

Class Diversity: Exploring our Past, Building our Theologies

Friday, June 26 | 7:45pm-9pm US/Eastern (4:45 – 6:00PM PTD)

Harvard Divinity School and UU Collegium

Join us as we explore class issues in Unitarian Universalist congregations. What insights and tools does our history offer as we seek to honor class diversity and work toward economic justice? What about our various theologies? What can class-inclusive theologies look like? Come share your experiences and ideas with this panel of historians and theologians.

Rev. Myriam Renaud | Rev. Sheri Prud'homme | Dr. Daniel McKanan | Rev. Mark Harris

Rev Myriam Renaud

We can be present to each other in the congregations as friends. Embrace relational philosophy of friendship. Numinous only accessible in community, not in isolation.

Need to understand selves as fundamentally interconnected.

To move intentionally into relational space is risky. Develop the attitude of a friend. Need to be unafraid to be hurt. Need to be a friend.

We are capable of friendship. Substitute courage for caution. Be solicitous.

Congregations can model friendship for society.

Believes more God language would be helpful. Useful metaphors that would be pleasing across the board.

Dr. Daniel McKanan

First Universalist in Philadelphia an indispensable ally for labor in early labor movement; most churches hostile to labor. No schools for the poor. Only property owners able to vote. Skilled craft workers in decline due to factories. Unitarians helped artisans learn to speak publicly. Leaders emerged for labor movement. Founded Working Mens' party, advocated voting rights and public education.

Most ministers "idle accumulators" but First Unitarian stood with working men.

Community Church of Boston founded in 1920s by a Unitarian and a Universalist minister who had opposed WWI. They wanted a congregation that put prophetic witness at forefront. Saw itself as a public rather than private organization. Open to public. Supported social justice organizations. Stood up for Sacco and Vanzetti. Became largest protestant denomination in Boston. Invited people from both sides of controversial issues to speak. McCarthy period began term of decline.

Both were young congregations with few ties to existing power structure. Left lots of room for people who opposed power structure.

Denominations are middle class structure, tend to promote people who can speak to people who have professional identities.

Both provided a megaphone to activists, but did not organize in a way that led to sustained pledges. Working class mobilization requires a different sort of style.

Different sort of congregation required to mobilize.

Anti-racism work not about attracting people of color. Point is to make a more fair world for everyone. Same for issues of class. Focus on increasing fairness.

Rev. Sheri Prud'homme

As UUs, have tended to specialize in congregations that are more able to speak to professional class.

Some of us express use language of principles, some use language of theological heritage.

At core evil is an exploitation/abuse of some to the benefit of others.

The "god question" a finer point in a system in which we share plenty of common ground. We are called into service to resist evil.

Classism pernicious for UUs because we tend to be people who benefit from unequal impacts.

Habits associated with wealth are the same ones that result in greatest consumption of fossil fuels. Things are set up to work out for white people of economic privilege. We are set up to feel our lives are more important than those of others. We flee from the knowledge of the impacts of our actions to ignorance.

We can resist moral oblivion. Can be communities of resistance. Early Christian communities emphasized earthly paradise.

- 1) Clear away what clouds our vision. Requires effort, cooperation. Cultivation of wisdom, discern good from evil. Churches as research bodies. Truth-seeking.
- 2) Worship and ritual lives need to include communal lamentation. Experience and express grief, powerlessness and rage. Including for our own complicity. Awake to what is really happening, painful. We are socialized not to notice.
- 3) Amplify beauty, abundance and grace of world where we live. Churches unique in being able to hold horror and hope of it all. To what future reality will we orient ourselves? Don't expect otherworldly heaven, focus on here and now.
- 4) Resist values of dominant culture. Includes practices to increase affection for each other and the ecosphere. Move outside of our comfort zones. Develop spiritual practices that encourage us to explore.

- 5) Act in world to bring about change. Mass movements of people required to bring about real change. Religious institutions have people resources and moral mandate required to sustain mass movements.

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Mark Harris

If UUA to maximize growth, decided to focus on university educated people and middle class. Extension efforts have been aimed at wealthy white class. Can't expect us to develop broad values if we focus on such a narrow group.

Still ask ministers if they would feel comfortable in an urban congregation, assuming white suburban congregation would be comfortable.

AUA was class-bound, thought to expand using periodicals. Farmers were not a good target.

Fostering true diversity not easy, but rewards are great.

Intentionally seek diversity. Reach out by placing people of different backgrounds in key positions and by sponsoring programs attractive to others.

Means tests such as inaccessibility to public transport are common for UU churches.

Being UU is about being thoughtful, not privileged.

Work towards righteous social order. Work to save society.

Classless heaven of Universalism. Has class implications. Based on love, not economic success.

Building class and race diversity not easy. Need to know our neighbors, be in relationship with them as full partners who might want to join us in making the world anew.