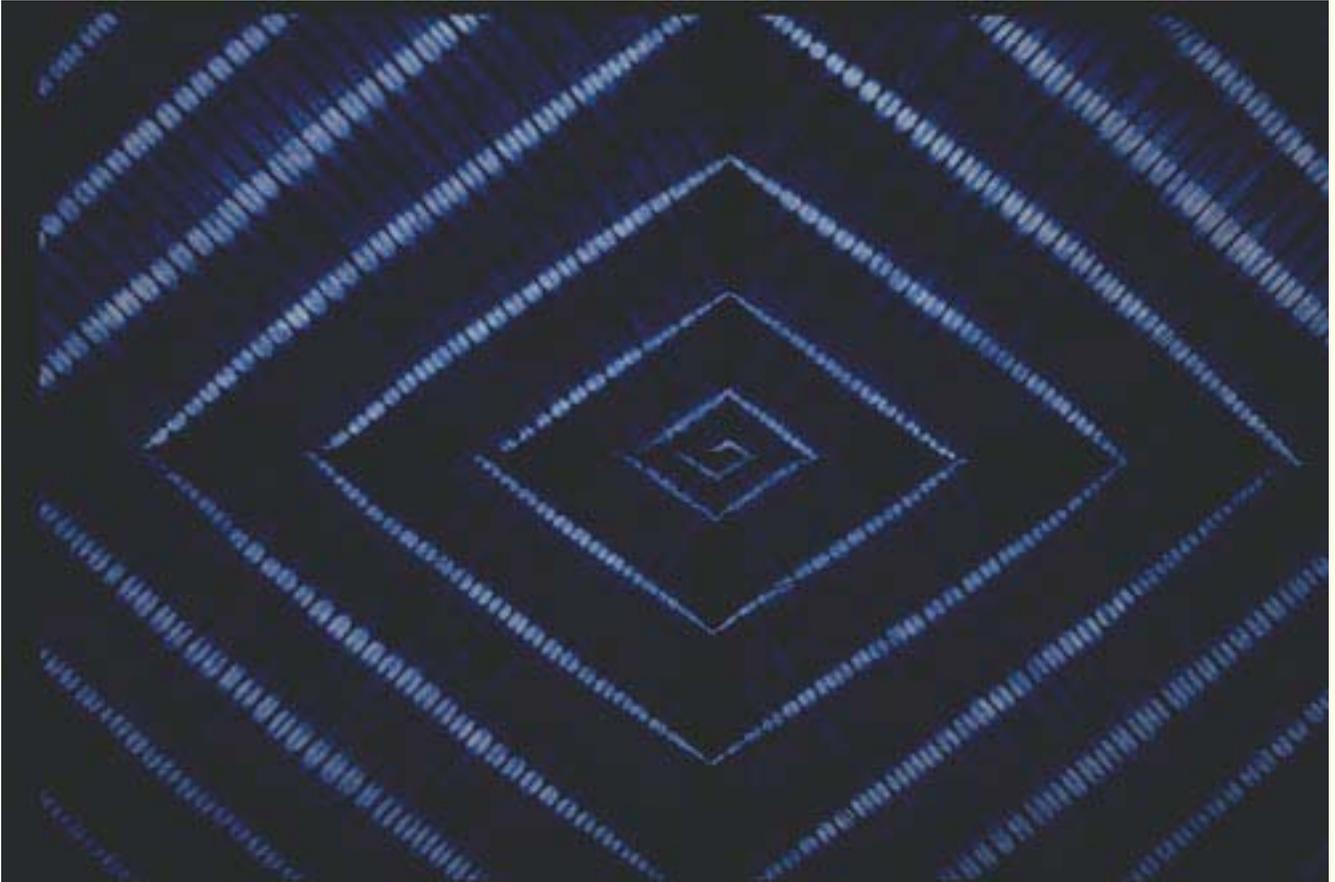


In Their Own Words



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**A Conversation With Participants in the Black Empowerment Movement
Within the Unitarian Universalist Association**

January 20, 2001

EDITED BY ALICIA MCNARY FORSEY

In Their Own Words

Published by

Starr King School for the Ministry

2441 Le Conte Avenue

Berkeley, California 94709

tel. 510 845 6232

fax 510 845 6273

<http://www.sksm.edu>

<http://online.sksm.edu>

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Front cover: Yoruba women in Nigeria make a type of resist-dyed cloth that they call *adire*. They make some *adire* by folding, tying, and/or stitching cloth with raffia before dyeing. This is called *adire oniko*, after the word for raffia, *iko*. They also make another type, *adire eleko*, by painting or stenciling designs on the cloth with starch. Both types are dyed in indigo, a natural blue dye. For more information on West African textiles, visit <http://www.du.edu/duma/africloth>.

Editor: Rev. Dr. Alicia McNary Forsey

Transcription and layout: Cathleen Young

Proofreader: Helene Knox

Timeline: Julie Kain

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In Their Own Words

A Publication of Starr King School for the Ministry

The concept of Black Power . . . is a call for Black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations and to support those organizations. It is a call to reject the racist institutions and values of this society. The concept of Black Power rests on the fundamental premise: Before a group can enter the open society, it must first close ranks. By this we mean that group solidarity is necessary before a group can operate effectively from a bargaining position of strength in a pluralistic society.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL AND CHARLES V. HAMILTON
Black Power, 1967

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FOREWORD

On Wednesday evening, January 17, 2001, a group of Unitarian Universalists who had spent the day traveling from various parts of the country to Berkeley, California, began to trickle into the lobby of the Hotel Durant, a short walk from the University of California and Starr King School for the Ministry. When I arrived with Yielbonzie Charles Johnson (Yielbonzie is a former Professor of Ministry at Starr King School), to pick up the group for dinner, the atmosphere in the lobby was not exactly what you would call subdued. No travel-weary souls here!

It had been thirty years since some of these Unitarian Universalists had seen each other. A few had remained in close contact, but getting together with the larger group made for a happy reunion. They would be together three days for a conversation long overdue. Everyone who gathered had participated in the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC), the Black Affairs Council (BAC), or were their white supporters (FULLBAC). These groups (and others) were active during the late 1960s and early 1970s in the Black Empowerment controversies within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

The reason most often given by participants for deciding to come to Berkeley in January 2001 was to “get the story straight.” A conference planned solely by participants in these groups had never taken place. There were occasional invitations to recount events of thirty-plus years ago, but never a time when the participants of BUUC/BAC and FULLBAC had planned their own, extended time together. Attendees active in BUUC/BAC included Winifred Norman, Alex Poinsett, Joe Samples, Gwen Thomas, Lone Vargus, and Harold Wilson. Attendees from FULLBAC included Victor Carpenter, Donald McKinney, Jack Mendelsohn, Roy Ockert, David Parke and Bette Sikes.

Starr King School for the Ministry agreed to provide hospitality, expenses, and a place to meet in support of the gathering. The understanding was that the seminary would not interfere in any of the planning or organization of the conversation. When I became the primary contact for the school, I also became responsible for seeing that this agreement was not



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Dr. Alicia McNary Forsey PROFESSOR OF CHURCH HISTORY

Alicia is a lifelong UU. She is the Professor of Church History at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, California, and is also responsible for continuing education endeavors. Her Ph.D. is in Religious Studies with an emphasis on Unitarian History. In June 2000 she received final fellowship as a UU minister. Alicia, in addition to the classes she teaches at Starr King School, is known for her outstanding online course in UU History. She is a Board member of the UU Historical Society, Chair of the UU Scholars' Panel, current Chair of the History Section of COLLEGIUM, and Trustee of The Church of the Larger Fellowship.

breached. My sense is that the seminary held to the expectation that the participants would not be expected to accommodate any agenda other than their own.

The one request the seminary made of participants was that the proceedings be taped. Starr King would then edit and publish the outcome of the three days of conversation. It did not take long to see that this plan was not favorably received by all present. Clearly, a tape recorder was not appropriate in an initial conversation among individuals who had experienced intense, tumultuous, and in some cases, life-changing times together over thirty years ago. I decided to tape only the closing conversation between participants and invited guests. There will be further conversations. Future gatherings will include others who participated in the Black Empowerment controversies of three decades ago, and these will provide broader, fuller accounts, compiled and published by those who lived the experience.

The open conversation was attended by about 75 people. Starr King School President Rebecca Parker, faculty and staff of Starr King School, students of Starr King and other schools, trustees, local ministers, graduates and friends made for a standing-room-only audience interested in what was going to be said, in their own words, after three days of conversation among people who had participated in the Black Empowerment movement within the Unitarian Universalist Movement.

The conversation published herein is but a small piece of an immense and complex history. It is full of insights, gems of humor, and harsh truths. When Cathleen Young and I began working on this publication, my first inclination was to augment it with other materials to make it something that could be used as an educational tool for students and other interested parties. Instead of taking it for what it is, I thought of all the missing pieces. Some of the leaders of BUUC and BAC who left the UUA were not present. The recounting of the history as it unfolded was missing. The perspectives of the participants in Black and White Alternative (later changed to Black and White Action) were missing. The programs that BUUC voted to fund were

missing. The important role that the Black Empowerment movement played in paving the way for other oppressed groups needed more development—beyond what was mentioned in the open conversation. Theological perspectives that were brought up briefly during the conversation on Saturday afternoon deserve to be thoroughly explored. The implications of the Black Humanist Fellowship which evolved out of BUUC are relevant to current issues within Unitarian Universalism and ought not to be overlooked. Insights on these subjects and others on the part of the individuals who were (and continue to be) in the struggle contain sparks of hope for ways that we can move forward from this point.

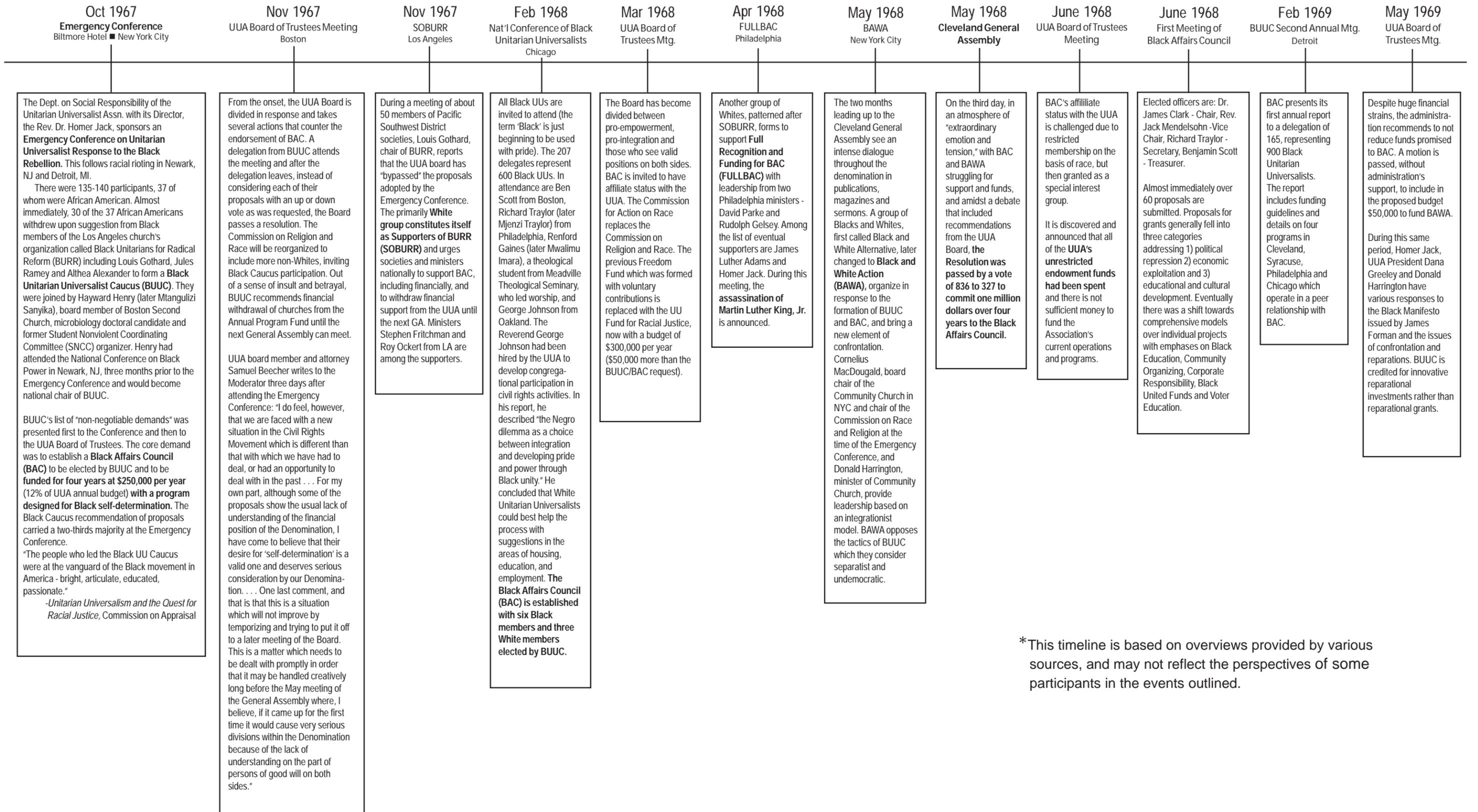
The list of what I would ideally like to see in a publication goes on. However, six months of reflection and evaluation has brought me to realize that the conversation held on January 20, 2001 must stand on its own or get stored in a cupboard. It does stand. It will be of use to those who want to recount the larger history. It will also offer a glimpse into the thinking and the lives of twelve outstanding and committed individuals who have remained Unitarian Universalists. Most of the people you will find here have been leaders among us—each in his or her own way. The open conversation is all that is published here, along with statements given to us by some of the participants, and a timeline. The rest needs to be attended to by people who have the real right to report.

Sometime in the future the whole of this history will be unveiled for all that it was. The prophetic voices that have gone without praise or thanks by contemporaries will, in time, be respected for what they contributed to our justice-seeking religious tradition, and to the larger world as well. ■

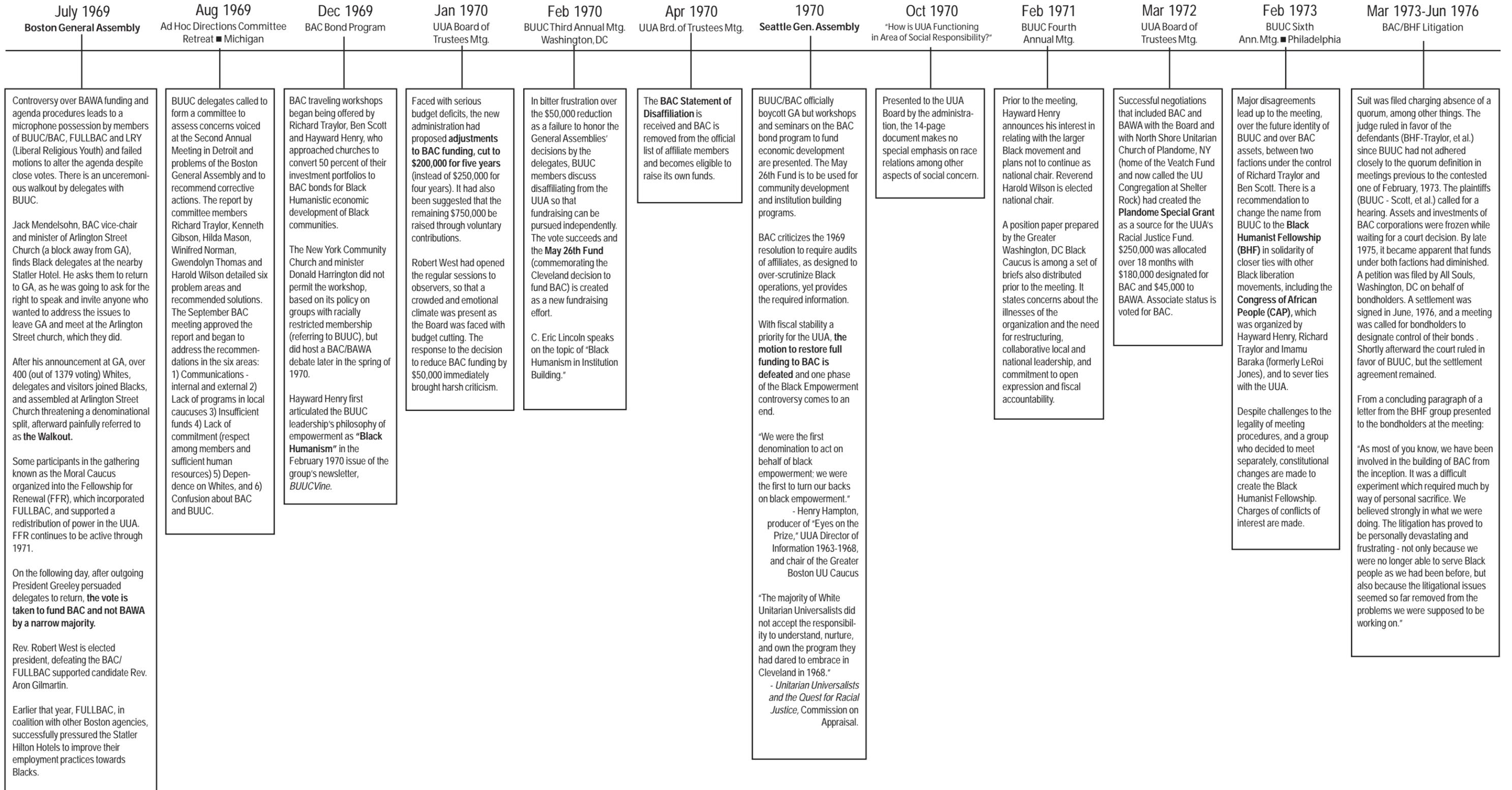
Alicia McNary Forsey
Professor of History
Starr King School for the Ministry
Berkeley, California
July 2001

A Timeline of the Black Empowerment Controversy in American Unitarian Universalism*

Compiled by Julie Kain



*This timeline is based on overviews provided by various sources, and may not reflect the perspectives of some participants in the events outlined.



In Their Own Words

ALICIA FORSEY: Welcome, everyone. Thank you, especially to the participants who have traveled great distances to be here for this conversation—the first of its kind since the controversies during the late 1960s and early 1970s, over issues of Black empowerment within the Unitarian Universalist Association.

During the last three days, twelve individuals have met in closed sessions in order to begin a conversation based upon their own perspectives as participants in the Black Empowerment movement. All participants were active in the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC), Black Affairs Council (BAC), or FULLBAC.

Historical narrative is greatly enhanced when it includes various perspectives, is in context, and related by those who experienced it. There will be considerably more to be told, and the larger view will come more into focus as time passes, but today's conversation will be of value in efforts to piece the whole puzzle together.

The participants have asked to introduce themselves today, but I would like to draw out two of them: Harold Wilson and Jack Mendelsohn. Harold Wilson is the organizer of BUUC/BAC participants at this gathering. Jack Mendelsohn organized the FULLBAC participants.

Both Harold and Jack have worked with diligence, patience, humor and a dogged determination to see this gathering take place. It is their commitment, along with the initial conversations that included Yielbonzie Charles Johnson; the assistance of Cathleen Young, who paid attention to virtually all the details; and the support of the faculty and our president, Rebecca Parker, that brought us to this important conversation.

Let's begin the introductions with Jack Mendelsohn.

JACK MENDELSON: Harold and I both want to express our gratitude to the Starr King contingent that has been so hospitable to us. It's simply wonderful to be here, and we will forever appreciate it.

During the Civil Rights era, as it's called, a great many more—first Negro, then Black, then African American—people joined our Unitarian Universalist



Jack Mendelsohn
FULLBAC

Now living in Maynard, Massachusetts, Jack said that although he found personal aspects of the January gathering to be tremendously important and moving, he hoped that the conversation would serve as a record in the general archive about that period in UU history—about the participants' experience of watching a hierarchical institution with a long tradition try to come to terms with a complete revolution in the way things had normally been done.

He referred to the period as a time when White privilege was really being challenged,— and to wrestling with events even as lives were being transformed.

churches than had ever been before in our ranks, and so by the time we reached the year 1967, there were groups of Black UUs all across the country. And from 1967 to '71, that changed presence in our ranks shook the very foundations of our Unitarian Universalist life. That took place because of the emergence among Black Unitarian Universalists of a caucus—a Black Caucus—in the form of demands upon the rest of us that Black Unitarian Universalists assume a dominant role in our midst—a dominant role of leadership and a dominant role of financial administration relative to our religious movement's participation in matters of racial justice.

Now that doesn't sound like a revolutionary idea today, but let me tell you, in 1967 that was a very revolutionary idea. And the Black UU Caucus, relatively small in numbers but spread across the continent, and organized, issued a call for White Unitarian Universalists to organize themselves and to organize on behalf of support for the demands of the Black Caucus. And that led to the formation of what you have on your sheet as FULLBAC, or full recognition and full funding for the Black Affairs Council. Well, that's the nutshell description of what happened from '67 to '71, and those of us who have gathered here—there are twelve of us altogether—six from the Black Affairs Council, or BUUC primarily—Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus—and six from FULLBAC—have been reviewing what that experience felt like to us—how we perceived it and how it affected our lives. It certainly affected mine—created great changes in my point of view. I became very active in FULLBAC from the beginning. I was minister at that time at the Arlington Street Church in Boston, but I have continued similar interests all of these years in between. I was one of the first three Whites named to the Black Affairs Council, and served in that capacity for three years.

So much for me. Harold?

HAROLD WILSON: Yes, well, the only thing I disagree with you on, Jack—if such a thing as BUUC emerged in 2001 and began to make the kind of demands that BUUC made in '67, '68, '69 and so on, it would, for many people, be a remarkable and an alarming case at present to confront.

So much has happened in these last three days. It's been a very rich experience for me. It's been a rich experience meeting all these guys from FULLBAC again, you know?

I will talk about some dramatic events because I'm interested in history, and we have with us a fine author, Victor Carpenter, who has given us the outline for anything else we want to write.

But what we don't have is the meat on the bones. We don't have Black people talking about what they were experiencing at that time, as members of the Unitarian Universalist Association, and some of us were there when it was the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America.

First of all, we [Blacks] were a small—we were a handful of people in the Unitarian Church. I was attracted by a man named J. Raymond Cope. One Sunday when I was just visiting, he said, "Some call Senator Knowland a fascist, you know." Senator Knowland was the editor of the *The Oakland Tribune*. Then he looked around and he said, "He is a fascist." I said, "My God! This is church?" I was attracted to that.

Because we were such a small group, we felt lonely in the UU churches. Some of us who went into the ministry and had a church had very few Black members. I had two or three Black people in my whole congregation when I was a minister. Amid all the things that were happening in America, we were not just isolated people being driven by isolated ideas, as Black UUs. We were members of a community, coming out of a community, and all kinds of things were going on in that community, and all kinds of issues were being raised.

As Black UUs, we had begun to understand that the issues were institutional. Some of us didn't give a damn what White people thought about us, but we wanted free access to their institutions—the schools and the churches and the industry and all of the various institutions. We had no power in any of those institutions. In some cities we had developed some political power, in the East and Midwest, for example, but out here we had almost none at that point.



Harold Wilson BUUC

Born in West Oakland, Harold was the first vice-president, and the second president, of BUUC. Driven from the time he was a little boy to help his people, Harold came out of the army "with a desperate feeling that we had to have some change."

Harold said his whole motivation for working on the January meeting was to sit down and "really write the story," because it is very important that Black people tell their own story about "our own experience in the Unitarian Church and in the context of this movement."



Roy Ockert

FULLBAC

Now living in Salem, Oregon, Roy had left Starr King and interned at the Berkeley church, then arrived at the Los Angeles church, where he gained the acquaintance of a number of people and learned about Black Unitarians for Radical Reform—BURR. Not long afterwards, he received notice that there would be an Emergency Conference on the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion. He organized people to attend the conference and was eventually asked to be a member of the Black Affairs Council.

Having initially declined, he finally agreed to serve for one year, and was instrumental in the formation of White Universalists for Radical Readjustment—WURR, SOBURR, and FULLBAC.

Reverend Homer Jack¹ called a meeting, and his meeting was the “Emergency Conference on the Unitarian Response to the Black Rebellion,” and a number of people came—some people from Black Unitarians for Radical Reform, which was a Black group that had organized in Los Angeles—out of Steve Fritchman’s church. I don’t know if you know about his history. Fritchman was named by *LIFE* magazine as one of the hundred most well-known fellow travelers in America. His picture was in the magazine. Steve was a radical guy. He attracted people, and he attracted more Blacks than most congregations had ever before attracted, plus he had a Black man working with him long before any Blacks were in the ministry. The few who were present were hardly visible.

We thought we might be able to bring major resources from the Unitarian Universalist Association to the Black community, and at the same time, we as Black people were enjoying being Black people. And being part of the movement, and addressing it. We later became more a part of the movement in the way we supported it.

JACK MENDELSON: Now—introductions.

ROY OCKERT: When I went to the Los Angeles church in September 1967 to become the assistant minister, I found that a group had been formed the month before—in August 1967—which called itself the Black Unitarians for Radical Reform—BURR. Very soon after that, a week or two later, there was a notice that came from Boston that there was to be an emergency conference on the Unitarian Universalist response to the Black Rebellion. By then I had known several members of BURR—Jules Ramey and Carrie Thomas and Althea Alexander and a few others—and I suggested to them that if there’s going to be a conference on the Black Rebellion, maybe there ought to be a few Black rebels there. [laughter in audience]

So they began scrambling around and did locate throughout the nation some Black people whom they managed to persuade to come to this emergency conference. And there they formed the Black Caucus, which was

off by itself. Whites were not allowed into it, and this was a terribly dramatic sort of a thing. It was traumatic for an awful lot of Whites there. But the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus was finally formed and we began the process of funding for the Caucus.

In April there were nine of us including Jack and myself; a lawyer from Indiana and six other Whites were invited—and six Blacks—were invited to be members of the Black Affairs Council. Now I refused. I delivered a sermon about this whole thing—in October, 1967, which used the model of labor unions as an example of what I felt that Blacks might do. That is, form their own organization, which would not have to be dominated by White liberals, White business professionals, business people, and so on. It would have its own organization, and I said I felt it—on the basis of the thesis I had—I felt that all members ought to be Black. But they wanted three Whites and they wanted me because of my labor background. So finally I agreed but I said, “I will serve one year. One year only.” And so I was on the Black Affairs Council for one year, and it was one of the most dramatic things that has ever happened to me in all my life.

I came here Wednesday—Wednesday evening—and it’s the first time I’ve seen some of these people in thirty-some odd years, and it’s very nice to see them.

IONE VARGUS: Actually, I didn’t get to all of the national meetings of BUUC because I was a graduate student at Brandeis at the time, working on my doctorate, so I couldn’t afford to go, but I was very active in the Boston chapter of BUUC, and working therefore with Hayward Henry, who was the president, now called Mtangulizi Sanyika. I worked very closely with him and Henry Hampton, whom many of you know of as a person who developed “Eyes On the Prize” and several other wonderful documentaries. He worked with UUA then. But he was also very active in our group. That was when I was at the same time very involved with the ideology and all that was going on with the Black Caucus because I was also working very closely with the Black students at Brandeis. Actually, my dissertation was on Black



Lone Vargus **BUUC**

Now living in Philadelphia, Lone was working very closely with the Black students at Brandeis when she participated in BUUC. She worked with the president, Hayward Henry, and with Henry Hampton, who was then involved with the UUA.

Lone said she regrets the fact that BUUC did not continue, and she looked forward to the January meeting for the opportunity to review what actions BUUC took, what they funded, and what “we thought about philosophically.”



Bette Sikes
FULLBAC

From Chicago, Bette has for many years been a member of the First Unitarian Society of Chicago. She first learned about the formation of BUUC when her husband, George, returned from the 1967 Emergency Conference in New York City. Bette, George, and Lee Reed worked to form a local Black caucus and to help White members gain understanding. They also organized a local FULLBAC group, and she and George took part in the walkout at the Boston GA, after which the local group formed a Fellowship for Renewal group that worked not only on racism, but also on sexism, homophobia, and other forms of oppression.

students at White colleges, and it was about the kinds of demands and why they were making the demands, and the ideology behind all of that, so both of those movements were very close to my heart and something that I learned a lot from. I just feel very badly about the fact that BUUC did not continue.

BETTE SIKES: My name is Bette Sikes, and I have been all these years a member of the First Unitarian Society of Chicago. In 1967, my husband, George Sikes, and Lee Reed from our church were invited by our minister to be among the participants in the emergency conference. Just very dramatic, it was very exciting. George, my husband, had been to Selma. He'd done part of the March to Montgomery—as much as he was allowed to do—so we were already involved in our household on the issues.

He and Lee Reed, who was an African American, came back and told us about what had happened—the separation—and my husband said it was very hard for us to deal with this, but I think it's something that had to be done. And this was a key issue for many, many White UUs. They could not bear that these people no longer wanted to meet with them. They felt—the White people felt—that that was disrupting the old status quo, where we all apparently were equal and worked together. It was only through the formation of the Caucus that we were able to begin to get ourselves together and to begin to understand what it means to not be the dominant people. And of course, as many of you women know, later, when women had to do the same thing, they really began to understand “Why a Black Caucus?” It was only when we could meet without the men that we could begin to find out who we were.

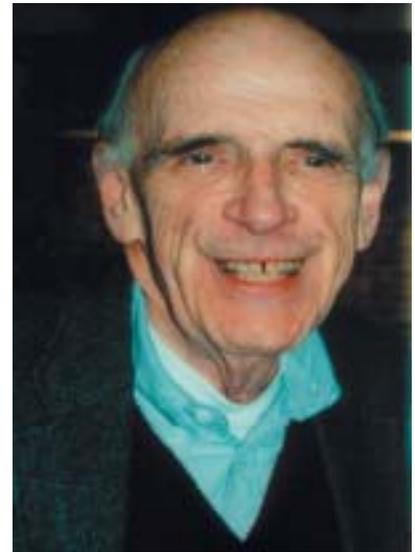
After the conference we went on to form a FULLBAC group—inter-church group in the Chicago area—then, after the money was lost, the White people began another group called “Fellowship for Reconciliation.” We continued that group in the Chicago area until about 1975.

DAVID PARKE: Bette, do you mean the “Fellowship of Renewal”?

BETTE SIKES: Yes, Renewal. That other one I used to belong to when I was a Presbyterian. [audience laughter] We took on the oppression of absolutely everybody as our territory, including Black people.

DON MCKINNEY: I am minister emeritus of the First Unitarian Church of Brooklyn. That church is a wonderful institution, one in which I feel very grateful to have been able to serve for my entire ministry—forty years of active ministry. I'm not dead yet. [audience laughter] The emergency conference that has been referred to is of course something that the Brooklyn church was very eager to be part of, and we sent—we had six—seven delegates. I happened to have been very sick at the time and was not able to go. At the end of that meeting, all the delegates came over to our house. There was so much excitement and so much joy. There was one Black only, and six Whites from the church, who felt themselves, really for the first time, hopeful that at long last we were going to find ways to address the problems of racial justice and empowerment in the city. That was something of course that we were primarily trying to serve. We had started a center a couple of years before—a storefront center—in an area of Brooklyn we found totally unorganized, with no opportunities for people to get together to try to set agendas for community organizing and development that might mean something. We therefore saw the great need that the Caucus was addressing, and the fact that we could hope to have the full funding of the Black Affairs Council, which you remember was for \$1 million—in those days \$1 million was quite a lot—to spread over four years for programs of community development and empowerment in all of the different areas of life that would be directed and started in new directions under the aegis of the Caucus and the Black Affairs Council.

For me, the vote in Cleveland—and I'd gone to General Assembly—I'm a lifelong Unitarian—I'd gone since I was twelve years old to these things—that was the single most wonderful moment in my professional life. I had a feeling and a hope that something really was going to happen. We weren't



Donald McKinney

FULLBAC

Donald McKinney is Minister Emeritus of the First Unitarian Church in Brooklyn, New York, where he served for forty years. The Brooklyn church has a long history of involvement in issues of racial justice and was deeply engaged in working for full funding of BAC. The church office served as FULLBAC headquarters, and Reverend McKinney was national cochair of FULLBAC with David Parke. McKinney also served on the BAC Board for several years.

Reverend McKinney has said that the Cleveland GA and its overwhelming vote to fully fund BAC remains “the single most significant, hopeful and spiritually thrilling moment” in his ministry.



David Parke
FULLBAC

Now living in Richmond, Virginia, David has been in the full time Interim Ministry program of the Unitarian Universalist Association since 1988.

Affiliated thirty years ago with the Unitarian Church of Germantown, David said that when “the call came from Southern California for White Unitarian Universalists to step forward in support of the Black Caucus’s demand for full funding by the Unitarian Universalist Association of the Black Affairs Council at the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland,” he joined with Jack Mendelsohn, Leona Light and Ann Reynolds in the leadership of FULLBAC, which he perceives as having implemented decisions that affected the denomination on behalf of the spirit of history as liberation rather than history as oppression.

going to talk and talk and discuss and argue forever and ever, and then think we had solved the problems.

The years that I had the privilege of serving on the Black Affairs Council and the time that our church became the center of the FULLBAC support program, when our assistant minister spent half of his time in doing administrative work, were exciting and wonderful years. Unfortunately, our denomination—although we were enthusiastic at the beginning—all those doubts and questions and organizational problems that are endemic to the way in which institutions somehow fail to address problems brought about the destruction of the Black Affairs Council. The hope is always that something will happen—again.

I am deeply grateful that in our church in Brooklyn, there is, standing by our altar of all faiths, a Masai warrior statue that was presented to our church by the Black Affairs Council—the only one they were able to give before it all disintegrated—for our efforts at confronting White racism. That warrior is there to protect our church, and I hope to continue to give inspiration to generation after generation to be—I mean, it’s wonderful that we confront racism in our institution and talk about weaving fabrics of diversity and everything, but we’ve got to be able to find ways to get out and be supportive in new and bold efforts to address those problems in the community. They just ain’t going to go away until we find a way.

DAVID PARKE: Since 1988 I have been in the full time Interim Ministry program of the Unitarian Universalist Association. In 1965 I became the minister of the Unitarian Church in Germantown in northwest Philadelphia. My colleagues in ministry in the city of Philadelphia at that time were my dear friend, Victor Carpenter, who had just a few months before returned from Cape Town, South Africa, where he had a five-year ministry prior to assuming the ministry of the First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. The minister of a church about a mile from the Germantown church—Unitarian Church of the Restoration—was the Reverend Rudolph Gelsey, whom some of you know. Rudy and Victor and I became a very congenial trio in

the leadership of FULLBAC, the White support group for the Black Affairs Council. We also during that period became very good friends and have continued on that basis ever since.

I attended the emergency conference at the Biltmore Hotel in New York in October of 1967, but I have to confess to you as I confessed to the group of us a few days ago, in our earlier introductions, that I did not fully understand what was happening at the Biltmore even as it was happening. I knew that there was a Black Caucus. I didn't fully understand the dynamics of that, coming out of a—personally out of an integrationist background, serving a racially integrated church. The White response to it—some Whites were supportive of the Black demands for an up or down vote without discussion and major presentations to be made by Blacks—minimal participation, but—at least in the presentation phase, by Whites—I didn't understand that. So I returned home from the Biltmore to my church and home in Philadelphia with my mind just aswirl, wanting to affirm, not fully understanding, but knowing that something fundamental had occurred within Unitarian Universalism.

In ensuing weeks, based on conversations with colleagues, others who had attended the emergency conference, and my friends and neighbors in Philadelphia, I began to understand what had happened. Also, the Unitarian Universalist Association, having sponsored the conference, was concerned to get the word out to the denomination of its importance, and the particular outcomes.

What I did understand was that Black people meeting in integrated settings do not have as much power as Blacks as they do meeting solely as Blacks. That was the most important finding, or discovery, for me, of the Biltmore conference. On the basis of that understanding, I supported from the beginning the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus because I knew that Blacks who get lost in integrated situations would be less likely to get lost—in terms of self-identity, self-presentation, and strategic planning—in an all-Black situation, and that's what a Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus is—diverse Black Unitarian Universalists versus meeting together as Blacks. I

“What I did understand was that Black people meeting in integrated settings do not have as much power as Blacks as they do meeting solely as Blacks. That was the most important finding, or discovery, for me, of the Biltmore conference.”

just found that idea magnificent, and I still do.

I returned to Philadelphia in the course of events. The call came from Southern California for White Unitarian Universalists to step forward in support of the Black Caucus's demand for full funding by the Unitarian Universalist Association of the Black Affairs Council at the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland. I believed that that cause was just. As the minister of a large church with a full staff and wonderful facilities, I jumped in and joined with Jack Mendelsohn, Leona Light and Ann Raynolds in the leadership of FULLBAC, the White support group for the Black Affairs Council. Jack and Ann and Leona and I were the original co-chairs of FULLBAC.

I just want to mention one other detail. During the year after the Cleveland General Assembly—after the great victory of seventy-two to twenty-eight percent majority vote in favor of a million dollars' funding for the Black Affairs Council over a period of four years, I bet I was on a plane to Boston at least twice a month to meet with Jack and Don and Victor and others, male and female, White and Black, trying to help the Unitarian Universalist Association leadership understand the implications of this commitment. There was resistance because they liked to do things the way they had always done them on an integrationist basis. They wanted to have all the staff members who were on the staff continue on the staff, whereas with the funding for BAC, that meant that a big slice of the UUA budget was going not for staff salaries but for empowering Black people. So what adjustments need to be made on the UUA staff in order to accommodate this bold new program by the Unitarian Universalist Association as voted in Cleveland? We were negotiating with the UUA leadership and with the president, Robert West, who was elected in 1969, the year after the Cleveland General Assembly.

One could go on. Let me just share a vignette from the Cleveland General Assembly in '68. We were in a state of high euphoria after that vote, as you can imagine. I was turning to various FULLBAC supporters around the hall to express my personal gratitude to them. I found Farley Wheelwright, a minister colleague, standing alone. I walked over to him and said,

"Farley, I want to thank you for your support of FULLBAC. I'm looking toward today's vote." He said, "Why are you thanking me? I didn't do it for you."
[audience laughter]

GWEN THOMAS: I'm an English professor from Colorado, and I'm not going to go into details about my BAC-BUUC experiences unless you ask me, because all I'm supposed to do as I understand it at this point is tell you who I am. So—

I have done some wonderful things. I want you to know that some of them were done in the name of the Unitarian Universalist Association when I was on the Black Affairs Council. I have been chair and vice chair of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, so I have been very active in this denomination. I want you simply to know that that activity was spurred by my White Unitarian minister [Rev. Richard Henry] in Denver, Colorado. He came back from Cleveland so excited he didn't know what to do with himself. We probably had four Black members in our church, but he surely wanted some of us to get into what was going on nationally. And I turned out to be the person who really got involved in national BUUC and served, I guess about ten years, on the Black Affairs Council. I also served on the UUA Board of Trustees for about ten years. It's been a wonderful experience.

WINIFRED NORMAN: My name is Winifred Latimer Norman, from New York City. My grandfather was Lewis Latimer, a famous inventor, and a founding member of Flushing Unitarian Church. So I was very interested when in New York this conference was held that you've heard about so far. I'm not going to say too much, either, but I do want you to know that I went to that overall Unitarian conference, representing my minister, Donald Harrington, from the Community Church of New York, who was not available that day and asked me to represent him. Little did he know what I would report when I came back to tell him what went on! He was most unhappy [audience laughter] because—some of you evidently know him—because of his principles of integration—nothing should be separate at all. However, we did get some



Gwen Thomas
BUUC

Now living in Colorado, Gwen is an English professor who says some of the "wonderful things" she has done on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association happened when she was on the Black Affairs Council.

Gwen, who was chair and vice chair of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, served on the Black Affairs Council and on the UUA Board of Trustees for about the same length of time. She won first prize for the funniest story told during the open conversation.



Winifred Norman

BUUC

Winifred, from New York City, is the granddaughter of Lewis Latimer, a famous inventor who was also a founding member of the Flushing Unitarian Church. She was a member of the Community Church of New York at the time of the conference, and her minister, Donald Harrington, was not available and asked her to represent him.

After the conference, Winifred reported back to her church, and she referred to that as “quite an experience.” She eventually joined the Fourth Universalist Society—where she is still a member—and planned after the January conversation to include something about it in the church service the following Sunday.

members who were interested in what we were doing, but in an effort to overturn what [the] Black Affairs Council had done, what BUUC had done, he formed, first in his own church, BAWA—you’ll see it in here—the Black and White Action—it was called something else before—.

VOICES: —Alternative—.

WINIFRED NORMAN: Yes, Alternative. Well, it ended up as Action. They wanted it to be that. I was a member of that church and I brought several people into the church. I stayed a while longer as people left because they did not want to be around with the minister’s stand. However, I was asked to stay on to see what they were doing and whatnot [audience laughter], but it was a most unpleasant situation because the church has a lot of columns—you’ve seen it in New York—and some of the nice members and some of the older members in particular—I’m no kid myself, by the way—were sort of hiding behind pillars to talk to me, to let me know that I was supporting them. I did eventually leave and join another church in New York, the church I’m a part of now, the Fourth Universalist Society. However, I did support the program all the way through, and there were some people in New York who did as well, and I’m very happy to be here today and to see you.

VICTOR CARPENTER: As Dave Parke said, I was part of FULLBAC, but I was not among the original people involved in FULLBAC. When that emergency conference was held in New York that you’ve heard about, I was finishing a five-year ministry in South Africa, where I had come face to face with what racist fascism looks like up close and personal, if you will. I came to Philadelphia in January of 1968, met with Dave. Dave told me what had happened in New York and I was absolutely thrilled because having seen what apartheid looked like in South Africa, I was able to translate what apartheid looked like in the United States. And you know, apartheid always has a fascist component, and from what I had seen, the fascism was not only being surfaced but being confronted. I felt it had been confronted in a wonder-

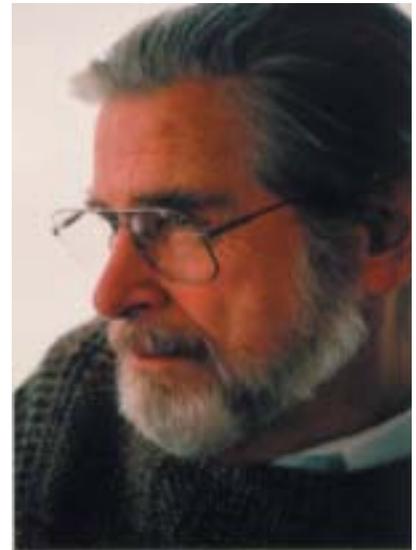
fully fundamental and powerful way in the reports that I had read in the emergency conference in New York, and so I should tell you that my church in Philadelphia did not have a clue about what was going on. I felt that I had five years instruction in South Africa in what exactly was going on, and so I was pleased by the prospect of becoming involved in a group that did not lead, but was in fact supportive of, the leadership of the oppressed people of this country in addressing their oppression and demanding power. And so it was my privilege to be part of FULLBAC and it was my privilege to be part of the various organizations involved in the next several years.

JOE SAMPLES: I'm from Detroit, and I've been a Unitarian ever since 1955. I did not go to New York, but I did go to Chicago, where Blacks from across the country met, and was so impressed that I went back to Detroit and organized the largest caucus group in the country. And because of that, the first national meeting of the Black Caucus was held in Detroit. I served on the steering committee of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, and because of my involvement there, I got elected to the Commission on Appraisal, and two years later was made its chairperson. And after I left the Commission on Appraisal, I then acted as a coordinator for the Urban Church Coalition.² So that's about all you need to know about me.

HAROLD WILSON: We had one more participant, Alex Poinsett,³ who many of you might know through his writings. He's a distinguished writer and has been published in periodicals and magazines, and at one time had an ongoing relationship with *Ebony* magazine. He was a member of BUUC. His wife was also an active member of BUUC.

What we hope now is that we'll be enriched by your questions. Could we open it up for questioning?

JACK MENDELSON: Let me add one other thing. It probably would not be appropriate for you to ask the question and then say, "You have one minute to answer," but the thought in mind is very important. [audience laughter]



Victor Carpenter

FULLBAC supporter

Living in Cape Town when the Emergency Conference happened at the Biltmore, Vic began his ministry at the First Church in Philadelphia around January 1st, 1968. Because of his longtime involvement with the antiapartheid movement, Vic became a supporter of FULLBAC, BUUC and BAC, and was part of the walkout at the General Assembly.

Vic says his purpose in writing the Minns lectures (1983), which cover approximately twenty-four months, was to make the point that the Black Empowerment controversy was "absolutely at the heart and soul of our association." He called it a "defining moment" which "remains an important part of our lives," and he is currently writing "another, larger story that needs to be told."



Joe Samples

BUUC

From Detroit and a Unitarian since 1955, Joe organized and served on the steering committee of the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus, and was subsequently elected to the Commission on Appraisal. Two years later he was made its chairperson.

Today Joe remains especially concerned about closet racism, and says what he learned from the Black Caucus is that there has to be a point in history where Blacks themselves get together to decide their own destiny.

Those of us who sit here in this semicircle are all given to oratory.

HAROLD WILSON: Do you have any questions? What are the questions out here?

(Note to Reader: There are approximately 75 invited guests present for the conversation.)

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What do you think is the most significant issue that you've discussed in the last two days among yourselves?

JACK MENDELSON: Who would like to take a crack at that one?

GWEN THOMAS: I would say, How important is the history? See, that's what we've been talking about—the history of BUUC and BAC, and I think that the issue is, was it worthy of all the time and attention among these people coming from all around the country to bring up this experience and to sort of set it in concrete so that our denomination will never forget what went on among us during the Black movement? That's what I think.

DON MCKINNEY: And there's a concern that that story has not been told fully or appropriately yet, and this really needs to happen.

HAROLD WILSON: The most appropriate thing lacking is that story has not been told by the Black Caucus members and people in integral roles in the Black Caucus. I agree with Gwen. Our planning is partly around what we're going to do next and our agreement is that we will proceed and produce the history as best we can.

JACK MENDELSON: Would anyone else like to respond to that question, which was pretty general? There may be other views of what was important.

DAVID PARKE: One distinction that came up during the course of our three days was the distinction between separatism and segregation. The formation of the Black Caucus was an instance of Black separatism for an affirmative ethical cause. Segregation, which involves the forced collectivities of Blacks by the hands of White people, their overlords, which is Victor's experience in South Africa, is a very different configuration of power.

JACK MENDELSON: Another thing that I think we talked about at length in between other things was the light that this whole episode from '67 to '71 threw on the nature of racism—that racism is not just personal bigotry. Racism is systemic. It's institutional. It's deeply embedded. We all grow up with it, and part of the racism of our society is under the name of White privilege, and until White privilege is examined and understood, we are never going to understand how racism operates in our society.

HAROLD WILSON: [Do any of our members?] have any comments on what they thought were important issues we discussed?

IONE VARGUS: Yes. I thought one of the things that was important is our reviewing of—quite a bit—of what BUUC actually involved, actually did—some of the action that they took, what they funded, what we thought about philosophically, and all of that. That was of very real interest to me, and then where we would be in that thinking today. [voices together say yes, yes] And so we discussed that.

GWEN THOMAS: I think it was important that I in particular have an opportunity to recount some of my personal experiences as a member of BUUC. That's the reason, you know, if somebody here wants to hear about it, I'll tell you what happened in Greene County, Alabama.

HAROLD WILSON: I want to hear about it right now.

“And I was about to say, ‘Well, that would be all right,’ and he said, ‘I’ve got two bodyguards to see that nobody puts any sugar in the gas tank.’ Now that alarmed me, see?”

IONE VARGUS: And she wants to talk about it. [laughter]

GWEN THOMAS: Obviously, this was one of the most exciting things that happened to this middle class school teacher. Right? I’m a college professor who reared two sons in the suburbs. Now I went as a member of BUUC down to Greene County, Alabama, where those White folks down there were drowning the Black Muslims’ cows, and we went as Unitarians—not just Black Unitarians. There were some White Unitarians, the members of BAC, who went along to make a personal, physical demonstration of the fact that we thought that those Black farmers ought to be able to have their cows in peace, and that those White folks had no business drowning cows that belonged to Black people. And somebody shot at us while we were down there—nobody ever shot at me before in my life—this guy had two bodyguards with him. And he flew in to Greene County, Alabama—.

HAROLD WILSON: In his own plane.

GWEN THOMAS: In his own plane, but first called me up and asked me if I’d like to fly down from Denver with him. And I was about to say, “Well, that would be all right,” and he said, “I’ve got two bodyguards to see that nobody puts any sugar in the gas tank.” Now that alarmed me, see? That was what made me understand [audience laughter] that I was going on a dangerous mission. So I told him, No, thank you, I would fly down on United. [audience laughter]

And that is what I did, but the fact is, that when we were down there, we were driving to the meeting place—out in the country someplace—somebody shot at us. When we got ready to leave this makeshift hall where we had had our meetings, these bodyguards came to us one by one and said very quietly into our ears, “When you leave this building, don’t stop under that light. Go straight to the car and get in it.”

And if that wasn’t bad enough, then this man got into the car, beside my mother’s middle class daughter, with a gun in his hand—a revolver in his

hand—and sat down beside me in order to protect me on the ride back to town. Now this was a BAC/BUUC experience, y'all—hear?

HAROLD WILSON: But more importantly, this was the setting in America that Black people were living, that was real for them, and they were in constant danger if they raised up their head in any way and objected. And you've got to understand the significance of Greene County. BAC finally funded Greene County to take a case to the Supreme Court of the United States—and we provided the funding for the briefs—on a voters' rights case. It was the first case before the Supreme Court where they found in favor of us, and it was not just significant for Greene County, but for all of us.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What year was that?

GWEN THOMAS: I don't know. [voices offer various answers]

HAROLD WILSON: About '70.

GWEN THOMAS: Probably.

HAROLD WILSON: I want to clarify one point. Dave has mentioned separatists. FULLBAC had to deal with the issue of separatists, because we were accused of being Black separatists, and we were not Black separatists. But that's what we were accused of and that's what FULLBAC had to address politically to keep us alive so we could have votes when these votes came up about the money and about our place in the denomination.

Let's talk about Black self-determination. It is not separatist, and it is not separatism. It is people of color understanding that the only thing they can do at a given time is to unite their own forces as strongly as they can to confront White institutional racism. And inherent to the concept is something else. The reality that we control no institutions, and we have to collaborate with White groups who do have power in those institutions to

try to convince them to deal with their own people. And that's what we were about. We were not separatist, but charged as separatists.

JACK MENDELSON: Well, that elicited quite a bit of response, so what about a second question?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I have a question. What happened in Boston, because I think that's very significant. I don't know if anybody knows that.

JACK MENDELSON: The question of the 1969 General Assembly and what happened there. All right, who wants to begin a recital in response to that—.

BETTE SIKES: It was all your fault, so I think you have to respond. [audience laughter]

MEMBER OF AUDIENCE: I've heard Jack's version. It's a great version.

JACK MENDELSON: Well, prior to the General Assembly in 1969, there was a lot of—what do we call it—backlash. A tremendous amount of backlash current in our midst, relative to the passage in '68 of the funding, and the accusations of separatism, for example, were much involved in that. And the UUA board simply backtracked—got scared—and voted to rescind the whole thing. The president said there wasn't money for it, the board said that it was not going to be able to implement the decision of the General Assembly, so we had to face into a General Assembly in which the tide had institutionally—at the executive level—had vastly changed. We had the prospect of a new president who was likely to be elected who was opposed to the whole idea of the Black Affairs Council.

So we tried to get organized both as FULLBAC and as BUUC to carry the day in Boston if we possibly could, and there was talk. There was some talk about having a blackout—I mean a walkout [audience laughter]—a walk-out!—if necessary. People have blackouts in California.

HAROLD WILSON: Yes, well, we were going to have a blackout. [audience laughter]

JACK MENDELSON: And in fact that's what it was. This talk was that if the Black Caucus request for an up-or-down vote on the funding right at the very beginning of the General Assembly was refused, then the Black Caucus members would walk out. And precisely that's what happened, that the vote on whether we would change the agenda so that a vote could be taken on the question of funding—that vote lost—at which time most of the Black attendees—the delegates—and there were a considerable number—we're talking now about maybe as many as a hundred people—got up and walked out.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: At that meeting, how many were there? What percentage was a hundred people of the people that were there?

HAROLD WILSON: About 2,500 in that meeting.

JACK MENDELSON: Five percent—.

HAROLD WILSON: I see the story a bit differently than he does, but keep telling.

JACK MENDELSON: I don't want this to get to be some dispute between Harold and myself, really. I'm just simply trying to tell you what happened from my point of view.

So when the Blacks walked out, there was a recess called by Joe Fisher, the moderator, and I went to look for the Black delegates. I didn't know where they'd gone. And I found them in a room of the Hotel Statler as it was called then, and they were saying good-bye to one another. And there were more tears being shed in that room than you're likely to see many times in

“This was a deeply, deeply sorrowful group of people who were going to leave. They were going to leave the General Assembly, they weren’t sure whether they weren’t going to leave the whole shebang—the whole movement.”

your life. This was a deeply, deeply sorrowful group of people who were going to leave. They were going to leave the General Assembly, they weren’t sure whether they weren’t going to leave the whole shebang—the whole movement.

I asked if I could have permission to speak, and I spoke to this group and said, “Let me go back into that assembly to demonstrate to you that you’re not alone in this. And would you just please stay around until I’ve had a chance to do that?” And so I went to Joe Fisher and Dana Greeley and said, “I’m asking for a point of personal privilege. Can I have just a few minutes?” And they gave it to me.

So I stood there in front of the General Assembly when it reconvened. I got the floor and I spoke, and I said, “This is a perfect example of Blacks again being told to go to the back of the bus. And that’s why they’ve left.” And I was hooted and booed, and when the tide died down a little, I said, “I’m going over to Arlington Street Church, because I can’t stay here and do business as usual anymore. And those who want to join me, I invite to come and join me. Be free to come.”

I got up, went down the stairs of the platform. One of my colleagues came up and spit in my face. I walked out and about three or four hundred other people walked out with me, and followed me the block and a half over to Arlington Street Church, where we assembled in the great auditorium. We’re licking our own wounds and asking ourselves, What can we next do? There’s a sequel to that whole story, too, but that’s what happened.

AUDIENCE: I wanted to hear that again.

HAROLD WILSON: There’s one thing I’d like to add. We were not just crying. We had designed our walkout in advance. We knew what we were going to do. We knew what we had to confront. It was strategy, not impulse. We knew that we had to put people on microphones. We knew we had to declare, for us, that we asked that this meeting be adjourned till they were ready to discuss social justice issues. And then—and only then—did we walk out. We

saw ourself [sic] caucusing in that room that you appeared in, Jack, and we had made up our mind that we would only use one person to go in and out of there who would talk to anybody during that period of time. And we used one person as a contact, and fortunately, our general strategy had worked. To begin with, we had developed a very strong, loyal group of White people who we never could have done that without, who were a part of it. And the truth of the matter is, while everybody was talking about separatism, there was more honest, decent, wholesome relationship between Black people and White people than had ever appeared in the church before because we talked as peers and back and forth and out of our realities.

JOE SAMPLES: Harold, I don't remember it that way.

JACK MENDELSON: He's making me sound like I lied.

HAROLD WILSON: No, I'm not saying you lied.

JACK MENDELSON: I told them these people were getting ready to leave, and they were.

JOE SAMPLES: I don't remember it that way, Harold.

HAROLD WILSON: I do.

[voices join in]

BETTE SIKES: Let's continue with questions.

JACK MENDELSON: Clare?

AUDIENCE (CLARE FISCHER): Thank you. First of all I want to say this is the most gratifying thing that's happened in this room for a lot of years. Twenty years

"I would walk into an airport and a janitor would say, 'Hello, Sister!' Now that was an unusual experience for some of us professional African American people, but it was the tenor of the times."

ago, when I first came to Starr King, I remember Til Evans often speaking about that walkout to the Arlington Church, and in between, in twenty years, not much else has happened with that narrative until today, in my view. So it's wonderful.

My question is this—and it's less historical and more sociological. I'm curious about the extent to which the various groups coordinated, built coalitions with secular Black movement groups during that period of time. How important was that, and was there a good deal of crossover?

HAROLD WILSON: There was a good deal of coordination across lines. To begin with, we funded some programs through BAC, or BAC funded some programs like the Committee for a New Newark, where they were trying to run a Black for the mayor of the city. We funded a program through BAC—a voter registration program—but it was really a political organizing program where we brought Black people from all over the country in to Newark, and they put on voter registration and political organizing meetings for a whole weekend. There were a number of things like that. The fellow who preceded me as chairman of the Black Caucus, Mtangulizi Sanyika—was then known as Hayward Henry—left the chairmanship in order to develop a world organization of Black people.

GWEN THOMAS: I think that you ought to set what was going on with Unitarian Universalists in the context of what was going on with African American people throughout the country. I would walk into an airport and a janitor would say, "Hello, Sister!" Now that was an unusual experience for some of us professional African American people, but it was the tenor of the times. We were recognizing all of our African Americans as being related to whatever we were doing, and so the African American Unitarians were very much a part of that atmosphere in the country. It wasn't just limited to the small number of African Americans who happened to be Unitarian Universalists, you see. It was an American thing that was going on, and we were part of the mood of the Black movement that was taking place at the time.

We did provide a good bit of leadership for it, but we didn't start it and we really just sort of fit into it.

JOE SAMPLES: On my part is that in Detroit, the Protestants and Catholics got together and formed what they called the Michigan Community Organization Council, and put in about fifty grand a year for distribution in the Black community. They heard about my experience with the Caucus, and I was a chairperson for the council for five years. Also, because of my experience with BUUC, I was also on an IFCO board, which was the Interfaith Community Organization, which met in New York. This was a gathering of all Black community organizations across the country.

HAROLD WILSON: You've had your hand up back there all the time. Why don't we answer your question?

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I heard that you spent some of your time looking at the issues today and looking forward, and I wondered if you talked at all about the public school system or the prison system in this country. What did you talk about?

JACK MENDELSON: Frankly, we didn't look forward very much at all.

BETTE SIKES: No, no. We're not—we're looking back.

DONALD MCKINNEY: But this is a very good example. What has just been discussed is one of the great reasons why we've got to have this story clearly understood and told. The programs that were being investigated and then funded by the Black Affairs Council, with UUA money that had been voted and was projected to go over that four-year period, was starting—and I had—it was for me a great privilege to be a part of BAC in those years to have a chance to see the detail in planning those proposals—not planning the proposals. The proposals came from the communities to BAC, and it was

so heartrending when it was necessary to say, "Well, there is no more money." And some of these were the most exciting programs, and those programs—the details of the proposals are there. And they've got to be brought forth and that's got to be a very important part of the history.

GWEN THOMAS: Some of us have brought these copies of books that date back to '68, '69, in which there are lists of some of the programs that BAC funded. You may want to look at these before you leave here today.

VICTOR CARPENTER: One of the reasons why your question was not addressed, John⁴, goes very deeply into why we are here and what I think the importance of this meeting, our meetings, and this whole gathering is all about today, namely the Black Empowerment controversy has been so buried in the psychic understanding of what Unitarian Universalism in the twentieth century is all about, that we really have not been able to bring the kind of attention to the programs that you have just mentioned, and the kind of possibilities that were at least in bud with the Black Empowerment work and the work of the Black Affairs Council. Really we're talking thirty years ago, and you had a lot of this stuff just germinating with Black people empowered to deal with precisely the kind of areas and problems that you've just mentioned. Now, we backed away from it. We decided that it was an embarrassment to us. It was looked upon and is still looked upon in the denomination as a failure. I hope one of the things you carry away from this meeting today is that you are seeing before you some people who were really turned on by this, who do not regard it as a failure, who regard it as the most important experience in their professional and individual lives. This was really important stuff, and if nothing else gets out about these meetings, and this meeting right now, let it be known that the Black Empowerment moment was a moment of enormous religious significance for at least the people who are sitting in this room today.

DONALD MCKINNEY: And for our history.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Leading up to the walkout, what would you say was the ratio between the backlash that you mentioned around separatism and the real issue of money?

JACK MENDELSON: The ratio? [laughing] That's a good question. I think they were pretty deeply intertwined.

GWEN THOMAS: You couldn't separate the way White people feel about money from the way they felt about giving it to Black people. [audience laughter] Let's be honest about this. And that's really what we were dealing with. I was on the Black Affairs Council. I was one of the people helping to decide which of those programs would get dollars, and I listened—both actually physically listened and then emotionally listened—to the way that people felt about money.

You know, Black people don't feel that way. We never had anything to start with. And so all these Unitarians, though, who had had direct relationship with dollars all along, were very concerned that these irresponsible Black people—I know that's what they thought we were—wanted to go help some kids in the inner city have a playground to play on. Those kids can play in the dirt.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: What about White accountability for guaranteeing money that wasn't there in the first place? Was there accountability in that respect?

HAROLD WILSON: Can I clarify for you? The following year, there was a major issue about funding for the whole denomination, and we were in the middle of a struggle with the denomination leadership. I knew that Bob West was going to be in this area for a day or two, and I invited him to dinner—.

JACK MENDELSON: President of the UUA.

HAROLD WILSON: President of the UUA, and I invited him to a meeting at my home, because I'm going to really answer your question as to money, and the response of money and emotion, money and racism, money and intense feeling, no matter what you want to call it.

He and I—he came to my house to dinner—and that dinner lasted from 7:00 till 2:30 in the morning when I drove him back to his hotel. When he left, he felt very good about things, and I think he began to see us in a little different light. Not just these Black devils who were just, you know, throwing away money and irresponsible and crooks and all of those kinds of accusations that have been made against us—by the way—by Unitarians. And we agreed. He would go to his people, meaning the structure—executive structure in the Unitarian Church, and I would go to mine, meaning the executive structure in the Black Caucus. And I went to the executive structure in the Black Caucus, who by then was very suspicious around this, and very suspicious of joining in. But I told them I had made an agreement that I would push our joining the finance drive for that year, and further, we would go to our FULLBAC group and ask them—and they had a lot of energy and some pretty big churches—and ask them to join. His response was, That was great. We would meet in New York City and discuss that on a given date.

So I met him in, of all places, outside Grand Central Station. I went to that meeting. We were to go to go somewhere and then talk. We never got a chance to talk. He looked at me and all of the fervor and the good feelings and all of that were gone. He had talked to the boys, and they probably were mostly boys anyhow in those days, and the boys had told him, "You're out of your mind, West. You've got to back away from that stuff," and they backed away. There was a real chance to deal with the debt, but that's how that stuff worked. The anger and the hatred was far stronger than the ability to say: Look, this FULLBAC organization has a lot of powerful people in it. I promised we would go from church to church, evangelizing around dollars, but that's what happens when you have racism.

Victor Carpenter has mentioned something very important. Wherever you find apartheid, you find fascism. I am very glad that you understand America represented absolute apartheid for Black people, and in order for that to exist, there had to be fascism, and it was real fascism, and that was the context that some of us were playing out of, and that's the understanding we had, and that's what we wanted to change, and then we also wanted to change the manifestations of it in a church that we had been drawn to and called our church.

JACK MENDELSON: Way in the back.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I'm just wondering—there seems to be an issue in terms of bringing African Americans into the UU congregations today, and I'm wondering, with this history, which I'm hearing—correct me if I'm wrong—it's sounding like post-1960s and BUUC, there doesn't seem to be any support for strong African American self-identified people in the UUA, so I'm wondering, is that a correct assumption, or am I missing something?

GWEN THOMAS: My feeling is that it is a fairly correct assumption, but what it is about is not that the UUA wouldn't be really excited and pleased to welcome numbers of African American people into our various congregations. It is that most African Americans come from a decidedly Christian orientation, and they themselves cannot tolerate the liberalism of Unitarian Universalism. We have Christian Unitarians, but we are much better known for the Unitarians who do not identify themselves as Christian, and that creates a problem with the African American community, which is predominantly a Christian community, you see. And so I think you've put your finger on a very important and serious issue that accounts for the limited number of African Americans in Unitarian Universalism. We have not made clear that there is a Christian segment to Unitarian Universalism, and so most African Americans look askance at us. They think that we are not Christians, and therefore, they don't want that particular identification.

"We have not made clear that there is a Christian segment to Unitarian Universalism, and so most African Americans look askance at us."

"I think we have to look—since this is especially a predominantly White audience—at ourselves, in our churches, as to what our attitude is on this."

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Do you see it as a theological issue?

GWEN THOMAS: Oh, I certainly do! I mean it's either you believe Jesus Christ is a savior or you don't, and you could be Unitarian if you don't.

IONE VARGUS: I think, too, in addition to that—I'm not sure, though, that you see as much social justice strongly—which is also an attraction to African Americans. I think when you were doing your churches in Philadelphia, you probably attracted African Americans because they saw that sense of hope really out there—action-oriented social justice—and I see that—I do a lot of Jubilee training, so I go to a variety of churches, and one of the things that a number of churches—of congregations are doing—is what I call social service, but it's not social action. And I think that it's the social action piece that attracts a number of African Americans. I mean I agree with you, Gwen, about the Christian piece, too, but I also think that there's always more than one issue.

WINIFRED NORMAN: I'd like to say something—that the responsibility is not only on the African Americans, which is the way the discussion has gone. There are many White people in our churches who are not interested in the kind of program we discussed, who are not interested in trying to involve people in coming to join—at least to come and see what the church is doing. I'm in a small church in New York, but I've been a member for a long time and then I was a member for a long time in other churches, and I think we have to look—since this is especially a predominantly White audience—at ourselves, in our churches, as to what our attitude is on this. First you get informed about what we say, and then I think it's a question of what your attitude is on African Americans, on involving them, inviting them into the church, and spending some time following up. It is possible, but we haven't done that very well.

JACK MENDELSON: Joe—do you want to speak?

JOE SAMPLES: Well, one of the things I want to say is that [going on in the Black community now] is that people used to think, “Oh, the Baptist church—Blacks singing, shouting, and carrying on.” But if you go to a Baptist church nowadays, you’d be surprised what’s going on. They’re doing community service, they’re getting out, working with kids. They’re doing stuff that they weren’t doing fifty years ago, and Black folks are like this. And in fact in Detroit, I would say about ten of our former members belong to a Baptist church that is *doing* something. That’s what’s going on.

JACK MENDELSON: In the 1950s, we had a steady trickle of Black people coming into our congregations in areas where Black people lived; that is, generally in close-in suburbs or cities. That went on because of the Civil Rights movement. As I said earlier, the Civil Rights movement and the activity of many representative UUs, widely known for what they were doing, like A. Powell Davies in Washington, or Donald Harrington in New York, and others—

And so all through the ‘50s we were increasing in Black membership, but we were also increasing in White membership. The Black members and the White members were coming in for essentially the same reasons—that that was a place they felt comfortable and enjoyed being. In the 1960s, in the early years of the 1960s, there was in metropolitan areas an explosion of people of color coming into our churches, which lasted up until 1970. From then on it began to decrease, and went down precipitously after 1971. Now we’ve been in this ten-year cycle of trying again to do something about enlivening our attraction to people of color with welcoming congregations and with anti-racism workshops and all the rest, but the fact of the matter is, we’re doing just about what everybody else is doing these days—just about holding our own in both categories—total memberships and increase in any real racial diversity.

JOE SAMPLES: Could I interject that I reported that I had organized the largest

Black Caucus group in the country. Now, today, in that church, my wife and I are the only ones left from that group.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I am Eliyahou Farajajé, and I am Dean of the Faculty here.

I want to thank all of you. I want to thank particularly my sisters and brothers of African descent because I think probably in some very real ways, those of us who are of African descent who are here now probably wouldn't be here if it hadn't been for what you all experienced and what you all have done to create a space, and also to take this occasion to thank those who have been real allies and have put themselves on the line and moved themselves beyond their comfort zone in order to create and make justice.

One of the things that has become very clear to me in working with the UUA for the last couple of years is that when we talk about race, we're also talking about class, we're talking about gender roles, we're talking about sexuality, so on and so forth. One of the issues that's been kind of hitting me often is looking at the fact that sometimes it appears to me that in some rather well-heeled White congregations, it's much easier for middle/upper-middle class White people to relate to middle/upper-middle class people of color than it is for them to relate to poor White folks.

I think what my question is is, How do we move this to the next level? For example, I'm very challenged—or troubled, to be more honest—by the fact that because of the intensity of this history, the understanding of race in the UUA in my experience is pretty much based on a Black-White construct of race. And I would really lament gathering again in thirty years—if I should still be here—and have a meeting of the Asian-Pacific Islander Caucus, and the Latino Caucus, and so on and so forth, talking about pretty much a lot of the same issues.

What are the ways in which—do you feel—that the work that you've done in the past and continue to do—will also help empower other people of color within the UUA—poor White people within the UUA—people with disabilities within the UUA, so on and so forth—to create their spaces of self-

definition and self-determination so that we really start to get to creating the kind of communities that we all say that we so desperately want to see?

BETTE SIKES: My lordie!

DON MCKINNEY: One part of it may be—looking at the history again, though, even though the BAC became a failure, in the process I think the thinking of many UUs was expanded to see that there were empowerment issues there for many other groups, and I think there's no question that the women's movement was very, very deeply affected by what happened in the Black movement, and the Gay Caucus was definitely there. And the Fellowship for Renewal was an organization which also has disappeared now, but it grew out of FULLBAC and drew into it very quickly people who were concerned exactly in trying to do what you're talking about. And that is when the Gay Caucus and all these other groups were starting in the churches. And now there's no question—I think—I hope—although I'm retired now—but I do see in my old Brooklyn church that this weaving the fabric of diversity is providing a mechanism, certainly within the local church, that, if it's used with enthusiasm, can be a welcoming and empowering means for people to realize that from any wide variety of backgrounds of lack of self-determination or feeling of support, that our churches can be—and our movement, I hope, could see in the larger setting that they could be there as a main and important support.

HAROLD WILSON: Dr. Vargus, what's your response to that?

IONE VARGUS: Well, you know, this may sound—well, I don't need to apologize, but it is going to sound kind of funny—first of all, I think that in some ways that's what the whole Journey Toward Wholeness is about, isn't it? It is about making us very aware of the diversity of all kinds that exists, and in fact, the group that used to be called the Black Concerns Working Group is now the Antiracism Group, in order to get away from the notion that it is just

"It's not just us anymore. It is the Asians. It is the Other. It is the gay and lesbians. It's all of that. It's an interesting thing."

Black and White, and in order to make the connection for all the groups. But you know, it's interesting that you're the one [gestures toward Eliyahou] who raises the question, because very often the persons who raise that question—How about all the other people besides Black and White?—tend to be the African Americans. So this is what I see, so it's kind of interesting that, you know, if you get more African Americans, you'll get more—you may get more, because we raise that all the time. It's not just us anymore. It is the Asians. It is the Other. It is the gay and lesbians. It's all of that. It's an interesting thing.

VICTOR CARPENTER: I want to add a word to what's been said. I was the first chairperson of the disability task force in the UUA, and I gave another lecture—I'm always giving a lecture on these things—on ableism—to introduce the term to the association, and out of that grew the whole issue around our heightened sensitivity toward issues of disempowerment of the disabled and how we can respond to the disabled more effectively. And once again, I don't think I would have been as sensitive to this had it not been for my experience in FULLBAC.

JOE SAMPLES: My response to the so-called UUA program on diversity is, When you can bring me a program that's going to attract poor White folks, then I can deal with it. [audience laughter]

HAROLD WILSON: Do you [toward Gwen] have any comments?

GWEN THOMAS: I think we are attracting people from other groups. I think there is a much less rigid structure of people in our congregations than there once was. We still have inner city churches from which much of our original membership has moved away, you see. And the people who live around those churches are coming into them if they continue to stay open. And so I think that what we have now in terms of diversity includes people of different financial statuses, and people of different racial backgrounds, due to the fact that the areas in which some of our churches are located are

changing demographically. And so it's almost automatic that we're going to have certain kinds of diversity that we want—did not have—and fortunately, it comes at a time when we are open to that increased diversity, I think. And so I just believe it's a natural kind of growth that's going to keep on going among us.

HAROLD WILSON: Where are you [toward Bette] on this question?

BETTE SIKES: Well, for a long time I've felt when issues of class come up, that we have to stop and think what we are offering in the way of theological stuff and liturgy and comfort for people who don't have money, and I think we think we have salvation, we have the nonanswer answers, you know, but there are a great many people in the world who are not comfortable with that. That's the first thing. So they're not going to be with us. The other is, a member of my family in the next generation down is quite comfortable with UU thinking on religious issues, but when she was poor and tried to enter one of our churches in a smaller city which has much the feel of the suburb—it isn't, but it feels like one—there were so many assumptions about what people have. What they own, what they make, how they live their lives, that she could not at that time stay there. Now, when she and her husband got more money and felt not so threatened by everybody else's affluence, they were able to come back, but it still distresses me when I think about it. And I think we forget that, because it's just like White skin privilege and it's like prick privilege. So much of it is unconscious. It is so much a basic, underlying thing for us that we cannot possibly conceive why somebody wouldn't just be rushing to get inside of our doors.

"So much of it is unconscious. It is so much a basic, underlying thing for us that we cannot possibly conceive why somebody wouldn't just be rushing to get inside of our doors."

HAROLD WILSON: Roy, did you have a comment?

ROY OCKERT: I spent most of my adult life—working life—as an economist in the labor movement. Out of this came the feeling that what people needed to do was to—use the word however you want—but self-determination applies

not just to Blacks but also to working people—Indians—.

HAROLD WILSON: Women—.

ROY OCKERT: I was born on an Indian reservation and my half-sister is part Indian. One of my closest—I had many Indian friends, but one of my closest buddies—one of my two closest buddies—was a young man named Dick Powaukie. When I lived in Los Angeles, there was a very large Indian population there, including people from the reservation that I grew up on. I think that one of the things that is necessary is for people to develop the self-determination, the competence—the self-confidence, the feeling of worth and so on that comes out of it, and out of that will come people who come, who not only accept Unitarian Universalism, but who seek it, just as I did. And I think that this is one of the things that's important.

On the list of acronyms, I think that there are three that are missing that are important for the history of what all went on. One is Black Unitarian Universalist—the Black Unitarians for Radical Reform—BURR—and it was formed in the LA area in August 1967.

IONE VARGUS: It preceded BUUC.

ROY OCKERT: It preceded BUUC. SOBURR was the Supporters for BURR, which preceded FULLBAC, another—. [voices say which—. SOBURR—] S-O-B-U-R-R.

IONE VARGUS: Supporters of—.

ROY OCKERT: Supporters of BURR. And the third one was a study group that we formed which in some ways also preceded FULLBAC—one we called WURR—W-U-R-R, which was the acronym for White Universalists for Radical Readjustment.

HAROLD WILSON: Joe has brought up a critical issue. Whenever I've gotten

together with Black people, usually it's been around Black political organization, and when we finish our business, we sit around and talk. Eventually somebody's going to say, "You know, man, we're talking about moving these White people," and I'm discouraged because they don't give a damn about underclass White people. Then somebody will say, "You ever heard a White person talk about his brother, or his sister, when they were underclass?"

WINIFRED NORMAN: I wanted to say since there are many young people here that the possibility of doing more on these questions is among the youth—youth in the denomination, and young people in the churches. We've had a limited experience, again in my church, but also in other churches in our New York district. We have been going ahead quite well on this question, and I would suggest if you are a part of this movement that you look around and see what the chances are of increasing our membership and increasing this information about what we are doing among the young people.

JOE SAMPLES: Let me add a sequel to my point. You know what? We have not seen a riot yet until poor Whites discover what the system is doing to them.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: [Directed to Don McKinney] When you said—in the midst of what you were saying before—something about how BAC might have been a failure—it was a failure or something like it—you said that—and tears came to my eyes because, God! It wasn't a failure.

DON MCKINNEY: I said mainly it's failed.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: Well, it stopped happening—.

DON MCKINNEY: Of the dreams it could have provided with the money. That's what I meant.

HAROLD WILSON: Let her plainly state her point.

"We have not seen a riot yet until poor Whites discover what the system is doing to them."

AUDIENCE QUESTION: It was an emotional response to—if there's any thread that FULLBAC and BAC and those efforts were in any way failures—I'm sitting here thinking, What a wonderful effort! What a heartfelt—what a love—what a passion, and that if there was a failure, we can look beyond to the larger institution and we can look at what stopped the process, in the way that it got stopped and the heartbreak of it all.

DON MCKINNEY: That's what I meant.

JOE SAMPLES: Let me say this to you. The organizations have failed, but we haven't failed!

[voices say No! That's right! and audience applauds]

HAROLD WILSON: Gwen gives the best example of that. Why don't you talk about all the things you did as a basis of the shift in you—as a basis of your experience in BUUC?

GWEN THOMAS: Oh, Harold! [audience laughter] You know, I'm a college professor, and everything that I do gets into my classroom some kind of way—you know. It doesn't matter—I do teach Afro-American literature, but I don't limit accounts—my students know where I am right now, and when I go back, I will tell them what all these people said, you see? I think that what happens to those of us who are activists is that we use all of our experience. We don't compartmentalize and ignore the things that we participate in. I think there's a natural tendency toward integration of experience, so that all the things we do and all of the people we come to know turn up in the classroom if you're a college professor, you know? It doesn't really matter what I'm *supposed* to be teaching. I've got to do a syllabus, but the fact is that anybody who takes a class I teach is going to learn a lot about Unitarian Universalism because it's at the center of my life. I cannot teach short stories

and never talk about the fact that I made this trip and spent this three or four days and got to know all of these different people. It seems to me that everything touches upon the center of one's being, and so that you don't isolate experiences. I don't even try to isolate experiences. I appreciate the fact that the students of Starr King wanted to hear something about my activities when I was part of BUUC, and there's just one little episode that I want to tell you about that doesn't fit anywhere else. Doesn't really fit here, either, but I want you to hear it.

At one time, BUUC was picketing a White Unitarian church in New York City, plus it was a very prosperous church, and it had no Black members. We felt that all of the Unitarian churches ought to be somehow involved with antiracism and ought to encourage some Black membership in their mix. Now I was out there walking up and down and it was at a time when I had a great big Afro. And a little White lady looked up at me and she said, "I'm not afraid of your hair!" [audience laughter]

There are all kinds of experiences. [audience laughter]

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I wanted to just make a statement, which is, I truly hope that the event here has somehow been an opportunity for some personal healing for you folks, and that it contributes to a more general healing within our movement so that we can get on with the work. Thank you for being here.

HAROLD WILSON: Our purpose for calling this meeting, and our purpose for being here, was to see if we could generate the kind of resources among our own people to develop a written history that comes out of Black Unitarian Universalists who were a part of that Caucus experience. For much of the data and all of that, we're going to depend on what some of our FULLBAC members have already done and done very well, but we still need to hear the story from the Black point of view.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I just was thinking—and I don't quite know how to

"We felt that all of the Unitarian churches ought to be somehow involved with antiracism and ought to encourage some Black membership in their mix. Now I was out there walking up and down and it was at a time when I had a great big Afro. And a little White lady looked up at me and she said, 'I'm not afraid of your hair!'"

phrase the question—but the Unitarian Universalist young adult movement is an effort to organize with a people of color caucus understanding—with self-empowerment and shared leadership across lines that divide—a radically inclusive vision for our movement. But what I haven't heard about is the connection with you all, or maybe we've kind of said, "That's history," and have forgotten—I mean, this is just, I guess, an ignorance of youth or you know, that whole thing of like, "You're still *alive*!?" [audience laughter]

I think we feel like we're creating it all over it again from scratch, so if there could just be some way to make that connection a bit more real, so that that learning could happen both ways. Thank you for doing this and I'll take it back.

GWEN THOMAS: Let me make one observation about that. One of the most important persons in the BUUC movement was Ben Scott, and Ben Scott died within the past two weeks—in Sumter, South Carolina—and so what you say touches me a great deal. We are going to lose some of the personal contact that keeps this history alive, and so it is important that you people here at Starr King have allowed us to come here and share with you our experience. I think it is a vital contribution to Unitarian Universalism and I personally want to thank you.

HAROLD WILSON: Yes. [applause] ■

¹ Dr. Homer Jack was the denomination's executive for Social Responsibility.

² In a later conversation with Cathleen Young, Joe explained that he came to a point where he didn't want to deal with White folks, and so he chose to work with the Urban Church Coalition because it moved beyond racism, toward engaging urban churches with diverse communities.

³ A statement by Alex Poinsett appears on page 49.

⁴ John Marsh, in the audience, is a local minister who asked the question now being discussed.

Reflections on Black Empowerment in the UUA

Years of experience as an *Ebony* magazine editor covering race conflict stories throughout the United States readied me for the firestorm which raged during the late 1960s over the issue of Black empowerment in the Unitarian Universalist Association. Much earlier, I had been radicalized already by the lynchings of Blacks almost daily somewhere in the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” angered by the Jim Crow navy that I served in, and traumatized by all sorts of insults at the University of Illinois, including a “nigger-in-the-woodpile” joke told by a professor to about 100 students that included only one African American—me. I had been challenged by Chicago newspapers, house organs and radio stations that refused to hire Blacks. Apparently, my master’s degree in philosophy only qualified me for a \$40-a-week job as a spray painter in a pig sty factory. I had been radicalized by the murders of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy, disgusted by too many Black and White liberals so mortgaged to the establishment that they were unwilling to challenge it seriously. I had been radicalized, too, by the mass beatings and jailings of Black students in the South who bravely staged lunch-counter sit-ins and freedom rides, or risked their lives for “integrated education” or voter registration. Given these circumstances, scraping across the national consciousness like a fingernail across glass, I no longer could relax in the relative ease and comfort of my politically liberal but guilt-ridden middle-classness. No longer could I float in a psychological space capsule above the social and economic suffering of most of my Black brothers and sisters.

In 1968, 40.9% of them lived in poverty, compared with 11.9% of Whites. Some 7% were unemployed or underemployed, compared with 3% of Whites. Their family income was only 58% that of Whites and falling. These 1968 statistics did not shock me. Only two decades earlier I myself had escaped from the depths of Depression-era poverty.

Nevertheless, I was more than primed for the incandescent Black Rebellion which finally ignited the UUA in 1968, recapitulating larger events occurring nationally. While many of us had respected Martin Luther King’s nonviolent disobedience stance, we knew that his “integration” goal was



Alex Poinsett
BUUC

Alex, an active UU from Chicago, was asked to write a detailed statement because he could not be present for the open conversation. He will join the Board of Trustees of the Starr King School for the Ministry in the fall of 2001.

rejected by many others. It had dawned on us that you could not integrate elephants and gophers because of the unequal power relationship, the unlevel playing field. Also, integration was, in fact, a one-way movement of Black to White, an assimilation process in which African Americans, instead of affirming their unique gifts, became mere carbon copies of Whites.

Indeed, integration as defined in the 1960s was cultural suicide. African Americans could enter American society's big house provided they were willing to accept its stress on Western thought and institutions that embodied a myopic and limited view of the world while perpetuating the myth of civilization as a European monopoly. That is, African Americans could enter the big house provided they left their traditions and values parked at the door.

I remember a discussion at the First Unitarian Church in Chicago about efforts to integrate Hyde Park housing back in the 1960s. "We want to integrate," claimed the wife of one of our associate ministers, "but we just can't find any Negroes (we weren't African Americans yet) willing to move in." I could not resist replying, "We want to integrate Chatham, but we just can't find Whites willing to move in." In fact, by the time Norma and I bought our home in Chatham in 1961, most of our White neighbors had fled. Within two years, the last two White families still living on our block had broken their earlier promises to stay put.

By 1968, President Lyndon Johnson's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders had warned: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one Black, one White—separate and unequal." Perhaps, more accurately, the Commission could have reminded the nation that it had never in its history been ONE society. The Commission blamed mounting urban riots on "White racism" and urged massive aid to the Black community.

Even so, both Black and White liberals were gradualists in a world of rapid change. The most arrogant among them spoke with an air of superiority, saying in so many words: "Make yourselves acceptable, that is, make yourselves like us and MAYBE IF you don't press too hard and MAYBE IF you don't holler too loud and MAYBE IF the time is right and MAYBE IF you show

the proper gratitude and MAYBE IF you do not cause disorder, then MAYBE we will accept you.”

This was only part of the social ambiance that triggered a rash of Black caucuses around the nation, including the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) which emerged out of an emergency call of UUs to respond to the urban riots. Using the words “empowerment” and “self-determination,” we argued that Black people should take charge of affairs affecting Black people, that no longer could White people tell us what our values should be and what was good for our communities. Because we faced racism daily both North and South, we were experts. We knew, for example, that the quality of schools and resources in Black communities was far more important than school busing.

Sometimes employing undemocratic methods, BUUC pressed the UUA to establish a Black Affairs Council (BAC) “as a vehicle to express the interests, feelings and aspirations of Black Unitarian Universalists for power within the denomination.” BAC, we explained, would become an affiliate agency with a clear majority of Blacks on its board. We also called for increased representation of Blacks on all of the UUA’s policy-making boards and committees and urged it to “make a real financial commitment to Black people” by releasing \$250,000 a year to BAC for the next four years to fund community and economic development projects in Black America. Out of the ensuing debate came FULLBAC, a White group which campaigned with us to secure full funding for BAC. Meanwhile, a more conventional, integrationist-oriented group, BAWA (Black and White Action), emerged to compete with BUUC, and branded its members as militant separatists.

The conflict escalated at the 1968 General Assembly in Cleveland when the UUA Board and President Dana Greeley urged delegates to substitute voluntarily raised funds for the million dollars demanded by BUUC and to accept both BAC and BAWA as affiliate members. However, GA delegates voted 836 to 326 to form and fund BAC while BAWA received neither funding nor affiliate status.

The 1969 General Assembly in Boston proposed to allocate the second

quarter million to BAC and \$50,000 to BAWA. But BAC insisted that move would be contradictory. Either the UUA would or would not support Black empowerment. In either case, BAC would reject UUA funding if BAWA received a single penny. Once again, the delegates voted to fund BAC solely. However, the unprecedented Cleveland General Assembly vote to fund BAC for four years was altered by the UUA Board when it decided that the BAC appropriation would have to be reaffirmed and voted annually at each subsequent General Assembly. Angrily, BUUC/BAC and FULLBAC accused the UUA leadership of failing to honor and uphold its commitment to Black empowerment. After subsequent parliamentary maneuverings failed to revive the Cleveland Assembly's intent, BUUC members silently walked out of the Assembly to meet at a BUUC/BAC hotel suite.

Returning to the Assembly as it concluded other "business as usual," the Rev. Jack Mendelsohn, then pastor of Boston's Arlington Street Church, was allowed to address the delegates. He complained that the spirit of Cleveland had been diminished, that White UUs had watered down the BUUC agenda, that BUUC members had not only left the room but also the UUA. Then the ministerial warrior announced a personal decision to walk out of the Assembly and persuaded about 400 others, as an act of conscience, to join him at his church a block away.

Later, Mendelsohn, his followers and BUUC/BAC accepted invitations by President Greeley and others to return to the General Assembly. I vividly recall BAC Chairman Haywood Henry speaking briefly, then leading the gathering in a rousing singing of the Civil Rights anthem, "We Shall Overcome." I repeated each refrain as loudly as anyone, but my brain kept whispering in despair: *If the White man lets us.*

Faced with a substantial deficit by November 1969, the UUA Board cut one-third of its budget, voted to reduce the BAC allocation by \$50,000 and meet its million-dollar obligation within five years rather than four. Consequently, BAC voted to disaffiliate in order to raise money, since affiliate groups were not then allowed to do so on their own but instead were funded solely by the UUA. Finally, the 1970 General Assembly in Seattle

defeated a motion to restore full funding to BAC. By 1971, not only BAC but FULLBAC and BAWA ceased to function. That was reason enough for me and an estimated 1,000 other disgruntled African Americans to leave the UUA. I remained absent about 18 years, returning in 1993 primarily to support Norma, who had chosen not to quit the struggle.

UUs are only beginning to understand how to use an anti-oppression lens to discern what they are called to do. Clearly, the commitment rests firmly on foundations laid by parties to the Black Empowerment controversy more than three decades ago. Proudly, they can say, that struggle—which among other consequences led to the massive empowerment of women and gays in the UUA—was not in vain. ■

Alex Poinsett

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Ione D. Vargus

BUUC member

I was an eager participant in the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. Although I was not at the Cleveland General Assembly, nor did I know anything was going to happen there, as soon as I heard of BUUC, I joined. At that time, I was a doctoral student at Brandeis University in the Florence Heller School in Waltham, MA. I was already communicating with Black students around the country regarding their demands and was the Communications person for the Black student movement. Thus, I received, analyzed and disseminated information from African American student groups around the country. I understood the reasons and processes of the students' demands. Ideologies were swirling around and those that BUUC embraced were ones I agreed with. I believed that we could make a difference by supporting community-based organizations seeking to bring about change.

I recall the meeting held at my house in Medford, MA, as we worked on the BUUC position on educational policy. In the Boston chapter, our focus was on community control rather than integration. This was interesting, because busing and White people, particularly South Boston White folks, hotly contested desegregation. Louise Day Hicks became their darling. But we, along with a number of other Black leaders, had disagreed with busing and "racial balance" as the solution. First, we didn't think it was necessary for our kids to sit next to White kids in order to be able to learn, as tended to be the general attitude. But more than that, we felt it was very important that neighborhoods and parents have control over their schools. (Now of course, people beg for parents to be involved with the schools.) On the other hand, we were aware of the importance of integration to our Southern sisters and brothers. Thus our final policy recognized and supported their efforts. Naturally, those opposed to busing were also opposed to community control.

I also made speeches to congregations attempting to explain the BUUC position and the position of those in the Black Nationalist movement. I remember the speech that I gave to a Unitarian-Universalist Congregation

in New Hampshire on March 5, 1969. I explained that many Black people were no longer interested in integration, and that we were about self-determination. Using Lerone Bennett's definition of the Conscious Negro from his 1964 book, *The Negro Mood*, I asserted that we were no longer White Negroes, that we were interested in building a collective system of Black action and that we were interested in redistributing power. The reception was very cold. Such speeches usually were greeted this way. Perhaps the concepts were so new to White people, vis-à-vis Black people, that they did not know how to respond.

The activity that I enjoyed the most was my work with a group of junior high school students called "The Soul Cousins." We went from church to church putting on a program to explain the Black experience using music, dance and literature from slavery to that time in the '60s. The program had emanated from a talent show at Ferry Beach where I had taken my children while serving as a counselor. On the last night at the camp I had led a group of children in explaining the Black experience using performance. (At that time I was teaching the Black experience through Black Music at Brandeis University.) It was so popular that I was asked by several of the ministers who were also at Ferry Beach if I could bring this to their churches. After we left camp, the youngsters who participated were not available, so I organized a group consisting of my children and their cousins, thus "The Soul Cousins." The son of the minister of the Braintree church traveled with us since he played the part of a White overseer, but the other children liked him and considered him as part of our extended family. We traveled by my Volkswagen and my brother-in-law's car to churches all over New England and even in New York, carrying instruments, costumes and food. The forty-five minute program, which started with slave dances, included "shouts" and spirituals, the poem by Paul Lawrence Dunbar "We Wear the Masks," and literature from Langston Hughes. We gave examples of jive talk and jive behavior and explained the "double entendre" through making up words of our own. We danced the Charleston, played some jazz, imitated music from

James Brown and ended with the song "Amen." I also carried soul food, which I had cooked at home, generally collard greens, sweet potatoes and pork. Our reputation spread and when we were invited to the First Unitarian Church in Philadelphia, I felt that we had had enough. I couldn't make it in the Volkswagen and Philadelphia seemed a far distance from Boston in those times. Furthermore, I was getting ready to write my dissertation and didn't have the time for traveling so much.

Not everyone in BUUC was pleased with this performance. After all, it was very popular, and it was not threatening. Some people thought that the singing and dancing was too stereotypical. But when Henry Hampton saw it, he thought it had a great message and was very encouraging. Sometimes when he gave a speech on behalf of BUUC, he would invite us to join him.

After finishing my dissertation and earning my doctorate in 1971, I went to the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, as an assistant professor. Although the Urbana congregation had had a Black minister, who later became one of the leaders in BUUC, he had left the area, and my participation in BUUC became mainly that of an onlooker. To this day, however, I include something about BUUC/BAC in my speeches to Unitarian-Universalist groups and speak of it as an opportunity lost for the UUA. We were not concerned about ourselves or whether the church sang the right songs or had the right curriculum. We were concerned about the community and social justice. We wanted to support programs based in Black communities. Clearly we were before our time. Because of our approach, I still believe we could have made a big difference had we lasted. ■

Victor Carpenter

FULLBAC supporter

Late in 1967 I returned to the United States after completing a five-year ministry to the Unitarian Church in Cape Town, South Africa. During that time I had become involved with organizations dealing directly and indirectly with the effects of apartheid upon the African and “colored” peoples of South Africa (one of these organizations was banned by the government). I had also been contacted by and been encouraged to become an informer for the United States Central Intelligence Agency. The invitation was declined.

As a result of my South African experience, I became deeply aware of the workings of a highly centralized nationalistic government, its efforts to maintain its policies of racist oppression, and its attempts to enlist the cooperation of foreign nationals.

In South Africa I followed the work of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Civil Rights movement, while at the same time reading the work of Malcolm X, Franz Fanon and others who were voicing a vigorous critique of the integrationist movement, charging it as a subtle attempt to maintain White control and direction of that movement.

The beginning of my ministry to the First Church in Philadelphia (January 1968) coincided with the beginnings of the Black Affairs Council and the Black Empowerment Movement within UUism. It appeared to me that the Black leadership of our movement was providing the denomination with an opportunity to confront the assumptions and to break out of the restrictions imposed by the White-sanctioned and -approved “integrationist” agenda.

In retrospect, I believe there were two reasons for my support of the agenda of the Black UU Caucus (formed in October 1967): my South African experience had made me suspicious of White attempts to address the issues of Black empowerment—efforts that seemed at best condescending and, at worst, a form of White supremacy. In addition my geographic remove from our denomination's direct involvement in the Civil Rights struggle as enacted in Selma, Alabama, had prevented me from developing the emo-

tional commitment to an integrationist model as the most effective way to address racial conditions in this country.

The organization of FULLBAC (i.e., full funding for the Black Affairs Council) at the beginning of 1968 appeared to be the most appropriate vehicle by which I, a White UU, could support this new phase (and I perceived it as a new phase rather than a contradiction of) the Civil Rights movement. What I had not anticipated was the degree to which it would deepen and confirm my commitment to the struggle for an antiracist society. It appeared to me that the Black leadership of our movement was providing the denomination with an opportunity to confront the assumptions and to break out of the restrictions imposed by the White-sanctioned and -approved "integrationist" agenda.

While I was not among the leaders of FULLBAC, I was a full participant in its struggles in support of BAC (including my participation in the "walk-out" during the UUA General Assembly in Boston in 1969). My concern for this period and the issues which it raised led me to deliver four lectures on the topic "The Black Empowerment Controversy and the UUA" under the auspices of the Minns Foundation in 1983. ■

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Roy A. Ockert, Sr.

FULLBAC member

When, in September 1967, I arrived in Los Angeles to serve as Associate Minister of the First Unitarian Church, after having been a student at Starr King School for the Ministry and simultaneously the intern minister at the First Unitarian Church of Berkeley, I soon learned that there was a group there that called their organization BURR—Black Unitarians for Radical Reform. The group had formed in August and included Black Unitarians from several churches in Los Angeles County. Among the members were Jules Ramey, Lou Gothard (who had suggested the name), Sue Williams, Carrie Thomas, Bob Wicker, Althea Alexander—and others whose names I never knew or have forgotten.

I became acquainted with several of the BURR members and, when a notice came from the UUA Boston headquarters that there would be an Emergency Conference on the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion, to be held in New York City on October 6-8, 1967, I suggested to my Black friends that there surely ought to be participation by Black UUs in the conference. I also delivered a sermon on October 1, my first at the Los Angeles church, called “Conflict: Function and Dysfunction,” which was originally intended to be concerned with the Black Rebellion which was resulting in riots in cities across the United States—including in the Watts area of Los Angeles. But instead, my focus became the problem of separation vs. integration and separation vs. segregation in race relations, particularly as the concepts applied in our liberal churches.

After discharge from the Army, I had been a student of economics at the University of California at Berkeley (1946-1952), had been an officer in a local union of the American Federation of Teachers, served as economist for the United Rubber Workers and, before entering Starr King, as a research economist for the AFL-CIO in Washington, D.C. With Dr. Charles Gulick and J. Raymond Wallace, I had published a book, *History and Theories of Workingclass Movements—A Select Bibliography* and I had published a number of articles, mostly in the union press. To quote from the sermon: “Because of my experiences in the union movement and because of my

longtime interest in the history and theories of working class movements everywhere—and everywhen—I think I see some similarities between working class union movements and recent trends in the Black Freedom movement.”

Particularly I had in mind the fact that workers had not been successful in organizing an institution which would represent their unique interests until the American Federation of Labor was formed in 1881—and membership was restricted to working men and women. Prior to that time, “labor” organizations had included, as full members, liberal and socialist middle class businessmen, lawyers, clergymen and others who sympathized with the conditions of workers. It seemed to me that most “Black” organizations suffered from the same handicap. Workers had not been able to formulate their own needs, policies and programs in integrated organizations and Blacks were not able to formulate their own needs, policies and programs in integrated organizations. What was needed in both instances was separation into organizations of people living and sharing the same circumstances—not forced segregation, even as subordinates in “their” organizations. To the Whites, I suggested we form a study group to search for understanding and that we call the group WURR—White Universalists for Radical Readjustment.

I was scheduled to attend a new ministers’ conference in Boston and was able to stop in New York and attend the Emergency Conference. BURR had scrambled and located Black UUs all over the United States, urging them to attend, and the Los Angeles church raised funds to send three BURR members. Most of the Black UUs, led by the three BURR delegates (Jules Ramey, Lou Gothard and Carrie Thomas), formed an exclusive Black Caucus. And the conference became a traumatic event for people who believed passionately in ideal racial integration, but who did not realize that, as of that time, it almost always resulted in tokenism and/or virtual invisibility.

My “Conflict” sermon was distributed among the Black Caucus members, who drew up a program which they demanded be sent to the UUA

Board without change. They proposed that there be a UUA Black Affairs Council with the members chosen jointly by the Black Caucus and the UUA Board. After considerable soul-searching and agonized debate, the Emergency Conference voted to do as the Black Caucus asked.

Sometime later, when Jules and Lou returned from meeting with the UUA Board, they addressed a meeting at the Los Angeles church and the group immediately formed the Supporters of BURR—SOBURR. The UUA Board had rejected the proposal for BAC, and WURR asked me to draft a resolution for adoption by our church, to be sent to all societies in the denomination.

On January 28, 1968, I delivered a sermon I called “Black Is the Color” which supplemented the earlier sermon and detailed the history of the period since the Emergency Conference. In February, 200 Black UUs met in Chicago. They changed the name to Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus—BUUC—and decided to proceed with forming the Black Affairs Council despite the negative action by the UUA Board. I was asked to be a member of BAC—and refused. Hayward Henry came to Los Angeles to persuade me. I told him it seemed to me that BAC should be all Black. He replied that BUUC had decided to have nine members on BAC—six Blacks and three Whites, and they wanted me to be one of the members because of my union experience. I agreed, but said I would serve only one year.

The nine selected by BUUC were attorney Sam Beecher of Terre Haute, Indiana; Dr. James Clark of UC Berkeley; Lou Gothard (who had become associate director of an inter religious foundation in New York); BUUC chairman Hayward Henry of Boston; Chester Lewis of Wichita, Kansas (a leader of the NAACP “Young Turks”); the Reverend Jack Mendelsohn of Arlington Street Church in Boston; nuclear chemist Ben Scott of Boston; educator and community consultant Dick Traylor of Philadelphia; and me—Roy Ockert of First Church-LA. Althea Alexander of the Los Angeles church was elected an alternate.

In early April 1968, a national organization was formed in Philadelphia. It was called “For FULL Recognition and Funding of the Black Affairs Council”—and known as FULLBAC. Leona Light of the Westwood church in Los Angeles, who had been a founder of SOBURR, was a founder and elected co-chair of FULLBAC. In May 1968, the largest-ever gathering at a UUA General Assembly voted 836 to 337 to recognize and fund the UUA Black Affairs Council.

On October 6, 1968, I delivered a “Report on the Black Affairs Council” to the Los Angeles congregation. I served the year as a proud member of BAC and attended all meetings except the last in May 1969, when I was scheduled to perform a wedding ceremony, which was canceled too late for me to attend what I had intended would be my last meeting with BAC.

The two sermons and the pulpit editorial detail what I knew of the origins of the Unitarian Universalist Black Empowerment movement in Los Angeles in 1967 and 1968. At a BAC meeting, I was told that excerpts of the two sermons were used in a *New York Times* advertisement, but I have never seen it. I plan to edit the three items, correcting typos but not changing the text, and to add a foreword and an afterword. Six former BUUC members and six former FULLBAC members met at Starr King on January 17-20, 2001, and expressed a profound desire for the compilation and distribution of the history of that time and those organizations. We also expressed the hope that as many Black and White perspectives as possible be made available. The Black effort to tell the story from the African-American perspective has barely begun. My sermons and report relate some of the earliest history and perhaps will assist others to tell the story from their perspectives. I would especially like to see a version written by an early member of BURR. ■

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Joe Samples

BUUC member

When my children were babies, I made a very conscious decision, and that decision was that during the Black Power movement, I figured it would become a very important part of our history, and I did not want my children to ask me when they got old, What was I doing during this period? So I organized the Detroit Black Caucus of Unitarian Universalism. One of the first things I recognized was that I began to understand that I was no longer a victim of racism, that Whites were the victims of their own racism. And as I realized this, I made a conscious decision that I was not going to help Whites to deal with their racism. That if indeed they wanted to talk to me about racism, they had to come to me first and say, "I am a racist and I'm trying to deal with it." And since I made that decision, there have been many Whites who have come to me and said, "Joe, I'm a racist. What can I do about this?" And I simply just tell them, "Hey, you got to live with it. This is something that was created by your race, and you've got to understand it, and once you understand it, then you can make it on your own."

I then got involved in the Unitarian Black Caucus and one of the first things I realized was that this was the first time that Blacks could get together and talk about their destiny without the influence of White folks. But one of the things that had happened prior to the Black Power movement was the fact that any time Blacks wanted to deal with racism or separatism, that they had to include Whites, and Whites had to be involved in determining their destiny. I found this a very provocative step in terms of Blacks getting together and saying, "Hey, we can decide our own destiny."

During that period, I was fairly active as a militant. I was chairperson of the Michigan community organization. We had funded Black militant groups with church money, and also I traveled about the country urging Black folks to get together to determine their own destiny. I have now come to a point in my life where I firmly believe the real victims in our society really are poor Whites. I believe this because I think the system is really totally fighting against them. If you look at the vote that went down in Florida, it was not only a disparagement against Blacks, but it's also a

disparagement against poor Whites. One of the things I firmly believe is that we have not seen a revolution in this country until poor Whites discover what the system is doing against them.

There is one other thing I would like to impart, and that is this whole question of diversity. I think that diversity is a code word. Diversity means one thing to Latin Americans, it means another thing to Arabs, it means something else to Blacks, and I firmly believe that until we as Unitarian Universalists really define what the hell it is we mean about diversity and what it is we really want to happen—. Let me say this. I believe that once Unitarian Universalists develop some kind of strategy to attract poor White folks, then I will say that you really believe in true diversity. I don't think that diversity—for me, diversity does not mean involving Asians, Latin Americans, Black folks and so forth and so on. Diversity to me means that you are including everybody. Are you trying to relate to everybody? And I just don't see this right now in the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Thank you. ■

Bette H. Sikes

FULLBAC member

During the 1960s my husband George and I were active members of the First Unitarian Church of Chicago. George went with other UUs to Selma for the protests and the March to Montgomery. During the summer of 1966, when Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Chicago, we participated in weekly demonstrations and continued working with the Chicago Freedom movement during the ensuing months. George was chosen by our minister, the Rev. Jack Kent, to be one of two lay representatives from our church to the 1967 "Emergency Conference on the Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion." The other person, Lee Reed, an African American, had long been involved in racial justice work.

George and Lee brought back from the conference their stories: the story of the necessity for Black people to separate for a time to focus on their own identity and on what the Black community needed to be doing, and the story that White Americans must not impede that separation, for to do so would again assert White control over non-Whites. Lee Reed immediately set about building a Chicago area Black UU Caucus, and George set about helping White people understand the necessity of the Black Empowerment movement.

I was a partner in this latter work. We carried the news to our own congregation and to Chicago area UU churches through area Council gatherings. We also became active in the continental FULLBAC group that was working to support the efforts of the Black UU Caucus to establish, with funding from the UUA, the Black Affairs Council, which would focus on Black economic development and self-determination. I attended a FULLBAC conference in Philadelphia in 1968 and another in Brooklyn a little later.

Our FULLBAC group worked with Chicago area UUs on explaining the need for Black empowerment and on developing an antiracist agenda for White people. In fact, we had a strong Chicago area FULLBAC group that was well represented at the 1969 UUA General Assembly in Boston. We participated in the walkout at the General Assembly and the several days of meeting with those of like persuasion at the Arlington Street Church. After that General Assembly, our group became the Chicago Area Fellowship for

Renewal (CAFFR), a group that provided antiracist and anti-repression programs at churches throughout the Central Midwest District. We also ran a workshop at the Lake Geneva Summer Assembly (called "The Whole Ball of Wax") from 1971 to 1974. In April 1971 CAFFR held a continental conference in Chicago, which was attended by people from around the continent.

Those days were quite important for me. I began to see African Americans in a new light. There were many opportunities for discussion of and confrontation over the issues of the day and much to be learned about oneself and the world. I know that some still feel that all that happened in our movement in those days was destructive. In our church that was not true. Those of us who struggled through the issues have been bound together in what is still today a rich Beloved Community. ■

AFTERTHOUGHTS

David B. Parke

FULLBAC member

My greatest moment as a Unitarian Universalist—the two denominations had consolidated to form the Unitarian Universalist Association in the early sixties—occurred during my Philadelphia ministry when, at the Cleveland General Assembly in 1968, the UUA, after months of soul searching, partisan maneuvering, and denomination-wide debate, voted a million dollars for the Black Affairs Council, an independent, biracial program agency created the year before by the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus to implement the association's commitment to racial justice.

In response to America's racial crisis, marked by the burning of downtown Los Angeles, Detroit, Newark, and other cities, Black Unitarian Universalists met in caucus, as Blacks, for the first time in history. At the time, and since, members of the Black Caucus gave voice to their feelings of awe, gratitude, and liberation that now, at last, after decades and centuries of slavery, segregation, and structural inequality, they were meeting face-to-face as Black sisters and brothers, alone together. Some White religious liberals, committed to a policy of integration, cried foul. You can't meet as a Black Caucus, they said of the Black Unitarian Universalists, several of them from Philadelphia-area churches, because our denomination is inclusive, and you can't hold a meeting from which I as a White Unitarian Universalist am excluded.

Well, the Black Caucus kept on meeting. Realizing that the Black Caucus could not carry the day alone, some of us organized FULLBAC, a White support group committed to full funding of the Black Affairs Council. The proposal to fund the Black Affairs Council was adopted by a 72 per cent majority at the Cleveland General Assembly.

I have never felt prouder of my church than I did on May the 26th in 1968 when our overwhelmingly White denomination said Yes to its militant Black minority. Yes, we said, we embrace you as Unitarian Universalists. Yes, we stand with you in your pain and rage as Black Americans. Yes, we accept your vision of a nation and a denomination led out of bondage by those having a direct experience of oppression. Yes, we trust you with the million

dollars. Yes, we know what other programs will suffer, but we are willing to do with less because you have done with less for so long. When, I ask, have Unitarian Universalists, Black and White together, stood so tall? Not in my lifetime. Perhaps not ever. ■

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We thank Julie Kain, who compiled the Timeline with the kind of attention to detail that is made possible only through genuine interest and scholarship in relation to one's subject of inquiry. Julie is a student at Starr King School who plans to enter the parish ministry.

There are several individuals who were leaders of Black Empowerment in the Unitarian Universalist Association who have begun a history project. We have benefitted immeasurably from members of this group in their willingness to have extensive conversations with us.

Thank you to several leaders of Black Empowerment in the UUA who gave generously of their time in conversations with Alicia Forsey and others in order to clarify issues, though they could not be present for the January conference. Special appreciation goes to Mtangulizi Sanyika (formerly Hayward Henry) for being a guest lecturer in the UU History class.

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O that the President would soon speak that electric sentence,—
inspiration to the loyal North, doom to the traitorous aristoc-
racy whose cup of guilt is full. Let him say that it is a war of
mass against class, of America against feudalism, of the school-
master against the slave-master, of workmen against the bar-
ons, of the ballot-box against the Barracoon. This is what the
struggle means. Proclaim it so, and what a light breaks through
our leaden sky! The ocean-wave rolls then with the impetus
and weight of an idea.

THOMAS STARR KING
(awaiting the Emancipation Proclamation)
Thomas Starr King: Patriot and Preacher