

To Sofia Betancourt, Commission on Institutional Change
From Bill Sinkford

Subject: 2016 Business Resolution on the Thanksgiving Holiday

The 2016 GA passed a Business Resolution entitled “Thanksgiving Day Reconsidered”. It calls for a broad educational and organizing effort to articulate a different narrative about the Thanksgiving Holiday as we approach the 400th anniversary of the “First Thanksgiving” in 2020. It also calls on the UUA President to report each General Assembly on progress toward this broad goal. This is a well intended effort. Unitarian Universalists have a long history of supporting efforts to balance triumphal national narratives with truth from the margins. Our work to expose the devastating impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery is a recent example.



The Resolution was introduced by representatives of the Brewster, MA, congregation and the Ballou Channing District, located near the Pilgrim’s original settlement. They have an interest in telling a more honest version of the Thanksgiving story. This history is their history. That congregation also has a tradition of inspecting its own history, including the role of the founders of the congregation in the slave trade. There is new historical material available to draw on, including a new Beacon Press book that deals with the Thanksgiving Holiday (*All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans*). There is also new history to learn. UU Mass Action has published a study guide for the book *Hidden Genocide, Hidden People*, which explores the early history of the Pilgrims and native peoples. The UUA is adding these resources to its already robust website on the Doctrine of Discovery (<https://www.uua.org/racial-justice/dod>).

However, in this time when our faith seeks to make central the voices of persons of color/indigenous persons and when we are committed to dismantling the culture of white supremacy, there are other things for Unitarian Universalism to learn from this Resolution.

The request that the UUA insure attention to this resolution and an appropriate public report at the New Orleans GA was one of the first I received after being appointed Interim Co-President. I began investigating what work was in process. What I discovered was

considerable complexity around this resolution. I am indebted to Gail Forsyth-Vail(MFD) and Susan Leslie(MGW) for doing the work of tracking information and initiating response to the resolution.

First, the congregation seems not to have a relationship with the Wampanoag Nation or the local Native American community. UU Mass Action (the statewide legislative ministry) declined to support the resolution. The Indigenous Rights working group of UU Mass Action is in accountable relationship with American Indian Center of Boston and the American Indian Center Northeast, both of which include Wampanoag representation. The primary focus of their work is legislation that will declare indigenous Peoples Day a Massachusetts state holiday. They are not focused on Thanksgiving at all. Native American leaders within our UU community were not consulted about the Resolution.

Second, although Thanksgiving is celebrated nationally, the advocacy priorities of indigenous peoples tend to be local, whether at Standing Rock or in Massachusetts. National efforts, centered in Massachusetts, make little space for locally determined priorities.

Third, the resolution itself is very prescriptive, calling for the development of programs to highlight the history of the Dissenters and Separatists of the 1600's, rather than inviting a review of the story our curricular materials tell by and about native peoples.

Fourth, the resolution concludes with the demand that Unitarian Universalists call for a time of truth and reconciliation for all Americans, including Native People. As a singular voice, this far exceeds our capacity, not to mention our authorization. More importantly, the demand of communities of color is now, and was in 2016, for the redress of specific oppressive realities in our culture. The demand is for change, not for reconciliation. Unitarian Universalism needs to ground its advocacy in the leadership of marginalized communities rather than assuming our privileged communities have the right to set the priorities.

It seems to me that the well-intended impulse to engage the history of Thanksgiving would benefit from the lens of "white supremacy culture" we are currently employing to ground our work and center the voices of persons of color/indigenous persons.

I do not plan to devote significant focus to this issue in New Orleans.

I hope the Commission on Institutional Change will find this a helpful example for reflection as it conducts its assessment of our need to change our culture and the practices which have come to embody that culture.

Blessings,

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