

## **Spiritual Odyssey (An Autobiographical Sketch)**

**By Rev. Chester W. McCall**

I was called into the ministry in 1960 at the age of twelve. I grew up Catholic in the fullest sense of what it means to be Catholic. At the age of twelve I knew that I wanted to be a minister and publicly proclaimed my ministry in a Pentecostal church in the neighborhood. Interesting enough, my parents did not allow me to fully develop my ministry, believing that I was too young at age twelve to know what I wanted to do and advised me not to play with God.

It was in 1967 that I resumed my ministry fully. I joined Antioch Baptist Church in San Jose under the leadership of Rev. C.W. Washington and began a “street ministry” with Rev. Henry Rountree, Jr., Community Services Director of the San Jose Salvation Army. This team-partnership ministry relationship lasted over 20 years and the ministry continues today.

In 1972 I graduated from Cal State University of San Jose and applied for admissions at Pacific School of Religion. The admissions office informed me that I was not accepted. Finding this unacceptable, I informed the school administrator that it was God’s will that I attend PSR and that the basis for my denial was rooted in human understanding and that if they were able to transcend the worldly criteria that they had established that they would find me acceptable and needed to reconsider their decision. I arrived on the day of registration, registered, and began attending classes. Three weeks after school began, I was informed that I had been accepted since three other students that they accepted did not accept their admission.

I graduated in 1977 with a focus of New Testament Biblical Criticism, Counseling and Religious Education. In 1977, I graduated from PSR and was employed by the Sequoia Young Men’s Christian Association in Redwood City as the lead counselor at its youth runaway house. In April 1979 I was

ordained into a specialized Ministry for Families, Youth and Seniors prior to the existence of the Specialized Ministry Committee.

To my surprise it was announced at my ordination that I was the first African American (Black) to be ordained in the Northern California Conference of the United Church of Christ and to this day the conference has not yet ordained another African American. In August 1983, I began working for the San Mateo County Service League as the Correctional Services Director whereby I worked in the seven San Mateo County jails, creating, and implementing rehabilitation programs and pre-release programs for inmates and their families. In August 1984, I was terminated from my employment with Service League when my advocacy for the inmates, regarding the construction of a new jail, forced the inclusion of a needed childcare center and renovation of the old jail visiting room, was supported by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors over the wishes of the County Sheriff, who took my advocacy as a personal affront to his authority.

By January 1985, I had run out of unemployment benefits. That same month my landlord sold the condominium I was renting and suddenly, I was homeless and unemployed with nowhere to go. From June 1983 until June 1985, I was employed by the Campbell Congregational Church as the Christian Education Director but the church was unable to provide any assistance that would have gotten me off the streets. I used this opportunity to fully experience my faith and homelessness, which still contributes to my ability to serve the homeless today.

In May 1985 a seventeen-year-old Black youth was shot and killed by a San Jose undercover police officer. I became the pastor to the family, providing pastoral care services for the entire family, assisting them to cope with the young man's death, adjust to life without him, especially his brothers and sisters, and struggled with them as they dealt with death and dying issues. My last act of ministry

included coordinating a public hearing into the death of this young man on behalf of the Truss family and the Human Relations Commission of Santa Clara County.

In October of 1985 David Jamieson came and visited me in San Jose in my homelessness. At the time I was living in the unheated garage of the Truss Family with the rats, spiders, fleas, and roaches. An old couch was my bed, and I had my own private bathroom off the garage. Basically, living out of boxes, but off the streets, he found my situation to be totally unacceptable and requested a grant from the ministerial association fund.

### **ONE OF MANY MIRACLES:**

On December 24, 1985 (on Christmas Eve) I received a check for \$1500.00 dollars. I used these funds to secure an apartment the same day. In addition, a job that I had applied for came through and I began work on Christmas Day 1985 as a retail clerk for Stop N' Go markets. **Life began once again, and my transformation began as well.** By March 1986 I became the Assistant Store Manager and in May 1986 I became the regional Training Supervisor for all new clerks from Sacramento to Salinas. In August 1986 I became the Executive Director of the East Palo Alto Senior Center in my hometown of East Palo Alto (a predominately Black Community). I ended my employment with Stop N' Go in March 1988. I moved back to East Palo Alto across the street from the Senior Center. While employed I secured the funding to build a new senior center, worked closely with the City Council who donated the land, developed the plans, etc.

In May 1988 while at the Senior Center and out shopping for a new stereo I ran into Rev. Harold Rucker who I had met one time at an annual meeting. He invited me to come to his church and visit. Shortly thereafter, he went on sabbatical for six months. In October 1988 his wife, who was working for Satellite Senior Homes, quit her job as the Administrator of a low-income housing project in Newark and encouraged me to apply for her position. I did and rather than giving me her position in Newark they

offered me a position in Oakland which I accepted. I began working at Satellite Central in downtown Oakland in December 1988 as the Administrator, which entailed property management and the coordination of support and services for the senior residents.

My car broke down on the San Mateo bridge in January 1989 and I moved to Oakland to live with the person who later became my partner. I remained a member of Island United in Foster City and was elected to the Board of Directors. I served as the President of the Board participating in the UCC Bay & Santa Clara Association regional activities.

It was in 1989 that I met Rev. Jerry Montgomery. When he left the Oakland UCC church, he joined Island United. We became instant friends because of our interest in ministry, chaplaincy, criminal justice, and computers. One day he told me that a friend of his who was the CEO of Volunteers of America was looking for a Black male in his forties to be his Assistant and serve as Chief of Operations and wanted to know if I would mind if he gave Rev. John Olmsted my name. I agreed and the interview resulted in my being employed by Sue Olmsted as her administrative assistant. I began work eight months after being employed by Satellite Senior Homes, and two weeks after my 41<sup>st</sup> birthday for Volunteers of America. Two weeks after I was employed my supervisor took a three-month sabbatical. My first task was the creation of the Midway Multiservice Homeless Shelter in Alameda, CA. That included the purchase of the modular buildings, creation of budget and program services, hiring of staff, coordinating volunteers, etc. On Christmas Eve, December 24, 1989, while purchasing gifts for the homeless children in the shelter, the Executive Director was hit by a drunk driver and killed. I was appointed acting director and assisted staff, her family, and the clients in dealing with death and dying issues. I organized a memorial service for the agency and the community to honor her and her commitment to the community.

In May of 1990, I officially became the Program Director of Midway, which because of the innovations of the many homeless services we provided, led to my becoming the Homeless Program Supervisor for the City of Oakland and my meeting Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs, chairperson of the City of Oakland Homeless Commission. Shortly after beginning my work with the city, Rev. Rob Eller-Isaacs extended an invitation to me to consider ministry with the UUA. Shortly thereafter I attended a meeting with the President of the UUA, the Rev. John Buehrens with other ministers of color who were interested in becoming UU ministers. I attended my first General Assembly in Fort Worth as John Buehrens' guest. It was during this event that I met Barbara Majors. I was introduced to the Journey Toward Wholeness Program, met with the MFC, etc. **which led to my acceptance of the invitation to join with the UUA and bring its vision and message to communities and people of color.**

#### **AND TO THIS DAY THE MIRACLE CONTINUES!**

I lived in Oakland from 1989 until I moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma to fulfill the MFC ministry requirement of serving a Unitarian Universalist congregation for a year to be granted ministerial standing. I served the City of Oakland as the Homeless Program Supervisor in the Office of Health and Human Services, with Floretta Chisom, Director. While employed with the City of Oakland, I was also on the ministerial staff of First Unitarian Church Oakland (FUCO) where I served as the Justice Associates Coordinator and Pacific Central District Diversity/Multicultural Consultant. The position was funded through a \$10,000 grant from the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, a matching grant from the Extension Ministry & Faith in Action Department. Six months after beginning at FUCO the ministers went on sabbatical, and the congregation began its renovations after the devastating earthquake. In September 1996, I began my ministry officially with the UUA.

Before leaving the Bay Area for Tulsa I had the opportunity to serve as an Adjunct Professor at Starr King Seminary teaching a course in Institutional Racism and other forms of oppression in the local

church. I used the workbook and materials that I had developed for the United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ. My ministry today still includes being a UU-trained, national anti-oppression trainer and consultant for the Unitarian Universalist Association, the United Church of Christ, and the Disciples of Christ, assisting local congregations, districts, associations, etc., in becoming and being an “antiracist and non-oppressive” “spiritually-centered” faith communities and religious institutions.

I serve as the Chaplain of the African American Unitarian Universalist Minister Association (AAUUM) and Diverse Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM). In addition to my in-depth knowledge of homeless issues, my ministry encompasses traditional and non-traditional ministerial services and includes providing a variety of workshops and seminars in the areas of Spiritual Growth and Development, Intentional Caring, Institutional Racism and Oppression, Achieving One’s Human Potential, Diversity and Multicultural Relations, Youth Violence, Creating Non-Oppressive communities and institutions, and a variety of other workshops that deal with community and social justice issues.

I have worked in the religious and non-religious non-profit sector for well over 40 years. I have served assisting community-based organizations in becoming 501(c)3 non-profit organizations, providing staff and board training, taught case-management processes and procedures, worked with community-based non-profit housing development organizations, served as project site manager for several construction projects and have worked with a variety of social service community-based and governmental agencies.

I welcome the opportunity to continue my blended ministry in the UUA in whatever form and structure that it may take.

## **Finding Home in a White Faith**

**by Latoya Brooks**

(These excerpted words are included here as a testimonial to Rev. Chester M. McCall's presence at the UU Church of the Restoration and how one individual was impacted by his presence. Source: Unitarian Universalists of Color: Stories of Struggle, Courage, Love and Faith, edited by Yuri Yamamoto, Chandra Snell, and Tim Hanami):

...I eventually found my way to the UU Church of the Restoration in Philadelphia. That church truly felt like home. ...What drew me to joining the church was the minister at the time, a Black gay man. He seemed to be from a Christian tradition, yet he celebrated other spiritual traditions effortlessly. I loved seeing someone who looked like me. I didn't feel "othered" or like an outsider. I felt empowered seeing him in a position of power and spiritual leadership in a faith tradition that has few ministers of color.

His presence reminded me of worshipping at a traditional Black church. I also met with him for spiritual guidance just like at a traditional Black church. Him being openly gay was refreshing because it reminded me of the close-mindedness of the Black church that I did not want to affiliate with.

Soon after I joined the Church of the Restoration, my beloved minister informed the congregation that he was leaving. After he separated from the congregation, I attended a few services, but it never quite felt like home...Having a Black minister as part of my UU journey was important for me to feel connected to the faith. During my tenure at the Church of the Restoration, I felt like I could be myself. I did not have to perform stereotypical roles bestowed upon Black people. It was not assumed that I wanted to sing in the choir, and no one tried to place me on the diversity committee...With the Black minister, I had felt that I could serve on the diversity committee because I wanted to, not because I was fetishized

or put in a box. UUism is a faith guided by principles that encourage us to embrace diversity and welcome all who seek to understand our spiritual traditions. Yet true diversity is lacking, so how can we truly test how welcoming we are?"