

“Go Tell It on the Mountain . . . But How Do We Get to the Mountain?”
An Essay for the Ohio River Group, 2014
By Gordon D. Gibson

One of my favorite Freedom Songs is the Movement version of “Go Tell It on the Mountain”:

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain:
To let my people go.

It draws on deep sources, combining two well-known songs with two clear messages -- proclamation and liberation. And this transformation of old and traditional music into new and revolutionary music is generally credited, in major part, to Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the finest minds and greatest spirits of the Movement.¹

I will return to the song and its imperatives and nuances. But now we need to hear and apply to ourselves these two messages -- proclamation and liberation.

In my understanding of ministry, and especially ministry in the best of the Unitarian Universalist tradition, we ministers are charged to tend to the tasks of liberation -- liberating minds and hearts, liberating and spreading a salvific message, but also liberating persons and social structures from patterns and realities of oppression and deprivation.

But coming from the places of relative power and privilege that we and many in our congregations occupy, we need a large measure of humility. Without that humility we risk becoming oppressive liberators, bearers of a message that makes us feel good and noble while making those we think we are helping feel pushed around coercively in yet another way. It’s a balancing act -- a continuous, tricky, and important balancing act.

And it is in this mode that we have to tend to proclamation. We are called to proclaim (humbly) the imperative of liberation. We are called to “go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere,” but to be circumspect and humble in the telling.

We all were told at one or many points in our preparation, “It’s not easy.” If we were both wise and fortunate, we heard that message and began to believe it. As practicing ministers we know this truth from hard experience. It’s not easy. It’s also not optional. We are called to

¹ See Sing for Freedom: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement Through Its Songs, compiled and edited by Guy and Candie Carawan (Bethlehem, Pa: Sing Out Publication, 1990), pages 204-205. Also Track 13, Disc 1 of Voices of the Civil Rights Movement: Black American Freedom Songs 1960-1966, Smithsonian Folkways CD SF 40084.

“go tell it on the mountain,” but continually need to figure how to get to an appropriate mountain or hill and how to frame a usefully liberating message.

To further our discussion, let me offer nine paths that in my experience and in my reading of our history move us in the desired direction. Then I’ll flesh each out with an illustrative example or two. The nine:

1. Show up
2. Listen
3. Be useful
4. Bridge
5. Embrace both the sorrows and joys of ally-hood
6. Speak from within our values
7. Work for equality, not assimilation or integration
8. Don’t count on results
9. Be flexible

Show up. That’s so basic and simplistic that it’s easy to overlook how essential it is to fulfilling our calling. And even once we notice this task, it’s easy to let it slip by undone.

Factors in our continental denominational culture make it easier for us to “show up” for issues, groups, and concerns of Euro-Americans of moderate or better means. As Paul Rasor comments in this year’s UUA Common Read, a “factor that weakens the liberal prophetic voice is the tension between religious liberalism’s prophetic impulse and the realities of its social location.”² Mark Morrison-Reed describes the patterns of congregational distribution and of site selection that have helped perpetuate this social location, placing our facilities mostly in White, middle-class or upper middle-class suburbs. He quotes Laile Bartlett: “While Unitarians engage in social action opposing class and race discrimination . . . those living in suburbia are increasingly isolated from the objects of their concern.”³

I have benefited from conversations that Mark Morrison-Reed and I have had as we have each worked on our books. I actually suggested that Mark was perhaps being too polite here about the elephant that is still tromping around in the room, only occasionally noticed. When the

² Reclaiming Prophetic Witness: Liberal Religion in the Public Square (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2012) page 20.

³ See pages 38-44 of The Selma Awakening.

UUA devoted major resources to starting the Pathways Church in the Dallas area early in this century, they placed it in a Zip code that was 94.4% White, although located in a moderately diverse county (12.8% Black/African-American and 19.7% Latino/Hispanic).⁴ For reasons conscious and unconscious, and often with excellent intentions, we have made choices that make it harder for us to “show up” on issues involving both race and class.

But when we are working moderately well, and with some clear consciousness about our call, we do show up. One colleague who made an impression as someone who showed up consistently was Bob Palmer, the first minister to serve the congregation in Nashville, Tennessee. On August 25, 1982, the Rev. Will Campbell wrote a letter to me responding to my request for any observations he might have on Unitarian Universalists and issues of race and civil rights.⁵

I do recall most vividly that during the fifties and early sixties there were two places we could meet regularly in the white community. One was the Unitarian Church. The other was the Jewish Community Center. It stuck in my memory because as a deep water Trinitarian I always resented it. Robert Palmer was the Unitarian minister during most of that time in Nashville and it became standard procedure to call on Bob for the invocation. That was for two reasons. One, he was always there. And two, we didn't want to take a chance on the other Christian preachers who were apt to end with, “In the name of the only true civil rightist, even Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.” Bob was a tough and noble soul (still is) and came in for a lot of harassment. I do not recall any physical abuse he suffered but when the Jewish Community Center was bombed he was in the forefront of protest and reconciliation. Since none of us whites made an A I suppose we'll have to give Bob Palmer a B+ and his congregation a C. That, of course, is looking back from the security of the present. At the time the marks would have been much higher.

We mustn't neglect our own flock. We mustn't neglect crying needs where we live. But we need to stay in touch with the broader community so that we know when it's imperative to get outside our own walls, our own cocoon, our own comfort zone, and show up for those causes and people for whom our presence may be a happy surprise.

⁴ Data from 2000 Census.

⁵ If you don't know the late Will Campbell, you are assigned his memoir Brother to a Dragonfly as remedial reading. He was a Mississippi-born, Yale-educated renegade Baptist preacher who served for a time as the National Council of Churches' chaplain to the civil rights movement.

Listen. I remember seminary courses on preaching. There was also one, I think, that encouraged us to listen. We probably needed a lot more practice in listening. Listening can be hard work for those of us who are well-educated, broadly competent, widely read, well connected and accustomed to holding our own with people of similar background. But we do well to give the ears priority over the mouth, especially as we seek to be helpful agents of change.

In an August 26, 2014, email for Standing on the Side of Love our colleague Julie Taylor spoke of her ministry in the wake of the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri:

For me, as someone who has only been living in the St. Louis area for two years, solidarity and accountability mean showing up to everything that I hear about, introducing myself as a UU minister, and then keeping my mouth shut. I don't offer my resume of more than a decade of experience doing pastoral care in crisis situations. I simply show up everywhere I am needed -- show up, shut up, do what people ask of me, and show up again.

And listening can be a revelation. I still recall vividly going to a meeting of GBAUUM, the Greater Boston Area Unitarian Universalist Ministers in late 1967 or very early 1968. Our speaker was a good friend, Hayward Henry, a Boston University graduate student who had just been elected Chair of BUUC, the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus. Hayward said something about "those of you who are non-Black." Hm, "non-Black." That was a reference point I had never had before.

Listening is not just a tool for those of us who are allies, outsiders, and relatively clueless. Listening can clarify, crystalize, and lead to decisions. It was a technique used well by Martin Luther King, Jr. In Andrew Young's memoir [An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America](#), he tells of a crucial decision point in the 1963 Birmingham campaign with SCLC staff and members of the local committee gathered in a stuffy room at the Gaston Motel on Good Friday:

In this atmosphere of utter depression, Martin said very little. He lit a cigarette, and just listened, as I was coming to learn was his habit in high-pressure situations. I watched Martin's face, knowing that whatever the staff and the local committee advised, he would make his own decision as to whether he should abandon or drive forward with the effort in Birmingham.

After several hours, Dr. King and then Ralph Abernathy left the room. When they returned they had changed from suits to jeans and denim jackets and Dr. King said, "We've already raised all

the money we can right now. The only thing to do is for me to go to jail, and join those people already there until people see what we're dealing with. Those who are going with me, get ready."⁶

Be Useful. Another of Julie Taylor's observations about the role she found herself in in Ferguson was, "Showing up and being of service is how relationships are built and nurtured, particularly across lines of difference." It is possible for those who are privileged to think that simply showing up should earn them praise, maybe adulation. No. Beyond showing up, we must be primed to be of service, to be useful, and not necessarily in ways of our choosing.

Our late colleague Sid Freeman came to the ministry by an unusual path. He held degrees from the University of Wisconsin, Bowling Green State, and Cornell and had been teaching speech and drama at Sweet Briar College. While working on his PhD at Cornell he had become interested and then active in the Unitarian Church in Ithaca. During his time at Sweet Briar he was asked by the Unitarian Church in Lynchburg to serve as a "lay minister." Subsequently, on the basis of his extensive academic work and his six years experience in Lynchburg, Freeman was granted ministerial fellowship. He was then called by the Charlotte, North Carolina, Unitarians in 1957 and his 31 year service there was his only ministerial settlement.

When Sid Freeman arrived in Charlotte he found in place a monthly program called "Town Meeting" in which a prominent person would be invited to speak to the church. Dr. Rufus Perry, the new President of Johnson C. Smith University, a historically Black campus, was the speaker at one of the first "Town Meetings" after Freeman's arrival. After the session, the two men were talking and Dr. Perry said that he had one White instructor on the faculty and he was working to further integrate the faculty, perhaps as a prelude to integrating the student body. Perry then asked Freeman if he might like to teach part-time. The next day he invited Freeman to the campus to sign a contract. Over the years Freeman taught English, his undergraduate major, and then speech. Sid Freeman was willing to be useful to Dr. Perry's long-term aims of moving that campus in a more inclusive direction. And his relationship with the students at the University did open interesting opportunities for him.

Students at Johnson C. Smith led the sit-ins in Charlotte. Charles Jones, a student and the key leader, invited Sid Freeman to join them in the sit-ins. At first he was the only White face in

6 *An Easy Burden* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), pages 212-216

the crowd. (The Charlotte Police Chief, Jesse James, called Sid Freeman in and said, “I’m totally neutral on this, but you realize that your White face sure sticks out in that crowd.” James was unusual in providing considerable security for those sitting in.) Catherine McIntire, a church member and a reference librarian, told Sid Freeman that one of the police officers assigned to escort those sitting in came to the reference desk to find out more about this White guy who some people said was a minister who was part of the sit-ins. She loaded the officer up with Unitarian Universalist information.⁷

Bridge. As Unitarian Universalists this is something that we can do with some ease while some other religious traditions can only contemplate it with angst. In Elkhart, Indiana, after 9/11 I remember suggesting that the Ministerial Association establish dialogue with the Muslim community, which led to the discovery that I was the only one in the Association who knew any Muslims. In Jackson, Mississippi, I remember with amusement that as a minister I was sometimes invited to moderately “Establishment” meetings where I might be the only man in sport coat and slacks rather than a suit; at the same time, as the most “radical” White minister in town, I would be treated as an asset in meetings where I was the only man wearing a necktie.

If we are to be agents of liberation we need to perform the task of bridging among disparate populations. We need to converse with Muslims and Jews, the “spiritual but not religious” and fundamentalist Christians, Sikhs and Bahais, and a great diversity of other people. In matters of race, if we have been doing our work, we should be among the White people most aware of pressures, needs, and opinions in the Black community and most able to work in the White-dominated parts of society for non-token involvement of Black people.

Others turn to us to perform this bridging function. Will Campbell mentioned Bob Palmer being asked to deliver invocations at civil rights meetings. When the Muslim congregation in Jackson brought Warith Dean Muhammed to town for a program, Imam William Waheed gave me a role in the program; I was the token White. Sid Freeman recalls an interaction he had with Martin Luther King, Jr.:

“After Martin Luther King delivered the Ware Lecture at the General Assembly he and I spoke. He remembered my name from that, and I got invited to a gathering in Jackson that he called over something, and I can’t even remember what the something was. It

⁷ From a March 10, 2000, oral history interview with Sid Freeman.

was a small gathering of clergy, and it was to back up some of the local clergy on some local issue. We were milling and greeting and he said, 'Let's all sit down.' He leans over to me and says, 'Aren't you that Unitarian I met at your General Assembly?' I said, 'Yes, I am.' He said, 'You pray. You won't offend anybody.'"⁸

At our best, we actively seek out ways to bridge. In Atlanta the Unitarian Universalist Congregation created an alliance with Ebenezer Baptist Church. From the late 1950s into the 1960s the youth groups of the two churches had joint meetings. According to Ed Cahill, who served the Unitarian Universalist congregation during this era, this was probably the only place in the Atlanta of that time where Black and White youth had opportunity to meet as peers and equals.⁹

Embrace both the sorrows and joys of ally-hood. A result of building and maintaining bridges is in some instances becoming an ally. Being an ally is both rewarding and challenging. The same can be said of having an ally. With both its promise and its perils, the process of developing alliances is a crucial one to work at.

When Ed Cahill was called to Charlotte, North Carolina, he found that as a Unitarian he was not accepted in the White Protestant ministerial group. On the other hand, the Black ministers welcomed him to their meetings. He was about to formally join the Black clergy group when a White Episcopalian clergy friend tipped him off that there was a plan to join the White and Black groups, but that that plan would fail if he were part of the baggage brought with the Black group. He chose to go for a while with no local clergy group.¹⁰

Virginia Price was an active layperson in the Nashville, Tennessee, congregation. She had grown up in the Nashville area but her attitudes on issues involving race led her to speak and act against the local norms in that area, including taking part in lunch counter sit-ins. This led to some tensions in her family of origin, but some rewards in the wider community. One of her stories is about her efforts in the Parent Teacher Association, the PTA:

There were separate White and Black PTAs. When I was so active in PTA I tried to get cooperation between the two groups as much as I could, not making much progress in it.

I went out to Pearl High School, a Black high school, to a meeting, and the PTA President

8 March 10, 2000, oral history interview

9 1982 letter from Ed Cahill

10 Tape recorded statement by Ed Cahill in 1982.

was talking about how many people she had invited from the White PTA , and she said, “None of them would come.” The person sitting next to me I could see peripherally pointing to me to remind the President that I was sitting there. She said, “Oh, Mrs. Price. She’s just one of us.” It’s one of the nicest things I’ve ever had said about me.”¹¹

We also need to remember that there can be costs, not just to us, but to those with whom we ally. Some of these may be suggested by a coffee hour conversation I remember in Jackson, Mississippi. Jim Loewen said something about having a book that was in the process of publication by Harvard University Press. Its subject was the Mississippi Chinese. One of our regular visitors, a student at Millsaps College and himself a Mississippi-born Chinese-American, expressed considerable interest. At some point in the conversation the Millsaps student volunteered that within the Mississippi Chinese community he and his family received some criticism because of their easy and friendly relations with White Mississippians. He said, “We’re called ‘bananas’.”¹²

Speak from within our values. The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber II, leader of the Forward Together Moral Monday Movement in North Carolina is eloquently clear that values and vision are important to the struggle for liberation. He has written:

How do we build a people’s movement? We start with vision. Prophetic moral vision seeks to penetrate despair, so that we can believe in and embrace new futures. It does not ask if the vision can be implemented -- questions of implementation are of no consequence until the vision can be imagined. The slaves didn’t get out of slavery by first figuring out how to get out; they got out because they were driven by a vision that said, “Oh freedom over me. / And before I’d be a slave / I’d be buried in my grave / And go home to my Lord and be free.”¹³

In the Moral Monday Movement there is a shared vision and a propulsion from compatible values. These compatible values pull together interest groups that had been competing for support for a variety of nearer term goals: improved teacher pay, restored voting rights, support for same-sex marriage, better mental health services, respect for labor rights, etc. Their compatible values, voiced on behalf of these complementary goals, result in a broad vision of a more just, equit-

11 Based on tape recorded interviews on November 19, 1997 and January 27, 2000.

12 Personal recollection. I wish I could remember the name of the Millsaps student. Jim Loewen’s book is *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971)

13 “A Prophetic Moral Vision” in the July 7-14, 2014 issue of *The Nation*, pages 14-15.

able, democratic and humane social order. The compatibility of their values allow participants to speak up, not just in narrow self-interest, but for shared goals. A straight Black clergyman can speak up for LGBT rights, followed by a teacher calling for better access to the ballot for all.¹⁴

If we are going to “go tell it on the mountain” and engage in the hard and gritty work of liberating people, we had better be motivated by our values, and not some short-term notion of “workable strategy.”

Mark Morrison-Reed focuses the first two chapters of The Selma Awakening on the professed values and the values in practice of the Universalists, the Unitarians, and then we Unitarian Universalists. Our capacity to respond to Dr. King’s call to come to Selma was clearly rooted in our professed values, and in our gradual narrowing of the considerable gap between professed values and values in practice.

To put an even finer point on it, Virginia Volker, a member of the Unitarian Universalist congregation in Birmingham, Alabama, since the 1960s observed of our civil rights Movement involvement that Unitarian Universalist rhetoric made Unitarian Universalist involvement inescapable.¹⁵

And Harry Weirsema, Jr. of Knoxville, a second generation Unitarian Universalist and second generation activist for civil rights, once told me that he didn’t follow the received wisdom of simply hanging up on harassing callers. For the most part he found that they didn’t want to converse, and they hung up on him. But one time, wakened by the phone in the middle of the night, he pursued the line of asking his caller what his church said about what he was doing. Harry told the caller, “My church teaches me to respect and value everybody without regard to their skin color or what they believe. Does your church teach anything like that?” Finally the man said, “I might want to talk with you some more. Would it be okay if I called you back sometime -- not in the middle of the night?”¹⁶

If we speak and work from within the context of our shared values, we have the ability to motivate and move our people and our institutions. Relying on the shared values of our religious movement, we can feel some confidence in what we attempt to do. What we cannot be assured of is that we will be safe from criticism or even retribution. One of the saddest stories I know of

14 Additional material from hearing Dr. Barber at the 2014 Selma Bridge Crossing Jubilee, March 6-9, 2014, in Selma, Alabama.

15 From a letter or tape recording provided to me in 1982 and paraphrased on page 24 of my paper “Unitarian Universalists and the Civil Rights Movement - What Did We Do, and What Can We Learn from What We Did?”

16 oral history interview in 2000

in this regard is from Spencer Lavan's ministry in Charleston, South Carolina. Spencer was called to Charleston in the summer of 1962 after his graduation from Harvard Divinity School. Here is part of the story as I recount it in a forthcoming Skinner House book:

In June of 1963 Spencer wrote a letter on church letterhead to the Fort Sumter Hotel in Charleston, protesting its "calling in the police to arrest Negroes" who sought to use its dining room. The letter noted that other local hotels were not doing this, and announced that the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association would be moving its meetings to one of those other hotels. The manager of the hotel responded, "I would not dignify your letter with an answer." However, two church members responded with blistering letters. Unbeknownst to Spencer Lavan when he wrote to the hotel, these church members were two of the stockholders in the hotel.

An October 2, 1963, letter from the Vestry of the church reported to the membership on the July and September meetings of the Vestry. In July the Vestry supported freedom of the pulpit, but noted that church stationery should not be used for contents not sanctioned by the church and that the minister, when communicating on controversial issues, should speak in a personal capacity rather than as minister of the church. Many of the Vestry members spoke supportively of Spencer and Susan's work in the community.

The September, 1963, Vestry meeting was attended by four members who "raised issues which touched upon the honesty and integrity of the Minister, his activities with respect to integration" and his letter to the Fort Sumter Hotel. Letters from some church members reducing their pledges were read, but a counterpoint of several Vestry members announced increases in their pledges. There was a motion (not seconded) from one Vestry member to call for a special meeting of the congregation to consider dismissing the minister and withdrawing the congregation from the Unitarian Universalist Association. The Rev. Clifton Hoffman, Executive Secretary of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Universalist Conference, was present for the Vestry meeting and spoke in support of Spencer Lavan's conduct of his ministry. The Vestry ultimately voted, with one dissent, to affirm the honesty and integrity of the minister.¹⁷

¹⁷ The working title of the book started out to be Freedom Moves South but at this time is Southern Witness. This passage is based on files from his Charleston ministry which Spencer provided to me some years ago.

Spencer announced in a January 26, 1964, letter that he would be returning to graduate school in July of 1964.

Our shared values framing and guiding our actions give us some protection from criticism, but not immunity.

Work for equality, not assimilation or integration. The question inevitably asked of any group seeking liberation from old constraints is, “What do you people want?” The answer is self-determination, if ever, “We want to become just like you.”

For Unitarian Universalists this question began to swirl as there was a transition from “the civil rights movement” to “Black consciousness” and “Black empowerment.” Sermonically there were ponderings and responses as Stokely Carmichael began widely reported calls for “Black Power” and many others echoed and amplified those calls. Within Unitarian Universalism, Homer Jack as UUA Director of Social Responsibility attempted a constructive framing of the issue by convening a conference on “Unitarian Universalist Response to the Black Rebellion” in October of 1967. It was at that conference that the Black Unitarian Universalist Caucus (BUUC) convened. Between then and a General Assembly vote on May 26, 1968, there was a great deal of Unitarian Universalist discussion of racial issues. Would a vote supporting BUUC’s demand for \$250,000 a year for a Black Affairs Council turn us away from supporting integration? Was it integration that we had fought and (in two cases) died for all these years? Or had we been working, in Selma and in many other instances, to empower Black people to speak to their own fates, their own choices?¹⁸

In 1968 BUUC won the vote at General Assembly, 836 to 326. In 1969 the issues had been somewhat recast and the vote was much closer. And then, amidst UUA financial crisis, this compact (and many others) came totally unglued in late 1969 and 1970. Bill Sinkford, writing an Introduction to Victor Carpenter’s book on the empowerment controversy, could say, “For 30 years, it has been hard to find trust not only across racial divides, but around any subject that touches on the issue of race.”

¹⁸ This subject cannot be dealt with in one paragraph or even one book. Much of my take on the subject is reflected in Victor Carpenter’s *The Long Challenge: The Empowerment Controversy (1967-1977)* (Chicago: Meadville Lombard Theological School Press, 2003). See also *EmPOWERment: One Denomination’s Quest for Racial Justice, 1967-1982* by the Commission on Appraisal in 1983, and the video documentary *Wilderness Journey: The Struggle for Black Empowerment and Racial Justice within the Unitarian Universalist Association 1967-1970* produced by the Massachusetts Bay District. We still lack a good articulation of the integrationist (“BAWA”) side of this controversy.

Many White Unitarian Universalists had not heard the answer to the question, “What do you people want?” Many still thought, “Oh, ‘they’ want integration. ‘They’ want to be just like all the rest of us.” Interesting thought, but misguided.

I was reminded of this with some clarity as I was preparing for last July’s Mississippi Civil Rights Journey that was co-sponsored by the Living Legacy Project and the Unitarian Universalist College of Social Justice. Because I wanted to dig a little deeper into the local dynamics in Meridian, Mississippi, I looked up Roscoe Jones, a resource person who had been recommended by two people who had been volunteers during the summer of 1964. If you watched the PBS documentary “Freedom Summer” you saw Roscoe Jones several times. As a 17 year-old in 1964 Roscoe had headed up the Freedom School in Meridian, which had 300 children and adults in its classes. He is today very clear (as I expect he was 50 years ago): “I was working for equality, not integration.” If equality resulted in integration, then fine, but equality was the prime goal, and he’s still working toward it.

When we can fit it in to our Living Legacy Pilgrimages I try to include traversing at least a few blocks of Farish Street in Jackson, Mississippi. Even into the 1970s Farish Street was a surviving if not thriving retail business district and office location for the Black community. As Black retail trade was integrated into the White business district and White-owned malls, Farish Street became a ghost of its former self. Integration (or at least desegregation) arrived, but equality is still an unreached goal.

Don’t count on results. Or, at the very least, do not count on quick, visible, short-term results. Sometimes they happen, but in my experience they are not the norm.

And the goal is liberation. The goal of all our proclaiming and working, is to nudge the moral arc of the universe. We need to remember that it is an arc, an arc that with adequate input from enough allies will bend toward justice. But it’s an arc, and not a highway sign for a U-turn.

I think of the history of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of New Orleans, a congregation that in the 1960s had a courageous and distinguished civil rights stance. But it had a long history that it took long years and work by at least three ministers to overcome. In 1834 it had been formed by a theological split in the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans; a majority of the congregation followed the Rev. Theodore Clapp’s migration to universalist and unitarian beliefs, but neither minister nor congregation migrated away from support for slavery. After

Parson Clapp resigned for reasons of health in 1856 there were a number of ministries, most rather brief and none very distinguished. In 1940 Thaddeus Clark, newly graduated from Harvard with an S.T.B. from the Divinity School and a Ph.D. in Philosophy, was called to New Orleans where he spent the years of World War II. With his guidance, the Unitarian Church hosted USO social evenings for servicemen, and at his insistence these were open to both Black and White men in uniform. After Thad Clark was called to St. Louis, the congregation called Alfred Hobart, who had served briefly as a Unitarian minister before the Depression and had then moved into social work. Hobart continued and strengthened many of the programs and emphases that Clark had begun, including forums and discussions on issues of race. The congregation's first Black member, a quiet educator who had belonged to the First Unitarian Church in Providence, Rhode Island, joined during this time. When Alfred Hobart moved to Charleston, South Carolina, he was succeeded in 1950 by Albert D'Orlando, a New Englander. Soon two more Black Unitarians moved to town to be executives in the local Urban League and the Negro Branch YWCA. J. Westbrook McPherson and Vernetta Hill were not quiet and retiring. They stayed after service when an after service coffee hour was introduced. On the second Sunday that there was a coffee hour, the kitchen cabinets were discovered to be padlocked; it seemed that the Women's Alliance owned the cups and saucers and did not believe they should be used for a racial mixed function. This was the first of many battles during the D'Orlando years, but after fifteen to twenty years of work during the service of three ministers the war for a racially inclusive, justice seeking congregation was mostly won.¹⁹

Be flexible. I have not seen any one formula, program, approach, or method that works all the time, everywhere, in all situations. We need to learn from the theme song for this essay. We need to derive, invent, and add new verses.

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,
Go tell it on the mountain:
To let my people go.

From two songs, one proclaiming the birth of Jesus the Christ and the other recapitulating the process of procuring liberation from enslavement in Egypt, we now have a new song proclaiming the imperative of liberation.

¹⁹ Based on materials from the church files and the personal papers of Albert D'Orlando, and greatly condensed from the Southern Witness manuscript.

What to do for verses to go with this new song? Again reach back to existing material, borrow, adapt. I'm no musicologist, but to my untutored ear there are hints that some of the needed borrowing for the Movement version may have been influenced, inspired, or inflected by "Wade in the Water," a song believed by some to be a creation of Harriet Tubman, the great Conductor of the Underground Railroad.

Who's that yonder dressed in red?
Let my people go.
Must be the children Moses led.
Let my people go.

But also look to contemporary experience, contemporary expression. Sometimes this verse has a third line that says, "Must be the children Bob Moses led," giving acknowledgement to the fabled SNCC field secretary who shaped the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964. And experience of the day also created verses such as:

Who's that yonder dressed in black?
Let my people go.
Must be the Uncle Toms turning back.
Let my people go.

Who's that yonder dressed in blue?
Let my people go.
Must be the freedom riders comin' through.
Let my people go.

"Freedom rider" was a term sometimes applied to any civil rights worker coming in from outside the immediate local area, and very often they were dressed in blue, with denim jeans or bib overalls being something of a uniform for male SNCC workers.

We are charged to be prophetic voices, proclaiming from whatever elevation we can reach the imperatives of love, liberation, community, and justice. But we continually discover there is no one path to trod, no one set of words to speak, no singular program to follow. We will be wise to derive inspiration from past successes and wisdom from past successes and failures, and from there to respond to the opportunities and challenges before us with flexibility, imagination, and courage.

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