



Self - Assessment of Cross-Cultural Sensitivity as Enhancement for Addressing Unitarian Universalist Diversity Programming and Oral Health Care

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Introduction

“Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships—the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace.” The program for the annual Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly conveys a wide range of topics representing the varied issues that are of interest to the Unitarian Universalist membership. Some of the representative program session topics include Serving our Larger Communities: A Path to Multiculturalism; Strength Through Diversity: A Bead Meditation; Facing Down Classism to Liberate Our Faith Community; and Rewiring Your Racial Consciousness. Such topics express the general common ground of diversity but also stress features having to do with diversity in unique ways. One can conclude from the program that there is significant concern within the Unitarian Universalist Church about matters tied to diversity and further related to oral health care. This report addresses the concept of diversity within the Unitarian Universalist Church generally and more specifically the conference program as being indicative of concerns within the larger body. As such a self-assessment of cross-cultural sensitivity is offered as a fundamental means for the church membership to engage representations of diversity within the Unitarian Universalist membership. Use of the self-assessment prompts the participant to reflect upon aspects of cross-cultural relations in a non-threatening context that enhances understanding. It offers a means for inquiry. All of this is intended to establish linkage with one of the functions exhibited at the General Assembly and interpret it through the perspective espoused via historical polity. This allows for establishment of a clear link among the ideals promoted via polity, the historical tradition and current normative approaches within the organization. All of

this together offers a manner of understanding that allows for a broader appreciation for how diversity is not only tolerated within Unitarian Universalist thinking but more fully embraced. The aforementioned programs point toward such a view. The racial/ethnic composition of churches has continued to evolve during the past 50 years. Increased world trade has brought an influx of immigration to the United States and this immigration has led to shifts within the racial/ethnic composition of the U.S. church bodies and larger American culture. The civil rights movement and varied reforms in the United States have had significant impact on church membership. These circumstances have posed the need for greater sensitivity having to do with cross-cultural concerns in the evolving multicultural social order. One angle of this situation emphasizes cultural differences while another angle stresses sub-cultural differences.

The primary objective of this report is to help church members evaluate their cross-cultural awareness within the church construct and to provide a starting point for improvement in this area but do so without necessarily endorsing “right/wrong” approaches. This end is stressed through the application of a self-reporting instrument that church members can use to gauge their awareness of predominant areas of cross-cultural difference and have a foundation for reflection about such matters. “Demographic changes are transforming the United States into a microcosm of the global village. Immigration has made North American society increasingly multicultural and multiethnic¹.” This reflects significantly more emphasis on the concept of diversity. “Cultural differences represent a major form of diversity in a group. Organizations of the future will continue to be increasingly more diverse, so information about how cultures differ can help you be a more effective group member.”

These changes will not happen overnight but instead will unfold consistently over time. "Unless someone calls attention to a feature of our culture, we don't think too much about the significant role it plays in shaping our behavior. In addition, we tend to assume that individuals from other cultures share our values, behaviors, and communication patterns, but they don't." These unique features can be found in varied areas of our daily lives. "Trends in many areas go together to make up the climate of the times. Four such areas include: 1) patterns of work; 2) relationship styles; 3) attitudes toward self-fulfillment; and 4) messages from the mass media." Changes in our cultural climate can change much like the changes we experience in the meteorological climate. "People in most, if not all, cultures have a notion about the self, although specific notions of self vary across cultures. These variations or cultural differences influence person-to-person interactions in sometimes subtle and sometimes dramatic ways, affecting how we conceive of the 'self,' the expectations we have for "Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships-the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace." The program for the annual Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly conveys a wide range of topics representing the varied issues that are of interest to the Unitarian Universalist membership. Some of the representative program session topics include Serving our Larger Communities: A Path to Multiculturalism; Strength Through Diversity: A Bead Meditation; Facing Down Classism to Liberate Our Faith Community; and Rewiring Your Racial Consciousness. Such topics express the general common ground of diversity but also stress features having to do with diversity in unique ways. One can conclude from the program that there is significant concern within the Unitarian Universalist Church about matters tied to diversity and further related to oral health care. This report addresses the concept of diversity within the Unitarian Universalist Church generally and more specifically the conference program as being indicative of concerns within the larger body. As such a self-assessment of cross-cultural sensitivity is offered as a fundamental means for the church membership to engage representations of diversity within the Unitarian Universalist membership. Use of the self-assessment prompts the participant to reflect upon aspects of cross-cultural relations in a non-threatening context that enhances understanding. It offers a means for inquiry. All of this is intended to establish linkage with one of the functions exhibited at the General Assembly and interpret it through the perspective espoused via historical polity. This allows for establishment of a clear link among the ideals promoted via polity, the historical tradition and current normative approaches within the organization. All of this together offers a manner of understanding that allows for a broader appreciation for how diversity is not only tolerated within Unitarian Universalist thinking but more fully embraced. The aforementioned programs point toward such a view. The racial/ethnic composition of churches has continued to evolve during the past 50 years. Increased world trade has brought an influx of immigration to the United States and this immigration has led to

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plays an important role.”⁷ It is in that spirit that the perspective of this report is conveyed. The survey that follows is entitled “Cultural Bound Areas for Personal Reflection.” These culture bound areas are domains that can be interpreted and emphasized in significantly different ways depending upon an individual’s cultural background. The foundation for this survey was observed via the National Association for Developmental Education. From that foundation additional components were added to further stress the church emphasis.

- SA-Strongly agree.
- A-agree.
- N-neutral
- D-disagree.
- SD strongly disagree.

Cultural Bound Areas for Personal Reflection:

Expectations And Standards SA A N D SD

- A. Pastor-congregant communication should be based more on formal (rather than informal) interaction. 5 4 3 2 1
- B. Pastoral dress and grooming is important. 5 4 3 2 1
- C. If a pastor does not experience personal growth within the church it is primarily her/his own fault. 5 4 3 2 1
- D. Congregants should have considerable 5 4 3 2 1

- input with church programming.
- E. Respect for congregational authority by ministerial staff is important. 5 4 3 2 1
- F. If ministerial staff stray from church regulations then he/she should be considered for penalty up to removal 5 4 3 2 1

Approaches

SA A N D SD

- A. I handle emotionally charged issues and conflict by never losing control of myself within church deliberations. 5 4 3 2 1
- B. Humor is essential in church functioning. 5 4 3 2 1
- C. I enjoy some church members less than others. 5 4 3 2 1

Preferences

SA A N D SD

- A. It is important for the pastor to treat congregants the same. Pastoral preferences should never be evident. 5 4 3 2 1
- B. I prefer group (instead of individual) activities. 5 4 3 2 1
- C. I prefer docile (instead of aggressive) church Members 5 4 3 2 1

¹ Ronald B. Adler, Lawrence B. Rosenfeld and Russell F. Proctor, *Interplay: The Process of Interpersonal Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 30.

² Katherine L. Adams and Gloria Galanes, *Communicating in Groups: Applications and Skills*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2021) 196.

³ Ibid, 197

⁴ Mark L. Knapp, Anita Vangelisti and John Caughlin, *Interpersonal Communication and Human Relationships* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2020) 104.

⁵ Stephen W. Littlejohn, and Karen A. Foss, *Theories of Human Communication* (Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing, 2021) 149.

⁶ Adler et al, *Interplay*, 32.

⁷ Ibid, 47.

This survey is intended for use by the individual. The respondent indicates her or his response in each of the areas: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. These are areas where the cultural background of each individual will impact his or her perception regarding the perspective to be maintained. There will typically not be vivid delineations to be reconciled. Rather, general understandings can suffice. When used in a workshop setting, this survey can help participants gauge their cross-cultural sensitivity by comparing/contrasting their perceptions with others. This instrument focuses on congregant expectations, standards, personal perspectives, approaches in common situations and how these areas can benefit or detract from the church environment. Use of the instrument can be prefaced with a description of theoretical concerns that underscore the relevance of areas to be reviewed [1-3]. Primary benefits from this experience can be realized through discussion of how participants can use the self-assessment results to improve their interactional approaches based on increased awareness of varying cross-cultural perspectives that frequently exist in our multicultural society. These are areas that can be misunderstood among congregants and the larger social order. Thus, the survey can benefit users via enhanced awareness of these potential areas of misunderstanding. For instance, I.F. states "If ministerial staff stray from church regulations, then she/he should be considered for penalty up to removal." This can be problematic because such infractions in one culture may not be perceived the same way in another culture. So much of the interpretation can be tied to the cultural context. As illustration, notions having to do with the "rule of law" in the American culture can equate with serious offense that can result in removal from an organization whereas the rule of law is not recognized so much in Chinese culture. Rather, the Chinese culture tends to focus more on the "force of law."

That is, laws exist in both cultures but the Chinese system allows for governmental changing of laws depending on the circumstances while the force of law is intact. This kind of differing foundation allows for significant differences of orientation in many areas of societal functioning. Sensitivity with these areas is helpful when interacting with the many subcultures that exist in the United States. The misunderstandings that occur among international cultures parallel the misunderstandings that exist among American subcultures. The differing frames of reference are a key variable in such interactions. These varied frames of reference reveal varied interpretations on a single continuum rather than polar opposite perceptions of the culture bound areas. The key here is that the degrees of difference depend on the cultural backgrounds that are compared. How we function in our churches regarding such matters can almost be equally as important as what we are worshipping. That is, actions speak louder than words. Thus, a multicultural church

environment that is sensitive to various cultural and sub-cultural backgrounds is going to help provide considerable understanding for congregants of all backgrounds. Obviously, the church membership has a direct influence on this church environment. Culture is the backdrop within which worship and other church functioning takes place. We all use our cultural background to "filter" what we are perceiving in our church setting. Thus, the American church member can actually experience "culture shock" in his or her own church setting without leaving the country. Culture shock occurs when we experience confusion, anger, or despair as a result of unsuccessful attempts to make sense of cultural practices which are foreign to us. This usually occurs when we are outside of our own culture (in another country) but it can happen when dealing with culturally different individuals in our own culture. Culture shock usually involves four stages: the honeymoon, crisis, recovery, and adjustment stages.⁸ The honeymoon stage occurs during our initial interactions with a new culture when we are intrigued with new places and new ways of living. The crisis stage occurs when we encounter a situation that we do not know how to resolve and we become frustrated. The recovery stage occurs when we learn how to resolve the situation. The adjustment stage occurs after we have resolved the conflict and begin to enjoy the culture again.⁹ There are dimensions of interpersonal interaction to acknowledge when considering cross-cultural communication. One such dimension involves high-context communication processes present messages indirectly and let meanings evolve. Much is communicated through paralinguistic cues and gesturing. High-context cultures are located mainly in the Orient.¹⁰ Speakers in low-context cultures are more direct when presenting messages. Low-context cultures are found mainly in the United States and European countries. Awareness of these perspectives is based heavily on both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Obviously, there is much room for confusion and incorrect interpretation of intentions. Two other dimensions focus on group orientation and status differential. The dimension of group orientation varies in each culture. The continuum scale extends from individualist (oriented toward the individual) on one end and group oriented (oriented toward the group) on the other end. Individualist countries such as the U.S. place considerable importance on individual effort and freedoms. Our economic system rewards the individual who can compete in business and win against others. Individualists are more to the point and do not mind arguing. Group oriented countries value the group and subordinate the individual to the group. Harmony and getting along with others is important in group oriented cultures. When I first taught in China (a group oriented culture) I observed how my students commented on my "odd habit" of taking daily walks "alone".

⁸ Joseph A. Devitom *the Interpersonal Communication Book* (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Publishers, 2019) 98-102.

⁹ Ibid, 102.

¹⁰ Judy C. Pearson and Paul E. Nelson, *Human Communication* (Boston, Massachusetts: McGraw-Hill, 2021) 177.

They tended to function in groups. The Chinese have a saying "It is the nail that stands high and alone that is first to be pounded."¹¹This status differential dimension deals with how a culture distributes status and how this distribution affects communication. All cultures can be placed on the high-status-distance--low-status-distance continuum scale. Cultures that rank high on the scale (as high-status-distance cultures) will maintain significant separation among social classes and social classes will differ regarding communicative norms. For instance, the lower classes will be expected to show deference to the higher classes. The United States is nearer the low-status-distance position. As such, the American culture leans more toward equality among classes. We have class distinctions but they are not as strong as found in some other countries. This equality is expressed in our form of government (i.e., one person-one vote, equal opportunity provisions in the workplace and equal rights)¹². Different perceptions of the culture bound areas are not always a matter of differing values. Values can be similar but the expression of these values based on cultural communicative norms can vary significantly. Cross-cultural understanding can become especially difficult because different perceptions of culture bound areas can be a matter of differing values and differing communication processes. Thus, a high degree of tolerance is beneficial. Cross-cultural communication occurs when we interact with someone from a different cultural background [4-6]. Cross-subcultural communication occurs when we interact with someone from a different subcultural background (i.e., a Euro-American farmer from Kansas interacting with an African American merchant in Philadelphia). Cultures are comprised of a variety of subcultures that are geographical, economical, occupational, racial, and ethnic. In the U.S., for instance, we have subcultures grounded in different regions of the country (i.e., the Southerner), economic levels (lower, middle & upper class), occupational (blue collar & white collar), racial (based on physical features) and ethnic (based on cultural practices). Cross-subcultural communication can be, at times, more difficult than cross-cultural communication. For instance, I (as a European-American rooted in the social sciences) can interact more clearly with an Australian who is rooted in the social sciences, than I can with a Vietnamese fisherman from New Orleans whose primary language is Vietnamese and who speaks very little English. This phenomenon is especially true in the United States because of the many groups that comprise the American culture. Cross-subcultural communication is best remembered as a form of cross-cultural communication since the dynamics and problems are the same. It is a myth to believe it is enough to treat culturally (or sub-culturally) different congregants like they are from your own culture (or subculture). Such a view is too ethnocentric. A basic goal can be to create a church environment that meets culturally different members "halfway." Intentions to establish a clear understanding can serve as a base for clear understanding. The following recommendations, general and specific, can help enhance such intentions. Generally speaking, awareness of the affective, cognitive, and interpersonal domains of

cross-cultural interaction can provide a general basis for improved relations. The affective domain involves acceptance and respect of other cultural backgrounds. The cognitive domain emphasizes knowledge and understanding of other cultural backgrounds. The interpersonal domain stresses the development of communication skills for interacting with various cultural backgrounds. A specific approach for clergy can begin with clergy tape recording their sermons for personal review. Particular areas for evaluation include the use of sarcasm, language norms, vocal animation, supporting statements through repetition and substantiation, level of vocabulary, pronunciation and articulation, and rate of speech. All of these areas can be variables in cross-cultural interaction. Issues needing attention will not always be boldly apparent. At times such issues will be more subtle.

Specific Analysis of the Following Survey Areas can also Be Beneficial

- i. Pastor-congregant communication should be based more on formal (rather than informal) interaction.
- ii. I handle emotionally charged issues and conflict by never losing control of myself within church deliberations.
- iii. Humor is essential in church functioning.
- iv. It is important for the pastor to treat congregants the same. Pastoral preferences should never be evident.

These areas can be evaluated using taped sermons. Again, it is important to realize these areas can vary from culture to culture. In doing this type of evaluation one should consider how her or his approach fits within his or her own culture/subculture and how his or her approach could possibly conflict with other cultural/sub-cultural approaches. I opened this report with a description of the program for the annual Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly and how it conveys a range of topics having to do with diversity. Also of particular note was emphasis during the June 21, 2023, opening session having to do with the Commission on Institutional Change and their initiative within the Unitarian Universalist organization for "Widening the Circle of Concern." This underscores how this concern for diversity has permeated the Unitarian Universalist body. I have highlighted these domains in this report. Such overall concern also resonates within the informal ethos of Unitarian Universalism. The need for cross-cultural sensitivity in our Unitarian Universalist churches as well as other denominational church bodies is a need that will doubtfully ever be fully met. But evaluation of congregant awareness in this area is the first step towards gauging our weaknesses (and strengths) regarding how we can promote a better understanding of not just what we worship but how we engage in our worship. Observation of this General Assembly and recognition of the focus on diversity issues within the programs offered can serve as a guide for pursuing improvement with such matters.

¹¹ Ibid, 180-181.

¹² Ibid, 184.

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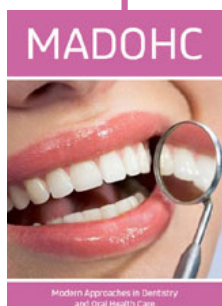
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