

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

3.8.15 Sermon: "Pentecostal UUs?"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

I doubt I'd be talking to you about Pentecostal Unitarian Universalism without Bishop Carlton Pearson's conversion experience to Universalist Christianity that I just described for you. That unasked for personal experience *dramatically* changed his life and may be beginning now to change ours. His decision to ask the remnant of his church to join All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa created the possibility for a new Unitarian Universalist mode of worship that I doubt could have happened in any other way. The merger of New Dimensions and All Souls is giving birth to a new way to be Unitarian Universalist that may break open our future as a religious movement.

We need to pay very close attention to what is happening in Tulsa right now!

Carlton Pearson, born in 1953, showed early promise for the ministry, casting out demons from his girlfriend at the age of 17. He attended Oral Roberts University and gained Oral Roberts attention and favor. Ordained in the Church of God in Christ, he formed his own church he called Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center. It grew to become one of the largest churches in Tulsa. His fame grew as he preached in arenas and stadiums around the country - one of the first African American preachers to do this within the Black Pentecostal tradition. By the 1990's, Wikipedia reports, attendance at his church was in the 6000's every Sunday. He hosted one of the most watched TV shows on the Trinity Broadcasting Network. There weren't many Black preachers whose star burned brighter than Pearson's.

And then he started preaching from that powerful experience he had watching television with his daughter on his lap. Throwing out the idea of hell wasn't embraced by Oral Roberts or his fellow Church of God in Christ ministers. In 2004, the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops concluded he was preaching heresy. Much as he was loved by members of his church, most started leaving for other more orthodox churches until he lost his building to foreclosure in 2006.

During all this, the Rev. Marlin Lavanhar, lead minister of All Souls Unitarian in Tulsa had reached out to Pearson with personal and theological support for his new found Universalist faith. Their relationship grew and became close. Close enough that Pearson decided it was time to close his church and ask the remaining members to join All Souls in 2008.

There has never, ever been a merger of a Unitarian Universalist congregation with a Church of God in Christ church. This was a very unique moment in human history.

There was nothing in All Souls statement of purpose to prevent it. (I doubt if there is anything in our bylaws that would prevent it either) They passed a resolution anyway that had strong

support. Their purpose says they are dedicated to religion not a creed. "Neither upon itself nor upon its members does it impose a test of doctrinal formulas. It regards love of God and humankind, and the perfecting of our spiritual natures to be the unchanging substance of religion and the essential gospel of Jesus." Most importantly it finishes with these words: "It welcomes into its worship and fellowship all who are in sympathy with a religion thus simple and free."

There wasn't any reference to whether music would be played on an organ or an electric bass. There wasn't any prohibition from people standing up during the music, waving their arms, clapping and shouting words of praise. Many of our congregations are already striving to diversify the sources and styles of music we use on Sunday morning. Matt doesn't usually play when I offer a meditation or during my sermon, but sometimes he does. We are already exploring how to bring more emotion and spirit into our services.

The merger with All Souls catapulted both congregations into a very different style of joint worship. Even small changes on Sunday morning can be difficult. This was an upheaval. Many loved it and welcomed the changes. Others hated it. On both sides.

I know I don't have to develop a long list of what might be concerns for a UU member after this merger, particularly a humanistic or atheistic member. Way, way too much Jesus and repetitive singing, jumping around and praising. Not enough intellectual rigor in the preaching that was way too practical.

Many of the former New Dimensions members weren't very happy either. Now they were not getting *enough* Jesus to satisfy them in the music and the message. Not only that, the emotional component of the service wasn't reaching the intensity to which they were accustomed and seeking. And there was the comfort factor. They were minorities all week long and didn't want to be minorities in church.

And there were big class issues to encounter. Many of the UU professionals have to wear suits and ties or fancy dress all week long. Sunday is a time to dress down and relax. Many who don't have professional jobs with African-American church backgrounds like to dress up on Sunday as a show of respect for their church and their faith. Something as simple as clothing became a dividing line.

Many New Dimensions members left and a few UUs left, but those who stayed are in the process of creating a new way to worship together synthesizing the two styles. And many people with backgrounds we don't commonly see in our congregations started coming. They were finding an inclusive spiritual experience that spoke to their minds as well as their hearts ... and they wanted both.

What Unitarian Universalists haven't appreciated, that the Tulsa experience is demonstrating, is the overlap of values rather than beliefs we have with the neo-Pentacostal tradition. We

aren't on the same wavelength around speaking in tongues but we do have one deep connection that unites us: a hunger for personal direct experience.

The Pentecostal movement took birth in the Los Angeles Azusa Street revival that began in 1906 and lasted another seven or so years. Founding African-American minister, the Rev. William J. Seymour, was brought up in the Holiness Movement of the nineteenth century. It emphasized the importance of a second baptism by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

The problem with many of the conversions that happened in the Great Awakening revivals of the beginning of the nineteenth century was backsliding into old ways. The desire to sin was still there even though now Christ was at war against those tendencies inside the convert. What was needed was a perfection that was possible when the Holy Spirit took control of people's bodies and changed them, removing the motivation to commit sin. These possessions cast out demonic influences and cleansed a person's spirit so they could do good spontaneously and avoid evil without effort. This possibility was the source of redemption that John Wesley sensed reading Martin Luther's words.

One of the innovations of Pentecostalism was the ability to speak in tongues. This was the outward evidence of the inward change of purification by the Spirit along with the ability to heal and predict the future.

There is a lot of interesting material to explore here (which I don't have time to do). I'd like to share some more of Rev. Lavanhar words that unpack the Pentecostal experience. He zeroes in on what the Pentecostal movement discovered in their worship experience that might be of value to Unitarian Universalists:

One of the reasons that Pentecostal Christianity is spreading to 100's of millions of people of many cultures is that there is what I call the Pentecostal Formula. Here's how it works. Sustained music, repetition, clapping, hand-waving and rhythms lead people to an experience of "awe." People describe it as feeling touched or infused by the spirit and like an ecstatic moment of emotional or spiritual high. The awe is made even more powerful because it is communal and one has the feeling that they are sharing this ecstatic moment with others who are experiencing the same phenomenon. Although the experience is not sexual, it is analogous to sex in which two people share a sense of mutual ecstasy. In both experiences a sense of unity and oneness is created and the boundaries between "self" and "other" feel erased or diminished. Pentecostals have found a way through music and movement to reliably and repeatedly take people to a place of awe.

Lavanhar goes on to point out there is nothing inherent in their theology that creates this experience, more the opposite. The traditional Christian theology is used as a way to explain and contain the experience. He goes on to say:

What we have discovered at All Souls is that with the help of skillful music ministries and new ways of worshipping, we can take people to similar experiences of awe in worship. However, as UU's we do not place a dogmatic frame on top of the experience, instead we provide people with a hermeneutic of religious freedom to interpret these experiences for themselves. Since starting this new service many people have come to realize that their experience of the spirit, in these moments of awe in worship, are not necessarily tied to a Christian theology or a particular dogma or even to Jesus Christ. Many have had the opportunity to reconsider their frame of reference since having the experience of awe in the context of worship that includes diverse names for God, expressions of Humanism and with an out Lesbian minister leading the service. Such experiences in worship can help people begin to deconstruct the premise upon which they had been taught about faith, God and spirituality. The experience, and our church, are making room for new religious understandings to emerge.

And what are the results in the Tulsa congregation? All Souls is seeing a strong increase in just the demographic we rarely see, young people of color. And they are not just coming for the music. They are looking for our liberal values that embrace diversity of sexuality and theology. They love the highly participatory liturgy and the progressive message being offered.

Lavanhar points to Christian scholar Harvey Cox's observation to explain the rise of Pentecostal churches around the world. Cox thinks that our rational post-modern society is suffering from an ecstasy deficit. People desire a way to have a bodily experience of being part of something greater than themselves. (This ecstasy deficit may be part of the motivation for the attractiveness of pagan ritual in UU congregations)

This isn't the first time Unitarians have encountered this deficit. The Transcendentalist movement in the middle of the nineteenth century was partly a reaction to the rational, analytic approach of the Unitarians of their day Emerson derided as "corpse cold." The Transcendentalists yearned for that direct personal connection to the oneness of God. They found it in the natural world, in poetry and music, and through intuition. Where they didn't find it was in church.

The energetic contemporary worship services happening at All Souls are not mountain top experiences. These services are ecstatic experiences of oneness that happen in community. Going away by yourself into the natural world isn't the only way to have a transcendent experience. Another way to feel that transcendent connection is through using your voice and moving your body while surrounded by sound, vibration and other people.

What I've been reading about All Souls that I've shared with you has me very curious. If what you've heard so far is stimulating your interest, I encourage you to stay after the service next Sunday, March 15th, and hear from someone who actually traveled there to witness it.

With our congregation's support, we sent Michael Hornsby to check All Souls out. He was very impressed and will be giving us his report and analysis. I believe we need to begin a conversation to explore if this might be an opportunity for us as well.

I strongly doubt we are going to encourage people to speak in tongues. We are unlikely to convert our Sunday service to this format. But there may be elements of what they are doing we might want to copy. And there may even be interest in an alternative service that uses some of these methods. I don't know yet.

What I do know with great confidence is Unitarian Universalism can be practiced in many more ways than we currently do on Sunday morning. I'm old school in some ways that could limit my ability to keep up with these changes. I like lecture style sermons that simulate my mind and I love organ music. I also like the way Matt plays and I like a good, practical sermon that speaks to the heart as much as the head. I like variety and I suspect many of you do as well.

What excites me most about what is happening in Tulsa is discovering a way to reach young people of color who embrace our core values. Promoting our values in the world is far more important than how we sing songs, clap or don't clap, stand or sit. One size fits ... some. To be who we can be as a religious tradition, we need multiple sizes, styles, and methods to tell the world our good news.

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