

## **Collegial Conversation on Theological Diversity January 31, 2008**

The conversation was facilitated by Jan Christian. Participants were Jay Atkinson, Anne Hines, Ken Collier, Hannah Petrie, Stefanie Etzbach-Dale, Lone Jensen and Rod Richards

Our conversation addressed concerns about a culture in many of our congregations which is hostile to certain theological beliefs, most notably Christianity.

Restorative justice asks: What are the hurts? What needs to be done to repair the hurts? Who is responsible? We used these questions to guide our conversation.

All participants gave examples of hurts:

- Many individuals are personally hurt by failing to find a safe or fulfilling religious home. Numerous examples were given.
- We lose members because they do not feel safe or because their spiritual needs are not met so both they and our congregations suffer.
- At its best, liberal religion holds out a promise that “we need not think alike to love alike” and offers a chance to model that for the world and we are failing to fulfill that promise.

We discussed some underlying issues:

- We all have a need to belong. Some members are concerned that if people of other theological beliefs are welcomed that they may become outnumbered and lose their religious home.
- There is often a fear of those who are different and of the unknown.
- There is a stunning lack of religious literacy in our congregations.
- There is a majority consciousness that is largely unconscious. Assumptions are made that we are less diverse than we really are and we act on those assumptions and this helps eliminate diversity by making those who do not share majority attributes uncomfortable.
- Most of our members are not all that well informed about UU heritage and identity.
- Some of our members have been hurt in their experiences in Christian churches and harbor resentment.

- Christianity is the dominant religion and is often perceived as hostile to other religions and our non-Christian members are seeking a place that is safe from that kind of hostility.
- Our larger movement has a hard time articulating what it is.

Things ministers/leadership can do:

- Name the problem. Hold out a vision of an alternative way of being together.
- Help put a face on the hurt and focus on the hurts. Very few members are seeking to intentionally hurt others and seeing the hurt done often opens our hearts.
- Teach listening skills.
- Provide many opportunities for deep listening and for unveiling theological differences. We gave many fine examples.
- Do their own work related to above issues.
- Covenant with others in leadership to directly respond to hostile off-hand comments.
- Challenge groups that have already developed trust to discuss theological differences and hurts related to them. For example, covenant groups, support groups etc. often have developed deep trust but have never discussed theological differences.
- Provide worship services which honor all paths in our tradition and which show how various traditions are part of our UU heritage and identity.
- Lift up the ability to honor different paths as a requirement for key leadership roles (e.g. worship and religious education).
- Encourage people to own their own feelings and to understand that hostile comments often spring from ignorance and hurt.
- Unpack statements related to our “like mindedness.” Does this mean we all share a value of honoring different paths or that we want people to share our specific beliefs?
- Differentiate “belief” from “faith” and “trust” and show that we rely on a shared faith/trust rather than on shared beliefs.
- Promote the idea that the best way we can ensure our own space in the circle is to keep the circle open and welcoming.
- Promote religious literacy and a deeper understanding of UU identity and heritage.
- Find ways to join with other ministers/congregations and the larger movement to address this.

We also spoke of our need as ministers to do our own work related to this and noted that we rarely speak of our specific beliefs. We wondered if this is a reflection of our discomfort about differences or our inability to articulate our beliefs.

We would like to discuss the following ideas at our spring meeting:

- Using the 2009 District Assembly to further this work.
- Using our Clusters/Clumps to work on this.
- Using our fall retreat for explore our own theological diversity and using the joint UUMA/LREDA retreat to develop additional strategies.