

Trends

Widening the Circle of Concern: Trends Audio Reading

The world around us is different than it was a decade ago. Or even five years ago. The question is, how will our “living tradition” keep up with the times? What choices will we make—or fail to make—and how will that affect the relevancy and the survival of our faith?

Here are some of the realities in which our faith exists as we enter into 2020:

- Our nation is moving away from institutional religion. According to the Pew Research Center:
 - Fewer people are participating in religious communities.
 - Emerging generations report higher rates of people not affiliated with institutional forms of religion, especially Christianity (those known as the nones because they have checked the “none” box when asked about religious affiliation). [1]
 - Increasingly, younger generations are the ones exiting religious institutions. While Unitarian Universalists often look at the slightly increasing number of people who identify as atheists and those who identify as not religious as an opportunity for us, some of the reasons appear to be tied to the nature of religious institutions as much as changing beliefs.
- Unitarian Universalism is not immune: we too are losing congregations and have many teetering on the edge of collapse. While we typically refer to 1,000 congregations, in truth we now have 819 congregations that would meet the standard to become a congregation today.
- As institutional religion declines, more who enter our doors are not refugees from other faiths but are experiencing faith communities for the first time through our faith and are seeking spiritual ground.
- The demographics of our nation have changed, and with them expectations around cultural competency:
 - We have seen an increase in the percentage of the population that is non-white. In California, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, and Texas, white people are already not the majority. A US Bureau of the Census report that showed non-Hispanic white people as a minority by the year 2044 has been thought to lead to a dramatic political reaction. [2]

- A growing number of people marry outside of their racial group, so the percentage of people who are multiracial is expected to increase significantly by the next Census count.
- The globalization of economies and these demographic trends means more people are exposed to cultural competency expectations in schools and in the workplace, with many seeing competency as a necessary part of doing business in the twenty-first century. [3]
- New generations face a much bleaker future than those who are now at the end of their careers or in retirement:
 - Lack of opportunity is felt most by new generations, and this trend will be exacerbated by disinvestment in schools, rising cost of health care, etc.
 - Income inequality affects younger people disproportionately. New generations no longer expect to achieve a higher quality of life than those before them.
 - A new level of despair caused by climate change, increased awareness of the problems of the world, the opioid addiction epidemic, and other trends brings more people into our congregations and communities who are seeking a sustaining faith.

In the face of these trends, we face some critical divides among us:

- Since the mid-twentieth century, more Unitarian Universalists are “come-inners” than birthright Unitarian Universalists. Many of those who came in during the 1960s-1980s were interested in getting away from religious practices that they felt were nonrational, demeaning, or illogical. The attraction of our faith was what it was not—non-creedal, non-hierarchical—and the emphasis was on personal freedom. In recent decades, more of those entering our doors have been attracted by our beliefs and their interest has been in the tenets of our faith.
- Some among us believe we can continue the practices that have been most prevalent in Unitarian Universalism without change. Others feel it is critical for us to change; many of these tend to be younger or identify as Black, Indigenous, or people of color or hold other identities that are marginalized in UU community, such as gender-expansive.
- Some believe that work to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity is optional and tangential to our faith. Others believe it is a form of spiritual practice among us necessary to live out our faith.

What puts extra pressure on these divides? A number of factors increase the tension and division:

- Since the early decades of the twentieth century, we have not invested in developing the theological resources that could have allowed us to have a vocabulary of faith to meet these troubling times.
- Our faith, as with almost all institutions in our nation, rests on a culture whose economic structures depend on the annihilation of Indigenous peoples and the enslavement of Africans forcibly relocated and enslaved.
- Despite periodic and episodic attempts to address this legacy and to address personal bias, we have not sustained these efforts and now find many of our congregational practices lacking in the standards of multicultural competency found in many workplaces.
- Our emphasis on hyper-individualism and the legacy of the consolidation of Unitarian and Universalism have led to a culture of mistrust that is augmented when difference is in play. Women and gay, lesbian, bisexual, gender-expansive, and disabled adults have all struggled as have Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color who have sought to lend their gifts.
- We do not have effective ways of dealing with conflict, tending to avoid it until it explodes. These explosions are often then covered up. This conflict-avoidant culture is now dangerous in an age of new interpersonal norms and the magnifying impacts of social media.

In consideration of these trends, we say,

- In a world where people can understand more about one another because of the way the Internet allows us to enter one another's lives, cultural competency is increasingly expected. Our theological legacy has long put us on the forefront of advocacy and prophetic action to widen the circle of concern for marginalized groups, and yet without a focus on addressing today's issues of inclusion, we are woefully unprepared to live our values.
- We have spent time comparing our religious wounds rather than healing them. As a result, we have often operated from a least-common-denominator approach rather than one linked to our highest values as a people of faith. Our time as a haven or social club for those disaffected by other religions has passed. In these searing times of political division, climate change, economic polarization, and global strife, people need a sustaining faith.
- Economic and demographic trends alone would require us to look anew at efforts to promote equity, inclusion, and diversity—and we also have a theological imperative to do so.

- We continue to attract a greater diversity of people and to retain a very small percentage of those who do not match the resourced, white, aging majority within our congregation.
- We witness a growing and cavernous gap between generations exacerbated by lack of investment in technologies and methodologies that can help us understand and better comprehend generational differences.
- As with other predominantly white institutions, we have failed to acknowledge the extent to which the resources that have built our institutions were amassed at the expense of people of color, especially Indigenous and Black people.
- The unfinished—and interrupted—work on race within Unitarian Universalism has marred our ability to move forward at a time when accountability, multicultural awareness, and inclusive language are becoming the new normal in the larger world.
- Engagement in this type of development is deep spiritual and faithful work that allows for growth and change.
- We need change at the personal and interpersonal levels, and most of all we need to make systemic changes that can be ongoing and lasting.
- The newer generations in our nation are increasingly at risk according to many reports, including the 2019 World Happiness Report, which singled out a dramatic and disturbing decline in health and happiness, especially for younger US citizens. [4]

Our deliberations to date have convinced us of this: *What is at stake is nothing less than the future of our faith.*