

Educating for Liberation

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

Widening the Circle of Concern: Educating for Liberation Audio Reading

“The next call to action for racial justice has arrived. My people: Will we answer? The UU White Supremacy Teach-In movement was unprecedented in its scope, and it was just the beginning of a crucial conversation. This conversation has angered some and empowered others. It is, for the first time, an honest conversation. What is at stake is the heart and soul of Unitarian Universalism. We are a people of faith, a faith that demands of us reflection, determination, and yes, a commitment to justice. Centering the voices of the marginalized will be part of becoming whole as a faith and as a people.”

—Aisha Hauser, accepting the Angus H. MacLean Award, 2018

“Children learn more from what you are than what you teach.”

—attributed to W.E.B. Du Bois

“Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate.”

—attributed to Carl Jung

“Some beliefs are rigid, like the body of death, impotent in a changing world. Other beliefs are pliable, like the young sapling, ever-growing with the upward thrust of life.”

—attributed to Sophia Lyon Fahs

Background and Trends

A growing awareness of the power of unconscious bias is pervasive across many settings. The fact that a vocal minority of Unitarian Universalists continue to deny the existence of unconscious bias is both disturbing and discouraging. It is also true that many Unitarian Universalists have not personally experienced the impacts of such bias, though Black, Latinx, Asian, Indigenous, poor, disabled and LGBTQ congregation members and professionals understand it as a day-to-day reality.

For many generations, the standard within many Unitarian Universalist communities has been to promote a “color-blind” approach to religious education and social engagement. This approach is inadequate. Research shows children, and people of all ages, need positive and empowering conversations about race to overcome bias and internalized oppression. Our theological mandate to be inclusive of all who share our beliefs includes a responsibility to move from being “color-blind” to working to end “anti-blackness” and unconscious bias. [31]

Unconscious bias, left unaddressed, creates personal, interpersonal, and organizational practices that privilege some and oppress others. These practices can prove toxic for members of groups that they are not designed to serve. The idea of unconscious bias is a hard sell for people who value rationality and observable science above all.

The good news is that, once unconscious bias is acknowledged, the journey of dismantling it is productive and, for many people, freeing. However, initial efforts can be unskillful and further

distance, other, and humiliate those of our beloveds who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Here is an example shared as testimony:

One of the people actually presented during the time for all ages and had our children stand up, which included children of color and an economically diverse group of folk, which the church does have. And they did a “step up/ step back” exercise in front of the whole congregation. And so I’m standing there and wanting to immediately stop it because I knew what was coming. It was like watching a train wreck. And there was no consent. You know there was no safe space. And all my children were involved.

If unaddressed, unconscious bias creates communities that are not safe for people who are marginalized. This is particularly true in religious communities because people bring their highest ideals and the gap between what they see professed and what is actually happening can be truly damaging.

One barrier to doing anti-oppression work can be shame and the expectation that the goal is to make people feel guilty. In fact, the goal is to allow people to change, and guilt is not an effective agent for change. The nature of history and facts makes it easy to center an approach on what has actually happened. Shame is never the goal of antiracism work—and it is a frequent by-product because of conditioning in a ‘mastery’ culture that one is supposed to be ‘learned,’ not ‘learning.’

The antidote isn’t to avoid antiracism work. The antidote is to train people to see that oppression happens at the personal and interpersonal levels and at the systemic and cultural levels. People are taught to be biased and to privilege the experiences of the white race over others. To undo this, people can engage their free and responsible search for truth and meaning in the work of self-discovery and learning about the systemic effects of oppression. [32]

We also heard about several other barriers. A significant one is that resources to assist with education are not easily identifiable and the existing resources are seen as too expensive.

As one person submitting testimony said of adult faith development,

Some people are doing some of that here. A lot of it costs a lot of money, especially if you’re talking about counter-oppression kind of work. Those things cost a lot of money. Other organizations can’t afford them. If we were doing something as a denomination that was consistent across the board, I think that that would be the biggest structural change I would make. But that’s not a structural change. That’s a cultural change.

And we can start with our children. As one focus group participant put it,

All of these problems we have with fragility, we still have to solve them. It might be a little easier if we started earlier and if we had a good solid curriculum that we could [use to] work with our kids about the way that they think about race.

VISIONS Audit of the UUA

VISIONS, Inc., a national consultant who engaged in an assessment of the UUA in the second year of the Commission’s work, recommended including the following skills and learnings in

trainings and ongoing work. The following recommendations are coming both from participants in the focus groups and from VISIONS, Inc.

1. Training/tools and skill building to do the work to prepare/equip congregations/UUA at all levels for maintaining energy and commitment in this (DEI) work
- Our experience is that if an organization or institution wants to learn a few concepts or become aware of some things that it had previously been unaware of, then a training or two may suffice. However, UUA is already on a path to improve the racial/ cultural climate in the organization as a whole, with a hope to impact congregations everywhere. Such a goal requires a consistent effort, over time, to impact all at the individual/interpersonal level as well as the institutional (policies, practices) and cultural (environment, building of community) levels. This effort would include building in regular times for leadership, and where relevant, other groups within the UUA to continue having conversations around related topics and experiences to increase individual and institutional practice with the issues as well as provide significant opportunity for additional members and congregations to grow into this initiative. This kind of process—building in ongoing work relative to trainings, conversations, support groups—was also very clearly emphasized in/and desired by many of the groups.
- Ongoing trainings (and coaching, as needed) would broaden a foundation for some of the skill development for members to be able to more confidently be in, hold and manage such conversations. Being able to use a multicultural lens as one engages with colleagues, employees, supervisors and leadership provides additional support for members to practice and hone their skills. Many of the needs and next steps could be addressed with such an ongoing initiative: community building, understanding the relevance of engaging in these conversations and other aspects of the work, knowing how to have and practice having challenging conversations while being able to specifically talk about oppression as it pertains to race and other structural ‘isms,’ identifying and addressing micro-aggressions, learning from these incidents and accounting, etc. Additionally, as these skills are practiced, the growth across the UUA that could gradually result from staying this course as an ongoing engagement is much more likely to enhance a shift in culture such that more people, particularly those uncertain about/or fearful of how to engage in these conversations will be more likely to join in the journey.

Therefore, the following are recommendations regarding training:

- a. The first step is to examine the existing trainings that are/recently have been in place and debrief/ glean impact to determine next steps; a thorough analysis of the trainings should yield successes to leverage, keep moving with, and challenges to learn from; additionally, we have learned that many trainings that have already taken place in recent years in various locations have been delivered by UUA members; leveraging internal resources like these that are effective is something that we highly recommend
 - i. The impact of diversity, equity and inclusion trainings and practice will lead to development of a multicultural lens through which all work can be viewed/completed; including all variables related to both privileged and

marginalized groups (race, class, gender—cissexism and sexism, ability, ordained/lay, UUA/local congregation, etc.)

- ii. Consider offerings that meet the status of the congregation—that is, to tailor trainings based on the pace and place where the members/ congregations are with regard to DEI learning and practice; also taking into consideration geography: focused learning within location (i.e., Canada and the nuances of race there).

Trainings and ongoing work would also provide the following skill building opportunities:

- i. How to respond to challenges (i.e., changing [bystanding] to action)
- i. Interrupting/responding to challenges; demonstrating learning from issues sooner
- ii. Leadership would enhance their growth/be able to do their own deeper work using a multicultural lens through all of its work—‘leadership training development within congregations’; ‘putting resources to develop Ministers of Color and how we can support trans ministers; they will need resources of money, time and people; we are not doing this perfectly and committed to doing it differently’; ‘ongoing coaching for and around experiences of being a leader as a person of color’; ‘more leadership training around issues of addressing oppression.’
- iii. Confidence building for more ministers to take on the work of anti-racism and dismantling white supremacy culture
- iv. Realization that members and congregations can continue doing multicultural work despite the lack of diversity—that they don’t have to wait to obtain a critical mass of diverse members in order to be ‘ready’ to do the work; many organizations have learned to work effectively with a multicultural lens, while not experiencing much diversity; additionally there is positive impact at the cultural level and when prospective members see that members and congregations are working in this way they are more likely to be attracted to them and more likely to stay once they enter
- v. Holding the ‘both/and’ of collaborating around the need to address white supremacy and environmental/ecological justice

*Ongoing training, coaching, technical assistance would provide opportunities to address the **personal, interpersonal and cultural levels** which can lead to insight around what **institutional** shifts need to be made to support the work at the other three levels. There are many different modules that VISIONS offers as ways to identify, analyze, understand and address obstacles to organizations moving in a direction that is more equitable for its employees and constituents. One such module—called *Modern Oppression and Internalized Oppression Theory and Behaviors*—focuses on what implicit/ unconscious bias is, the behavioral manifestations of it, how to identify and address the challenges related to it, and how to identify and put into place options for behavior/ decision-making that is more collaborative and equitable.*

VISIONS also noted,

VISIONS acknowledges the challenge/dilemma of the autonomy of congregations and the inherent challenge in wanting to have an initiative take hold without the ability to delegate it to the congregations. It seems that continuing to enhance the culture and demonstrating to both old and new members the benefits of how this [diversity, equity, and inclusion] initiative can and will enhance the organization and communities alike is the way to create the kind of culture shift over time necessary for getting more and more buy in to the work itself, and the organization as a result.

Recommendation

The Unitarian Universalist Association and other national UU organizations should **prioritize the development of resources that allow Black people, Indigenous people, people of color, and other targeted groups** to address the effects of today's racism and other oppressions on their minds, bodies, and spirits.

Participants in our process spoke repeatedly of the impact of living within a white supremacy culture, especially the relentless toll it takes on the spirit, mind, and body. A particular source of pain was the disillusionment that comes from discovering these same societal and cultural forces within one's beloved religious community.

So many of those engaging with the Commission's work spoke of the fact that they would not have been able to remain Unitarian Universalist without the support of networks that brought people who shared their identities together. Gathering with others who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color or other LGBTQ or disabled people was essential to preserving a sense of dignity and self-worth.

Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM) and Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU) are two such networks. DRUUMM has continued to be part of efforts to identify systemic problems and demand redress. BLUU has taken leadership in developing Black-centered worship, theological, and spiritual resources. Opportunities to come together and spiritual practices that embody Unitarian Universalist values are all essential.

VISIONS, Inc., told us that a continuum of options is needed. These can be curated as well as developed. VISIONS advised us to tailor trainings to the "pace and place where the members/congregations are" in their learning and practice around diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as their local contexts.

When developing these resources, the UUA should look toward the knowledge and expertise of those most affected religious professionals, lay leaders, thought partners, and leaders among our own ranks, while bearing in mind and deed the ways in which they have already been harmed by our institutions and ways in which we may empower them to heal, survive, and thrive beyond that harm. To do so, the institution must re-evaluate power and authority in these relationships, striving for power with rather than power over.

- **Action:** Continue to prioritize support for gatherings of lay leaders of color and religious professionals of color, including continued funding for the Finding Our Way Home

gathering for religious professionals and regional and national DRUUMM events. Resource efforts to address physical, emotional, and spiritual injuries caused by systemic racism.

- **Action:** Curate new online resources to address the impacts of systemic oppression and white supremacy culture. These resources, including worship resources, inSpirit meditation manuals, video archives, and other tools should be made available and funded to allow for easier distribution.
- **Action:** Develop peer networks to collect and create trauma-informed resources for Black/Indigenous/people of color to address the spiritual issues of systemic oppression, to be used at the annual gathering of religious professionals of color and in online settings.

Recommendations About Education, from VISIONS, Inc

Our experience is that if an organization or institution wants to learn a few concepts or become aware of some things that it had previously been unaware of, then a training or two may suffice. However, the UUA is already on a path to improve the racial/ cultural climate in the organization as a whole, with a hope to impact congregations everywhere. Such a goal requires a consistent effort, over time, to impact all at the individual/interpersonal level as well as the institutional (policies, practices) and cultural (environment, building of community) levels. This effort would include building in regular times for leadership and, where relevant, other groups within the UUA to continue having conversations around related topics and experiences to increase individual and institutional practice with the issues as well as provide significant opportunity for additional members and congregations to grow into this initiative.

This kind of process—building in ongoing work relative to trainings, conversations, support groups—was also very clearly emphasized in many of the groups. Ongoing trainings (and coaching, as needed) would broaden a foundation for some of the skill development for members to be able to more confidently be in, hold, and manage such conversations. Being able to use a multicultural lens as one engages with colleagues, employees, supervisors, and leadership provides additional support for members to practice and hone their skills. Many of the needs and next steps could be addressed with such an ongoing initiative: community building, understanding the relevance of engaging in these conversations and other aspects of the work, knowing how to and practice having challenging conversations while being able to specifically talk about oppression as it pertains to race and other structural ‘isms,’ identifying and addressing microaggressions, learning from these incidents, and accounting, etc.

Additionally, the more that these skills are practiced, and the growth across the UUA that could gradually result from staying this course as an ongoing engagement, is much more likely to enhance a shift in culture such that more people, particularly those uncertain about or fearful of engaging in these conversations will be more likely to join in the journey.

Modern “Isms” and Internalized Oppression Behaviors

Modern “Isms”

The ways that people in historically and currently privileged groups continue to perpetuate discrimination without meaning to, especially through the use of explanations or justifications

that deflect the ways that we still operate off of “better than” and “less than” dynamics. Most often, these behaviors are unconscious and unintentional yet still have tremendous negative impact and serve to maintain the status quo.

Types of Behaviors

- **dysfunctional rescuing**
Help that doesn't help and that isn't requested or mutually agreed upon.
- **blaming the victim**
Placing 100 percent of the responsibility for negative consequences on the historically marginalized group, whether individually or as a group.
- **avoidance of contact**
Keeping at “arms length” from people in historically marginalized groups or not saying something about cultural differences for fear of making a “mistake” or offending. This can also take the form of not raising issues of oppression with people in one's own historically privileged group.
- **denial of cultural differences**
Not recognizing that cultural differences do exist, not acknowledging the importance of coming to understand and appreciate the relevance of these cultural differences. Also refers to the ways that people in historically privileged groups don't acknowledge our distinct cultural backgrounds, norms, and values.
- **denial or lack of understanding** of the political, social, economic, cultural, historical, psychological significance of cultural differences
Minimizing, discounting, or refuting the day-to-day impact of oppression on people in historically marginalized groups.

Internalized Oppression

The ways that people in historically and currently marginalized groups internalize negative messages received from society. The result is the development of survival skills to cope with overt prejudice, bigotry, discrimination, and “modern isms.” Most often, these behaviors become ingrained and we fail to realize that they no longer serve as survival mechanisms, but rather as barriers against change.

Types of Behaviors

- **system beating**
Not challenging oppression and prejudice, or using one's historically marginalized group status to “get over.”
- **blaming the system**
Placing 100 percent of the responsibility for negative consequences on the historically nonmarginalized group (privileged group or institution) whether individually or institutionally.

- **antagonistic avoidance of contact**
Overwhelming mistrust of the non-target group, or being entirely separate from them for fear that marginalized group will not be able to hold on to “selves.” This mistrust can also extend to people in the marginalized group who connect with folks in the historically privileged group.
- **denial of target group status**
Internalized self-hate as a result of oppression. This condition leads to many other behaviors, such as excessively trying to assimilate to the standards and norms of the privileged group and not connecting with other people from one’s historically marginalized group for fear of being negatively associated with it.
- **lack of understanding** of the political, economic, cultural, historical, psychological, significance of being part of the target group
Minimizing, discounting or refuting the day-to-day impact of oppression on oneself and one’s group.

Recommendation

Resources and tools to ensure a variety of entry points into the spiritual work of embracing one’s own identity and the identity of others should be curated and, where not available, developed. Resources on healing religious wounds and productive conflict engagement are also needed as a core part of faith development.

This sort of education for liberation could be a source of dynamic spiritual growth and an invigorating set of spiritual practices. It requires a willingness to acknowledge and accept mistakes, emotional maturity, and the ability to use productive conflict. While models of education that involve training over a period of months can be helpful, they are not accessible for all people, and less time-consuming models should also be made available for those who need a different kind of entry ramp.

One focus group participant said,

I think I would just say in general that my focus has been really on helping the congregation focus on reflection and antiracism as a spiritual practice and its own work.... I think one of the things I began to realize [is that the] congregation is struggling with this urge that we have to go out there and do something. We have to go fix everybody. And so I’m pushing back a little and saying we need to do this work ourselves and trying to get people to really focus there and really go deeper and really get it in that way.

- **Action:** Offer resources to address the healing of religious wounds, which many Unitarian Universalists bring in from past religious experience and which sometimes restrict the deepening of our shared Unitarian Universalist faith.
- **Action:** Include funds to purchase equity, inclusion, and diversity resources in congregational budgets, since many existing curricula are fee-based to allow the developers, often people of color, to be supported in this work.

- **Action:** Develop training in inclusion, equity, and diversity for boards, nominating and membership committees, and other key leaders at the regional level, both in-person and virtually.
- **Action:** Promote intergenerational partnerships within Black/Indigenous/ people of color communities to provide mutual mentorship and support to address wounding because of systemic oppression.

Recommendation

A comprehensive path to understanding the work of equity, inclusion, and diversity should be developed and maintained as part of faith development.

Because of the widespread focus on equity, inclusion, and diversity work across a range of fields now, many of the tools congregations need may be available and may need adaptation rather than full development.

Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color have called for the development of a certification program that would help religious professionals of color discern which congregations are most equipped to accept their leadership.

- **Action:** Increase the repositories of worship resources that center the voices of people of color as well as others marginalized within our Unitarian Universalist culture.
- **Action:** Develop tools that allow congregations to hold conversations across generations about issues of inclusion, with the goal of recognizing the evolution in our Living Tradition and that spiritual developmental needs change over time.
- **Action:** Begin a renewing certification program similar to the Welcoming Congregation program for congregations, emphasizing lifespan learning in diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-oppression similar to the Our Whole Lives curriculum.

Take-aways

- Unconscious bias is real.
- Unconscious bias, when unaddressed, creates toxic organizations.
- Many congregations have not addressed this and so can be toxic to people of color.
- Addressing unconscious bias requires education, not guilt.
- Many good tools are available and need to be curated for leaders who are overwhelmed by today's challenging religious landscape and need easy access to resources.
- More Unitarian Universalist-specific tools are needed, including a certification program which would indicate commitment and readiness for leadership from people of color.

White Accomplice Avatar

Widening the Circle of Concern: White Accomplice Avatar Audio Reading

- Genevieve Mills
- white
- cisgender woman
- heterosexual

When I was in seminary in the late 1970s one of the requirements was to take a course in non-Western religion. I enrolled in a course on Native American spirituality and tradition. A leader advising the seminarians informed me that that was not going to meet the MFC requirement for a non-Western religion. I protested, saying that indeed it was non-Western, and he responded by implying that it was not a real religion. I was furious and voiced my objection yet he would not reconsider. It was one of the first times I started to realize how many people don't see their white supremacy/settler-colonial attitudes in action. Who was he to decide what is a "real" religion?

I joined my current UU congregation about ten years ago when I moved here for a new job. I've spent most of my career working with adolescents and had the chance to join an organization working on re-entry programs for youth offenders. My work gave me a close-up look at the vagaries and biases in the criminal justice system and I started to learn to identify systemic racism. I joined my congregation's Social Justice Committee after the shooting of Michael Brown and the uprising in Ferguson.

Michael Brown was the same age as many of my clients and his loss felt personal to me. At the beginning of the Black Lives Matter movement, I knew we needed to get more white people engaged in changing these systems.

I advocated for hanging a Black Lives Matter banner on our congregation's building when the call went out for congregations to support the movement with this action in early 2015. Our committee debated the idea for a few meetings and then we had to do congregational education before asking for a congregational vote. I was new to organizing work and found the gathering of signatures and conversations with my fellow congregants to be very informative about the range of views and level of understanding about racism in our country and our city. We had a lay service about white privilege in which three members shared their stories about the harm they had done to friends of color when they acted without acknowledging their privilege. It was very powerful and moving, so by the time the congregation voted there were only three dissenters.

So I was completely surprised—and bitterly disappointed—when the Board said they didn't want to participate in the White Supremacy Teach-In just two years later. Our Social Justice Committee was working with the religious education director and Worship

Committee to make it happen when we got shut down without a real explanation. We had gone together to the Board meeting as a courtesy to let them know about our plans because they didn't

usually get engaged on matters of our Sunday services. The Board thought we had already done enough work and the framing of White Supremacy made them very uneasy. I was angry and sad and tired. We'd done so much educational work in the congregation and to be stopped in our tracks was tough, really tough. I have to admit I wasn't my best self when I called the Board in on their cowardice and lack of support for our justice work. I told them centering their comfort was not what we needed in this moment. But our group wasn't successful and we were one of the few congregations that didn't participate.

I found a congregation in a nearby town that did participate and went to their service. I've attended services there a few times since, and while I've kept up with my Social Justice Committee work, the lack of support and enthusiasm from leadership for the work has made me reconsider whether that congregation is still a good place for me. I need a community committed to justice inside and outside the congregation.