

A small, emerging congregation in the South felt drawn to its historic connection to both Unitarian and Universalist heritages that dated back to early in the Civil War, 1862. Acting out of their fiduciary and strategic modes, the congregational board was seeking their first home and planning for future ministries when property in an African American neighborhood became available. The property was heir's property that had been purchased by former enslaved Africans of the Sea Islands of South Carolina in the 1860's.

A Unitarian woman of privilege, Laura Towne, had come from Philadelphia, answering the call to come to the South to support the transition of these formerly enslaved people to a life as free women and men.

She started a school, the first school in the South for these newly freed souls. It survives to this day as the Penn Center of St. Helena Island.

This beautiful property along a lovely salt marsh surrounded by moss-draped live oaks was beautiful and connected to both their Unitarian and Universalist roots. Moreover, this was on the very land where the original school was started in a plantation house abandoned by its owners who fled as the Union forces overtook the Sea Islands.

The leadership was excited: this was land that their foremothers, Laura Towne and later Clara Barton had trod in their commitment to racial justice!

Operating out of their generative mode of governance, the board spoke with the African American woman who was selling the property, her extended family, neighbors, ministers of Black churches, and the leadership at the Penn Center. They hosted neighborhood meetings to explain Unitarian Universalism and

their hopes for becoming a multi-racial, multi-cultural religious community.

The proposal was brought to the congregation for a vote and was approved overwhelmingly. In the board's first meeting in the small house on the newly purchased property, they were greeted by a handwritten note nailed to the front door: "You are not welcome here."

Of course they were stunned and deeply saddened. The agenda for the board meeting was discarded and a deeply emotionally meeting began on what to do... when a rapid knock on the door interrupted their meeting.

A young man of color introduced himself as a grandson of the seller who had not known of the sale. He apologized for the tone of the note and made a simple request: he would like to own the property where his ancestors worked under slavery and became free people of worth and dignity. He had played on this spot as a child. He couldn't conceive of the property leaving the family. And as well meaning as he came to know these people to be, he just didn't think it was right.

The board went into a period of deep discernment. They were reluctant to give up their dream, their anticipated ministries. They had worked hard to ensure they would be welcome neighbors. They had raised funds to affect a purchase without debt. They had done their homework, held meetings, and engaged the community.

But they came quickly to a resolution.

Through bold leadership they took a proposal to the congregation and the vote to restore the property to the family was approved unanimously!

The decision was hard to be sure, but big, bold, brave; and I would add, compassionate.

That decision put that UU congregation on the map. People, black and white, heard the story and came to know Unitarian Universalism. That congregation became known as the people who loved everybody.