

“Staying in Covenant: A Reexamination of the Empowerment Controversy”

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The Black Power movement was a reaction to the relatively moderate views of the Civil Rights movement, Black Power preached separatism. Black Power believed that, in order to fully understand Black identity, Black folks needed to separate from whites and explore what it means to be Black in America. It's hard to generalize about the Black Power movement as there were so many factions, but many within our movement took the relatively moderate view that African-Americans needed a separate, autonomous space from white in order to understand themselves more fully and become empowered.

Unitarian Universalists were affected by the Black Power Movement just as much as the rest of the nation. As Unitarian Universalist minister Mark Morrison-Reed reminds us, “We do not stand above the social attitudes of our times, as we are prone to believe, but instead flounder about in their midst with everyone else.”

Despite our wide participation in the march on Selma in 1963, during which two UUs were murdered, many Black UUs felt disenfranchised. They viewed white UUs as selectively ignoring portions of our history, forgetting how Black people were systemically excluded from some Unitarian Universalist spaces for so long. This was on top of the fact that there had, at that time, only been a handful of Black Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist ministers to achieve fellowship, and even fewer to be placed in congregations. This was combined with the fact that most UU congregations continued to be predominately white.

The Black Affairs Council, or BAC, was formed in 1967 at the Biltmore Hotel in New York, where the UUA had gathered to consider their response to racial riots flaring up all over the country. The idea was to give Black UUs a Black only space where they could figure out for themselves what it meant to be Black in a mostly white denomination that was still excluding them in many ways, and they demanded complete freedom over how they organized and who they appointed to the council.

As can be imagined, divisions started showing nearly immediately, with some Black participants at the Biltmore favoring a more moderate, integrationist approach that would work together with white folks, and some white people themselves feeling excluded. They eventually formed a competing organization called Black and White Alternative (later Black and White Action), or BAWA. Tensions flared almost immediately, and the aftermath of what was to follow continues to scar our association to this day.

In June 1968, BAC demanded the Cleveland, Ohio General Assembly fund them to the tune of \$250,000 a year for four years. In the aftermath of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination the previous April, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor. The Cleveland GA did not resolve the issue of competing philosophies, though, and it surfaced again the next year at the Boston GA, where BAC delegates and their white allies demanded that BAC be funded but not BAWA, viewing the funding of both organizations as being contradictory to Black Power, and even possessing the delegate microphones so no one other than BAC could speak on the issue. BAC delegates and their supporters even walked out in protest when the BAWA co-chair tried to address the GA.

Following the 1969 GA, a new president of the UUA, Robert West, had taken office. To his horror, he discovered that he had inherited a mess, and the UUA was nearly bankrupt,

information that hadn't been given to the delegates of the Cleveland GA before they voted to fund BAC. He and the board of trustees began looking at any expenses they could cut, with survival of the association being the goal at that point. As one could expect in hindsight, the money for BAC was one such item, and he decided to cut funding for BAC.

BAC saw this as just another example of the fickleness of white UUs when it came to racial justice issues. What resulted was a controversy that tore congregations and even families apart and led to a sad chapter in our history. In fact, following the BAC controversy, racial justice issues were absent from our national agenda for nearly a decade, not surfacing again until a Commission on Appraisal report on the entire controversy in the mid-1980s.

The reactions were intense.

White UUs and moderate Blacks were concerned that this was a return of segregation.

Others felt white UUs weren't being given enough credit for their actions at Selma and the fact that two of their own gave their lives there.

BAC supporters were concerned that whites would impose their racial justice agenda on them, and that they would ignore their history of racial injustice.

Robert West became a convenient scapegoat for BAC supporters, though all evidence shows West was doing his best under very bad circumstances.

It even got personal. Jack Mendelsohn, then minister at Arlington Street Church in Boston, later recalled that, during the walkout at the 1969 GA, a colleague spit in his face after he asked white UUs to join him at Arlington Street to assess what was happening with BAC supporters, who were fully prepared and ready to leave our movement altogether, feeling that there was no place for them here.

Now that's a very simplified version of events, and it doesn't capture the full spectrum of what was going on. I know our own Jim Boyce was present at the 1968 Cleveland General Assembly, and he may remember things different than I presented them. My point here isn't to rehash history and point fingers. In fact, if you're interested in more of the historical facts, I invite you to read the chapter on the Empowerment Controversy in Mark Morrison-Reed's book *Darkening the Doorways*, or the UUA Commission on Appraisal's report.

No, my purpose here is to look at the controversy from a covenantal perspective. It has been said that our faith is a covenantal one, meaning we're bound by covenants that explicitly and implicitly remind us how we're going to be in community together. Covenants allow us to agree to treat each other in a certain way through good times and bad. Marriages are perhaps the most famous type of covenant, but people enter into covenants all the time, including in UU congregations.

It's the only way I've found through which Unitarian Universalism could possibly work since none of us agree on everything, including whether we all agree on anything. We need pacts with each other about how we're going to be in community. UU covenants specify our duties to one another and how we will be in covenant together.

I like the way my colleague, Rev. David Pyle, defines covenant: as the promises that, were we not to keep them, we would cease to fundamentally be us. Covenants are promises held by many hearts.

Pyle continues, "When we say that Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal faith, and not a creedal faith, what we are saying is that we are a religion that is based not in a set of dogma or beliefs, but a religion that is based in a set of sacred promises we make to one another"

If this is the case, then it has always seemed to me that the vast majority of our faith movement were out of covenant during the Empowerment Crisis. We failed to show compassion, did not see the inherent worth and dignity in each other, and did not engage in acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth, the first of the three principles that would later be adopted by our association.

Binary, black and white, either/or thinking sure did get us in trouble!

Our movement broke promises it made to each other, which are core to who we are.

Ironically, I think everyone had a point, if they had merely listened to one another.

BAC's desire for Black only spaces and autonomy is relatively uncontroversial in our movement today. And it was always going to be a sore point that, despite the contradictory story we told ourselves about Selma, that the denomination was relatively unchanged when it came to race, that our successes in the Civil Rights Movement could not erase centuries of systemic oppression.

At the same time, BAWA's desire for white UUs to be integrated into racial justice work had a point. I'm proud to be a member of Allies for Racial Equity and Showing Up for Racial Justice today: as an opportunity for me to use my white privilege for some good in the continuing struggle for racial justice.

I question how BAC, BAWA, and their white supporters could have stayed in covenant, and I know hindsight is 20/20, but I believe we need to learn from our failures as much as our successes.

Perhaps if white BAC supporters had lead the conversation with other white UUs so BAC members could focus on racial justice issues.

Maybe if BAC and BAWA had seen themselves not as competing organizations but as two sides of the same coin.

What if BAC and BAWA had found a way to enter dialogue with Robert West and the board of trustees before the 1970 GA and agree on a consensus action?

What if white UUs had their own space to process and realize that the actions of both BAC and BAWA were not personal, but systemic?

I'm completely speculating, and I'm aware it could be viewed as problematic for a white person to second-guess actions of Black folks from decades earlier; after all, I don't know if any of these things would have changed the way things turn out, but they point to the need for us to be creative in maintaining covenant, especially when we feel like the "other side" isn't listening to us. I have just as much problem with this as others, and I believe that, if both sides of a conflict become so deadlocked that they can't hear a word anyone else says without becoming defensive and confrontational, disaster is sure to follow, as it did in our movement.

I might well have been one of the white supporters of BAC who walked out of GA, viewing it as important to demonstrate the importance of the organization's demands.

What I do know is that the Empowerment Controversy shows the importance of staying in covenant, first with knowing what that covenant is to begin with. After all, expectations are much easier to clarify before a conflict happens. Once disagreement and discord have taken place, people tend to double down and push the fight, seeing the only acceptable outcome as a "win."

The reality is that, if someone wins in these sorts of situations, everyone loses, as the damage done will take years, sometimes decades, to heal. BAC won in writing, but the entire association lost for years to come.

Therein lies the crux of covenant: making promises for the good of the community, and how do we know what is the good unless we define it? In my experience, UUs who take it for granted that everyone's idea of communal good is the same as theirs and don't do the hard work of creating a covenant will be sorely disappointed. Consider that we're in a religious tradition that can't even agree on whether a god or gods exist or not!

Such promises could have shown that both BAC and BAWA had points, and lead to deeper discussion. In the process, we may even learn, as the children in our story this morning did, that we are stronger when we bring each of our truths, each of our ideas, together.

In the end, what covenant is about is building communities that will last through the tough times, and I've known many UUs who will say that's what we're all about: building communities of mutual support and encouragement that will get us through.

We don't always get it right, as the Empowerment Controversy shows, but I'd like to think we're learning the lessons of the past in our current struggle for racial justice. Our movement still exists, and isn't that testimony to just how powerful covenant is?

This brings me to another lesson: covenants remind us to come back together when we do mess up, ask forgiveness, and try again. They remind us that we're in this together, and we need each other, even when we think the other person is wrong, maybe especially when we think they're wrong.

When we engage our covenants, we work to build something out of our community, even if we don't exactly get what we'd prefer, because our community has a vision of something larger than any one person's desires.

We were reminded in congregational conversation last week that change often happens slow, whether it should or not, so it behooves us to have some patience and humility in this

regard. Covenant calls us to remember that we all come from different circumstances and contexts and to respect those differences.

I'm so proud of our board of trustees for taking on the task of creating a covenant of right relations that will help our community clarify the expectations we place on each other in community, and there are still more questions, such as the question from last week's congregational conversation about the possibility of white nationalists finding a home here which I didn't have space to investigate today, but I hope to take up in October when we look at our third principle. But I believe we are on the right path.

I'm also leaving unanswered for now the question of when covenant has been irreparably breached.

Know, though, that the work we are doing is holy and good and needed in the world. At the same time, it's hard and potentially divisive. May we be beacons for the world of how Beloved Community can be built in the midst of disagreement, showing how divisions can be healed through the promises we make to one another.