

Unitarian Universalists of Color: Living into a Groundbreaking Journey

Bearing Witness to the Journey

At the turn of the twenty-first century, Unitarian Universalism moves steadily into its promise as a theological and spiritual home for Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color (BIPOC).* We know that racism is as old as history itself—a story to which our families, elders, and ancestors across generations have borne witness. The African American feminist poet Audre Lorde famously wrote, “We were never meant to survive,” suggesting that the colonizing ways of white-dominant culture make it consistently difficult for racially marginalized people around the world to flourish and live lives rich with meaning and promise. Yet as people of faith, Unitarian Universalists of color live into that improbable journey every day, dismantling racist structures and practices, healing ourselves and our community along the way, and attending to the important work of ensuring our lives matter as much in the public sphere as they already do in private circles.

Unitarian Universalists are a people of heart and action. As a faith community, we have a tradition of tearing down cultural walls and religious myths that can't persist under the light of reason and moral examination. From the Edict of Torda in 1568, when our religious ancestors rejected early church practices that promoted hatred and oppression, to current campaigns that rally around those marginalized because of their race, class, sexual orientation, gender and gender expressions, or immigration status, Unitarian Universalists work to build a world where all are loved, included, and treated with compassion.

**People of color* is widely seen as an imperfect term that historically refers to the shared experiences of social and structural oppression among people of African descent, Asian Pacific Islanders, Arabs, Latinx people, Native Americans, and mixed-race people. In today's highly divisive climate, it might also include those whose national affiliation and language are the source of marginalization and social/structural oppression.

Why Unitarian Universalism?

An obvious question could certainly be “Why would BIPOC people choose or decide to remain in a mostly white faith community?” The most frequent answer is because of its liberatory theology and commitment to creative and often fierce justice making. The ideas and practices of liberation—both for individuals and groups—are of particular importance to those targeted for social and spiritual oppression in the world. As early as 1785, when African American Gloster Dalton signed the founding charter of our Gloucester Universalist church in Massachusetts, we see how racially marginalized bodies and minds intersect with Unitarian Universalism. We have been a people who feel comfortable working for a world that does not yet exist, resting on the ideals that we are inherently good and worthy of being valued. Just as importantly, we are called to make a difference in the here and now. This shows up dramatically when dealing with racism. Like other forms of oppression, racism secures its power by making people feel ashamed, powerless, violated, and isolated. In response, our faith radically affirms and creates justice-minded spiritual spaces that critique wrongs that dehumanize our people. It carries potential to create communities of compassion and care that restore our wounded hearts and minds. And in alliance with our white co-religionists, we work to develop social movements—coupled with governance and policies—that dismantle practices of cultural domination at the expense of people of color.

The archival collections Sankofa, Cuentos, and Mūlāni are housed at Meadville Lombard Theological School and tell the history of spirited peoples who, generation after generation, chart intentional paths outside of social conventions. Being an outsider, both in the social world and in religious life, is a story many of us can tell. It is a story wrapped in creativity and compassion, grit and grace, courage and collectivism. As a result, we celebrate when our faith communities act as truly welcoming places that celebrate the life-force of love, inclusion, and justice. We are joyful when our communities encourage our children, youth, and young adults to live into the potential of their promise. We work to support people and families who take the risky move of refuting deeply held religious traditions, political dogma, and ageless myths that make us feel small and unworthy. And yet we are not naïve in our understanding of how the world works. So when our faith community or our society falls short, we work collaboratively to develop a clear-eyed, compassionate critique that updates thinking and practices so as not to threaten our spiritual and civic well-being.

Building a Better Way

You have likely noticed that many of our world’s twentieth-century ways are outmoded and require re-thinking. What is remarkable about our UU faith communities, populated largely by people socialized into white ethnic identities, is the defining role that people of color play in creating dedicated spaces that promote the full humanity of everyone, and especially BIPOC folks. Guided by the Principles affirmed by all our congregations we covenant—collaboratively commit—to forge relationships of trust and mutual support that align our spiritual and political commitments and help us think with our hearts. Through a variety of groups, gatherings, conferences, camps, revivals, and collectives, our BIPOC communities directly shape Unitarian Universalist ideas, applying them in ways that enrich the way we worship, how and what we teach our children and youth, how we act as workers for social change, and how we activate intentional communities to support cycles of personal and professional life.

A few examples are:

[**Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries \(DRUUMM\)**](#) is a network of laity and UU religious professionals who carve out spaces for programming, social justice engagement, and restoration.

druumm.onefireplace.org

[**Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism \(BLUU\)**](#) provides virtual and in-person support, empowerment, and spiritual resources that expand the power and capacity of Black UUs in our faith.

blacklivesuu.com

[**Finding Our Way Home**](#) is an annual gathering of religious professionals of color for social and spiritual community, professional development, and collegial support.

uaa.org/multiculturalism/retreat

[**THRIVE**](#) is a leadership development program for youth and young adults of color, helping them to deepen their faith, lift their spirits, and build critical skills for leadership in the face of our uncertain, broken, and beautiful world.

uaa.org/youth/events/multicultural-leadership-school

The Well: A Family-Friendly Retreat Tending the Wounds of Racism is a life-giving retreat that brings children, youth, and adults into a shared space for learning, sharing, connections, and the saving grace of community.

ferrybeach.org/thewell

Making It Real

Meeting and hanging out with other UUs of color is a wonderful balm for the spirit and a sparkling alternative vision of what's possible in a faith community. If you ask who tends to find their way to our intentional communities, the answer includes both the ordinary and the exceptional: the parent who wants to ensure a just world for their child; the community organizer who wants justice for the poor, the disempowered, the ones who are marked "different"; the teacher, social worker, builder, or administrator who works to make a difference during the week but needs a community for spiritual sustenance and renewal; the healer who cares deeply about the spiritual legacy of immigration, global migration, and cultural hybridity; the artist with a deep desire to create an alternative vision of what's possible; the student or community activist who wants to push boundaries in the secular world and, at the same time, be in a community that respects the miracle of the human spirit; The neighbor working to thwart centuries-old practices of relocation, gentrification, and historical amnesia; the investment banker or politician who has a passion for pulling levers that shift systems; the high school student who can't resist speaking against a spirit of meanness that damages self-esteem and self-worth. These are our racially marginalized people, marked not by their status but by their commitments to better themselves as they work to bring others along.

We are a community that has always been restless and full of voice. We also know we have a long way to go for our dreams to be achieved in everyday life. Finally, we know many of our faith communities struggle mightily and imperfectly as they work to shift toward multiracial sensibilities. And yet, still we invite you to be part of this effort, started long before this generation arrived and likely to continue long after we depart. Come join with us! Find your way into one of our national intentional communities, inspired by visions of what can be, to support and deepen your Unitarian Universalist faith formation.

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

For Further Reading

Danielle J. Bujouo, ed., *Spiritual Care in an Age of #BlackLivesMatter: Examining the Spiritual and Prophetic Needs of African Americans in a Violent America* (Cascade, 2019).

Akiba Solomon and Kenrya Rankin, *How We Fight White Supremacy: A Field Guide to Black Resistance* (Bold Type, 2019).

Rev. Julián Jamaica Soto, *Spilling the Light: Meditations on Hope and Resilience* (Skinner House, 2019).

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

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