

Multicultural Worship at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh

By David Herndon

October 2, 2014

We aspire to offer multicultural worship every Sunday at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh. This document provides some specific suggestions regarding multicultural worship for all those who contribute to our worship celebrations.

I. Definition of Multiculturalism. The Unitarian Universalist Association provides the following definition of multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism means nurturing a religious community where people of all races, ethnicities, and cultures see their cultural identities reflected and affirmed in every aspect of congregational life—worship, fellowship, leadership, governance, religious education, social justice, etc. Multiculturalism means that we create religious homes where encounters between people of different cultural identities intersect with Unitarian Universalism to create a fully inclusive community where, in the words of a vision statement adopted by the Unitarian Universalist Association's (UUA) Leadership Council, "all people are welcomed as blessings and the human family lives whole and reconciled."

Multiculturalism means that one cultural identity does not dominate all other identities; that people are able to participate in their faith community without denying or hiding their cultural identities, that the role of cultural identity is part of pastoral and prophetic ministry; and that leaders have the competency to understand how their multiple identities and socialization influence their values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and interactions with others.

Multiculturalism means:

- *We welcome each other into shared community just as we are;*
- *We welcome the many ways that people define, express, and experience the Holy and respect what is considered sacred in our diverse cultures;*
- *We understand public witness and all social justice work as ministry in partnership with communities to make the world more compassionate, equitable, and just—a place that is safe, nurturing, supportive, and fair for all people;*
- *We support communities and individuals in their search for truth and meaning—and a sense of aliveness—in their quest to make a positive difference in the world;*
- *We offer mutual aid and comfort through life's challenges in ways that meet everyone's cultural, as well as personal, needs;*
- *We recognize that there are many cultural languages (words, symbols, acts) that manifest in worship, fellowship, pastoral care, etc.*

II. Multiculturalism and Social Justice. We aspire to offer multicultural worship every Sunday not only as a way of offering hospitality to church members, friends, and guests from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, but also as a way of expressing and deepening our commitment to social justice. In particular, multicultural worship is a way of expressing and deepening our commitment to racial justice between African-Americans and European-Americans. More generally, from the perspective of expressing and deepening our commitment to social justice, multicultural worship is a way for our congregation to experience not only African-American voices, but also the voices of many other communities which been historically oppressed or marginalized.

III. Many Ways to Create Multicultural Worship. We have many ways to create multicultural worship. Here are some specific suggestions.

A. Inclusion. We can understand the diversity within our congregation as an essential resource for multicultural worship. We can ensure that people from historically marginalized and oppressed communities are active participants in planning worship and also in leading worship as preachers, readers, liturgists, musicians, intern ministers, and so on. Some would say that this inclusive involvement and visibility is even more important than including readings and music representative of different cultures. Thus, we could make formal commitments about consistent inclusion of people from historically marginalized and oppressed communities in planning and leading worship.

B. Music Presentations. Our standard order of service includes four opportunities for music presentations, including the Prelude, the Special Music, the Offering, and the Postlude. Our current understanding is that on any given Sunday, at least one of these four music presentations will come from a community of color or from some other community that has been historically oppressed or marginalized.

1. Sanctuary Choir. The Sanctuary Choir usually sings on second and fourth Sundays, and the Sanctuary Choir usually presents the Special Music and the Offering. Our current understanding is that in any given month, the Sanctuary Choir will present at least one anthem or song from a community of color or from some other community that has been historically oppressed or marginalized.

2. Folk Orchestra. The Folk Orchestra usually performs on third Sundays, and the Folk Orchestra usually presents the Special Music and the Offering. Our current understanding is that over any given span of two months, the Folk Orchestra will present at least one song from a community of color or from some other community that has been historically oppressed or marginalized.

3. Pianist and Organist. The Pianist and Organist usually performs the Prelude and Postlude each Sunday (although sometimes the Pianist and Organist performs the Special Music and the Offering as well). Our current understanding is that having learned what the Sanctuary Choir or the Folk Orchestra will be presenting, the

Pianist and Organist chooses instrumental pieces so as to ensure that on any given Sunday, at least one of the four music presentations will come from a community of color or from some other community that has been historically oppressed or marginalized.

C. Hymns. Our standard order of service includes five opportunities for congregational singing, including the Opening Hymn, the Chalice Lighting Song, the Middle Hymn, the sung response after the prayer, and the Closing Hymn. For the Chalice Lighting Song, our custom is to sing one verse of a hymn. (We do this in place of a spoken chalice lighting.) For the sung response after the prayer, our custom is to sing “Spirit of Life” in both English and Spanish.

One appropriate and effective rule of thumb for creating multicultural worship is to choose at least one hymn each Sunday that comes from a community of color or from some other community that has been historically oppressed or marginalized.

We use hymns not only from Singing the Living Tradition but also from Singing the Journey. Music staff members also have copies of Las Voces del Camino, the more recent Spanish-language hymnbook.

Sometimes we are fortunate to have a more energetic and rhythmic accompaniment for our hymns provided by piano plus bass and drums. When this group accompanies our hymns, it shows consideration toward the musicians to ensure that all of the hymns for that particular Sunday can appropriately be accompanied in this more energetic and rhythmic way. To put this point another way, it would not be considerate toward our volunteer musicians to expect them to spend the entire morning with us but only play on one hymn.

D. Visual Arts. We often place fabric on the pulpit as a multicultural contribution to our worship celebrations. For example, the Art Committee purchased a large piece of colorful Kente cloth several years ago, and we frequently place this cloth on the front of the pulpit. We have more recently acquired a large piece of woven cloth with the colors of the rainbow, and this could also be placed on the pulpit. A worship leader could also use other fabrics with other specific cultural meanings.

Worship leaders could be using visual arts much more extensively in fulfillment of our aspiration to offer multicultural worship.

E. Words. We use words throughout our worship celebrations. We generally use words written by specific people for the Quotation at the top of the printed order of service, the Call to Worship, the Reading(s), and the Benediction. We also use words written by specific people as quotations or illustrations in the Sermon. And sometimes we use words written by specific people during the Message for All Ages.

Words can help make our worship services more multicultural when the worship leader is mindful about the cultural backgrounds of the specific people whose words are used. I am not suggesting that every sermon needs to include one quotation from a man, one quotation from a woman, one quotation from an African-American, one quotation from a European-American, one quotation from a gay or lesbian person, and one quotation from a straight person, in a mechanical pattern. I am saying that every worship celebration offers many opportunities for us to hear the voices of individuals and communities who have often remained unheard, to express the thoughts of individuals and communities whose thoughts have often been suppressed, to include the perspectives of individuals and communities whose perspectives have often been excluded, and to lift up the concerns of individuals and communities whose concerns have often been marginalized. To borrow a phrase from liberation theology, we can engage in a kind of “preferential option for the poor” when we make choices about the specific people whose words we use in our worship services. There is great power in using words that come from beyond the dominant culture of this country.

Making an intentional practice of reading the writings of authors who do not represent the dominant culture of this country is one way of having appropriately expressive quotations and illustrations already in mind when the need arises.

I am not saying that we should never ever use the words of those whose worldview has largely shaped the dominant culture of the United States, that is, straight white Protestant males. I am saying that it is all too easy to use the words of these folks as an automatic or unreflective default. Each worship celebration will, of course, call for its own mix of quotations and readings. But a worship leader who brings a multicultural mindfulness to the process of designing a worship service will be more likely to create worship that is multicultural by intentionally including a chorus of culturally diverse voices.

F. Contextual Notes. Our new order of service format, which appeared for the first time on Sunday, April 20, 2014, includes a blank column running down the left-hand side of each page. This space is available for brief contextual notes that can help explain various elements of the service.

We seek to offer multicultural worship each Sunday at First Unitarian Church, and being able to provide some context for music, readings, hymns, and other elements can provide extra depth and meaning to what is being presented. Sometimes, telling a story related to a reading or a piece of music is a very appropriate way to provide the context for the congregation as they appreciate the element from a multicultural perspective. However, at other times, presenting this context verbally can interrupt the flow of the service. When the contextual comments are presented through brief written notes in the left hand margin, the flow of the service can continue uninterrupted and yet the information is present for all to see.

The practice of using contextual notes in our order of service can help develop a multicultural mindfulness for those who contribute to our worship celebrations at First Unitarian Church. Knowing that we have an opportunity to provide background information through contextual notes can help us be more mindful about our choices. Knowing that we have an opportunity to provide background information through contextual notes can help us avoid unimaginative choices that simply reflect the dominant culture as an automatic default.

The practice of using contextual notes in our order of service can also help us connect our worship celebrations with the social justice initiatives of our congregation. In this way, those who are actively engaged in social justice work can feel a stronger link between their sense of hope and our Unitarian Universalist religious affirmations, and they can feel spiritually supported and renewed in their ongoing efforts.

Here are some specific ways that contextual notes can be used.

1. Contextual notes can point out the names of hymn tunes. For example, the tune for Hymn #95, “There Is More Love Somewhere,” is named after the South African activist Stephen Biko, and the tune for Hymn #116, “I’m on My Way,” was named after the African-American Unitarian Universalist minister Egbert Ethelred Brown.

2. Contextual notes can mention background information about our hymns. For example, Hymn #170, “We Are a Gentle, Angry People” was written in response to the 1978 assassination of Harvey Milk, the openly gay mayor of San Francisco. Between the Lines is a good source of background information about hymns and readings in Singing the Living Tradition. Background information for hymns in Singing the Journey can be found on the website of the Unitarian Universalist Association at this address:

<http://www.uua.org/worship/music/hymnals/journey/songinformation/93778.shtml>

3. Contextual notes can provide background information about composers of music presented for the Prelude, Special Music, Offering, and Postlude.

4. Contextual notes can provide background information about customary practices in our order of service. For example, we can explain why we sing “Spirit of Life” in both English and Spanish.

5. Contextual notes can provide background information about the people who have written worship elements such as the Call to Worship and the Benediction.

6. Contextual notes can provide background information about the sources and authors of our readings.

7. Contextual notes can help explain uniquely Unitarian Universalist ceremonies.

For example, we can point out that Flower Communion was celebrated for the first time at the Unitarian Church of Prague, Czechoslovakia, on June 4, 1923, by Rev. Norbert Capek.

8. Contextual notes can help explain how and why we celebrate or observe holidays and other special occasions throughout the year.

9. Contextual notes can commemorate important historical dates, both for Unitarian Universalist history and world history. For example, a worship service that happens to fall on October 27 might note that the Unitarian reformer Michael Servetus was executed on October 27, 1553, or a worship service that happens to fall on March 18 might note that the Edict of Tolerance was signed on March 18, 1568, at the urging of the Transylvanian Unitarian minister Francis David.

10. Contextual notes can refer back to events in the recent or distant past of our own congregation. For example, if the choir sings a movement from Mozart's "Coronation Mass," a marginal note might point out that the choir sang the entire work at our 2006 MozartFest.

IV. Avoiding Cultural Misappropriation. The following set of questions, adapted from the work of Beth Zemsky, may help us avoid using "borrowed" worship elements inappropriately. Here, the term "worship element" could refer to a text, a song, a story, a ritual, a custom, a ceremony, a style of presentation, or some other practice.

- *Why do you want to use this worship element? What do you want our congregation to learn, appreciate, or honor by using this element?*
- *How does this worship element reflect or amplify a core Unitarian Universalist value or principle?*
- *What is the meaning of this worship element in its original cultural context?*
- *What is the current context of institutional or systemic power differences between our congregation and the community in which this worship element is indigenous? What is the history of these power differences?*
- *How might we present this worship element in a way that amplifies our Unitarian Universalist theology and respects the worship element's original cultural context? How does this worship element reflect or amplify our commitment to social justice?*
- *How might we present this worship element with our congregation in a way in which they can share in the process of creating meaning and context?*

V. Embodying Multicultural Worship as an Inward Commitment, Not an External Formula or Checklist.

The suggestions presented in this document provide some practical guidance, and even specific guidelines, for offering multicultural worship at First Unitarian Church. But the key to success is to remain mindful that offering multicultural worship is an expression of our Unitarian Universalist values, not merely a mechanical exercise.