

Being Welcoming
Rev. Ann Kadlecak and the Inclusivity Team
First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany
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Reflection

Joyce Chicoine

I am Joyce Chicoine, chair of the Inclusivity Team. My pronouns are she / her. I share my pronouns so that trans and non-binary people feel comfortable sharing theirs.

I want to tell you all about the Christian church that I attended when I was growing up in northern Indiana. That church had some similarities to Albany UU and some notable differences.

The gorgeous, well-maintained building was located in a mixed-race, lower socio-economic neighborhood, in the heart of the medium-sized city. However, the membership of the congregation was extremely homogeneous. Members were almost exclusively white, middle-class, and lived in the suburbs. If any members were LGBTQ+, they stayed in the closet. Many church members were aging, but they still had a strong adult choir, a youth choir, and active youth groups.

I loved that church SO much that I was married there in 1984. Even after I had moved to NY, I continued to subscribe to their weekly newsletter for many years, in order to maintain a connection.

So, what was the most important difference between this Christian Church and Albany UU? IMO, they talked the talk, but they did not walk the walk. They looked inward and focused on spirituality, but they did not look outward. They failed to make a concerted effort to bring in diverse new people, or go out of their way to make visitors feel comfortable. They did not have an Inclusivity team like we do.

I believe that if a congregation wants to have a viable future, a conscious effort must be made to include a wide variety of people, and to strive to make them feel welcome and comfortable, not just tolerated.

That is why in November, 2016, the Albany UU Board of Trustees voted unanimously "to establish a team to address inclusivity issues, focusing on institutional racism and other types of oppressions." Since January of 2017, the IT has been on the lookout for signs of institutional racism and other forms of subtle discrimination that would make newcomers to our congregation feel unwelcome.

As many of you know, about a year ago, our Inclusivity Team sponsored a congregational read of a book titled *Mistakes and Miracles*. The authors of that book had visited 5 UU congregations that had made a commitment to "building multicultural, anti-racist Beloved Community." The hope is that by learning about what happened in other congregations like ours, we can do better ourselves.

The next step for us was group discussions about the book, to try to apply what we learned to Albany UU. We talked about our strengths, our weaknesses, and our needs going forward. In our case, one common theme was "We've read books. We have had lots of discussions. Now, what are we going to DO about it? How are we going to hold ourselves accountable to our aspirations? How are we going to genuinely become a diverse beloved community?"

That is what brings me here today... It is easy for us to feel comfortable around people that look like us, think like us, and who have similar life experiences. We understand each other and instinctively know the right thing to say to make each other feel good. The challenge comes when we encounter someone who is different from us.

Rev. Ann talked about ways we can be different. To reiterate, they could have differences in race, religious background, sexual orientation or their way of expressing their gender identify. Maybe they have a disability or they are “differently able” and experience the world in a unique way. Maybe they face daily challenges that we have never had to face. Whatever the difference, it behooves us to get to know them so that we can make them feel like they belong here.

The thing is, we are not mind-readers. We don’t always know what other people are thinking or feeling and we are bound to make mistakes. Without meaning to, we may say or do something that makes another person feel uncomfortable, like they don’t belong. It’s not our fault, really. We’re only human. How are we supposed to know better?

The answer is that we teach each other. We speak up when someone experiences a Subtle Act of Exclusion. We can utilize teachable moments and listen to each other, and we keep trying to do better. This requires a skill set that does not come naturally for most of us. That is why the Inclusivity Team has been developing some workshops to teach us how to do this. We will review some key concepts, to make sure that we are all on the same page. Then we will talk about strategies for avoiding Subtle Acts of Exclusions, as well as how to respond when they occur. These workshops will include roleplaying so that we can practice new strategies and guided conversations to help us reflect on what we are learning. Don’t worry. We are not re-inventing the wheel. We have another book that is guiding the presenters called “*Subtle Acts of Exclusion: How to Understand, Identify, and Stop Microaggressions*” by Tiffany Jana and Michael Baran.

If I were to go back my old church today, I would find the exterior shell of the building still standing and recognizable to me. But if I were to go inside, I would recognize almost nothing. Much of the woodwork has been removed, or covered up. The pews have even been removed. More significantly, none of the people that I knew are still there. Most of the older folks that I knew have passed away. People like my parents started attending other churches out in the suburbs, where they felt more “comfortable.” People like me moved away entirely...Eventually, the few church members who remained merged with another congregation in the next county, kind of like if Albany decided to combine with Schenectady. And the building was sold to a church of another denomination, hence the structural changes.

I am passionate about my work with the Inclusivity Team because I don’t want to see what happened to my former church happen here. I want the Albany UU to continue to be a vibrant, loving congregation well into the future. I want to help us reach our goal of being a multi-racial, multi-cultural, diverse beloved community.