

Book Review: Mark D. Morrison Reed, *Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism*.

Even as a small child, Mark Morrison Reed was bothered that there were so few people in the Unitarian church he and his parents attended who looked like him. He felt at home and warmly loved in the church school, the Chicago Children's Choir, and later the Youth Group. But there were very few people in families like his. This question has been a theme through Mark's life and has directed the work he has done as a historian of Unitarian Universalism.

Revisiting the Empowerment Controversy: Black Power and Unitarian Universalism is the fourth book Mark has written on the history of African American participation in the Unitarian Universalist community, and it deals with the explosive crisis in our denomination in the late 1960s and early 70s.

A number of Unitarians, particularly a new generation of young ministers, had become committed to the civil rights movement through their participation in the march in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and were working in their communities with civil rights organizations. Some congregations, mostly in urban areas, were beginning to develop racially integrated congregations, although the numbers were small. The membership in most congregations, however, particularly in suburban locations and in New England (and Canada), was totally white. Like the society around them, they displayed a full range of attitudes to racial integration, from very open and accepting to uncomfortable, and even racist.

These were turbulent times. The civil rights movement was experiencing a split in leadership between Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael, with sharply different approaches to bringing about social change. Carmichael's Black Power movement was shocking and threatening to many white liberals and liberating and exhilarating to many African Americans.

Within the Unitarian Universalist community, a similar split took place. Some people, black and white, felt that to separate, to divide into black and white groups was contrary to UU principles of equality and dignity. Others (also both black and white) urged UUA support of

organisations developed and controlled by blacks and encouraged black UUs to carry out their own program of action and service with the financial support of the UUA.

In Unitarian fashion, people began to organize into groups to achieve their ends: A plethora of groups with differing aims and objectives sprang up: Black Unitarians for Radical Reform (BURR), Black Affairs Council (BAC), Black UU Caucus (BUUC) Black and White Action (BAWA), Full Recognition and Funding of Black Affairs Council (FULLBAC), Black Affairs Council Investment Corporation (BIC). It makes for some complicated reading to keep these groups straight!

Mark's methodology involves collecting as much fact and response as possible. He has interviewed or corresponded with everyone who had participated and was still alive and willing to talk to him. (There were still people for whom the memory of these events was too painful to remember.) He's read sermons, letters, reports, the minutes of meetings. He's drawn all this material together to create a compelling picture.

In UUA governance, the General Assembly is the place at which the membership— delegates from individual congregations and ministers-- debate the issues brought to the organization. The two key General Assemblies during this crisis were in Cleveland in 1968 and Boston in 1969. Mark's descriptions of these meetings read almost like dramas, drawing on the memories and experience of the participants. It's impossible to summarize those events in a review; they were complicated and often painful.

They involved passionate debate, anger, misunderstanding. The various groups campaigned for funding for projects and activities to enhance their views of what was needed. And at the Boston GA, first the Black Caucus, and then about 300 other delegates, walked out of the meeting in protest. It is this event—the Walkout—that many remember as the point when they feared for the future of our community

Passions ran high. People who had been friends and worked together for years were unable to deal with these issues. Colleagues were estranged. Competition for funding was intense, and most of the people lobbying had little idea of what the financial situation of the UUA really was. The pain and anger people carried away from that meeting to years to abate, and for some people, have never been satisfactorily resolved.

For the Canadian delegates to the meetings, the issues and the passion did not seem relevant to their major concerns. The experience raised questions for them about what their place was in this primarily American association.

The UUA was not prepared to meet this divisive challenge. The merger between the Unitarian and Universalist national bodies had only been in place a few years. While theologically generally on the same page, they were institutionally and behaviourally two quite different cultures. Both of them were led almost exclusively by white men. The Unitarians, in particular, were strongly individualistic and their governance was highly intellectual and democratic, rather than consensual. The leadership in the groups advocating radical change was equally patriarchal and confrontational.

Mark writes, "The conflict that embroiled the UUA between 1967 and 1976 marked a collision of worldviews and loyalties that left all sides feeling misunderstood and battered, victimized and betrayed. Everyone stood on principle. Caring deeply, they did what they felt called to do. Each claimed the moral high ground and over the years spun a narrative in which they defined the good cause and suffered for it. Having constructed a sense of integrity out of righteous hubris, the recitation of ancient justifications became the bulwark of their defense. Everyone saw themselves as having defended principles while others betrayed them. Contrition was for the guilty, and they were not."

Mark's approach to this most difficult period in our history is compassionate and thoughtful. His detailed approach has enabled us to hear many different voices and to understand where those voices came from. In his conclusion, he writes, "Broadly within the UUA, there was little question that seeking justice was an imperative and the end was equal rights and opportunity. Broadly it was acknowledged that this would require black empowerment, the affirmation of Blackness, and an end to white racism. The disagreement was over strategy. In this struggle, the church had to hold in balance two responsibilities. Alongside justice-seeking, it was also called to serve as a spiritual and emotional resource for those engaged in that effort and for those who were not, to be not only a moral bellwether but a balm for the wounded and haven for the weary. Holding these in equilibrium, while neither

succumbing to righteous moralism nor sanctioning avoidance, was a challenge the UUA did not meet.”

Mark’s post-retirement ministry has been to educate Unitarian Universalists about a part of our history that we might prefer to forget. But in these difficult times, we have much to learn from our past. This book, and the others that preceded it, are huge contributions to our religious community.

Ellen Campbell