

THE PERVERSITY OF DIVERSITY

Hamilton, ON

March 1, 2009

Step out the front door of our condo in Toronto, look west across Christie Pits Park and above the tree line I see the domed spires of the Ukrainian Catholic Church [for the] Protection of the Mother of God. However, my little pocket of Toronto is called “Korea Town” and if I walk north, the first church I pass is the Korean Beacon Church. Keep going and I pass a Jehovah’s Witness Kingdom Hall with Portuguese language services. A little further north and west and I come across the Metropolitan Korean Church and then St. Paul’s Slovak Evangelical Lutheran.

What about Hamilton? Nearby you have the Filipino Baptist Congregation, and elsewhere Sikhs, Russian Orthodox and Ukrainian Catholics and Unitarian Universalists, of course.

Your part of the ethnic mix, as well. If you don’t think of yourself that way I’ve got news for you. You are. Our numbers (97.5% Euro-American), our education (17.2 years on average) our language (Anglais si vous plait), our style of worship (no amens here), our principles (seven of them and not a word about Jesus), and our social norms (this is, after all, a Welcoming

Congregation)—are shaped by our Scottish/English heritage and upper-middle class, liberal, North American values.

Our brother and sister Unitarians in Transylvania would find the question I asked you perplexing, and it's a question that could only come from the lips of a naive foreigner. An ethnic church? Of course, they are ethnic -- Hungarian Unitarians. Preserving their language, culture *and* faith is what they are all about. I imagine they find our emphasis on diversity perplexing.

Institutional religion is *always* a marriage of religion with culture; the Transylvanians know this. We, on the other hand, are in denial. Our history tells me this is so.

In 1967 we were members of the UUA and its "Report of the Committee on Goals" found that in regard to "Negro" ministers 27 percent of UUs agreed that such a person's "race might hamper his effectiveness." Guess what percentage said the same thing about women? Forty-seven percent. What happened in the ensuing years? The number of women grew from about 21 in '68 to 199 in '87 and 20 years later women make up over half of our active ministry. "Might hamper her effectiveness"? I guess not.

Meanwhile, the number of African Americans, which had been five in 1948, was around 8 in 1967, this increased to 17 in 1987 and currently stands, when you include other people of color, today there are 56 in fellowship of which 40 are serving congregations across North America and none except me are in Canada. We guessed wrong.

In a 1987 Commission on Appraisal survey UUs made a similarly lop-sided prediction about whether being openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual would hamper one's ministry. Twenty-six percent said being an African American would hinder one's ministry and a whopping 66% said so about LGB ministers. What happened? Today there are over 70 LGBT ministers. Take note it was 1975 that Mark Belletini became the first openly gay minister to be fellowshipped. The first minister of color, the Rev. Joseph Jordan, was licensed by the Universalists in 1889, 120 years ago. We got it wrong again.

Culture prevails. Diversity advanced more quickly when the primary barrier to inclusivity wasn't culture but gender or sexual orientation. And in deed, the people of color who became UUs have always been those who already operate within our cultural

norms. People like me; raised middle class, a lifelong UU, trained at Meadville/Lombard. I'm pretty assimilated. It bears repeating: *'We are an ethnic faith.'*

The difficulty, and why we keep guessing wrong, is that who we are conflicts with who we want to be. That same 1987 COA survey indicated that we rank "embracing diversity" very highly. In deed, when diversity is promoted we automatically nod our heads; it would be apostasy to do otherwise. Bill Sinkford's President of the UUA wrote in the *UU World* that he hears among UUs "a deep sense of failure" and for himself "to sing 'We Shall Overcome' felt like a lie." Why? Because we aren't as diverse as many would wish. Therefore, Bill says "the UUA Diversity of Ministry team...has outlined a plan for welcoming the" "forty-two seminarians preparing for our ministry who are persons of color and Latino/Latina/Hispanic people." [UU World Summer 2007 p.7]

What is it we aspire to be?

If you had a large population of people who used American Sign Language wouldn't that be great? Of course, but it is not what we

mean when we say diverse. Wouldn't it be great if you attracted even a handful of individuals who are developmentally-challenged? Of course, but that is not what we mean. Suppose ours was a faith to which working class people came in droves. That would be something to celebrate, but it is not what we mean either. And we all know it doesn't mean religious diversity; God knows we have enough of that. When we say diverse what we mean is "persons of color and Latino/Latina/Hispanic people"; which seems to be the current politically correct mouthful. You know what I'm talking about people. Why do we say diversity? I suppose saying diversity saves time; if we had to list everyone Asian and South Asian, First Nations people and Inuit, Filipinos and Pacific Islanders, Latino/Latina/Hispanic peoples and of course Caribbeans of others of African descent and whomever else I've missed we'd never finish the sentence.

This attention to naming looms large and the awkwardness of the nomenclature reflects an awkward relationship. People want to have their cultural identities recognized and respected in a way they haven't been. And so in a denomination that first and foremost "respects the inherent worth and dignity of every person", we try. We are awkward, in part, because we are afraid

of offending, and that fear makes us cautious; and being cautious, whether looking for offense or fearful of offending, makes for stilted conversations and hesitant relationships.

So we stumble along: Who we are isn't who we want to be and the way we are going about addressing this challenge isn't working as fast as we wish. We know it when we look around the room at UU gatherings and notice the lack of racial and cultural diversity. Hamilton is not as diverse as Toronto but still 13.6% of your population are visible minorities. We see that our congregations don't reflect the world in which we live and feel a vague sense of discomfort. We ask, 'Why?' Worrying, perhaps not even consciously, that the absence of persons of color shows we aren't as progressive as we pretend. We ask, 'When we have such good intentions why can't we change even though we have been working at it for 50 years?'

So what is going on?

The numbers, not our hopes, wishes or impatience, say there has been change. The number of female and LGBT ministers have simply moved to reflect their percentage in our UU population.

And the same is true of ministers of color. If I consider all ministers of color this is what I get. Over the past 70 years the number of ministers of color serving congregations grew from 2 to 5 to 8 to 21 to 56, in other words it more than doubles every 15 years. This increase happened whether we were doing little as in 1952, marching in Selma in '65, responding to Black Power in '67 or retreating from it in '70, finding our feet again in the 80s or ignoring it as Canadians are want to do. This suggests to me that the determining factor is not our indifference, our efforts or our fretting; in fact it has nothing to do with the UUA or CUC. What has happened over the past 70 years is that the *ethnic* group we draw from has changed as Canada has become so diverse, and with the substantial increase in number of people of color graduating from college, the growth in the number of mixed marriages and of the children of those marriages; a group that is overwhelmingly middle class. And because we *are* an ethnic church and these individuals fit into our UU culture we have seen incremental growth, and the numbers indicate this will continue regardless of what we UUs do or don't do. Rather than leading we are simply reaping the reward of changes in society.

In the 1987 COA survey that I keep referring to not only did

“embracing diversity” rank as the third highest factor in being a vital congregation it also ranked second lowest in being met. 20 years later, Bill Sinkford is still hearing that we feel “a deep sense of failure” in this regard.

Why the fretting?

We, as UUs, have a self-image problem. In 1967 our self-image was that of civil rights activists and that led us to say it would be more difficult to be a woman minister than an Afro-American. Today we think of ourselves as open, tolerant, justice-seeking, feminist, gay-affirming liberals attuned to a multicultural world; and seduced by our own self-image we make outlandish predictions and set unattainable goals. Then, of course, we don't live up to *one particular racially –focused set of expectations*, which were unrealistic from the beginning. And what? We feel bad about ourselves. And what do we do? We flagellate ourselves because our efforts at racial diversity haven't kept pace with our achievements vis-à-vis women and LGBT. This response isn't really about social change or spiritual transformation or even diversity in its broadest sense; it is about our self-image as liberals. It is about our collective ego. We want to be different

than we are because we *want to feel better*. We want to look around be able to say, ‘Yes, this reflects the world in which I live’ rather than feel ashamed that we do not. We want our congregations to reflect the multi-cultural pluralistic society that is emerging and we want to think of ourselves as on the forefront of that and we can’t.

What are we to do about this?

First, lecturing and cajoling *is* not the way. Pulling the race-card and kicking you in the teeth by telling you what low-down racists you are *is* not the answer. Sinners? We have jettisoned the language but held onto the attitude, and that is not the way. Why? Our earnestness is sabotaging this project for guilt always deals cruelly with vision. What kind of enthusiasm and commitment do you bring to the things you *ought* to do? You can’t try something different and, at the same time, be careful, our trepidation only encourages timidity. We’ve got to lighten up and laugh at our mistakes, apologize for our gaffs and forgive the inevitable blunders. The sort of transformation we are seeking can’t be rooted in ‘I should’ but will only grow out of what we want and yearn for.

Second, as we move on we need to be honest with ourselves about who we are, why we want to be different than that and what is possible. Who are we? An ethnic faith, and that defines who we can successfully attract. Why do we want to be different? Frankly, so we can feel better about ourselves. What's possible? Let's be realistic and stop setting ourselves up for frustration and failure by creating expectations we can't meet.

Third, if we want to be diverse we must appreciate the diversity we have achieved. Find that diversity. Treasure the complex and unique identities that are already represented among us. Who we are is worth celebrating, and the more we do that the more inviting a place we will become because praise and joy and affirmation will serve us better than blame, guilt and earnestness.

Finally, accept that we are caught in a conundrum, that there is a perversity to our call for more diversity. What makes it so is this: We don't want change. Having found a comfortable religious home (no small challenge) we are reticent to let it slip from our grasp. As important as being a justice-seeking community and an openly tolerant one is we also yearn for stability, predictability

and familiarity; a religious home where we can come and find comfort as we face personal challenges and an unpredictable world. So we understand the need for change and in principle are open to it. Yet at another level we don't want change but we can't be honest about that. Instead, we say we want diversity. We mean we want a change in appearance rather than substance. We'd settle for looking different rather than being different. But pursue diversity and you invite change, change and you become something different than you were drawn to in the beginning. And that is the conundrum.

Change means discomfort but we welcome that when we see that it is to our benefit.

Change means not welcoming someone and then when they behave or believe differently than we do meeting it with a raised eyebrow, a frozen smile and silence.

Change means being open and adventuresome; it means lighten up and smile about the theological and social diversity in our midst.

Change will come whether you work for it or resist it or simply wait; it will come whether you want it or not.