if we had kept them going in the 1970s, the 1980s, and the 1990s, for commitment and continuance are what will allow real progress.
- **Humility**—knowing we don’t know the answers, especially in these times; offering to one another those glimpses of what we do know and so, together, creating a clearer sense of where we are going. In the spirit of that humility, we acknowledge that we have no doubt forgotten some ideas and recommendations that should be included and have perhaps misformulated others. And once again we acknowledge the debt to our ancestors: much that is written here is the collective wisdom of those who have travelled in the valley places of our faith. With this we pass the baton for others to pick up and carry.
- **Restoration**—understanding that where harm has been done, effort must be expended to provide address and redress.
- **Prioritization**—Many of our recommendations are about focus and emphasis, rather than money. Though investments are needed in specific areas, much can be accomplished through education and attention.

## What Do We Mean by Systemic Oppression?

*The following is a Commission on Institutional Change blog post published on March 13, 2019.*

This post is offered in solidarity with our transgender, genderqueer, and gender-expansive kin whom we have previously cited as experiencing similar dynamics as those experienced by people of color within Unitarian Universalism. We affirm, prioritize, and wish to amplify the analysis of the specific dynamics to those leaders and community members most directly impacted by these dynamics as that is a principle of accountability that we honor, the violation of which has caused much pain among us.

We do wish to pause a moment to discuss the costs of systemic oppression. As we have pointed out in previous posts, the oppression faced by transgender, genderqueer, and gender-expansive Unitarian Universalists, while unique in its manifestations, has many of the same dynamics that animate racism. A denial of the differential treatment faced by those whose gender identity is marginalized among us was the cause of much pain. We are deeply saddened by that pain and ask the larger Unitarian Universalist community to engage in self-study, learning, and transformation.

Those who are marginalized among us are not on display for the learning and edification of the majority culture. We treat people as “other” when we treat them as objects or when we act as if our understanding is more important than their right to dignity and privacy.

Second, we note that these sorts of damaging dynamics are perpetuated by a culture that values “expertise” rather than a culture of learning in which we know that we are all learners. The need to “master” knowledge in this way, especially by using individual lives as the teaching tools, further objectifies people.

Third, we note that we have a generational understanding gap in social justice issues. For many of our younger members, and certainly our youth, our failure to be able to expand our inclusion causes us to become irrelevant and also results in a culture in which we reject and harm people.

Fourth, we must create a culture of hospitality in which we allow people to enter into our congregations with the identities they claim without questioning their experience or their truths. Failure to do so feeds into a dynamic that denies that those targeted by hate in our larger society also struggle to thrive among us.

As we said in our blog post of September 2018, “Our basic premise is that if we can live into the full participation of those who have been most marginalized among us, we can create a responsive, vibrant Unitarian Universalism. A Unitarian Universalist faith marked by full equity and participation will continue to play a vital role in transforming lives and communities.”