



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF ARLINGTON VIRGINIA

A Place to Connect, Grow and Serve

March 7, 2019 – Connections article

Beyond Categorical Thinking Summary

On February 23, nearly 70 UUCA-ers participated in the Beyond Categorical Thinking (BCT) workshop facilitated by UUA Transitions Director Rev. Keith Kron (his 237th time facilitating over 23 years), and focused on recognizing and removing unconscious bias, promoting inclusive thinking, and preventing unfair discrimination during our congregation's search for a new minister.

History of Beyond Categorical Thinking and Connection to Ministerial Search

The workshop began with Rev. Keith providing a brief history of BCT over the past 30 years as a reflection of changing social attitudes towards marginalized communities. He then provided an overview of the consequences of unconscious bias during a congregation's search for a new minister -- including instances where candidates have withdrawn from consideration due to a congregation's unwillingness to see them as a full person, instead focusing solely on one aspect of their identities (i.e. the fact that they were gay, disabled, Latinx). These congregations were often concerned that a minister who is a person of color/disabled/LGBTQ would change church demographics or only preach about issues related to those aspects of their identities -- Rev. Keith called this the single-issue minister problem.

Small Group Activity

Following this discussion, participants completed a short survey asking three questions -- what, if any, concerns do you have; what, if any concerns do you think congregation might have; and what, if any benefits would there be -- about a minister who identifies as a person of color and/or Latinx, a person with an apparent or invisible disability, or as LGBTQ. Later in the workshop, Rev. Keith tallied the responses and compared them with UU congregations in 1996 and in 2017 (see below).

Participants then formed small groups to discuss how their lives would be different if they were born another race/ethnicity, a different ability, a different sexual orientation, or

gender identity. Later in the workshop, participants again formed small groups to discuss case studies of other UU churches where assumptions about a minister's identity resulted in a learning opportunity for the congregation (see BCT handouts).

How Church History Can Affect a Search

Notably, Rev. Keith said that congregations in search are usually most reactive to concerns related to the last ministry and that some individual congregants may be triggered even if another congregant has completely moved on. He explained that the UUA is getting more complaints than ever, a trend he attributed to the #metoo movement and a painful sign of progress. He cautioned against allowing a problematic ministry to affect congregational self-esteem and to avoid creating different standards for different kinds of ministerial candidates during the search process.

Conclusion

Rev. Keith explained that in 2020 about 45 churches will be in search -- an average number -- and that although the number of ministers who will be searching for new congregations is still unknown, trends indicate the pool gets smaller each year. Our mental image of the "ideal minister" (categorized by age, gender, gender identity, nationality, physical ability, race, and sexual orientation) can unintentionally and easily exclude quality candidates who don't match this picture. Therefore, identifying and deconstructing our unconscious biases will help us recognize and communicate UUCA's needs and culture in an honest way -- pushing us outside of what is comfortable towards growth.

The BCT handouts will be posted to the Ministerial Search Committee's website at <https://www.uucava.org/2020search>.

Survey Results

What concerns would you have about the congregation calling a minister who identified as a person of color and/or Latinx/Hispanic?

	UUCA Concerns	Numbers	1996	2017
1	We have more prejudice than we think we do	31	Single issue	Single issue
2	They'll be a token	10	Too Christian	Congregation is very white
3	Congregation is very white	9	Not smart enough	Community is very white
4	We'd only be doing it to make us feel good	5	They'll have a chip on their shoulder	We have more prejudice than we think we do

5	They'll be single issue	4	Accent/won't be understandable	We'll lose members
6	Church history	3		
7	Arab; members will leave; worship will change; they are taking over; will they be qualified?	1		

*In 2018 The #1 Concern became "We have more prejudice than we think we do."

Perceived benefits: We'll learn more (35) Grow/Diversify (33) Work on our privilege (10) Live our values (8), Good role model (3) Good for social justice (3)

What concern would you have about the congregation calling a minister who identified as bisexual, gay, lesbian, and/or transgender?

	Your Concerns	Numbers	1996	2017
1	Don't understand/unwilling to accept transgender	26	Become gay church	Transgender
2	We have more prejudice than we think	4	Kids won't be safe	Single issue
3	We'll be a gay church	3	Single issue	Become gay church
h	We're in a conservative area	2	We live in a conservative area	We live in a conservative area
5	Kids won't be safe	1	Won't be able to provide pastoral care to straight people	We aren't as welcoming as we think we are

Perceived benefits: We'll learn something (13); We'll grow (8); Live our values (8); They'll be a role model (2); Good for wider community (2)

What concerns would you have about the congregation calling a minister who identified as a person with a disability?

	Your Concerns	Numbers	1996	2017
1	Stamina	38	Stamina/Won't be Able to do Job	Stamina—will they be able to do the job?
2	Church history	22	Our building isn't accessible/It will cost too much money to make our building accessible	Our building isn't accessible/It will cost too much money to make our building accessible
3	Emotional disorders are problematic	10	Will we have to take care of our	Will we have to take care of our

			minister?	minister?
4	Won't be able to understand them	9	We won't be able to understand them	We won't be able to understand them
5	Addiction is problematic	9	Don't want a minister who'll fall off the wagon	Don't want a minister with Emotional Disorder
6	Need more access/accommodations	5		
7	We have more prejudice than we think	4		
8	We'll have to take care of them; don't want a depressed minister	3		
10	We'll pity them	2		

Perceived benefits: We'll learn something (31) We'll have more compassion (4) They'll be a role model, we'll be more diverse, we'll learn to accommodate (2 each)

Other Concerns:

Too old—10; Too younger—8; Obese—9; Working class—9; Male—7; Conservative—5; Political (at all)—2; Too Intellectual—2