

Misconceptions about Becoming a more Multicultural Congregation

Don't Let Them Stand in the Way of Standing on the Side of Love

We welcome people who affirm our UU principles regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, political affiliation, gender or sexual identity, education or income level, or physical abilities. Yet misconceptions can cool the warmth of our welcome, particularly persistent misconceptions about race and ethnicity.

Misconceptions about Multiculturalism

1. This is about numbers.

One benchmark of congregational diversity is that no single group accounts for more than 80% of the community, but becoming a diverse, multicultural community is not just about counting. It is about ensuring that people of color who visit First UU Richmond feel respected and valued here, and that they feel welcome in becoming active participants in building this beloved community.

2. This is about political correctness.

Essentially, this is about being Unitarian Universalists. Welcoming people from all races and cultures who share our UU principles gives witness to those principles. We cannot be who we say we want to be, or even who we already claim to be, and not be intentional about this aspect of welcome.

3. They wouldn't choose us.

Destructive stereotypes underlie this myth, incomplete truths that lead some people to presume, for example, that all African Americans prefer “Black churches” (often narrowly construed as Baptist or Pentecostal), all Latino/a people prefer Catholic churches, all Arab Americans prefer mosques, or all Asian Americans prefer a meditative community, sometimes prompting questions like “*Why would ‘they’ want to leave ‘their’ churches to come here?*”

While intentionally ethnic churches serve a unique role in the religious landscape—whether Korean Baptist, African Methodist Episcopal, Greek Orthodox, or another ethnically identified religious community—our UU principles are incompatible with being a mono-ethnic church.

White people **and** people of color bring Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Ethicist, Buddhist, Muslim, earth-centered traditions, and other practices into our UU communities, including some who feel disconnected from the creed of the faith tradition in which they grew up.

In addition, a growing number of people from many races, ethnic groups, and cultural traditions are “unchurched” and are seeking a spiritual home. Unitarian Universalism offers a home for religious seekers of all colors and from all practices who share our principles.

4. This means more theism.

Religious diversity among people of many colors includes non-theist traditions. Anthony Pinn, a Black Humanist; Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk and teacher; Michael Saso, a Jesuit Taoist Buddhist priest; and those who have carried on the Humanist Judaism practices of Rabbi Sherwin Wine, are just a few multicultural voices from such traditions.

5. This is about evangelizing.

Unitarian Universalism's inclusive, uplifting message shouldn't be the best kept secret of world religions, but this doesn't mean recruiting people out of churches where they already feel at home. It means being more visible in our neighborhood and city so that people seeking a spiritual community like ours can discover us. And when people visit, it means sharing expressions of our principles through diverse, multigenerational voices, rhythms, and images, celebrating UU principles reflected in the literature, art, music, and sacred teachings of many cultures and faith traditions.

6. This is about doing something for others.

Becoming a more diverse, multicultural, multiracial community can enrich each and all of us. This type of transformation thrives in an environment of radical openness, challenging us to expand our religious pluralism from a pluralism of beliefs to a pluralism of being¹. In such an environment, where diverse religious practices are as welcome as diverse religious beliefs, multicultural expressions of UU principles can enhance our appreciation of those principles, and relationships with people who live UU principles in diverse ways can deepen our understanding of what it means to be a UU.

¹ Rasor, Paul. "Unitarian Universalism: A Religion for Our Time?" 15 Jan. 2011. Williamsburg, Virginia.

7. This is about "doing things."

Although the journey may begin by doing things to increase our visibility or enhance our multicultural awareness, it is our openness that will reflect our success—each aware of our own cultural lens and striving to perceive the world through a multi- rather than a mono-cultural one. Becoming multicultural will include forming intercultural, interfaith, and other partnerships marked by shared leadership, and informed and enriched by differences, partnerships in which we work together to build a more loving, just, compassionate society. This is about more than checking off a list of multicultural things we've done; it is about being multicultural.

8. This will just "happen."

Some people examine recent census data and suggest that our congregation will become more diverse and multiracial by default. While it's true that our children and thus our future are already multicultural, if we do not begin to live into their world, then they will pass ours by. Evidence from successful, multicultural faith communities shows that becoming part of this reality requires a shared vision, an intentional, deliberate plan, and commitment.