

Mini-history of Fighting Racism at the UUAA



1884 News clipping - Mayor Harriman was a member of the 19th century Unitarian Church



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-- Presented by Kathy Friedrichs and Lucia Heinold, January 25, 2015

This congregation was born just after slavery in the era of Jim Crow. 150 years later, “Black Lives Matter” – are words that call us to action! Understanding and confronting racism has been an important effort for our congregation for over 150 years. Understanding and confronting racism and classism is the mission of our congregation’s current Challenging Racism group.

Our congregation has a long history of involvement in civil rights issues both locally and nationally. The forty liberal citizens who founded this congregation in 1865 were in part brought together through their opposition to slavery; several founders were involved in the Underground Railroad, helping slaves escape to Canada.

One of our prominent 19th century members was James Mitchell Ashley, who in his earlier life worked tirelessly to abolish slavery and while serving as a US representative from Ohio was the House floor manager who guided passage of the 13th amendment.

During the 1940’s, our minister, Rev. Edward Redman, was an energetic activist involved in many community projects including reaching out to Michigan’s 200 Japanese refugees during World War II. Ed Redman was minister to George and Bessie Jackson and worked with them to set up our Jackson Social Welfare Fund that distributes money in support of the First Amendment.

I hope many of you were here a couple of weeks ago when Eric Ericson told us how in 1970 a radical black man, Charley Thomas, took over our pulpit from Reverend Erwin Gaede and presented the Black Manifesto, demanding money for reparations be paid to a social welfare fund to help black families. He

did the same in other Ann Arbor churches. The other Ann Arbor churches got court injunctions to keep Charlie Thomas away. Our church and the Friends responded by raising money for his causes.

Perhaps you noticed four black and white drawings about peace by the artist, Ben Shahn that are hanging in our front entryway. These drawings were presented to our congregation in the 1970's by the American Civil Liberties Union in appreciation of our support of their efforts to defend first amendment rights.

And the pattern of defending human rights continued on through the 1980's and 90's. Last week you had the opportunity to meet members of the Rodriguez family, a family from El Salvador who were given Sanctuary by our church for over 18 years.

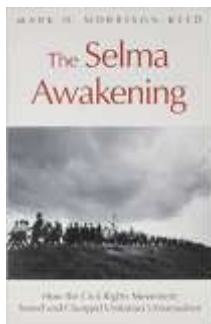
And many of us still remember the Peace Team training our members and minister Ken Phifer took to deal with the Klu Klux Klan rally in Ann Arbor in 1998.

Our current Challenging Racism group grew out of a program called D.A.R.E. (Dialogue and Action on Race and Ethnicity) which sponsored book discussions and story circles where we could share our personal stories related to race. Our Challenging Racism group continues to use provocative books and films as triggers for congregational reflection and discussion. Examples include: *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice*, "*The New Jim Crow*," and "*Class Matters*;" films included *Roadmap to Apartheid and Inequality for All*. We revisited story circles with local storyteller, La'Ron Williams, and developed our own reflective and drop-in conversations.

Reverend Gail Geisenhainer has been a big supporter of Challenging Racism efforts and encouraged us to expand our focus to include social class. Bruce Gibb facilitated two sessions of the engaging simulation, *Star Power*, that examined class.

And we have been expanding into our community, reaching out and partnering with other groups from the Underground Railroad Freedom Journey to a Restorative Justice project and an Interfaith Coalition for Immigrant Rights.

Opportunity for meaningful dialog about race is coming up as we approach the 50th anniversary of the civil rights marches in Selma, and passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.



On April 19 after the second service, Challenging Racism will lead a book discussion of **The Selma Awakening; How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism** by UU Minister Mark Morrison Reed. Our congregation is fortunate to have Rev. Morrison Reed return to our pulpit on Sunday, **May 3rd** to discuss this.

Understanding our history, role and privilege in a world of racist and class inequalities has been an important effort for our congregation for over 150 years, and we are dedicated to continuing this effort well into the future.