

We are Unitarian Universalist. Both of these names refer to theologies that we don't often talk about. I do think it is incumbent upon us to know what these theologies are and why they are important. I'm going to talk about Universalism today. We'll look at it through the eyes of a young seeker, an evangelical pastor of a mega-church and a UU minister that has given his life to Universalism.

First I'll tell you a story of my own. I was Interim Minister to a church about half this size in Greenville, NC in 2006. I was working in my office there alone in the building one afternoon when a very tall broad shouldered young white man came to the door. He was wearing a suit and carrying a Bible. I was expecting that he'd be a Mormon or Jehovah's Witness coming to proselytize. He was very polite and asked if he could speak to me. I invited him in to my very tiny office and where we sat almost knee to knee while he told me his story. He was a member of an evangelical church and has always been very devoted to his faith. Then recently he began reading the Bible on his own.

He quoted some passages from the New Testament and said, "I can't see where Jesus believed in judging anyone or excluding anyone. To me Jesus' message is relevant to everyone even non-Christians. I can't continue in a faith that rejects most people in the world. I don't think that's Christianity." This was one of those very rare moments in life when one is privileged to witness a beautiful transformation in another person. I invited him to come to our services. I would have so loved to stay in touch with him and continue to get to know him through his journey, but I never heard from him again. I wonder what it would have been like for him to come to our church.

Sometime probably in 2004 I saw a documentary about Carlton Pearson the pastor of the Higher Dimension African American Pentecostal church; the largest mega-church in Tulsa, OK. Rev. Pearson was a charismatic preacher in true Pentecostal tradition. His church at its peak had 6,000 members. He was raised in the tradition of hellfire and brimstone, hated the sin of homosexuality, heretics of all kinds, and the separation of church and state. He graduated from Oral Roberts University where he had a full scholarship and was named by Roberts as his "black son." He was close to Jerry Falwell, and Pat Robertson as well. He was a spokesperson for George W. Bush in his campaign for faith based initiatives; all in all, not a particularly good candidate to become a Unitarian Universalist.

You might be surprised to know that we have a mega-church in our movement and that it is also located in Tulsa, OK. It is the All Souls Unitarian Church with minister Rev. Marlan Lavanhar. At the time Pearson was at the peak of his career, they had about 1,400 members.

One fine day in 1996, Carlton Pearson went through something similar to the young man who visited me. For him, it came in the form of a conversation with God. The article says, “Watching a news report one night in the spring of 1996, he was getting worked up about the genocide in Rwanda. His assumption was that the victims were bound for hell, persecuted yet unsaved. Feeling angry at God, and guilty that he himself wasn’t doing anything about it, he recalls, he fell into a sort of reproachful prayer: ‘God, I don’t know how you can sit on your throne there in heaven and let those poor people drop to the ground hungry, heartbroken, and lost, and just randomly suck them into hell.’

He heard God answer, ‘We’re not sucking those dear people into hell. Can’t you see they’re already there—in the hell you have created for them and continue to create for yourselves and others all over the planet? We redeemed and reconciled all of humanity at Calvary.’

Everything Pearson thought he knew was true started unraveling, as he began to realize: The whole world is already saved, whether they know it or not—not just professed Christians in good standing, but Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, atheists, gay people. There is no hell after you die. And he didn’t have the good sense to keep it to himself.”

So, Pearson began preaching Universalism at his church although he called it the Gospel of Inclusion. Not much happened surprisingly, until 2001 when Pearson decided to run for Mayor in Tulsa on the platform of inclusion, he called “One Tulsa.” That’s when he was branded a heretic and all but kicked out of town. Pearson writes, “I discovered that what I had thought was a close, genuine family of brothers and sisters in Christ was really a power-mad cabal that would not tolerate any deviation from the intellectually, spiritually bankrupt mantra that has brought them so much money and power.”

This same year Carlton met Marlan Lavanhar on a local TV show debating the federal funding of faith-based initiatives. Marlan knew Carlton’s church because

some of the children at All Souls visited the mega-church for their “Neighboring Faiths” RE class. Carlton knew about All Souls because it was the church where Oral Roberts’ gay son, Ron, went after Oral failed to “heal” him.

Lavanhar called Pearson up and invited him to lunch when he heard how he was being vilified for his Universalist beliefs. Pearson found Marlan to be someone who really understood what he was going through. They began to meet for lunch monthly and Marlan invited him to preach at All Souls. As their friendship evolved, he offered the second service at All Souls during the summer since he no longer had a church to meet in. Half the people that showed up to the service were UU’s. By the Fall, they decided to offer the 11:00 service to them indefinitely. Pearson responded that he didn’t want to do that. He felt that All Souls had become their spiritual home and so he dissolved his church and they began attending All Souls as members. In response, Marlan instituted the praise band permanently at the 11:00 service. Two hundred African American formerly Pentecostal and now Universalist Christians joined All Souls a predominantly white church.

Ok, so now, let’s stop and imagine this. What would it be like if all of a sudden 25 African American Universalist Christians joined this church? That would be proportionately what it would be here. What would it mean and how would we respond? What kind of changes would we accept? What would be our issues? Racism? Classism? Religious intolerance? How would you respond if we had a praise band service in addition to our regular service and what if it drew more people in that loved music with a beat and call and response type sermons as it’s done at All Souls? It’s worthwhile thinking about this. Our movement is seriously interested in creating multi-racial, multi-cultural congregations. As a body more UU’s have wanted this than any other change. How do you all feel about this?

Diversity is a challenge. Whether it is economic status, skin color, religious belief or foods at a potluck we will be confronted with behavior, ideas and interests different from our own. How open are we to this? I found the article quite challenging and exciting. What an amazing opportunity to grow spiritually! By that I don’t mean that we should all embrace each other’s beliefs, but rather they have put themselves in a situation where they are forced to walk the walk or leave. The walk I’m talking about is being a truly welcoming congregation living the famous Francis David creed that “we need not think alike to love alike.”

What All Souls has done is remarkable. I don't know of other examples of this in our movement. There are some racially integrated churches in large cities, but very few. Not many have had this chance.

All of this begs the question in my mind of whether we exclude others because we are set in our ways. It would take some kind of seriously intentional effort to get 25 people to come of any race at all much less people of color. What made it possible for All Souls to win the hearts of a large group of former Pentecostals was somewhat out of their control, yes, but the way they extended the hand of friendship to a fellow seeker was a big part of it. Marlan Lavanhar made it possible, but the members of his church opened the door to what followed. They believed, except for the handful that left, that having these African American, charismatic Christian members among them was more than worthwhile, it was *necessary* to becoming fully Unitarian Universalist.

Marlan Lavanhar says, "If we don't make this kind of thing work, we're in jeopardy of becoming a small, parochial church that appeals to just a tiny slice of the NPR audience. It's not just our message that's the problem. That's strong and relevant. If we go ten to twenty years and have not diversified in any significant way, it's going to seem ridiculous to say all these things we sing and speak about—love, diversity, a unified world, being open-minded, open-hearted. This is about becoming who we say we are. If we do, we will become transformed by that process."

Forrest Church was minister at a different All-Souls UU church in New York City. He served there for 30 years. He developed a terminal esophageal cancer and had just a few years to get ready for the end of his life. He decided to put down as clear a description of his Universalist beliefs as he could. The result is this book, "The Cathedral of the World". I wish we could just read this book together cover to cover. It is a very healing experience for the painful times we are living in. Universalism is about being open-minded, open-hearted and willing to help others

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So this gives you some idea of magnitude and beauty of Universalism a religious perspective that is not owned by any one faith but is available to all. It is the foundation of our first principle to respect the worth and dignity of all people.

There is so much to learn from the experiences that have led people away from dogmatic, judgmental beliefs of fundamentalism and led them to see that everyone is given the same light.