

INTRODUCTORY
GUIDE FOR

BLACK HISTORY MONTH

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N.B.: This guide was put together by a non-Black person largely for other non-Black people trying to engage in this work. It is not the end all be all and it is not perfect, but it is a place to start. As you move through this, remember that the goal is not perfection, and the goal is not guilt, the goal is transformation and growth.

WHAT IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH?

Black History Month is a time to uplift the brilliance and contributions of Black communities, and also honour and call attention to the injustices that have been faced and the systematic oppressions that still persist today. While Black history is woven into the fabric of our world every day, February offers a dedicated space to reflect, celebrate, and deepen our understanding of what that means. It's also a time for action—an opportunity to ask ourselves how we are showing up for racial justice, not just this month, but all year long. For Unitarian Universalists in Canada, this reflection is deeply connected to our faith and values, we can see the importance of this work in every one of our principles. Black History Month isn't just about learning history—it's about building a future rooted in justice, solidarity, and liberation.

The origins of Black History Month go back to Dr. Carter G. Woodson, a historian and educator who believed that history should serve as a tool for empowerment. In 1926, he launched Negro History Week to bring attention to Black achievements that were often ignored by the public at large. Woodson, one of the first Black Americans to earn a PhD from Harvard, founded what is now the Association for the Study of African American Life and History (ASALH) to uplift and preserve Black stories. He chose February for Negro History Week to align with the birthdays of Frederick Douglass and Abraham Lincoln, two figures associated with Black liberation. Over time, communities expanded the celebration into a month-long recognition, and in 1976, the United States officially declared February as Black History Month.

WHAT IS BLACK HISTORY MONTH?

Here in Canada, Black communities were already commemorating Black history through local celebrations, including Emancipation Day on August 1st, marking the abolition of slavery in the British Empire in 1834. But it wasn't until 1995 that Black History Month was officially recognized in Canada, thanks to the work of Dr. Jean Augustine, the first Black woman elected to Parliament. This recognition didn't just mark a moment—it affirmed the long, deep roots of Black history in Canada, from the stories of Africville in Nova Scotia to the legacies of Black communities in Little Burgundy (Montreal), Vancouver's Hogan's Alley, and the Underground Railroad settlements in Ontario. The importance of Black history month cannot be understated, especially since much of Black history in Canada is still considered “hidden”, that is, it has been erased or forgotten.

Black History Month is an invitation—to learn, to listen, and to commit to the work of racial justice beyond just these 28 days. Dr. Woodson's vision was never for Black history to be confined to a single month but for it to be fully embraced as part of our collective story. For Unitarian Universalists, this means looking inward at how we create truly welcoming and equitable spiritual spaces, supporting Black-led initiatives, and challenging anti-Black racism in all its forms. It's about making sure that our commitment to justice isn't performative or seasonal, but something we live and breathe every day. This resource guide includes reflections for non-Black people around how to take action with this work, as well as lots of resources to explore. Please use it, and share it with those around you.



TERMS TO KNOW

Anti-Black Racism: A term coined by Dr. Akua Benjamin (a Canadian!) to describe how racism specifically targets Black people in ways that are distinct from other racialized groups.

Tokenism: Inviting a Black speaker, artist, or leader for optics without real investment. Asking Black people to educate the group without compensating them. Using Black representation without addressing deeper racial inequities.

Intentional Inclusion: Building relationships, redistributing power, engaging in continuous learning, and committing to reparations.

Appropriation: Taking elements of Black culture (language, fashion, music) without crediting or supporting Black creators.

Appreciation: Learning from Black communities, giving credit, and supporting Black-led initiatives

Reparations: Financial compensation to address systematic injustice.

TERMS TO KNOW

Microaggressions: Subtle, everyday acts of racism.

Examples:

- “Where are you really from?”
- Assuming a Black person is new to UU spaces.
- “You’re so articulate!” (as if it’s surprising).
- Can I touch your hair?

White Fragility: When white discomfort leads to defensiveness instead of growth.

White Saviourism: Centering yourself as the “hero” instead of supporting Black-led efforts

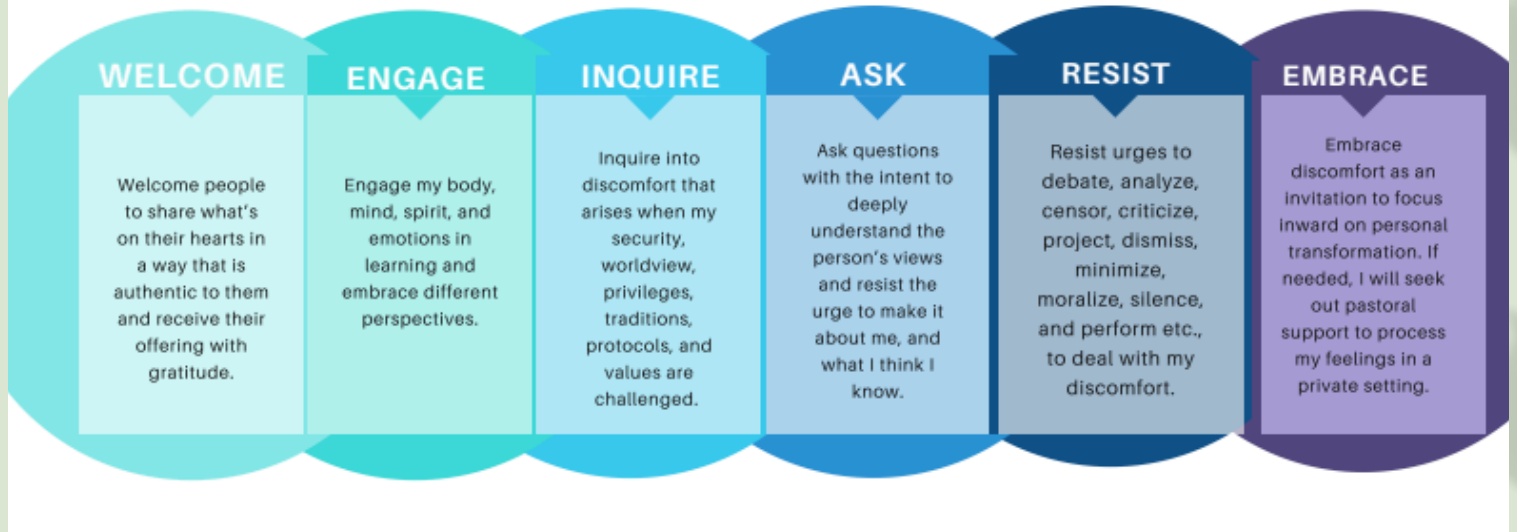
White Superiority: Holding “whiteness” as the standard that everything else is measured against.

Colourism: Prejudice and discrimination against people with darker toned skin, even by people who may be part of the same ethnic group.

Abolition Movement: A movement to eradicate slavery in all its manifestations

Responsibility Covenant

My UU Principles call me to be accountable in relationship.
I will...



Curious about the responsibility covenant? Learn more about it here!



REFLECTION QUESTIONS CENTRED AROUND OUR UU PRINCIPLES

First Principle: The inherent worth and dignity of every person.

- How does systemic anti-Black racism challenge this principle?
- When have I prioritized my comfort over affirming Black dignity?
- When have I dismissed someone's worth based on assumptions about the colour of their skin?

Second Principle: Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations

- What inequities exist in my congregation regarding race?
- How do I respond when I witness racial injustice? Do I stay silent, deflect, or take action?
- How can I better embody a compassionate response to injustice when I am not the centre of a conversation?

Third Principle: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth

- Have I truly accepted that I have racial biases to unlearn?
- How can I use my spiritual practices to stay grounded in this work?

Fourth Principle: a free and responsible search for truth and meaning

- What truths about Black history and Black UU experiences have I ignored or been unaware of?
- Where do I seek information? Do I expect Black people to educate me, or do I seek out books, lectures, and resources?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS CENTRED AROUND OUR UU PRINCIPLES

Fifth Principle: The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

- How can I take anti-Black racism into consideration when I make decisions? When my congregation makes decisions?
- What policies can I advocate for to support Black communities?

Sixth Principle: The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

- How can I move beyond just thinking about justice and into real action?
- What does Black liberation mean for the liberation of all people?

Seventh Principle: Respect for the interdependent web of all existence.

- How is anti-Black racism connected to environmental justice and economic justice?
- What would a world without anti-Blackness look like?

Eighth Principle: Individual and communal action that accountably dismantles racism and systemic barriers to full inclusion in ourselves and our institutions

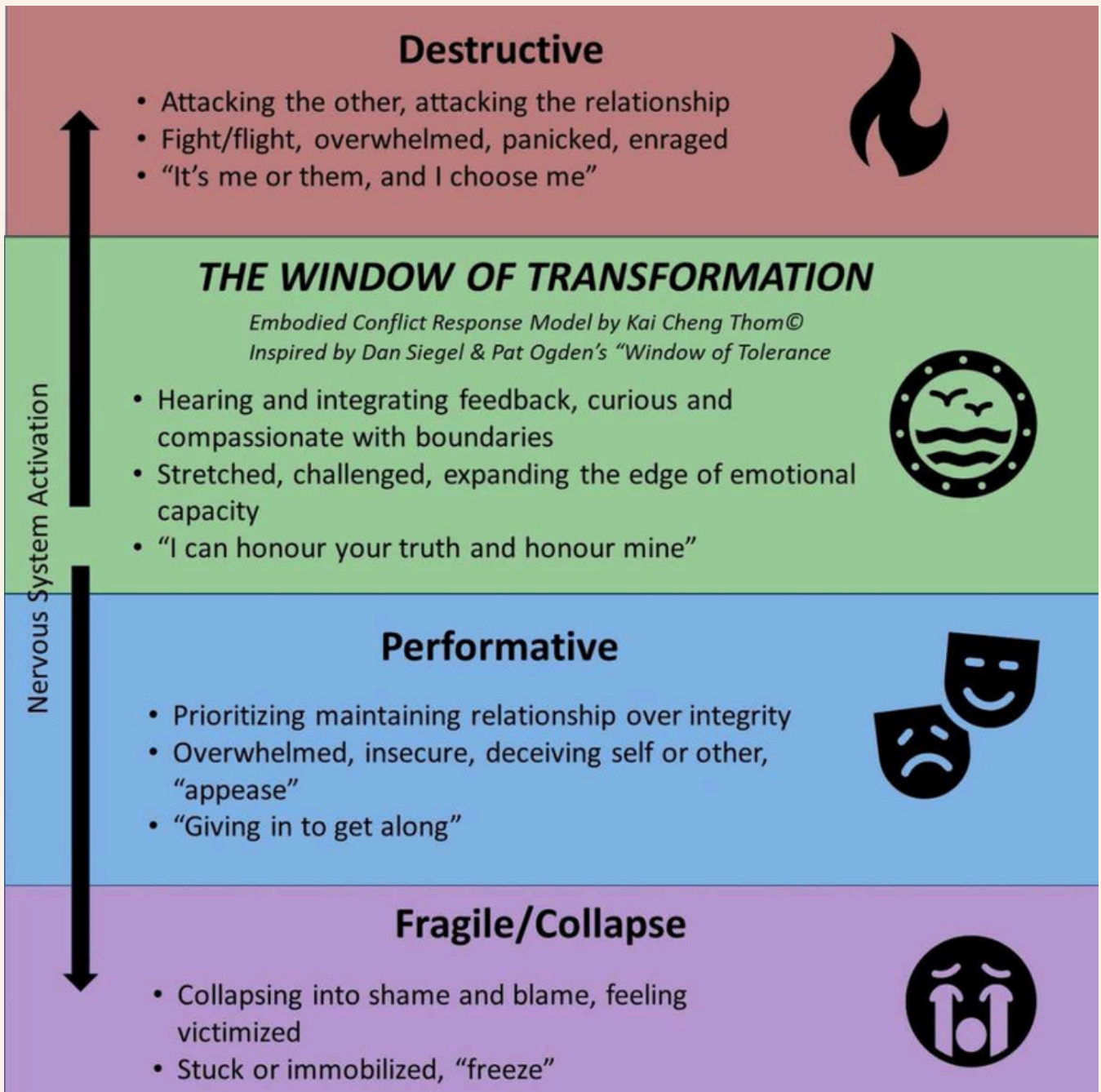
- What is my part in dismantling white supremacy?
- How can my congregation build long-term accountability structures?

HOW DOES RACISM SHOW UP IN UU SPACES?

If the questions above gave you pause, here are some examples of what racism, and especially anti-Black racism can look like in UU spaces. These have been taken from the work that the Dismantling Racism Study Group did as well as the experiences and reflections that came from the conversations that were had while the CUC staff worked with congregations on the 8th principle.

- A White UU asked for a discounted rate for an anti-racism event because they weren't sure the presenter would have anything new to teach them about racism since they had been doing a lot of their own self-education. The presenter was a Black woman.
- After facilitating a workshop, a White congregant approached the Black presenter with a surprised look on her face to enthusiastically compliment him about how articulate he was.
- A Black woman visited a congregation with a White friend and was told by a group of White ladies that “she doesn’t belong here” when she tried to enter the church kitchen. She never returned to the church.

The unfortunate reality is that racism exists and permeates through all areas of life. We are not a “safe space” because we are Unitarian Universalist and we must accept that in order to counter it. [Clicking this link will take you to more examples of racialized harm within UU spaces that are not unique and that we can hopefully learn from.](#)



Made by Kai Cheng Thom
 Inspired by Dan Siegel and Pat Ogden’s Window of Tolerance

ADDRESSING DISCOMFORT AND DEFENSIVENESS

WHY DOES DISCOMFORT HAPPEN?

Unlearning racist conditioning can be painful because it calls us to question what we know about ourselves and the world around us. Racism influences all sorts of things that are both personal and social. The goal here is not to feel guilty, but to allow ourselves to transform through our unlearning and relearning. Discomfort is not a lack of safety, but it takes courage to move through our defenses and be willing to learn something from a different perspective.

We have been conditioned to value people based on their productivity and where they fit into the hierarchy of White supremacy culture. While our society has been set up this way and we have inherited these conditions, it now becomes our responsibility to undo these things. We must recognize that our discomfort does not make us unsafe, instead it invites us to consider the safety and capacity for joy of those that colonialism and racism deems less than.

When we engage in this work of decolonizing our minds to confront racist teachings, we are giving ourselves the gift of expansion. Expanding our notions of joy, pleasure, beauty, and love....our discomfort is a sign of limitations of rigidity, but if we can move past that discomfort we open ourselves up to so much more.

CREATIVE REFLECTION PROMPTS

Journaling Prompts:

- What does my discomfort teach me?
- What have I gained from anti-Black systems?
- Where can I view discomfort as a chance for expansion?
- What does safety feel like to me?
- How do I react when I'm called out/in?
- How can I stay engaged when I feel defensive?*
- Write a letter to your past self, what do you wish you knew about racism 5 years ago? what advice would you give your past self?
- Write a letter to your future self, what do you hope for yourself in 5 years?

Remember, staying engaged doesn't mean responding right away. You can and should take a pause when you notice defensiveness in order to come back to a conversation fully present

SOMATIC PRACTICES

1. Pause and Breathe: The 4-7-8 Breath

Defensiveness often triggers a fight-flight-freeze response, making it harder to listen and engage thoughtfully. A simple breath practice can help slow down this reaction.

- Inhale deeply through your nose for a count of 4.
 - Hold your breath for 7 seconds.
 - Exhale slowly through your mouth for 8 seconds.
 - Repeat this cycle 3-4 times.
- ◆ Why it helps: This practice activates the parasympathetic nervous system, signaling safety to the body and reducing stress so you can move from reaction to reflection.

2. Hand Over Heart: Releasing Tension & Self-Compassion

Defensiveness often comes with tension in the chest, shoulders, or jaw. Placing a hand over the heart can create a sense of connection and shift the nervous system out of defensiveness.

- Sit or stand comfortably. Place one or both hands over your heart.
 - Take a deep breath in through your nose and exhale with a sigh.
 - Notice any tightness in your chest, shoulders, or jaw—imagine softening those areas with each breath.
 - Silently repeat a grounding affirmation like:
 - “I am open to learning.”
 - “Curiosity is more important than being right.”
 - “I can listen without fear.”
- ◆ Why it helps: This practice builds self-awareness while offering self-compassion, helping shift away from shame or reactivity.

SOMATIC PRACTICES PT. 2

3. Shake It Off: Releasing Stored Tension

When we feel defensive, stress hormones build up in the body. Shaking—like how animals shake after a stressful encounter—helps release that stored energy.

- Stand up and let your body be loose.
 - Shake out your hands, arms, shoulders, legs—one at a time or all together.
 - Let your jaw go slack, wiggle your fingers and toes.
 - Take deep breaths as you move, and let yourself laugh or sigh if it feels natural.
- ◆ Why it helps: Shaking helps reset the nervous system, moving stress out of the body instead of letting it build into resistance or withdrawal.

4. Journaling With the Body: Writing Through Defensiveness

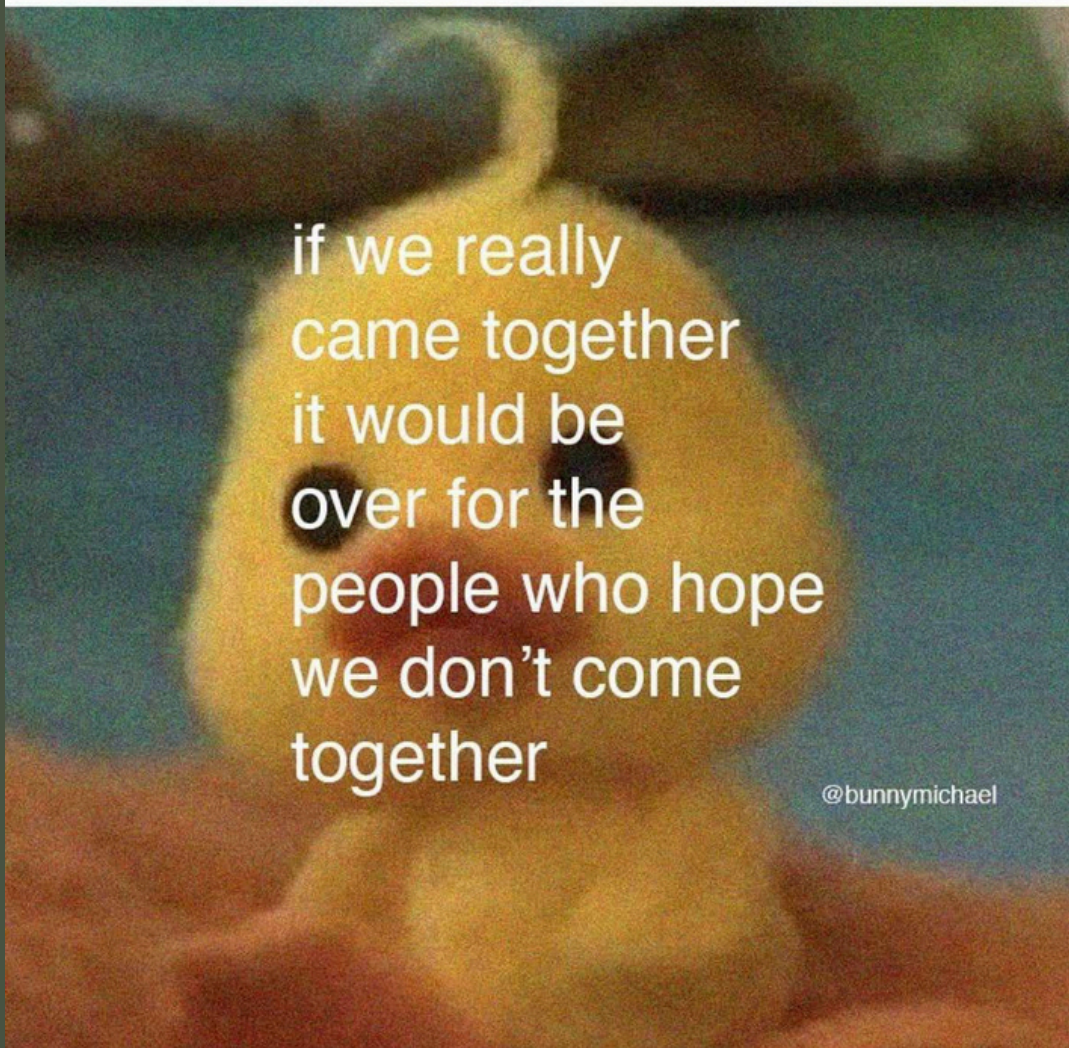
Sometimes, defensiveness hides an important lesson. Instead of pushing it away, try writing from the body's perspective to understand where it's coming from.

- Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths.
 - Ask yourself: Where do I feel defensiveness in my body? (Jaw? Shoulders? Stomach?)
 - Place a hand on that spot and breathe into it.
 - Open a journal and start writing, using one of these prompts:
 - “My body feels defensive because...”
 - “Underneath this reaction, I’m afraid that...”
 - “What would happen if I stayed open instead of shutting down?”
 - “What does this feeling want to teach me?”
- ◆ Why it helps: Naming and externalizing emotions through writing helps break down resistance, making space for deeper self-awareness.

“Why you so quiet? What’s on your mind?” “Why you so quiet? What’s on your mind?”



“Why you so quiet? What’s on your mind?”



COMMITTING TO LONG-TERM WORK

1. Build Authentic Relationships with Black Communities & Organizations

- ◆ Why? Black communities and organizations are already doing powerful work. Instead of starting from scratch, congregations can listen, learn, and support what's already happening.
 - Research Black-led organizations in your area. Reach out and ask, “How can we support your work?” rather than assuming what's needed.
 - If you have rental spaces, consider prioritizing Black community groups, artists, or organizers.
 - Develop long-term partnerships instead of one-off events. For example, if your congregation is involved in food security, collaborate with Black-led food justice initiatives.
 - Instead of inviting a Black speaker for one Sunday service during Black History Month, consider a year-round commitment to amplifying Black voices in worship, education, and leadership.
 - Follow and support Black-led initiatives in your city—whether they focus on education, mutual aid, abolition, environmental justice, or the arts.
 - If you attend events or workshops led by Black speakers, compensate them fairly and don't expect free emotional labor.

Reflect: Are my interactions with Black communities based on extraction (taking knowledge/resources) or reciprocity (building relationships and giving back)?

COMMITTING TO LONG-TERM WORK

2. Engage in Reparative Giving & Economic Justice

◆ Why? Many Black-led initiatives are underfunded due to systemic barriers. Reparative giving is about redirecting resources to communities that have been denied economic opportunities.

◆ Ideas for Congregations:

- Dedicate part of your congregation's budget to funding Black-led justice work.
- Partner with local Black churches or organizations for joint fundraising initiatives.
- If your congregation has an endowment, explore ways to invest in Black-owned businesses, land trusts, or mutual aid networks.
- Organize a "Redistribution Pledge" where congregants commit to shifting a portion of their income, inheritances, or stimulus checks toward Black-led efforts.

◆ Ideas for Individuals:

- Set up a monthly recurring donation to a Black-led organization. Even \$10/month adds up.
- Buy from Black-owned businesses and hire Black professionals whenever possible.
- If you have generational wealth, explore ways to redistribute it intentionally.

COMMITTING TO LONG-TERM WORK

3. Address Tokenism & Performative Allyship

◆ Why? Many non-Black individuals and congregations unintentionally engage in tokenism—including Black people in a superficial way rather than building real relationships or redistributing power.

◆ Key Questions to Ask:

- Are we inviting Black speakers/musicians/leaders only during Black History Month, or are we consistently valuing their voices?
- Are we creating leadership roles for Black UUs, or just asking them to do emotional labor?
- Do we engage with Black history, culture, and issues only when it's trending, or is this an ongoing commitment?

◆ Ways to Shift Towards Authenticity:

- Move from symbolic gestures (like putting up a BLM sign) to structural changes (like revising policies).
- If you're showcasing Black art, music, or literature, make sure Black creators are compensated and credited.
- Instead of using Black voices for “diversity points,” ask: Are we amplifying Black leadership and following their guidance?

COMMITTING TO LONG-TERM WORK

4. Advocate for Policy Change & Racial Justice in Your City

◆ Why? Systemic racism exists in policing, housing, healthcare, education, and employment. UUs can take action beyond their congregation to push for racial justice in their communities.

◆ Ideas for Congregations:

- Host community forums to discuss racial justice issues in your city. Bring in Black activists, lawyers, and policymakers to guide the discussion.
- Form a racial justice task force that keeps the congregation informed on local issues, elections, and policies impacting Black communities.
- Advocate for police accountability and support community-based solutions and collaborations.
- Join or donate to bail funds and legal defense funds for Black activists and communities. Did you know that even though Black people only make up 4% of the Canadian population they make up 9% of those incarcerated?
- If your congregation owns property, explore land back initiatives or housing justice partnerships.

◆ Ideas for Individuals:

- Call or email your city councilor about issues affecting Black communities.
- Join or donate to bail funds and legal defense funds for Black activists and communities.
- Attend public hearings or protests around education equity, housing justice, and criminal justice reform.

RESOURCES AND REFLECTIONS FOR LEARNING ABOUT AFRICVILLE

[35 minute NFB documentary “Remembering Africville”](#)

[Canadian Museum of Human Rights- africville page](#)

[Africville Museum Website to Explore](#)

[Music by Black Union about Africville](#)

[Power Point Presentation by Dr. Wilburn Hayden](#)

[Collection of Africville Stories by Joe Sealy](#)

[Razing Africville: A Geography of Racism by Jennifer Nelson](#)

[The History of Africville As Told by the People of Africville
By Irvine Carvery](#)

Join us on February 19th, 2025 for a special session:
Lessons from Africville

7-8:30pm ET on zoom

[In this session we'll spend time learning about Africville together and engage in meaningful reflection and discussion around what we can learn from the history of Africville. You can register at this link.](#)

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTIONS FOR LEARNING ABOUT AFRICVILLE

- What does the story of Africville teach us about the history of Black communities in Canada?
- Does Africville challenge the narrative that Canada is free of systemic racism compared to other countries?
- In what ways have systemic neglect and exploitation (e.g., lack of basic services, forced assimilation) been used as a tool of oppression?
- How does understanding this intersectionality help us envision liberation for all oppressed peoples?
- How does the story of Africville challenge us to uphold the inherent worth and dignity of Black Canadians, especially in the face of historical and ongoing systemic racism?
- What does Africville teach us about the importance of equity and justice?
- How can we center compassion while engaging in racial justice work?
- How does the destruction of Africville highlight the need to actively dismantle systemic racism in Canada?
- Africville residents were systematically excluded from decision-making processes about their community. How can we, as UUs, ensure marginalized voices are heard and empowered in our congregations and broader society?
- How do our principles call us to respond to historical injustices, like those experienced by Africville and Indigenous communities?

EVEN MORE RESOURCES TO EXPLORE

Books/Articles:

Policing Black Lives: State Violence in Canada from Slavery to the Present – Robyn Maynard

BlackLife: Post-BLM and the Struggle for Freedom – Rinaldo Walcott & Idil Abdillahi

Trailblazers: The Black Pioneers Who Have Shaped Canada – Tiyahna Ridley-Padmore

So You Want to Talk About Race – Ijeoma Oluo

"How to Be an Antiracist" by Ibram X. Kendi

"Notes of a Native Son" by James Baldwin

Articles assembled and/or written by Dr. Wilburn Hayden,
member of First Unitarian Toronto

Videos:

"The Skin We're In" documentary by Desmond Cole and the
CBC

White Fragility Lecture with Dr. Robin DiAngelo

"Ours is a Responsive Faith" with Beverly Horton, member of
First Unitarian Hamilton

BLACK HISTORY MONTH IS A STARTING POINT, NOT AN END GOAL

CITATIONS

- Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU): An organization that provides support, information, and resources for Black Unitarian Universalists and works to expand the role and visibility of Black UUs within our faith. Website: <https://www.blacklivesuu.com/>
- Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM): A Unitarian Universalist People of Colour ministry and anti-racist collective bringing lay and religious professionals together to overcome racism through resistance and transformative action. Website: <https://www.druumm.org/>
- "Beyond Diversity: Tokenism vs. Real Inclusion" by Dr. Tiffany Jana
- "Me and White Supremacy, by Layla F. Saad
- Rucker, Walter C. The River Flows On: Black Resistance, Culture, and Identity Formation in Early America (2006)
- Carter G. Woodson & the Origins of Black History Month, Website: <https://asalh.org/>
- Baldwin, James. The Fire Next Time (1963)
- DiAngelo, Robin. White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism (2018).
- Menakem, Resmaa. My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies (2017).
- Morrison-Reed, Mark. Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism (2011)
- Statistics on incarceration in Canada:
<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/cbjs-scjn/fact1-fait1.html>

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CANADIAN UNITARIAN COUNCIL

