

First Universalist Church—Minneapolis, MN
Racial justice Mapping Session: May 2014
Executive Summary

Background

In May, 2014, a group of approximately 35 First Universalist congregants and leaders gathered to conduct a “Mapping Racism” exercise, facilitated by Dr. Heather Hackman. All of these participants had attended either the first or the second twenty four hour training with Dr. Heather Hackman. With curiosity and compassion, using what we’d learned in these 24 hours trainings, the purpose of this exercise was, "to ‘map’ out racism and whiteness at First Universalist and look at the places that seem to demand the most attention with respect to working toward racial justice.”

Dr. Hackman invited participants to “conduct an honest assessment of long-standing patterns of whiteness that may have gone unseen in the church up to this point,” and undertake an effort to address them. In doing this mapping exercise, we would then move toward identifying ways in which different functions and processes of the church might change as we collectively lived into our vision of being a church fully committed to racial justice.

The areas of focus for the mapping exercise included *Staff, Governance, Programming, Culture/Identity, Building, Worship, Faith in Action, Religious Education, History, Membership, and Communication.*

The mapping participants were also asked to engage with the following questions:

- 1) Where do you see the white racial narrative in this area of the church? (Staff, governance, programming, worship, etc.)
- 2) What are possible action steps, or important questions to consider in each focus area?

This document serves as an executive summary of the process, identifying common themes in the discussion and highlighting areas of focus. The Racial justice Leadership Team, as a strategic body, has identified its focus areas for this year and next year based upon this document. The Racial justice Leadership Team will invite other church leaders to focus on the other recommendation actions that emerged from the “mapping session.”

Note: Many steps have already been taken since the “Mapping Session” gathering took place last May. The themes and notes below reflect the material generated from last May; they do not reflect the changes that have been initiated since then.

Common Themes

There were several common threads of the “white racial narrative” that were identified in every aspect of the church. They included:

Racial Make Up and Representation—Whether considering the staff, ministerial leadership, church governance/Board of Trustees, music and worship arts, religious education, the pledge team, pastoral care, faith in action work, or the congregation in general, the mapping participants consistently identified that these areas of the church were made up predominantly of people who appear to be racialized as “white.” This was noted without judgment; it’s simply what is.

There was a consensus that First Universalist should invite members of color to participate in these ministry areas.

The mapping participants were curious about current membership practices and expectations in the church and wondered if they represented a “white racial narrative,” thus making the church less appealing to people of color.

The mapping participants also agreed that the current policies and practices related to hiring and interviewing should be reviewed so that they intentionally include a racial justice lens.

Church Organization/Structure—With respect to staff, ministers, governance, and decision-making, mapping participants noted that First Universalist seems to have a traditional white model of operating. (The idea that democratic and “civilized” society is regulated by logic, rules, etc., i.e., Robert’s Rules.)

The group noted certain factors that impeded overcoming the current structure, including the fact that top staff leadership did not include any people of color.

Policies and Procedures—Throughout First Universalist church, including the processes for meetings, fundraising, communication, goal setting, budgeting, recruitment, program selection, and partnering outside the church on major initiatives, it appears that (until recently) the white racial narrative has been privileged.

There was also curiosity as to how the Board of Trustees uses a “racial justice” lens in its work.

Additionally, participants wonder if the current evaluation of our mission and visionary goals included a racial justice lens?

Church Culture/Identity and Communications—Whether through direct communication functions in the church (website, newsletter, public announcements, signage, etc.) or through the communication of leaders and ministers from the pulpit and at formal gatherings/meetings, the way that First Universalist communicates and embodies its values was a significant source of much reflection among mapping participants.

The results of the mapping session related to communication can be divided into three common themes: inward facing communication, outward facing communication,

and the communication of our culture and identity, throughout history and currently ongoing.

Communication:

Inward: The Liberal, bulletin boards, the visual representations inside the building, such as art, and the communication implicit in the music, within programs in the church-, as well as explicitly stated in the sermons, new member orientation, and announcements---were all mentioned as areas where the church could grow in its racial justice commitment and identity.

The communication expressed through the experience of the social hall was highlighted—participants noted the high level of white people, and the art as often being perceived as “white, liberal, progressive.” Some participants noted that they had experienced micro aggressions in some coffee hour conversation.

The mapping participants wondered if First Universalist was publicizing or communicating racial justice activities or accomplishments as well as they could. Participants also wondered if the various sources of our communication could be reviewed and enhanced to reflect our racial justice values. Participants felt that the racial justice work should have greater prominence in the social hall.

A number of observations and recommendations were made regarding the worship life of our church, including suggestions that the content, structure, sources used in the sermons, music selections, and worship associate stories, all reflected a racial justice lens.

The ***outward facing*** communication, such as the building exterior, its location in the neighborhood, the website, and any public communication associated with our activities and programs, such as Faith in Action were highlighted as areas to deepen our racial justice focus.

Third: Communication of Culture and Identity.

The communication of our “culture” that stems from the history of the Unitarian Universalist faith tradition in this country in which there have been tensions around race, and unexamined social justice values that seem potentially paternalistic and assimilationist.

Participants also noticed that the founders of the church were in many cases the “founders of Minneapolis,” seen as “leaders” and “helpers,” in the community.

Education

A prominent theme during the mapping session focused on education. There was deep curiosity about the religious education content and how the curriculum and content spoke to children and youth of color. Additionally, there was curiosity about how the program might support parents of color, as well as include UU curriculum to teach about race, racism, and whiteness.

There was also a deep desire to have the “race, racism, and whiteness education” be spread across all areas of the church, including Board of Trustees, staff, Religious Education, adult programming, committee leadership, music, worship associates, membership, fundraising, and Faith in Action.

Based on these themes and feedback from the mapping session, the racial justice Leadership Team is focusing on the following areas this year and next:

1. Create a Worship Audit team. Examine sermons, music, readings, themes, and offering plate choices and the racial justice connection in all of these. (This is an immediate goal, and a team will be created to work closely with Rev. Justin Schroeder, Rev. Ruth MacKenzie, and others.)
2. Create a Communication/Culture/Identity Audit team. This team will conduct an audit of communication messages in all aspects of the church, worship, RE, public communication, the building, visual communication, etc. through a racial justice lens, and will make suggestions on how to make our Racial justice work be more prominent in Social Hall. (This is an immediate goal and a team will be created to work closely with Rev. Justin Schroeder, Heidi Johnson (Communication Manager), and others).
3. Create a team whose focus will be on connecting with church members who have a passion for racial justice, and inviting them into relationship and leadership in this important ministry.

It is our hope that these teams will be assembled and begin their work in early 2015.

Recommended Actions (for ministry teams, working with staff liaisons):

1. Create a racial justice “litmus test” for all our Faith in Action work, i.e. a set of questions we will ask about all our efforts to ensure they happen with a racial justice lens. (Note: Rev. Jen Crow has just begun work with a twenty hour a week intern who will be helping to do this.)
2. Review Religious Education materials to make them more accurate and relevant. Examine what leadership is needed in the RE program so that the curriculum contains race relevant content and impacts early racial narrative development. Consider potential racial justice training of our RE volunteers.
3. Focus on church Policies/Governance. Update strategic plan, budget, hiring goals, recruitment for the board, and all areas of leadership and governing policies with a racial justice lens. (Ongoing work for Board of Trustees, beginning this year and next.)
4. Programming: Begin to construct all programming with a racial justice lens. (Immediate goal, and ongoing.)

