

Beyond Diversity: Calling White Unitarian Universalists to the Work of Dismantling White Supremacy in Our Faith

I'm in love with the Unitarian Universalism that does not yet exist.

– Natalie Fenimore

People of many races have been part of Unitarianism and Universalism since the beginning, yet our congregational values and practices have marginalized the importance of those who are not white. UU theology aims to be both liberating and radically inclusive, freeing us from destructive dogma and welcoming each person just as they are. Our commitment to create and nurture relationships compels us to be authentic with each other, supporting each other during challenging times and loving each other when we make mistakes. In this moment, Unitarian Universalists of color are calling white UUs to consider how our congregational culture feels anything but welcoming to Black and brown people. Desire for diversity is not enough! White Unitarian Universalists are beginning to understand that, like the wider society, our congregations were built on—and too often still reflect—practices that privilege the norms of white culture and the expectations of white people.

Unitarian Universalists who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color consistently tell us that the theology of Unitarian Universalism is highly attractive, even a saving grace in their lives. How can our congregational culture reflect more fully the boldness of our theology? We are called by our faith and our fellowship to change. We must go beyond shallow forms of inclusion and work together to dismantle the practices, behaviors, and thinking that keep us from affirming and respecting every person in our community—both today and in the future.

Why a discussion about white supremacy culture?

White Unitarian Universalists are learning that many of our religious practices elevate the sensibilities and comfort of white people, as if other cultural values do not exist or are not important. White cultural practices are often treated as if they are sacred, long-cherished traditions. The stories told in our congregations are most often the stories of white people. The ways our congregations face conflict and solve problems reflect a focus on the individual rather than on the whole community. This is what we mean by white supremacy culture: if we act as though white people's ways of knowing, seeing, and being in the world are the right and true ways, we exclude Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color by rejecting their experiences, needs, and values. Like it or not, this benefits

white people at the expense of others—even if, or especially if, we aren't aware of it or never think about it. But as people of faith, we must do the work to understand the hold that white supremacy culture has on us and then resist supporting and perpetuating it. If we are to be who we say we are and act faithfully in the world, it is essential that Unitarian Universalists dismantle white supremacy in ourselves and in our congregations.

This is long-haul faith formation work

The privileges of whiteness are part of what feels “normal” to white people, even if we have not consciously chosen or asked for these privileges. Listening to the perspectives of Black and brown people, recognizing and acknowledging the harm being done, and repairing personal and congregational practices is long-haul faith work.

For example, our second UU Source encourages us to seek “wisdom from the words and deeds of prophetic people.” Is the congregation making room for the previously hidden stories and perspectives of ancestors of color and the voices of today's Unitarian Universalists of color? Our third Principle calls us to “accept one another and encourage spiritual growth in our

congregations.” Are we supporting Black and brown people in the spiritual work of healing from cross-generational racial trauma and working to stop the trauma of public violence against black and brown bodies? Are white congregants pushing one another to confront the ways racism impedes our own spiritual growth? Are we examining the way we make decisions about our social action projects so that they model the kind of democratic process called for in our fifth Principle, affirming that “each person should have a voice and a vote about things that concern them”?

Our faith requires white Unitarian Universalists to draw on our liberating theology and our personal spiritual practices to do the unsettling, uncomfortable, and essential work of coming to terms with our own whiteness and choosing to create a new way of being together. We seek nothing short of the transformation of our faith, so that it can be the Unitarian Universalism that liberates us all, yet binds us together in shared faith community.

CHANGING CONGREGATIONS AND BUILDING BELOVED COMMUNITY

Do you contribute to this dynamic? Consider congregational life through a multicultural lens

Notice white supremacy culture patterns	Move toward multicultural values and solutions
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • sense of urgency and efficiency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • listen to all, develop shared goals, honor individual responsibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • perfectionism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be comfortable with uncertainty and learn from mistakes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • right to comfort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • embrace discomfort, conflict, and complexity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • defensiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be curious before critiquing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • fear of open conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • expect mistakes and ask for help
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • paternalism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • collaborate and share wildly!
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • worship of the written word 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • partner on shared interests and celebrate successes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • either/or thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • receives new ideas as gifts, not problems
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • objectivity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • apologize and take responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • individualism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • recognize multiple realities; take a both/and approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • quantity over quality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • foster a culture of appreciation and gratitude
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drive to further progress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • center the voices of those most impacted when making decisions
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • understand effective collaboration as the goal, not efficiency

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • welcome emotions as legitimate forms of wisdom
<p>adapted from <i>Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups</i> by Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun</p>	<p>adapted from “Multicultural Centering” by Christina Rivera and the “Beloved Conversations” curriculum by Mark A. Hicks</p>

Taking responsibility

Here are some ways you and your congregation can engage fully and wholeheartedly to go beyond diversity and dismantle white supremacy. Commit to:

DISCOVER HOW WHITENESS LIVES WITHIN YOU

- Read *Centering: Navigating Race, Authenticity, and Power in Ministry*, edited by Mitra Rahnema, and/or *Me and White Supremacy: Combat Racism, Change the World, and Become a Good Ancestor* by Layla Saad. Form a discussion group to reflect. Both are available from uua.org/bookstore.

Watch Brittany Packnett’s Ware Lecture at the 2018 General Assembly (uua.org/ga/past/2018/ware). Ask yourself, “Do I know what the people of color in my life expect of me?” If not, find out.

- Intentionally choose to view, read, listen to, and purchase films, books, children’s books, music, podcasts, and visual art created by Black and Indigenous people and people of

color. How do they challenge your story and expand your perspective?

LEARN AND GROW AS A FAITH COMMUNITY

- Provide regular opportunities for congregants of all races to learn more about white supremacy culture and to reflect on what their UU faith requires in response.
- Schedule Beloved Conversations for a congregational learning experience to support the individual and shared work of seeking racial justice.
- Center voices and perspectives of UUs of color in worship. Make a congregational financial commitment to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (blacklivesuu.com).
- Create/fund programs and spaces to intentionally nurture the spiritual growth and faith formation of Black and brown children, youth, and adults. Learn what is most needed and how it should look by asking them first. Seek and support leadership for these initiatives from the communities they will serve.

ACT FAITHFULLY IN THE LARGER COMMUNITY

- Examine your congregation's justice and service projects. Who makes the decisions about what is needed and which projects to pursue? Are those most affected at your table?

- Develop relationships with organizations led by people of color in your community. What are their concerns and needs? How are they asking you to help?
- Commit resources such as money, volunteer time, and space in your building to organizations led by Black, brown, and Indigenous people.

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The leadership of DRUUMM (Diverse and Revolutionary Multicultural Ministries) was involved in the initial conceptual conversations about this pamphlet.

RESOURCES

Beloved Conversations, Fahs Collaborative at Meadville Lombard Theological School: meadville.edu/fahs-collaborative/fahs-curriculum-catalogue/beloved-conversations

More UUA resources here: uua.org/justice/dismantle-white-supremacy, [#uuwhitesupremacyteachin](https://twitter.com/uuwhitesupremacyteachin), and uuteachin.org

Stephanie Pinder-Amaker and Lauren Wadsworth, *Did That Just Happen?! Beyond "Diversity"* (Beacon Press, 2022)

Rachel Ricketts, *Do Better: Spiritual Activism for Fighting and Healing from White Supremacy* (Atria Books, 2022)

Regina Shands Stoltzfus and Tobin Miller Shearer, *Been in the Struggle: Pursuing and Antiracist Spirituality* (Herald Press, 2021)

Shelly Tochluk and Christine Saxman, *Being White Today: A Roadmap for a Positive Antiracist Life* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2023)

UUA Commission on Institutional Change, *Widening the Circle of Concern* (UUA, 2020)

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