

All Souls Church's Multicultural Commitment: A Brief Historical Overview

This year All Souls Church (ASC) finds itself undeniably in need of institutional change. Why we are in need of change can best be understood from a perspective that is wider than the complications that have been experienced in the past year. How far into the church's past should we cast the lens in order to make sense of our current predicaments and opportunities? This is a brief overview of the evolution of one congregation's commitment to build a Beloved Community that is based on multicultural equity. This overview does not delve into the details of any specific minister, rather, it attempts to show that our commitment to racial justice and inclusion has taken work and we take it seriously.

The reach back into the church's history will begin with Rev. A. Powell Davies' arrival at ASC in 1943, but this is not by any means the beginning of the story. We start with Davies for three reasons:

1. The longest living members of the church were here during Rev. Davies' ministry.
2. Davies envisioned All Souls as a multicultural church.
3. The congregation and Davies addressed issues of racial justice and inclusion in concrete ways, "by their actions."

One of the stories that best illustrates this commitment and progressive social justice stance in the church and the Washington, DC community concerns desegregating a long-standing church tenant. The 1954 passage of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was a turning point in the church's ability to begin removing the structures of legalized racial segregation. An all-white Metropolitan Police Boys Club ("Boys Club") resided in the church building. The new legislation gave Davies and the church the legal authority to insist that the Boys Club integrate or leave the premises. They refused to integrate and left the church. In its place, All Souls, working with the Unitarian Service Committee, established the first integrated Boys Club in the city of Washington, DC. One can find more ASC examples of these early efforts at racial justice and inclusion. People of color began to join/attend the church during Rev. Davies years as the minister because the church was beginning to demonstrate its commitment to Beloved Community.

All Souls continued to address matters of racial justice and to be a place in the city where racially integrated groups met in the next ministry of Rev. Duncan Howlett who began in 1958. Rev. Howlett served as the church fought against poverty and through the riots following Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. In his wisdom, Rev. Howlett advised the Board of Trustees that it was time to call an African American minister.

In 1969, the church called Rev. David H. Eaton, a native Washingtonian and the first African American to serve as minister of the church. The church was on the forefront of racial justice and inclusion during Rev. Eaton's ministry. When Rev. Eaton first came to the church, the membership was about 95% white. He worked with the Board to develop and put resources into a five-year plan to become more diverse. In addition to establishing a racially diverse minister's team and staff, there are two important

demographic shifts that led to a more balanced, diverse membership. People of color saw the church's relevance to their lives and community and became engaged. Also, some white members of the church left. With the successful expansion of Unitarian Universalist churches near major corridors leading to the City during A. Powell Davies period, many of those who left had options to go to a church where the dynamics of race were less dominant in church life. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HEa_LYHHiK4)

During Rev. Eaton's years, the racial diversity of church membership grew tremendously and fell into the 60-40 range or 50-50 percent white to people of color, who were mostly African American. The demographic shifts also resulted in a true cultural shift in the church, which permanently established the multicultural identity of All Souls.

This background is important to understanding who we are and our commitment to sustaining the church as a multicultural progressive spiritual home. Our expectations for inclusion, ministry, membership and culture at the church are shaped in part by this history. Multicultural ministry takes leaders who are committed to inclusion, who are loving of people and who are self-aware enough to understand their role and the impact of their decisions on the complex dynamics of relationships in diverse communities.

The minister that followed David Eaton, Rev. Dan Aldridge (in 1994), was not as effective a leader in the complex multicultural context of All Souls. He was African American. His ministry ended within four years and with congregants greatly conflicted over what were the key issues and how to address them. In the end, a greater number of members voted to end Rev. Aldridge's ministry than those who voted in his favor. This represented a crisis of leadership. It was a crisis for the church community and many people left the church. It is estimated that 50 or more of those who left were African American. There are many different stories about the reasons that Rev. Aldridge's ministry did not succeed at All Souls. No one story is sufficient to explain the complexities of leadership and community in this multicultural church. All Souls' leaders never did agree to write the story or how we could tell Our-story during this difficult period in the church's history.

To have 50 people of color leave any multicultural church is an undeniable statement that the community and leaders are not equipped to navigate the complex relationships and expectations of a diverse membership. Under the skillful leadership of Rev. David Eaton, the church thrived in its multiracial ministry. Under Rev. Dan Aldridge, the church was strained to the breaking point. While committed to multiculturalism, the minister and people in the church were not equipped to work through conflict resolution to sustain the membership. The loss in members and in trust resulted in a financial crisis for the church and the remaining members had to begin rebuilding the church's ministry.

Much work was done on many fronts as we began to reassemble the infrastructure of the church and the hope of existing members. A pair of consultants were brought in to help the church begin the work of reconciliation. From that work, we began a process of transformation that invited anyone in the church to contribute their ideas on "What issues, concerns or opportunities do you think need to be addressed for All Souls to be a vibrant, multicultural community?" About 70 people participated in each of two sessions. People responded to the question posed above in the first session. About 150 suggestions were submitted. These were compiled into categories that were meaningful to the church

culture and brought back in the second session, where people were invited to volunteer to work in groups to address the items in each category. The work groups continued over the year. Each had a representative that met monthly with the overall coordinator to keep each other informed and to keep the process moving forward. By the end of the year, the work groups were brought to a close. A lot of healing had been taking place, as members of the congregation worked together to rebuild programs and to restore trust in our processes.

The work groups were not intended to be a separate infrastructure, only to inform the existing infrastructure on what congregants thought would be important for improving how we worked, learned and worshipped together. Members of the workgroups were invited to join the committees that held their work, thereby imbuing those committees with new energy and deeper purpose. Work groups that had no committees had the opportunity to become new committees or programs in the church. This gave rise to Adult Spiritual Development, Worship Associates and ADORE, to name a few. Each of these programs continue to make significant contributions to the life of the church today.

During this transition period, the church also formed a search committee to find a new senior minister. It is important to note that church leaders were not waiting for someone to come and heal us -- we were doing our work so that a new minister would come into a healthy community. Because issues of "racial equity" are critical in a multiracial community in the United States, and because the All Souls community had lost trust relating to a sense of fairness on racial matters, we brought in the Jubilee training for the Ministerial Search Committee, Board, Nominating Committee, and ADORE. The purpose was to provide leaders involved in the new minister search with an understanding of the historical, systemic structure of racism and power. After the training, the Search Committee revised its message to interested candidates and negotiated with the Board for a commitment to a multiracial ministry team moving forward. We had multiracial ministry teams during Rev. Eaton's and Rev. Aldridge's ministries, but it was not yet a firm policy.

The loss of members following Rev. Aldridge's ministry left the church in a financial situation that could not support two ministers. The commitment to a multicultural ministry team established a promise that the identity of the person receiving the first call as Senior Minister would directly affect the racial identity of the Associate Minister. The Associate position would be filled as church membership increased. The Board agreed.

The Search Committee worked with a great deal of integrity to ensure that the congregation would trust the process. They were intentional in expanding the outreach of the search process in hopes of having a diverse pool of ministers from which to call. That meant searching for ministers on two fronts -- the Unitarian Universalist pool of ministers and a wider circle of ministers who were progressive liberals, but not ordained by the UUA. All potential candidates had to show commitment to antiracism and the multicultural church.

In May of 2001, they had found their candidate. Robert Hardies, young, not yet ordained, openly gay and white, had unanimous support from the nine-member Search Committee. In the fall of 2001, Hardies would become Rev. Hardies as he was both ordained and installed as the minister in the same ceremony.

The church grew rapidly with the new minister. We instituted an annual antiracism training with a goal of reaching a tipping point of people who shared an analysis of race and power. This was a strategy to see if we could get a critical mass of members to share an understanding of institutional racism that would change the way that the church behaved. It was hard to reach a tipping point because new people were joining the church at a rate of maybe 80 to 100 per year. This was a good problem to have, but new people coming into the church would need to be equipped to help us sustain an inclusive environment. In addition to having difficulty providing enough training, the majority of new members were by far European American. It was a struggle to keep a multiracial balance.

In a few years, the church was large enough to support a second minister. We searched specifically for a minister of color to fulfill the commitment made with the Board to always have a multiracial ministry team as part of our religious mandate of building the Beloved Community. In 2003, Rev. Shana Lyngood was called by the congregation to serve as the Associate Minister. Rev. Lyngood left after seven years and the church entered another search for an Associate Minister.

Rev. Susan Newman Moore was called as the Associate Minister in 2011. In the two weeks preceding her call, 120 people signed the membership book so that they could be part of what Rev. Hardies called, "an historic occasion." Part of what made Rev. Moore's call to ministry at All Souls historic is that she and Rev. Hardies represented so many aspects of diversity. She was African American, straight, senior in age and liberal Christian. He was European American, gay, younger and Unitarian Universalist. They also differed in terms of their styles, including preaching from the pulpit. Rev. Hardies' ministry played out predominantly from the pulpit, and Rev. Moore's played out predominantly in pastoral care.

At the December 2017, Annual Meeting, All Souls Church adopted the 8th Principle, as a statement of our commitment to live as fully into the Beloved Community as possible. The Principle states:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:
journeying toward spiritual wholeness by building a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

It was jarring to many in the community in January of this year, 2018, when they learned that Rev. Moore's ministry had ended. Rev. Moore had many connections in the church community. As a called minister, her departure came as a surprise, and it happened with no input from the congregation. Some felt like their minister was taken away. Whatever the details that led to the end of Rev. Moore's ministry, what was communicated with the congregation created a sense of betrayal for many, and raised questions about effective leadership and a lack of fairness in how the situation was handled. People questioned the Board, Rev. Hardies and the UUA representative(s) involved. These questions remain alive today and fueled the need for a robust, comprehensive transformation process.

It has been exactly 20 years since the 1998 termination of Rev. Aldridge, the disappointments in the church community, and loss of members. Once again, the church will have to find its way forward as a multicultural community, like we did years ago. Whatever people may think about Rev. Moore's departure, there is no sense in being stuck in the debates about whether it was about race because it

clearly had a racialized impact. This impact must be addressed for the church to regain the integrity of our call to build and be a part of the Beloved Community. The results of this impact must be understood and healed in order for All Souls to be welcoming for all, including members who are waiting to see change and those who have yet to come. We have to learn how to do this. It is not a given that we are where we want to be, just because some diversity is present in the church. The magnitude of the break in community trust is directly connected to the magnitude of the opportunity for change. It is time for us to define how our community shares this ministry. We are a work in process and we will do the learning we need to do, while we work, and worship and live together. Life is the classroom that can teach us how to succeed. So, we begin again in love.

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