

Sermon: “Association Sunday: Growing Our Diversity”
October 11, 2009 **Rev. Martha Hodges**

First of all, I want to applaud all of you for coming out today despite knowing that today we intended to ask you for money. Not just the usual offering, but a special appeal to you to support the efforts of the Unitarian Universalist Association, our continental association of congregations. You're here in part, I know, because these annual Association Sundays, when we affirm our ties with other UU congregations around the country, feel good. It feels good to know that we are part of a much larger movement of individuals and families, gathered in churches like ours, people who are committed to the same values we affirm. In a world in which violence to the environment and to our fellow beings, in which hatred, ignorance and want are considered normal, it feels good to know that we are not alone in saying, we can do better. That we are only one of a thousand or so congregations that are saying this week, and every week, we can do better.

Now, before we go any further, I want to acknowledge that these are tough times for many of us, times that require us to prioritize, to make careful choices about where we invest our financial resources. As you know, UUCC has always been a Fair Share Congregation, meaning that we have always supported the UUA and our Pacific Central District by paying our fair share of annual dues, calculated on a per capita basis. This year, instead of including these dues in our operating budget, we will be asking UUCC members to donate their share of our dues in a separate appeal. But that's coming later. That money will go to the UUA and District Operating Funds and allows these associations to provide the many services that their member congregations depend upon. If you are forced by circumstances to give to only one of these appeals, we ask that you choose the Fair Share dues contribution and limit, if you must, your contribution to today's collection.

Because I know that it's painful to be accosted every day by desperate and worthy causes appealing for money when you have little to give. I understand that you come to church in search of respite from all that, in search of a community that values you for who you are, for reasons that have nothing to do with money.

But here is the irony: It is those very principles that tell us that a person's value does not depend on wealth, and that every one of us has unique and precious gifts to share, gifts that transcend money and property and power – it is those very principles that call us to the purpose of this particular Sunday. Because this Sunday, we affirm our determination to be more inclusive of everyone – not just those with money, or influence, or membership in the elite. Not just white people, not just middle class people, not just straight people, not just people of European descent, not just the able-bodied. We affirm and renew our determination to welcome all. Today we ask for your support in order to do better, in order to build that beloved community where every person has a place at the table, where everyone has a voice, and no one is forgotten or discounted.

We've come a long way. More than half of our UU clergy are women. Many of our clergy are openly gay or lesbian. We do less well in calling clergy who are bisexual

or transgender, but our congregations have educated themselves about sexual identity and orientation and we have been remarkably successful in welcoming and affirming people of all genders and orientations.

We do a pretty good job of making our facilities accessible to people with limited mobility. This particular congregation doesn't even consider those kinds of diversity to be challenges.

Theological diversity is a given in most of our congregations. Differences of belief are not only accepted but celebrated as we each seek answers. We understand that such differences enrich all of us.

So why do we UUs continue to struggle so with diversity when it comes to ethnicity and class? I don't believe it's a question of our unconscious racism and classism, although probably most of us, regardless of ethnic and class background, harbor prejudices that we fear to bring to light. Examining and challenging our hidden stereotypes is all to the good. But I honestly don't think individual prejudice is the reason that we continue to look so homogeneous.

I say "look" homogeneous advisedly, because we are much more economically diverse, especially nowadays, than we perhaps give ourselves credit for. It may be true that the per capita income of UUs ranks among the highest of religious groups, but the days of assuming that your neighbor in the pew was financially well-off are over. At least in the UU congregations I have known, there has been plenty of economic diversity. We are probably not as classist as we accuse ourselves of being – at least if we define class in terms of wealth. If we add occupation and education to the mix, the picture becomes more complex. But as more and more people are unemployed or underemployed, or consciously choose an occupation that does not bring with it status or money, these distinctions are becoming more blurred. And when it comes to education, a prestigious degree just doesn't carry the weight it used to. Critical thinking, curiosity and an open mind do not depend on an Ivy League education.

And on the question of race and ethnicity, if you are a person of color, you may have had the experience of being mobbed by eager white congregants when you've first stepped into a UU church. Not a good thing, when your color results in your being treated like a desirable commodity... but not as bad as the opposite. UUs' hearts are in the right place when it comes to ethnicity, at least for the most part, even if our attitudes may need some fine-tuning. It's better to try too hard than to not try enough. But there is no doubt that we need to get better at talking about race, to become more educated about it, less fearful of the subject and more open to learning and change. We have a ways to go...

Still, our limitations as UU churches, I believe, have less to do with either class or ethnicity than they do with the intersection of those categories, with all the attendant complexities of culture and baggage of historical guilt and pain.

An African-American physician or teacher will fit right in here, will probably feel quite comfortable here. Our outgoing UUA president, Bill Sinkford, was the first African-American to be chosen to lead a predominantly white denomination. Race alone isn't the issue.

But what about the African-American or the Latino who lives in project housing, who works as a maid or is unemployed? Now our stereotypes come into play and we aren't so comfortable... and neither are they. Why is that? Do we even really want to think about that? "Those people" – those whose ethnic and class culture and religious traditions differ from the traditional "UU culture" -- feel threatening. We feel threatened with the loss of something that is treasured and comfortable, our sense of belonging securely in the majority, belonging to the group in charge. We feel threatened by the loss of power, and also by the possible loss of UU culture, and our own religious traditions. But really, are we going to be swallowed up by Evangelicals if we educate ourselves about Latino cultures in order to be more inclusive and welcoming? Are we going to become Pentecostal UUs if we form alliances with black churches?

Our new UUA president, a Latino, was elected on a platform of leading us into becoming a multicultural religious people. In another fifty years or so, the United States will no longer have a white majority. Multiculturalism is in our future, and we'd better get used to it. What will that look like? Nobody really knows, and that makes us fearful.

One thing we do know: multiculturalism is not cultural homogenization. That's what it means – the co-existence and mutual enjoyment and enrichment of **multiple** cultures. It means that no one group is trying to make any other group more like them. We're talking about the salad bowl, not the melting pot.

It means that UUs, if they are to have any relevance in the years to come, will have to open their minds to the possibility that more orthodox forms of religion may have their own validity. In order to engage in authentic collaboration with Latino, Black and Asian religious groups, we must be as respectful of all forms of Christianity as we are of Buddhism and Judaism. For it is in collaboration that our path toward diversity lies.

Christians may call it the Kingdom of God, but the Beloved Community is what we all seek – a world of justice and mercy. We will need to humbly offer our aid to people of all classes and races in the work of creating a nation of truly equal opportunity – equality in education, in health care, in housing and criminal justice.

We will need to overcome any lingering discomfort with traditional religious language. If we are to reach something like true understanding of other cultures, we will need to become expert in translating sacred stories and ritual as well as language into terms we can apply to our own lives. In the process, our own spiritual lives will deepen. I have found my own spirituality enriched by a deeper understanding of our Jewish and Christian roots, and this is why I frequently refer to scriptural passages or stories in my sermons – not because I am a Christian or a bible believer, or want you to be – but because I want to share my excitement over how familiarity with scripture has enriched

my own spiritual life... How becoming familiar with traditional sacred language and imagery has added richness to my own sacred vocabulary. I am convinced that this cross-cultural pollination will enrich all of us when we overcome the barriers to true interfaith communication and cooperation.

We will need to give up the dream of a country of Unitarian Universalists and celebrate the stranger in ways that are not premised on his becoming more like “us.” At the same time, we must keep our doors and hearts wide open to all those who seek a religious home with us, to all those who need a liberal religion that welcomes them as they are.

And we will need to steel ourselves to take a hard look at institutional racism and the ways that most of us benefit from its existence. We will need to commit ourselves to changing those institutions, and that means inviting the disapproval and even the hostility of our cultural peers.

We must do this because it is the right thing to do, the way of life we must inevitably follow if our principles are worth more than the wall they are written on. We must do this, not in order to soothe our consciences or pat ourselves on the back for being “tolerant,” but because we know that we have much to learn from others. We must humbly and sincerely acknowledge that our understanding of the truth is partial, and that truth is not limited to those with white skins and college degrees and good jobs; nor is it limited to those who embrace our liberal religious values. We must do this for our own spiritual growth, health and wholeness.

In the words of bell hooks in the reading we heard earlier, all this “clamoring” about diversity and justice for all “is for us to recognize that our lives are intertwined, so intertwined, that each is accountable to the other. Each particular story/truth calls us to accountability, calls me to accountability for my life, my limits, my individual and our collective transformation...”

We talk about the potential of our liberal religion to change the world. For most of us, the unspoken premise is that we can save the world by making the world more like us. We are now being challenged to reconsider. The world is not going to become Unitarian Universalist anytime soon. So how are we to change the world? Again, by recognizing that our lives are so intertwined that each is accountable to the other. We are accountable for our limitations, for our personal transformation into people free of prejudice, and for our collective transformation into a country in which all are respected for who they are without regard for race, gender, age, ethnicity... or theology.

Can we do this? I have no doubt we can. Where do we begin? A good place to begin might be in our own house of Unitarian Universalism. The funds raised today will go in part to complete a new curriculum for adults called “Building the World We Dream About.” This course in diversity training is designed to take place in monthly classes over the course of a year and is modeled on the “Welcoming Congregation” curriculum that has been so successful in building congregations that embrace LGBT persons. I’ve

put myself on a list to be advised when this curriculum becomes available and we can take a look at it. There are many many resources available from the UUA and elsewhere that we can choose from to educate ourselves in the realities of race in America and in our denomination. I would love to embark on such a program and invite you to let me know if you are interested in such a venture. From there, we can explore ways to make our own congregation more welcoming as well as opportunities for collaboration with other churches and organizations that are doing the good work of overcoming institutionalized racism and class prejudice.

Through this fundraising effort today, we can support congregations that are seeking grants to help them become more racially, culturally and economically diverse. And by contributing to Association Sunday today, we can enable our churches and districts to minister effectively to youth and young adults who identify as people of color or multiracial, and to their families, in ways that address their spiritual needs, racial and cultural identity development and leadership skills. This is how we begin, but it is not the end. We have much work to do – work on ourselves, work on our denomination, work on our institutions and systems that oppress us – any of us.

This is the work of wholeness and health, the work of healing. This is the work of building a future of justice, compassion and love. This is **our** work. This is holy work.

