

## **Us divided? No!**

by Jennifer Ratcliffe

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On Sunday, June 16th, Todd Callen, our newly elected President, made an announcement from this pulpit that the Board of Trustees and Toniann Read, our Director of Ministry with Children and Youth, known as MCY, had decided to part ways. This came as a surprise to many of us. In the following days, speculation surfaced as to the reasons for this action.

It's hard to talk about this incident publicly because many of the main actors have left the stage and are no longer associated with UUMAN.

This sermon is an attempt, from a layman's point of view, at trying to understand what happened to our community and what we can do to find forgiveness and start the reconciliation and reconstruction process within our walls.

The reality is that there was a clear separation at UUMAN, camps had formed and loyalties were on display.

My perception is that we had formed two groups, formed along the lines of parents with young children attending MCY classes on one end, and a group of adults without connection to that program, on the other end. Some of the comments that I heard or saw were some parents with children didn't attend Sunday service, or other gatherings, such as the Silent Auction, and they didn't pledge according to their income. These facts may or may not be true.

On the other hand, this same group felt ostracized, marginalized, some spoke of classism and racism in the "adult" camp, and at the end felt that the explanation for the severance lacked transparency. These facts may or may not be true.

There are several group behaviors worth looking at, that may apply to this situation.

The first is called **group formation**. We have a tendency to gather into groups for security, to divide labor, to build leaders, to create uniformity, and to distinguish ourselves from others. Individual identity frequently forms from group formation during the teenage years. Have you noticed how bands of young women wear the same hairstyle, the same cutout jeans, the same baggy athletic shorts? They're trying to fit in by forming a homogenous group.

Homogenous groups tend to polarize. They adopt more extreme and narrow-minded thinking as time passes. and **group-think** settles in. The following behaviors emerge:

1. A high moral stance
2. Collective decisions
3. Demonize and stereotype others
4. Self-censor to create a uniform culture
5. Protect their leaders by withholding information

Do any of these sound familiar? Look at the newspapers, they're there.

In order to simplify our lives, we usually rely on **categorizing**, or bulking people into categories, usually based on easily distinguishable features, such as physical similarities—color of skin, language, theology, political preference, etc.

Members of these groups begin to make assumptions and predictions based on incorrect information: all hispanics are thieves, black people lazy. But it doesn't stop here. We take it a step farther with **meta-perception**: What we think they think of us is usually negative or pessimistic. We counter-balance by finding diversity among us and sameness in the other. **We** are unique, **they** are the same, which eventually leads to prejudice and marginalization. And because we are human, recall fills in the gaps instead of gathering information. So we draw conclusions about the outer group that are inaccurate, including resisting getting information from any member of the group just because they are part of the outer group.

Now let's apply it to us. See if you can see yourself or someone you know:

1. Do you cringe at the thought of praising a particular group that is not yours?
2. When someone associates you with a particular group, do you overreact and go out of your way to clarify that you're NOT part of that group?
3. Do you avoid exposing yourself to ideas or ways of a particular group? Do you listen to them or get feedback from them?
4. Do you avoid admitting that you're threatened by another group's success, prominence or influence?

No, not us!

When relationships between groups deteriorates, a war begins and cultural threats trigger inevitable hostile reactions.

I headed the Social Justice committee during the Iraq war and felt compelled to assemble a group to attend a march in Atlanta in support of peace. I naively assumed that everyone at UUMAN agreed with my position. But the minister suggested that I place a poster outside the sanctuary On Sundays asking people to give me their honest opinion—pro or con. Everyone

avoided me like a hot potato! I hurt a lot of people's feelings. It has been said that we nearly went to war over peace. This example was a cultural threat. Cultural threats:

1. Increase ambiguity
2. Confuse us, especially if caused by members of our own group
3. Trigger negative consequences more than positive outcomes.

Let's talk about each of these.

**Ambiguity.** We hate ambiguity. We prefer to have an answer, any answer as long as we avoid confusion or ambiguity.

**We hate black sheep.** This explains why members of a group go to great lengths to punish or exclude other members who do not "toe the party line" because black sheep blur the lines between the in-group and the out-group.

In research, people who interact with black sheep show increased heart rate and blood pressure. No wonder I my face flushed when I recently confronted a patient for missing her noon medications.

Finally, we fear **negative consequences** because they influence our group identity in unexpected ways.

Intentionally or not, groups tend to marginalize others. When we're all doing and saying the same, we form a common identity. And when we stay in that place, we start deteriorating in relationship to others. We criticize based on superficial opinions, we feel superior, we refuse to see positive aspects in other groups and their members, and we avoid criticism and feedback.

When we find ourselves in the middle of a conflict, we need to address it, make it go away fast, fix it.

If you're going to remember anything about this sermon, I hope you remember this:

**ALL people are more likely to need a cognitive closure when they believe that the benefits of premature closure outweigh the costs of remaining open minded.**

What that means is, we can be open to many solutions to conflict, but we can't stay in that place for long. And the longer we take to decide, the more likely we'll choose a mediocre solution than an ideal solution.

If you're a person averse to conflict, you're going to want to make up your mind sooner than a heretic. Heretics take a long time to process and reach a conclusion. Groups tend to go to great lengths to "get over this," even if it means choosing an easier or quicker solution than the right solution. This may or may not be where we're at, right now.

So, let's pay attention, because there are some healthy behaviors we can practice.

1. Be aware of our own biases
2. Engage in personal interactions with members of different groups inside UUMAN
3. Leaders model behaviors of inclusivity, not just offer lip service, AND they leaders must cultivate equal status among all members
4. By working on a common goal, we respect dual identities. I'm a UU AND I'm also latina.

This is no easy work, it takes time and intention. Last Sunday, I witnessed how we were capable of coming together to assemble care packets for relatives of detainees at Stewart Detention Center. In fact, our common goal was shared with members of Temple Beth Tikvah and the Roswell Community Masjid, two historically opposed groups.

This is not new work for us. It motivates us to engage with Family Promise frequently. We act against the injustice of racism. We come together in the midst of our hurt to roll out a Religious Education program for our children. "From Me to We" is ground work and ours to finish.

We may have differences, we can't agree on everything, but growth happens in the uncomfortable spaces of our lives. May we embrace them with courage and optimism. Amen.