

UU Scholars and Friends

AAR 2021

“The Theology and History of Unitarian Universalist Institutions”

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As with many UU scholarly spaces, we are a mix of academics, ministers, students, and lay folk. Unlike the other panelists, my primary location is not in the academy, but in a congregation as minister. However, I am here on the panel because [as Dan said] I currently serve as the co-chair of the new UU Studies Network, which was formally created in August as a merger of Collegium and the UU History and Heritage Society. I say “new” but as I’ll discuss in the next few minutes, the challenge before the Network is just how “new” it will be as an institution and how much it will intentionally or unintentionally reflect the culture of the preceding institutions.

Despite my role as co-chair, I must say that I still feel like a “new” UU of about 10 years—and 10 very Boston-centric years. During grad school, I attended the UCC/UU federated congregation of the First Parish in Lincoln, MA, which was really a Transcendentalist congregation more impacted by Walden Pond up the road than Beacon Street downtown. And so it was not until I graduated HDS and began an internship in the fall of 2012 at a UU congregation that I began to experience the *institutional culture* of Unitarian Universalism as well as learn about more recent history. As a theological student, my choice to enter Unitarian Universalist ministry had been rooted in a general love of religious community and an academic understanding of UU theology as resonant with my own grounding in feminist Christian theology. As a consequence, I admired the legacy of 19th century Unitarian abolitionists, but knew nothing of the “Black Empowerment

Controversy.” I knew of the early support for women’s ordination, but did not know that women’s UU leadership nearly disappeared in the 20th century, nor that in the 1970’s and 80’s women faced enormous challenges in the ministerial settlement processes...especially if they became known as “difficult.” In other words, to know the historical theological story of Unitarians and Universalists was not to know the institutional culture of 21st century Unitarian Universalism.

In addition to the local congregation I served as intern minister, becoming involved with Collegium exposed me to a larger, and more recent, UU world. I joined Collegium when Dan asked me in January 2015 to become Program Chair of the upcoming annual gathering of ministers, scholars, lay folks, and students. Over the next six years from 2015 to today, enormous changes in our national and religious context contributed not only to the merger of Collegium with UUHHS, but more importantly to the shape of the new institution.

At that first Collegium meeting in October 2015, I encountered aspects of Unitarian Universalism that revealed more of the strains and shadows of the culture. While there was meaningful intellectual conversation—especially from the 2015 Distinguished Scholar, Gary Dorrien, there were also painful dynamics of dismissal, interruption, and criticism—dynamics that often carried a gendered pallor. In side conversations, I learned that this was nothing new...that Collegium had long been a difficult place for women and people of color. I also began to learn about the presence of clergy sexual misconduct in the UUA...and that several prominent members of Collegium were among the ranks of those named and criticized by those seeking accountability and change. Paying closer attention, I also began to notice just how white Collegium was in its membership and as an institution.

Over the next five years, Collegium actively wrestled with how to change the culture to be more welcoming to women, People of Color, transgender folks, and other historically excluded identities.

Concurrently, the #MeToo movement as well as a reckoning with white supremacy culture broke open in the wider U.S. and UU culture. At the last pre-pandemic Convocation in Baltimore, hallway conversations began once again about the possible future of Collegium. Then at the Collegium business meeting, the idea of a merger with UUHHS was openly mentioned. With all the energy of the Convocation in the room, the vision of a continuing partnership was well received. After the holidays, as headlines of a new virus began to circulate, the Collegium board finalized a letter of proposal to send to the UUHHS board.

Part of my pandemic memories will be the hours spent on Zoom with the combined boards discussing the merger. Relieved by the pandemic of pressure to plan an annual Collegium gathering or the next Convocation, we were able to meet and talk at the speed of thought. Realizing that we were engaging in the very kind of institutional change advocated for in the newly released, “Widening the Circle of Concern,” we read and discussed the report as a group. After considering how it might directly impact our new bylaws, programs, and culture, we sought to institute change. For example, the new institutional structure calls for co-chairs, accountability partners, and removal of members in “instances of gross ethical or professional misconduct.” We’ve also chosen to include a process observer for all board meetings and to engage the whole board in the nomination process for new board members. The larger context of the moment enabled what could have been a simple merger of two friendly institutions into a choice to use the structural change as an opportunity for deeper institutional and cultural change. Significantly,

the was a deliberate choice made by the people of the two boards which had themselves been slowly changing in the prior years.

Throughout the initial merger process as well as in the current work of trying to implement the intentions, I am struck by how granular and even mundane the work to change institutions can be. There are subgroups and task forces, Zoom links to send, reports to read, edits to be made to the website. In these ways, instituting change means remaining committed to the larger vision while enacting them in the details. To change an institution is to remain attentive to how that vision shows up in how meetings are run, which emails are sent and to whom, and when to pick up the phone to have a conversation.

One of my heroes in Unitarian history is Henry Whitney Bellows—you can read about him on the “DUUB”, a project of the UU Studies Network. I like Bellows because he believed in the importance and power of institutions to shape how people connect to and relate to one another. At their best, institutions are how a group of people live out their theological commitments and further shared visions for how to be in the world. *And*, institutions are artifacts of the intentions of a group of humans that are then interpreted and sustained (or not) by another group of humans. As such, institutional change is not a singular event, but an ongoing project. A project, I would argue, is best when clearly linked to a theological vision that shapes not only *why* a group exists, but also *how* this vision will be expressed in granular, mundane ways as an institution and as a culture.