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Many People, Much Faith: Unitarian Universalism in Africa

The assignment to explore practices, institutional situations, theological interpretations, and the spirit of Unitarian Universalism in Africa is peppered with land mines. Just under the surface—of more than 3,000 languages in more than a half-dozen linguistic families, post-colonial assumptions, disparate understandings of the cultures and even the geographies of Africa—lie both the heart of an emerging free religious movement as well as the post-colonial triggers that have long caused violence, human division, and unspeakable harm. What are the "promises and pitfalls" for Unitarian Universalist communities in Africa? There are few written resources: some pamphlets, religious education curricula, a book or two depending on how one defines "book," and outdated online articles. Therefore, this exploration is a work of primary scholarship—journalistic in tone and style—relying primarily on interviews with ministers and lay leaders in Africa.¹ I have included interviews with North American Unitarian Universalists who have traveled to Africa to visit congregations and communities there—but with the understanding that they are outside perspectives. Structurally, this paper moves from stories of Africa's oldest Unitarian congregations to emerging Unitarian Universalist churches in East Africa, concluding with a brief discussion of religious practice and lessons heard within the accounts presented here.

South Africa

The history of the Unitarian church in South Africa is embedded in the history of the country as a whole, according to the Reverend Roux Malan, minister of the Unitarian Church, Cape Town, which is South Africa's largest Unitarian Universalist congregation. The church began as an offshoot of the Dutch church right before the Boer War. Like its parent, it remained a gathering of the privileged White minority; half the congregation spoke Dutch and the other English.²

The congregation's first minister was a Dutch Reformed minister who had encountered liberal theology while attending seminary in Holland. This "new theology," preached by the Reverend Dawid Faure, was grounded in what he called "the very essence of religion": love of God and love of neighbor. Fraure's successor brought what became known as Cape Town's Free Protestant Church into the Unitarian movement in 1921.³

¹ I pull on my former career as a journalist. If tone and style are unusual for Prairie Group, it is because this article required the communities being discussed be less scrutinized than heard.

² Roux Malan, Skype interview, August 10, 2016.

³ Gordon Oliver, "Unitarian history of South Africa," www.unitarian.co.za/unitarian_history_rsa.html

The Unitarian Church, Cape Town, is the only congregation in South Africa that meets weekly, calls itself a church, has a constitution, and, according to Malan, operates like a church. Malan is one of only two ordained ministers in South Africa, the other being the Reverend Gordon Oliver, minister emeritus of the Cape Town congregation, who also supports congregations in Somerset, which meets in a home about 40 kilometers outside of Capetown; Johannesburg, which has been meeting monthly since the 1950s; and Durban, which meets twice a month.

"In other parts of Africa, churches may be more influenced by Pentecostal practices," Malan said, but the Cape Town congregation is not distinctively Christian. The congregation from its beginnings was influenced by the minister's reading of Theodore Parker and eastern religion. Worship in the main Cape Town congregation looks much as it does in the United States and Great Britain. "We even use *Singing the Living Tradition*," Malan says, "and before that, the British Unitarian hymnbook."⁴

Many of the congregation's rituals come from North American worship practice, including flower, fire, and water celebrations related to the equinoxes. Malan believes strongly in exploring the six sources and seven principles, and helping people root themselves deeply in a values system common in North American Unitarian Universalism. Nevertheless, the Cape Town church has historically been influenced by Afrikaans culture, so Malan has tried to incorporate more African culture in worship through readings and music. He explains:

When I took over, it was mainly White people and those on the older side, and they prided themselves on being liberal intellectuals. Even when the church was started the minister delivered lectures in liberal theology. When I came into the church, I felt a church in Africa should have an African feel to it. We've made progress with our music style. We're a little less churchy.

He describes the congregation in Cape Town as stable. "We haven't managed to grow in numbers," he comments, "but we have grown in vitality." Two members from the Congo region recently joined and have helped the congregation incorporate indigenous African theology, and Malan encourages members to "re-appropriate their own African roots." Malan's eight years with the congregation have been marked by more ethnic diversity and women in leadership, along with the inclusion of earth-centered and feminist theologies. Recurrent humanist/theist struggles within the congregation will be recognizable to North American Unitarians: members haggle over objections to organ music and the word "church" in the name of the church, for example.

Part of the congregation's social justice interest, and certainly Malan's, is in attending to the larger African refugee situation. The congregation finds itself responding to the needs of refugees not only from political but also environmental crises. "Global warming isn't *coming* to Africa," he said, "it is here already—and we need to engage in a more African theology as these refugees come to us."⁵

⁴ Malan, *Ibid.*

⁵ Malan, *Ibid.*

Nigeria

Unitarianism was established in Nigeria in 1918 as the Unitarian Brotherhood Church. It grew quickly because of its embrace of the local culture: services in Yoruba included hymns composed by worshipers to the accompaniment of African drums. When orthodox Methodist churches in Lagos observed they were losing members to the Brotherhood Church, they began to persecute the Unitarians. However, emboldened in their struggle for a freer faith, the group built its own church building and school in 1936 with the support of influential Lagos residents. An additional congregation formed in 1994 and came to be known as the First Unitarian Church of Nigeria.⁶

Olufemi Matimoju is a Unitarian Universalist lay leader, social worker, and third-generation Unitarian from Nigeria. He recently relocated to Chicago due to the economic hardships of his country. Both his father and grandfather served as ministers of the Unitarian Brotherhood Church in Lagos. As we settled into my office one summer afternoon, I heard both his enthusiasm for Unitarian Universalism in Africa and a discouraging account of poverty and lack of opportunity in his country.⁷

Some elements of the Nigerian services would look familiar to North American UUs. The congregation has a call to worship, lights a chalice, sings hymns from their own Yoruban hymnal, and listens to a sermon. Other elements include testimonials for what God has provided during the week and spontaneous thanksgiving for the blessings of faith. Unitarian worship in Nigeria is usually conducted in Yoruba unless there are visitors, for whom the congregation may switch to English (the country's official language) or Edo. Matimoju added that government restrictions on free speech carry into the worship service: "We cannot preach about a lot of things around us, like economics, social issues, embezzlement, or poverty, so we speak in generalizations."

One commonality between the Unitarian church in Lagos and smaller fellowships in the United States is their decline. "Bigger flashier churches are killing our church," Matimoju said. "Unitarian churches in Nigeria are shrinking, youth are moving on, we are almost dead."⁸ Like other Nigerian congregations large and small, however, the Unitarian Brotherhood Church in Lagos has a distinctively Christian flavor and a close relationship to the Bible, which is referenced extensively. "I believe in the Bible," Matimoju said. "There are many contradictions, but I am not willing to throw it all out. There is so much there to learn and interpret."

Matimoju's relationship to Jesus as Lord is important to him on a personal level, and he describes his belief as theologically unitarian: The word "Lord" in the Christian scriptures does not necessarily mean God, he suggests. There is only one God, he asserts, and God designated a Lord to save humanity. "Even Jesus said there is only one holy one," Matimoju said, "and we are all sinners."⁹ This relationship to sin is a departure from North American Unitarian Universalist

⁶ International Council of Unitarian Universalists (ICUU), Richard Ford, principal author, "UUs in Kenya," Planning workshop report, May 24-27, 2012.

⁷ Olufemi Matimoju, interview, Evanston, Illinois, August 8, 2016.

⁸ Matimoju, *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

practice, and informs how the Lagos community approaches gay, lesbian, transgender and queer identities—which they do not affirm as a whole. While such views are uncharacteristic of North American Unitarian Universalism, they came up several times in my interviews and shed light onto the socio-political environment in Lagos; the limits to liberalism in Nigeria, where homosexual acts can result in life imprisonment; and local culture.

In a departure from North American Unitarian Universalist values, Matimoju told me he believes homosexuality will be judged by God on the Day of Judgment, which he believes is coming. However, he adds he cannot judge gay men and women, stressing three points: only God can judge; we are all sinners in our own ways; our role is only to welcome and love. "If someone is gay, I may think it is a sin—but I cannot judge. Only God can judge." Matimoju went on to note that millions in his region are being killed in wars, genocide, and famine, and said, "It's those things we should judge. When people are dying by the millions we have bigger issues."

It is a matter of emphasis, he said, reminding me that God's ways are not our ways, and His thoughts are not our thoughts. What matters is how we express God's love for everyone. "Jesus didn't come to the world to preach religion. He came to preach love. This is what God is interested in, and we come to God through Jesus."

Despite these cultural differences, Matimoju assured me that freedom of belief and acceptance remain cornerstones of his congregation's faith: "Unitarian is all about love, and we welcome all . . . Muslims, traditionalists . . . as long as you are a human we love without boundaries." ¹⁰

Kenya

The Unitarian Universalist congregation in Kenya was founded about ten years ago when two separate groups stumbled on Unitarian Universalism on the internet while searching for information on liberal religion. The two were not aware of each other and contacted the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and International Council of Unitarian Universalists (ICUU) independently.¹¹ Once they learned of each other, the groups merged under the umbrella of what is now the Kenya Unitarian Universalist Council (KUUC), within which there are six congregations.¹² The primary congregation is in Nairobi, with a membership of approximately 35.¹³

Ben Macharia, chair of the KUUC, discovered Unitarian Universalism while looking for a way of living into a faith that was more tolerant and accepting of ethnicity and difference. Since then, he and his congregations have interacted globally with the UUA, ICUU, and the Unitarian

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Kevin Abuga Ragira, "Our Unitarian Universalist History in Kenya," sermon delivered at the Ruai/Tasia Unitarian Universalist Church, <http://ruaiuuchurch.org/who-we-are/our-unitarian-universalist-history-in-kenya/>

¹² The UUPCC reports 10 congregations, in: Nairobi, Kitengela, Ruiru, Eastland, Kayole, Githunguri, Naro Moru, Mt. Kenya, Manga, and Kisii.

¹³ Ben Macharia, phone interview, August 12, 2016, and personal correspondence.

Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC)—as well as individual congregations from North American and Canada. These have offered capacity-building assistance and mentoring.

Building infrastructure is a challenge faced by Kenyan congregations, which meet in a variety of spaces: under trees, in member's houses, in rented spaces, in cafes and restaurants. "The social economic background of our people is low and there's high expectations of support that the church cannot meet," he said.¹⁴ A more fundamental struggle, however, has been forging an African intellectual and theological identity. "Our cultural beliefs are not in line with some Unitarian Universalist advocacy positions [on issues] such as same sex marriages," he said. On the other hand, he finds inspiration in promoting "the freedom to choose individual beliefs, the lack of dogma in liberal religion, and the refuge offered for people seeking diversity in religion.... Our future hope is to have our own church buildings and create self-sustaining congregations with ordained ministers."

Worship in Kenyan churches is theologically Christian, at times Evangelical, and liturgically African. Says Macharia:

Basically we are all coming from a Christian background, but we are very open to people and their beliefs. My beliefs may be different from someone else. . . . The Son of God is still important for some. To others he may a prophet. What unites us is the openness and non-dogmatic approach to religion. The freedom to choose and to question. Freedom, accepting other faiths, and having respect for them is important to us.¹⁵

Jill McAllister is a program consultant with the ICUU and former president of the organization. When she visited the congregation the service included a blend of rich melodic harmonies and African traditions with drums in traditional Kenyan style.¹⁶ As Kenya has 41 languages, services are conducted by lay leaders in the language of attendees on any given Sunday. Often services feature the local language of Swahili, but when there are guests, the primary language is English, which is then translated locally.¹⁷

McAllister cautions against the temptation of thinking one might easily understand the theological context of an African congregation in relationship to North American Unitarian Universalism. She notes, for example, that Nigerian Unitarianism came into contact with British Unitarianism decades ago, and it diverged relatively independently on its own from there. The best we can do as Westerners, she says, is observe and listen with open hearts.¹⁸

Uganda

The state of the Unitarian Universalist church in Uganda is unclear. Repeated attempts to contact Mark Kiyimba, the minister of the Unitarian Universalist church in Kampala, have gone

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jill McAllister, phone interview, September 9, 2016.

¹⁷ Macharia, Ibid.

¹⁸ McAllister, Ibid.

unanswered despite an initial exchange of messages. In an interview with *Willamette Week*, Kiyimba said his congregation has 200 members. He mentioned that there have been fundraising efforts in the United States to support the Unitarian community there. However, it is unclear how well the congregation is organized or how often it meets.¹⁹

Unitarian Universalist efforts in Uganda have focused on Kiyimba, an evangelical minister who broke with his former church over his belief in LGBT rights and equal status for women, which ran counter to local culture. Kiyimba had tried to persuade the elders at his former church to give equal status to everyone in his church. Failing that, he says, he searched for a religion "that recognizes the equality of all people."²⁰

Kiyimba's search brought him to Unitarian Universalism and he began to gather a community in Kampala. Practices there have included a mixture of Kiyimba's theological interests and Unitarian values. Worship is not the center of the community which is focused, instead, outreach, building community, and increasing local opportunities for education. When the Unitarian community in Uganda does meet, it puts heavy emphasis on singing, movement, and prayer.²¹ The community has founded two schools: The New Life Primary School and the New Life Children's Home for children who have lost parents to AIDS or who are HIV positive.

When in 2009 Uganda's parliament introduced legislation that would impose the death penalty on homosexuals testing positive for HIV, and up to three years in jail for anyone who knows a gay person and does not report them to the authorities, Kiyimba and fellow Ugandan Unitarians stood for human rights and gained media attention in the United States.²²

In 2011, Kiyimba's life was threatened, and he fled to the United States. He continues to work in Uganda and in the United States on human rights issues.²³ Kiyimba said: "In Kenya and Uganda people are so excited to be Unitarian that they start churches, schools, and orphanages on faith that somehow it will all work out."²⁴

Burundi

Before he founded the Unitarian Church in Burundi, Fulgence Ndagijimana was a Dominican brother, searching for a religious path that was more meaningful, open, and affirming—and less dogmatic—than the orthodox Catholic faith practiced in his country.²⁵ He discovered on the

¹⁹ Jacob Pierce, "Mark Kiyimba: On the Front Lines of the Fight for Gay Rights in Uganda," *Willamette Week*, October 26, 2010.

²⁰ Steve Palm-Houser, *Unitarian Universalism Examiner*, online, quoted in "UUism Around the World," a sermon by Rev. Erica Baron delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills, February 2, 2014.

²¹ McAllister, *Ibid*.

²² George Prentice, "Rev. Mark Kiyimba," *Boise Weekly*, November 10, 2010.

²³ Erica Baron, "Unitarian Universalism Around the World," sermon delivered at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of the Catskills, February 2, 2014.

²⁴ Jim Robinson, "Sharing: UU and Uganda," sermon delivered at the Unitarian Universalism Church of Sharon, MA, [uupcc.org / Sermons / Sharing-UU-and-Uganda](http://uupcc.org/Sermons/Sharing-UU-and-Uganda)

²⁵ Melinda Sayavedra and Marilyn Walker, "Unitarianism in Africa: The Ana Tree," in *The Garden of Unitarian-Universalism*, curriculum published by the International Community of Unitarian Universalists, <https://issuu.com/uuinternational/docs/gardenofunitarianuniversalism>; and Mark D. Morrison-Reed *Ménage à Trois: The UUA, GAUFCC and IARF and the Birth of the ICUU*, pre-publication manuscript provided by the author.

internet a fellow Dominican brother in Canada, Ghislain laBonté, who left monastic life to join a Unitarian Universalist church. When the two met, Ndagijimana was struck by his new friend's inquisitive mind. He continued his search, spending hours of research on the internet, "and in the end," he said, "I was not converted; I discovered that I *was* a Unitarian. That was the beginning of Unitarianism in Burundi and my end of Dominican life."²⁶

One pattern in Eastern and Western Africa is that Unitarian Universalist communities begin as gatherings of family and/or friends and often remain tight groupings of related people. Ndagijimana told me: "I wanted a space for me and for my friends without fear or guilt, and with an open mind and spirit to what we might learn and become." The average age of the congregation is about 30 years of age, and it is filled with youthful energy of young adults who want to connect with each other.²⁷

According to McAllister, the practice of Unitarian Universalism in Burundi— where indigenous traditions were long ago outlawed by the former colonial government— may be the closest to North American practices. They use and interpret the Bible more than we might, but their worship and practices resemble ours. When she visited, a key interest for the congregation of 60-70 was building a civil society in Burundi.²⁸

The Burundi Unitarian Universalist community is religiously liberal and rooted in the Christian tradition, with a high focus on individual and communal spiritual growth. As in most African countries, music plays a big role and is an important form of religious expression. Preaching is a big part of Sunday worship services, with themes taken not only from the Bible but also philosophical and literary subjects.²⁹

Being a liberal religionist in Burundi can be dangerous. The Roman Catholic church represents the majority of religious life and has great influence both socially and politically, and the Unitarian community is often accused of bringing to Burundi a foreign, atheist, agenda. In 2015, the government singled out the Unitarian community, the church was attacked with bullets and grenades, and in October of that year Ndagijimana was arrested and held in jail for nine days. He was released after Unitarian Universalists from around the world rallied, and he escaped to live in Canada as a refugee.³⁰ Throughout it all, the congregation has never missed a Sunday worship, and Ndagijimana says he has been inspired by the spirit of resilience, mission, and courage of those who remain in Bujumbura.³¹

On October 10, 2016, Ndagijimana posted on Facebook he had preached his first sermon as the Intern Minister at the Unitarian Congregation of Saskatoon, where he now lives.³²

Rwanda

²⁶ Fulgence Ndagijimana, personal correspondence, September 2016.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ McAllister, Ibid.

²⁹ Ndagijimana, Ibid.

³⁰ McAllister, Ibid.

³¹ Ndagijimana, Ibid.

³² https://www.facebook.com/fulgence.ndagijimana.7?hc_ref=SEARCH

The Unitarian church in Rwanda opened in 2010 after Clement Uwayisaba met Ndagijimana in Burundi. Uwayisaba said he was also a Dominican, and that “Ndagijimana told me about Unitarian beliefs and principles and we began to discuss them.” Uwayisaba shared his thoughts with friends, most of whom were university students who were interested in the free and responsible search for truth and meaning in the context of what they believe. “We decided to be ourselves and not to follow those religious leaders who tell us what to believe or not,” he said, “and what to do or not.” The first gathering in Rwanda began with that group of friends, and by 2013 the group had grown to 32 members, mostly young adults. They wrote a charter and chose a name for themselves, Congregation Unitarienne du Rwanda. The church today has legal standing with the Rwandan government.³³

Services at Congregation Unitarienne du Rwanda are a blending of “the spirit of liberal Christianity and humanism,” Uwayisaba explained. Conducted mostly in French and attended mostly by students, services may have a more intellectual slant than other congregations in Africa. Nevertheless, the congregation faces challenges similar to other African churches. It has yet to find a permanent meeting space for worship, and currently the group finds a different place for each meeting, which is not always weekly. Uwayisaba said that the lack of a physical location has been a barrier to growth, both spiritually and physically. But he also noted that “most of our fellows members are still students, which means they are not always there and we can’t meet regularly.” Another challenge is that of theological training for congregational leaders. As his church’s minister, he said he would like to have more theological and pastoral care training. However, the “promise of changing lives and their society through dialogue, thought, seeking and truth-making,” keeps him going.

Congo-Brazzaville

The congregation in Congo-Brazzaville began, as have other congregations in Africa, when a group of people interested in liberal religion were introduced to Unitarian Universalism by a visiting minister. In 2005, the Rev. Gordon Oliver visited a group of twenty interested persons in Congo-Brazzaville, and together they formed the Association Unitarienne Francophone Africaine (AUFA). After an initial showing at an ICUU conference, however, the group lost touch with its new international and African partners. In 2013, South African journalist Gur Milandou Mouanga, who had received lay ministry training in England, was invited to look into reviving the movement in Congo. As of 2015, a small group of former Boy Scouts have been meeting—timidly, due to the political climate of the region—in Brazzaville and Pointe Noire. Mouanga says:

Like in other emerging groups, the Congo-Brazzaville people need a place for worship. It’s enormously expensive to hire a room in a hotel or other public place, and all of these people live in tiny crowded homes, which excludes the possibility of a home as an option. In addition, there is an important need for education in Unitarian Universalism and

³³ Clement Uwayisaba, personal correspondence, August 23, 2016.

training in leadership, and ministry. There are many young adults here who show signs of good leadership ability. Training, materials and information are needed.³⁴

Observations on Worship, Practice, and the Formation of Community

I asked each of the pastors I interviewed about worship practices, but I didn't get a full picture until I realized a few things. First, we often had little common reference. African ministers and worship leaders might have limited experience in North American churches, and I had no experience in theirs. We had a limited basis for comparison and contrast. Second, I realized that comparing and contrasting was not of interest to my interviewees. Third, while North American Unitarian Universalists often fashion a sacred cow from the liturgical elements of their services, many African UUs deemed liturgical details to be unworthy of comment. As former ICUU President Brian Kiely observed: "Ask the Kenyan Unitarians about their church and they won't talk about worship or membership numbers. Instead they will tell you about their projects: the women's groups, the working cooperatives, the AIDS orphanages, the volunteer-run schools. To be a Unitarian there is to be involved in the community in a faithful way."³⁵

The Reverend Eric Cherry, Director of the UUA's International Office, has worshiped in Africa on a number of occasions. He is careful to note that he came to worship with the perspective of an international partner, not a member, so his experience is that of a relative outsider. He noted that almost without exception, scripture is at the center of worship throughout Eastern and Western Africa.³⁶

However, he says he has experienced a vast variety of practices, all deeply rooted in the local culture and history of particular congregations. Some worship might look much like it does in the United States or Canada. For example, in Lagos, "there was an Anglican quality to the way worship happened. At times it had a Kings Chapel quality," he said. On the other hand, some worship didn't suggest "obsession with academic rigor, but was reflective of the spirit of the moment." In Bujumbura, for example, worship was deeply participatory, including a homily that was punctuated by testimony from members as to the power of Unitarian Universalism.

The Reverend Bill Sinkford took a rapid, three-week grand tour of African Unitarian Universalist congregations in 2008 with a group of four Unitarian Universalists from the United States. This group worshipped with many congregations and experienced a variety of worship practices and styles.³⁷ In Lagos the service was delivered in indigenous languages with drumming and a "sermonic presence which was removed from anything recognizable in the European or American tradition," Sinkford said. In Cape Town, the congregation was about 80 percent white, heavily ex-pat, and the service liturgically protestant. "It really matters what tradition they are coming out of," he observed. "Each of these congregations has their own story, and these individual stories drive the experience in each of these countries."

³⁴ Gur Milandou Mousanga, "Pioneering the Unitarian Movement in Africa:

On the Paths of the Founders," paper written for the General Assembly Of Unitarian & Free Christian Churches.

³⁵ Brian J. Kiely, "African Unitarianism," sermon delivered at the Unitarian Church of Edmonton, February, 2008.

³⁶ Eric Cherry, phone interview, August 23, 2016.

³⁷ Bill Sinkford, phone interview, August 12, 2016.

Many congregations in Africa, he added, were formed after people from Africa came to the United States, encountered North American Unitarian Universalism, and took back at least some piece of that faith to Africa. Many began and continue as family enterprises. "For example, in Lagos, there may have been 40 or 50 folks present, and I bet at least 10 were members, close or distant, to the original founding family." Many center upon or emphasize one aspect of Unitarian Universalist theology and interest while opposing or ignoring others. For example, they may be very interested in non-Trinitarian theology or ethnic acceptance, but opposed to civil rights for people who are LGBTQ.

A lingering question is how completely North American Unitarian Universalism will accept its African variants, Sinkford noted. The answer is in whether we choose to emphasize our theology or cultural viewpoint. He asks, "Are we going to live into our UU theology and values, or are we going to live into our North American culture?" Indeed. Do privileged, Western Unitarian Universalists get to define who is UU for the whole world? This is a question that comes up when we do border-crossing work as Unitarian Universalism encounters other cultures.³⁸

What can we know? What can we do?

McAllister cautions against making grand statements about Unitarian Universalism in Africa or its future, reminding us that Africa is a huge continent and that each country and region is different. "We need to be careful about making statements that say we know anything," she said. "We don't know what partnerships mean in a post-colonial context. We know some facts. We can know what we see." McAllister says that sources of money, contact with outsiders, a spirit of entrepreneurialism—all aspects of our interactions with African UUs—are skewed by the fact that they want to communicate something to North American Unitarian Universalists, but we may not fully understand that communication.³⁹

Drawing a parallel to Black Lives Matter, McAllister says it's about listening for a long time before emerging with an inkling of what a relationship might look like, or how we might engage. She told of an experience in Burundi, for example, where she led a group of U.S. UUs. The Americans started blogging the first day about Burundi culture. "I told them to stop," she said. "They had no way to understand what was being said with language, body language, or the cultural context. "There may not be conclusions we can come to. We can only talk to people and convey what they say to us. That's it."⁴⁰

Brian Kiely writes he once thought that the UUA's Seven Principles described the sum total of our religious diversity: spiritual versus humanist, global versus local, rational versus intuitive. He now realizes that the North American context is a limited one; in a global context, our faith has been shaped by forces and contexts far broader than he could have imagined.⁴¹

³⁸ Sinkford, Ibid.

³⁹ McAllister, Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Brian J. Kiely, "Afterword," in *Belonging: Our Unitarian Identities and the Nature of our Relations*, Jill McAllister, ed., Proceedings of the Third ICUU Theological Symposium, Kerkrade, Netherlands, July 13-17, 2010.

These questions are not for North American UUs alone to figure out, debate, or leverage. Ndagijimana observes that while a shared identity is emerging among members of different Unitarian Universalist congregations in Africa, questions about relationships with North American and English congregations—and ways in which African Unitarian Universalist identities are distinct from North American and English Unitarian Universalist expressions of faith—are theirs to ponder. At the center of these questions is the African interpretation of *belonging*, he writes, with interwoven traditional circles of clan, ethnic group, or tribe, as well as modern regional and political identities, cultural expressions, and economic inequalities. Regarding emerging Unitarian Universalist identities in Africa, he asks:

. . . how do we *together* make sure we Africans also have a UU identity and not some sort of Western identity? The best question should be, what do we mean anyway by a UU identity expressed through values that can be shared or passed on to others? Simply put, the UU principles can be the best place to tap: freedom of conscience which we all cherish; the high importance given to individual judgment in matters of faith; the worth and dignity of every person; the concern for justice and compassion in human relations; the web of life and the commitment to democratic principles, are all elements of what could be called the UU identity.⁴²

The task of discovering these identities and establishing the foundation and scope of partnership is for Africans to shape. A 2010 program to support East African Unitarian Universalist congregations in becoming agents of community development identified five lessons for moving forward. According to the report, it will require:

- dedication from leaders in local groups;
- a locally sustainable vision, not merely money but a means to help local communities identify, mobilize, and implement their own plans with local resources;
- a strong role for women;
- local talent with visitors willing to listen and respond rather than bestow charity and dispense wisdom; and
- regional opportunities with existing talent, re-kindled motivation, and the potentials for collaboration.⁴³

The Reverend Roger Berchausen, president of the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church Council (UUPCC), also cautions against making the same mistakes we have in our past. Our Western interest fits completely within the legacy of colonialism," he said. "What are we going to do to help, rather than just study? We need to come up with some better partnership models."⁴⁴

⁴² Fulgence Ndagijimana, "African Perspective on Belonging," in *Belonging: Our Unitarian Identities and the Nature of our Relations*, Jill McAllister, ed., Proceedings of the Third ICUU Theological Symposium, Kerkrade, Netherlands, July 13-17, 2010.

⁴³ Richard Ford, Nytha Ntalemwa, Concepta Makasa, Alice Tibazalika, and Doug Henderson, "Two Communities One Goal: Enabling Churches to Become Agents of Community Development in East Africa," May 2010.

⁴⁴ Roger Berchausen, phone interview, August 31, 2016.

Coming up with mutual partnerships in an environment of post-colonialism and vast economic poverty is the challenge we face moving forward. What works in Transylvania may not work in Africa. Even with Unitarian Universalist partnerships in the Philippines or India, where vestiges of colonialism also exists, a different set of circumstances are at work. Berchausen noted problems often emerge when well-meaning North American Unitarian Universalists just start sending money to individuals or even congregations, setting up a situation of unequal funding between emerging congregations or funds not reaching their intended purposes. The essential thing to remember is that it's all about relationships: "We're just realizing we need to find a different model, and we're working with the UUA and ICUU for these models. A lot of this work is looking to African congregations to ask what works for them.... and it needs to take the time it needs to take."⁴⁵

Cherry agrees it will take time. Many African congregations are struggling, and funding is not the only issue. He says:

Experience tells us that infusing financial contributions without shared expectations rarely solves the problem. Instead, from where I sit, what makes a difference is investing in the skills of the leaders. It's rarely been providing a salary or just financial support. In parts of the world where economic injustice is way of life, it's very tempting to turn shortterm solutions to the struggles emerging UUs face. For me it's about creating relationships and bringing them into long-term programs that match up with the goals and needs of local communities. It usually doesn't mean a weekend but a program that takes six, nine, twelve months to complete. And then dealing with the ramifications that come after.⁴⁶

When I began this paper I anticipated a burst of inspiration that would emerge as I spoke to those who are working in African congregations and those who are working closely with our African siblings in faith. I also expected to find some commonalities between churches and communities. Instead, I discovered vast geographical distances, ethnic and cultural differences, and complexities of post-colonial engagement. I discovered that the personalities of the individuals who began these communities, and even the variety of languages in which worship is conducted, all formed a intricate Web of diversity emphasizing various aspects of Unitarian Universalism as practiced in North America. This said, I did find some harmonies between our continents that unite us in shared commitments to finding truth and meaning within a frame of free faith, as well as a willingness to build religious community without creed or dogma. In a world where too often religion is used as a tool to oppress, to create illusions of separateness, and to harm the human spirit, such concord is a sacred beginning to this chapter of the story of Unitarian Universalism in Africa.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Cherry, Ibid.