

Task Force on Widening the Circle Final Report 2024

This task force was created late in 2021 by the Old Ship Board of Trustees to review “Widening the Circle of Concern,” a report issued in June 2020 from the UUA Commission of Institutional Change. This Commission was charged “to conduct an audit of the power structures and analyze systemic racism and white supremacy within the Unitarian Universalist Association.” The report makes findings and recommendations regarding the problems of racism and white supremacy within Unitarian Universalism. The report itself is grounded in the premise that our faith is calling us “into living the fullness of the theology we inherit and proclaim.” The report is available on the UUA website at [The Commission on Institutional Change | UUA.org](https://www.uua.org/institutional-change).

At various times since the task force was created, the following individuals have participated in its work: Ralph Brown, Davalene Cooper (chair), Ellie Handleman, Laura Harbottle, Fan Leonard, Eva Marx, and Patti Smith.

One specific project of the task force has been to research our Old Ship history as it relates to enslaved and indigenous peoples. Carol Valentine and Eileen McIntrye have been part of this work that has been led by Laura Harbottle. This work continues and we are considering how we might best present its results to the congregation. We have found how many other UU congregations have shared their histories on their church websites and/or made reparations related to this history.

When we first began our work, we decided to study the report and consider how to use it to explore how we could be a more welcoming and diverse congregation. We also reviewed the 2021 Statement of Conscience on Dismantling White Supremacy, characteristics of white supremacy culture, and other materials from the UUA on these issues. We decided to use the report and its recommendations to meet with Old Ship committees and explore how our various committees could be more welcoming to newcomers. We also discussed how to create this community. How would this atmosphere of radical welcome change us as a community? What hidden obstacles, or perhaps overt obstacles, get in the way of someone feeling truly welcomed here? These were some of our initial questions. As it developed, meeting with various committees was not a useful process and we ended up not doing this work. Given the various transitions and challenges over the past few years at Old Ship, we discovered that many of our committees were not functional. So, we decided instead to explore these questions through an adult learning course that would create recommendations for when we were more ready to address widening our welcome.

As part of the task force, the Reverend Erin Splaine and Davalene Cooper offered a sermon on the culture of white supremacy as an introduction to this work. We had planned to offer the course during that same church year, but between the issues related to selling the parish house and the need to select a new contract/interim minister, we delayed the course until this past fall (November 2023). This course, attended by about 20 members and friends, was a good way to discuss how to widen the welcome at Old Ship and come up with specific recommendations to do so.

In the three sessions of the class, we have had a lot of good discussion as to how we might widen the circle of concern and as to how we might better understand our own culture of white supremacy at Old Ship. We identified specific actions we might take to be more open and attractive to the groups we would like to welcome more explicitly. We also expressed the goals of continuing to do our individual and collective work within the Old Ship community of identifying, understanding, and working to eliminate the characteristic or traits of white supremacy culture within ourselves and our practices and processes. We want to be certain that when we attract new people that they find something at Old Ship to keep them coming.

Although we identified four special groups we would like to attract to Old Ship, we also identified specific actions or steps that cut across the spectrum. Some of these actions have already been taken during the course of this church year. These are things we could do to be more visible and more welcoming:

- Wear Name Tags.
- Create a post card or other form that would give visitors a place to request more information about Old Ship. These could be placed in the pews or as part of the order of service.
- To the extent the groups discussed below are already a part of our circle, we could ask them what they would like to see at Old Ship and how we could increase our commitment to the groups they represent.
- Ensure that someone or some committee in the congregation is responsible for keeping the congregation informed of UUA efforts in this area.
- Become more visible in the community. Have a presence at Town events such as Taste of Hingham and the Arts Walk.
- Put ads about our programs and events in local media.
- Organize a blessing for the animals on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon.
- Host a Film series in the Meeting House.
- Host a Lecture series in the Meeting House.
- Encourage the minister to explore these issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in sermons.
- Explore these issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in lifelong learning courses.

Now, to each of the groups we specifically discussed in terms of how best to create a welcoming environment.

Children and Young Families

- Develop a strong RE program.
- Hire a part-time DRE.
- Provide child care at events, programs, etc.
- Make a presentation to Hingham High School and/or connect with the Global Citizens Program at the High School.

- Get children in the Meeting House for special and regular events. For example, have twilight concerts or recitals. Host something akin to the Mock Town Meeting that was held with elementary school children.
- Have Neighboring Faith Field Trips.
- Unite with other congregations to coordinate youth group activities involving trips to Boston, learning about other religions and cultures, etc.
- Expand the OWL program to others in the community.
- Programming for children and their parents on days other than Sundays.
- Create and support intergenerational activities, especially around social justice issues or projects. Provide charitable credits for students.
- Interfaith opportunities such as the Seder Dinner or other ways to learn about and celebrate different cultures and religions.
- Sponsor a sports team in the local area.
- Have activities for children in the pews, such as coloring books or UU materials, to keep children occupied so their parents can come to services, especially during the time we do not really have an RE program.
- Consider how we nourish and support parents.
- Have a black and white movie in the Meeting House with an organist. For example, a spooky movie on Halloween or a Christmas movie during the holidays.
- Have a haunted house in the Meeting House at Halloween.
- Create a Quest for the Meeting House history and nearby surroundings.
- Have a banner to celebrate religious education at Old Ship (akin to the Vacation Bible School banner at the South Shore Baptist Church). Maybe a “Come celebrate neighboring faiths” banner. Perhaps we could develop a week long RE Vacation School or Camp based on UU values.
- Create a “rent a grandparent” program. Connect older people with younger children and parents.
- Provide opportunities for parents to connect either just socially or around issues related to parenting.
- Gather for a meal and an activity aimed at this group.

Young Adults (ages 18-35)

- Create or host an Evensong Program.
- Social Justice Activities, Projects—easy to do projects with a regular schedule, such as “Come the first Thursday of the month to make lunches for Father Bill’s”, or a one time event such as a winter coat drive.
- Create affinity groups of interest to this population—walking or running clubs, parenting classes, music or art classes, and book groups.
- Open our space to other non-profits with a reduced or no fee schedule.
- Create opportunities or programs for mentoring from within the congregation.
- Classes or programs on undoing white supremacy—an important issue for this group.

- Create opportunities for young adults to meet others and make connections, perhaps form romantic partnerships.
- Create a list of available housing.
- Offer the OWL Program to young adults.
- Sponsor a sports team.
- Candlelight Concerts with music especially appealing to this group.
- Outreach to Hingham Unity and similar groups offering the use of the Meeting House.
- Sponsor a discussion series with a spiritual connection.
- Offer child care for date nights.
- Provide community service credits for college students.

LGBTQ+, including non-binary

- Sponsor specific social events for LGBTQ+ individuals, perhaps a dance or “prom.”
- Put pronouns on Old Ship name tags.
- Put a better indication of our WC status on the wayside pulpit, not a faded rainbow flag, something more permanent.
- Ensure that we continue to keep our WC status with the UUA.
- Offer space to groups supporting LGBTQ+ issues.
- Film Series aimed at this group and these issues.
- Forums or Lectures focused on LGBTQ+ issues, including transgender issues.
- Keep informed of UUA efforts in this area.
- Develop new leadership for the WC committee.
- Partner with Hingham Unity and other groups around LGBTQ+ issues and needs to maximize our impact.
- Develop a specific program for high school students, modeled after Norwell UU.

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color)

- Create a deeper connection to the UU Urban Ministry in Roxbury.
- Participate again in the Mother’s Day Walk for Peace in Roxbury.
- Study the 1619 Project.
- Continue to research and then acknowledge Old Ship’s connection to enslaved and indigenous peoples—explore what other UU congregations are doing in this area. Are there others who would like to join the efforts regarding our own history and relationship to enslaved and indigenous people at Old Ship? How will we present this history on the new revised website?
- Broaden our resources for worship to be more open and welcoming: readings, music, etc.
- Partner with Hingham Unity, perhaps as a cosponsor of the Juneteenth Celebration at the Harbor.
- Partner with the League of Women Voters on issues for advocacy.
- Sponsor an antiracism training at Old Ship—we need to break our hearts open, not just make an intellectual shift.

- Offer story hours for children on racial justice. Example is the Ruby Bridges books telling her story.
- Imagine a drumming circle regularly at the Meeting House.
- Imagine a poetry night or slam of BIPOC poets.
- Advocate on BIPOC issues.
- Expand or strengthen the antiracism book group.
- Partner with another church on MLK day.
- Do not ask newcomers for their “credentials” as we welcome them.

As we consider our next steps in this work, we need to remember we are doing at least two different things. First, we are opening our own hearts and minds to understanding white supremacy culture and to becoming open to the experiences of other people. We are decentering whiteness in ourselves and in our community.

Additionally, we are finding ways to be more open to others—to widen our circle of welcome. For example, the UUA lists several programs or workshops that might be helpful to us. These resources can be viewed at the following link: [Programs, Guides, and Curricula for Anti-Racist, Multicultural Change | UUA.org](#). It may be that individual committees and groups can use these resources in their specific work. This would be consistent with an all church effort to be more welcoming and diverse.

At this point, the work of the task force itself is complete. Our social justice work focuses on antiracism and dismantling white supremacy, and that is where this part of the work will continue. The Social Justice Council is the place where the work regarding our Old Ship history is finalized and shared. We have fulfilled our task of reviewing the report and considering what it might mean for Old Ship. The remainder of this work of widening the circle of concern should be done through our existing committees and groups.

Finally, as we continue to widen the welcome at Old Ship, we need to remember that this is challenging, messy, and life affirming spiritual work. We will make mistakes and we will need to forgive ourselves and others for those mistakes. And in the end, we will move closer to the creating of the more beloved community.

(Final Report of the Task Force on Widening the Circle Submitted by Davalene Cooper, Chair, June 2024)