

Racial, multicultural tensions still beset Unitarian Universalists: Moving toward truth and reconciliation

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During the Unitarian Universalist Association's recent national convention in Portland, Oregon, Joseph Santos-Lyons was ordained as the host city's first homegrown minister of color in the church that proudly represents the left pole of U.S. religion.

The Boston-based UUA, which is 92 percent white by its own estimate, embraces multiculturalism in theory like other liberal movements, Santos-Lyons said.

"A habit of liberals is to want to fix everything on the outside," said Santos-Lyons, 34. "But we don't turn inward and fix ourselves."

William G. Sinkford, president of the UUA since 2001, who was the first minority person elected to that post, said the uneasiness may have generational roots in the U.S. civil rights struggles. "Many of us thought we were going to solve racism and poverty," said Sinkford, who is African American. "To come to terms with the unfinishedness of that work is almost acknowledging a failure for my generation."

Santos-Lyons, who is Asian American and white, said he decided to speak out about race at the June convention because the UUA is at a turning point. Santos-Lyons is used to shaking things up—his personal blog is titled "Radical Hapa" (*Hapa* means Half Asian Pacific American), and he learned his organizing techniques from Chicano activists at the University of Oregon who led boycotts on behalf of vineyard workers.

In the national church body, a series of events—flare-ups between members, funding decisions and hiring choices for positions of power—has led to discouraging conclusions for many minority members, he said. Some have left the faith.

The points of tension are telling: Should discussions of racism focus on white privilege and the inherited responsibility for historical wrongs, especially slavery?

Does creating separate ministries for people of color divide an organization based on unity? And should the ethics of transracial adoptions be questioned?

Many minority Unitarian Universalists regard the 2005 General Assembly in Fort Worth, Texas, as symbolic. There, two Korean Americans who had been adopted by white families came to speak to a denomination that, by anecdotal accounts, has one of the highest rates of transracial adoptions.

The title under which the two adoptees spoke? “Transracial Abductees.”

“You could see the discomfort on people’s faces,” said Meggie Dennis, a Korean American adoptee. As for Santos-Lyons, also an adoptee, the UUA was the church of her white parents.

“Many of us grew up in a white suburban church where nobody wanted to point out how a child was different, so race was just not talked about,” Dennis said. “That set us up for a sudden identity crisis because we had not learned about our cultures.”

Manish Mishra, the leader of the UUA’s multicultural ministries organization, said the church and its leadership are sometimes unfairly blamed for issues that affect “all of white liberal America.”

To focus on funding decisions, the sheer number of minorities or discomfort among otherwise well-intentioned people “is a very superficial analysis,” said Mishra, one of only three ministers in the UUA with a Hindu and Indian heritage.

Petra Aldrich, another UUA official, said Unitarian Universalists have an insecurity that stems from the faith’s lack of theological structure. “Because we don’t all believe in the same thing, people look for structure and commonality in how we behave, who we are or who we aren’t,” said Aldrich, who is white.

Sinkford said he is trying to take the UUA to the next step—truth and reconciliation.

During the convention, Sinkford challenged fellow Unitarian Universalists to address reparations for slavery—specifically \$1 million that had been promised, but not paid in full, by the UUA three decades ago. It was controversial then and it is controversial now, he said.

“Many of our churches with beautiful steeples on the New England coast were built with money from the slave trade,” he said. “We have to be able to tell the reality of our history. This is spiritual work.” —*Religion News Service*