



LREDA Fall Conference Report

LREDA stands for Liberal Religious Educators Association. Each year, there is a fall conference, and this year it was held virtually on ZOOM. There were about 275 participants, and I represented the Unitarian Church in Westport.

During the opening worship service, designed specifically for religious educators, who typically never attend worship services, we were reminded that this is a really hard time to do our work. Even those who have been doing it for a long time are struggling with how to serve their congregations right now (and how to care for themselves, set limits, and get dressed in the morning...)

We were reminded that Religious Educators are “the most creative, bold heart-forward, collaborative, warm, funny, quirky, awesome group of people you may ever have the opportunity to know!” Also, we were reminded that despite the virus, there is so much potential in the ministry we offer.

The Unitarian Universalist Association set up a Commission on Institutional Change to bring attention to the fact that our congregations are not very diverse. They are largely comprised of well-educated, wealthy, and white people. The theme of the conference was “Widening the Circle,” essentially wondering how we can become a more diverse faith denomination. Similar to a 12-step program, the first priority is to acknowledge the addiction. For us, it means first admitting that we have not fulfilled our principles as a faith with respect to consistent anti-oppression.

I confess that I tuned out during some of the speakers. Congregational polity and governance were not my cup of tea. As I explained to Rev. John, sometimes it felt like I was joining a conversation already in progress. I recognized a few of the speakers, Gail Forsythe-Vail and Natalie Fenimore, both of whom are great speakers!

Each day, there were small-group breakout sessions. These sessions were more interesting and discerning. We were asked to reflect on difficult questions. The first day, we were asked to speak about our religious education theology. What about our theology might widen the circle? Many of us found it difficult to answer this question because the word *theology* is problematic. It is part of the vernacular that conjures the wounds of childhood church. The common thinking is that we teach our theology intuitively. We avoid naming it aloud. One of my group members said, “We bring them [the children] to the edge of the cliff, but we don’t push them off.”

Could a rethinking of our theological messaging, or simply naming what we stand for, be in order? It is not unlike some of the social justice signs we see around the neighborhoods these days, the ones with the inscriptions of what the homeowners believe in: love, justice, kindness, in addition to black lives matter.

We were asked to reflect on covenant, and to share a time when a covenant between me and another was strained or broken. When I shared a story (and we all have ours), I described how I apologized and explained that my intentions were good. Indeed, our staff covenant holds us, in typical fashion, to ‘assume good intentions.’ There was pushback for this. This expression is outdated in the current climate of acknowledging privilege and bias. To assume good intentions can be a license for white people to insult people of color. Assuming good intentions is protection. It means that whatever was said was meant without harm. But what if harm has been done? The newly amended version of this well-intentioned but flawed covenantal expression is to say: Assume good intentions, acknowledge impact.

The second day’s breakout session had us thinking about the ways we have used our UU values to make a change in a system. I mentioned my digital stories for all. I had to convince the worship associates, indeed the congregation, that in order to survive, all churches need to attract children and youth. If we want to attract children and youth, we need to speak their digital language. Sharing a picture book will not be sufficient any longer. Indeed, some of my colleagues have graduated to the digital format but continue to use children’s books. They merely take a picture of each page and broadcast the images on a screen.

In the end, the conference got me to see more clearly that I am biased and racist because I am white, and I am privileged to participate in a system that is set up to help me succeed. As I continue to tackle my daily lists, it is important for me, indeed all of us who are white, to remember that. We were not given any specific solutions or strategies for how to widen the circle of our faith. It is up to us to do this difficult work.

Thank you,

Nate Pawelek
Director of Faith Formation