

Oral History Interview: Duncan Teague

Interviewee: Duncan Teague

Interviewer: Mark Bowman

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Duncan T: I wasn't ordained in the UU movement until 2014. I graduated seminary in 2011, to answer your question. So there's this 20 something years of HIV and AIDS work, if not—

Mark B: You did AIDS work, yeah.

Duncan T: —maybe 30 years.

Mark B: What seminary did you go to?

Duncan T: Candler School of Theology right here at Emory University.

Mark B: And what precipitated the call, the desire to go into pastoral ministry and go to seminary?

Duncan T: How much time to we have? [*Laughs.*]

Mark B: We have much time.

Duncan T: I probably knew as a kid that I had a calling, but early in my life I also knew I was gay, and so I compromised and accepted what I thought was a calling to gospel music, because I could sing, because I didn't see gay people in our pulpits as National Missionary Baptists. Certainly not out gay people. And then when I got really mad and my heart got broken by the church during the HIV and AIDS thing, I sort of walked away because

it was also about having my heart broken about HIV and AIDS from my family. And it was all tied together because my father was a minister.

And I discovered that there were liberal religions like MCC where I could be myself, and I was a part of that for just a little bit. And then I found out that I could even go further radical, and so I joined the First Existentialist Congregation here in Atlanta, and they were loosely affiliated with the Unitarians. So I was there for like ten years.

Mark B: Around what year was that that you joined the Existential congregation?

Duncan T: I think it was like 1990.

Mark B: Okay.

Duncan T: Yeah. It's here in Atlanta. And the minister actually was ordained Methodist, but also he went back and got ordained as a Unitarian Universalist. Because of his relationship status, he was going to have a lot of problems with the UUs, and so he founded his own congregation here in Atlanta. And what was attractive about that was the diversity of people and the absolutely open acceptance of whoever walked in the door, and acceptance of me. And I'd never seen anything or heard of anything like it. And when I... That place grew my ministry. And I thought that I could stay in HIV and AIDS work and I was compromising, so I was just going to be a lay minister.

And the universe decided that that wasn't satisfactory. And literally, you know, I want to be a process theologian because God is wooing you, and

you have all this autonomy, but that isn't my story. My story is that God is, you know, whoever God is, and corners you sometimes and says here's your plan. [*Laughs.*] So the more I leaned toward ministry the better things got. And in my last job—

Mark B: What do you mean the better things got? Say a little more about that.

Duncan T: The more my life started to fall into place and I started to feel like I was doing what I was called to do all along. And it's interesting because one of my neighbors that I grew up with in Kansas City pulled me aside one time and said, well, Duncan, why don't you just go into social work? And as much as I liked what I was doing in HIV and AIDS the idea of me being a social worker just, it turned my stomach. First of all, I was misinformed about social work from an ex-boyfriend, but I was like that's not me, and that's not how I want to do this. Yeah.

So it turns out that the universe does have a strange sense of humor. So I go to seminary, I'm finishing seminary, and I'm still in the UU ministerial formation process, which is pretty elaborate, and a job offer comes up right after I graduate, and I finish my internship, and it's to work with Georgia Equality on marriage equality. And I'm thinking you mean I went through all of this and spent all this money to come back and do exactly what I had done before with the same people? But they were organizing faith leaders. And I kid you not, people would answer the phone who, if I had not been Reverend Duncan Teague, would not have answered the phone.

Mark B: Sure, yes. And what year is this? What year did you graduate?

Duncan T: Well, I was ordained in 2014 because I went to Knoxville and worked with that congregation, the Tennessee Valley UU church. And they were wonderful to me. And I needed to get out of Atlanta, where everybody knew me, where I had all this reputation, and see if I could be a minister in a strange place, because I hadn't gotten clear about my calling, and I thought I was going to go into search, which is the way UU ministers typically do it. And so I went to Knoxville and I found out oh, I can be a good minister in a place where nobody knows me. But my calling was to not leave, it was to stay and plant a new congregation here.

Mark B: Can you say a little more about how that calling emerged?

Duncan T: Oh, sure. This is when a spirit or the universe or however you want to describe God gets pretty explicit because I noticed on a map that there were about six or seven congregations here in Atlanta who were Unitarian Universalist, and if you draw a line through the city all of them are north of that line. Well, the community south of that line looks like me. And the Unitarian Universalists are very concerned with racial justice, and being antiracist, and fighting white supremacy. And we didn't have any churches in the Black community, and I thought, you know, I don't want to drive 45 minutes into the white suburbs to talk about racism anymore.

And I thought it will be really good when somebody opens up a church in the Black community. You have to be so careful about saying things like that because the universe is listening. And I thought boy, when that

happens I might help. [*Laughs.*] And I had no idea that that exactly was my calling. And my calling even—I mean, I felt it. It was like “go south of I-20.” And so we actually did research in the development of Abundant Love, which is the name of our congregation.

Mark B: And when you say “we,” did you find some colleagues or you started it all on your own?

Duncan T: If Jesus needed 12 I knew I needed some help. And so I called on friends. And ironically, some who I knew would support me but may not have necessarily been involved in church, and then other people came who loved and admired what I was doing. I had two people who grew up in the community where we planted in the west end. And the group has changed over time, but they have still supported, mostly.

It’s been a wonderful adventure. And a strange one because on paper it’s not listed as something that the movement actually supports and pushes ministers who are brand new into doing. But I knew this was my calling. I also knew that if we were going to start a church in the Black community, centered in the Black church tradition, a minister needed to start it. That’s what I knew about being Black and part of a religious community.

Whereas most of our congregations have started from groups of laypeople who got together. And I didn’t know of any Black church that started without a minister. So I’m sort of translating Unitarian Universalism and Black church theology and putting it in the blender. And we’re not pushing “puree,” but we’re sort of pushing one of those lighter buttons.

Mark B: Is there particular significance around the choice of the name for the congregation?

Duncan T: Oh, very much so. Very much so. Because we're Unitarian Universalists, and a lot of the Unitarian theology and development has leaned towards humanism and toward not necessarily in the past being so concerned with spirituality. But the Universalists were people who believed in universal salvation, and who really believed that love was so central and so profound that it leaves nobody out, literally. And they sort of jettisoned the whole theology around hell.

Well, I thought if I'm really honest, that's my theology. And that's what attracted me to Unitarian Universalism, was this whole diverse acceptance and this loving, weird interpretation of things. And I'll admit that initially it was also some of the humanism and more secular thought. But as I got into it, and especially after going to a Methodist seminary, I came out very clear that I was Unitarian Universalist.

Mark B: What have been the challenges of developing this congregation?

Duncan T: Oh, my goodness. That some people who love me and care about it actually said to me out loud, well, Duncan, if you're going to start a Black church you've got to have somebody straight leading. And I politely ignored them. And I ignored them because I really feel called to this. Not just because I'm gay Duncan, but because I'm Duncan, and my story, and my life and my ministry is not just for one group of people. It's for everybody. We have sort of a target audience, but if we really are

abundant love, I don't stand at the front door and go, well, you know, our abundant love is only for this one and not that one. And I also trust my own integrity about this.

And from the beginning Reverend Wylie Hughes, who's a Presbyterian leaning in our tradition, and may transfer at some point, has always been a part of us. Reverend Dr. Qiyamah Rahman, who is also a leader in our movement and has been on national staff, regional staff, and now she's in St. Croix, where she had started a church, she left, and came back to St. Croix, but while she was here in Atlanta, she was helping me. So I've never been without heterosexual Black leadership. But the calling to start Abundant Love was my calling. And it's sufficient. I'm enough. At times too much. But I'm enough.

Mark B: Before I started recording you were telling me about the COVID pandemic being a little blessing for you, that you've increased, your participation has actually grown. You want to say a little bit about that?

Duncan T: Well, we're a new congregation, so in the Black church tradition I really celebrate our anniversaries. It's a big deal. And at those we have been standing room only. And we meet in the Hammonds House Museum, which is a 40 plus year old African American museum.

When COVID struck, of course the museum had to shut down. And I remember the week that we shut down. It was the second week in March, 2020. And she was trying to accommodate us because we knew our crowd, we were very small. If I got 25 people there I was thrilled. And we

sometimes didn't get that many. This is on a regular Sunday, not our anniversaries.

But then by the end of the week we got clear that the virus was airborne, we got clear that we needed to start wearing masks, we needed to start doing things that we should have been doing in January, and that the museum as a public venue was not safe, and especially for her employees, who were at the mercy of whoever would come in the door and how they felt about protecting somebody else from themselves. And so she allowed me to have worship on that Sunday and then they shut down.

And I misinterpreted the anxiety level because the week before was our anniversary and we were full. We were brimming. I mean, we had like almost 60 people there. And we were happy, and we had brunch together and all that. By the end of the week the messages had changed, and I thought, well, we will have one last service so that we can meet as community and be here for each other before we have to shut down for a few months, you know, yeah. And my husband, by the way, is a public health doctor. He's retired. And he looked at me kind of funny when I said, well, you know, by summer this will be, you know. Anyway.

So the woman who brought the flowers brought them in, set them down, did not hug us, did not greet us, waved at us and left because she's also in the CDC. We got me, the musician, my husband and one person there, and it was the smallest crowd I've had since...it was the smallest crowd we ever had. It's not a crowd, you know, it's four people. And I thought uh-

oh, the anxiety is already beyond this. And that was our last meeting in person.

And when we went online we had doubled the attendance of a regular service immediately. And I only had one week to sort of cry and grieve being in person because I'm an extreme extrovert and the idea of being on camera was like what am I doing? And I don't want to be a televangelist. And while I was doing that my husband and other people on the core team were planning about online worship. And they didn't really ask me how I felt about it. *[Laughs.]* And so the next week, we've been online ever since.

Mark B: Excellent. So looking ahead, do you have dreams, expectations, a sense of where you'd like the universe to move you in the future?

Duncan T: Yeah. Because we're doing ministry that people want, which is what any good minister wants, and we're touching people during COVID who were really isolated, because they took all of this stuff to heart. And so our coffee hour was doing as much profound ministry as the whole worship service, because that's when we let the guards down and let people talk and really share in community. And there's no way, when we go back in person, probably in the fall for us, that we're going to just say well, it's been so nice knowing you.

I think from now on we're going to be hybrid, because the guy from Amsterdam who has a chronic illness, and it is not HVI, he's got a horrible inherited spinal column, and he's in chronic pain, and he's making it

work. But he chimed in one Sunday and he's known me forever. And the idea that he could make it to church, there's no way.

And I have a supportive gay dad, somebody who really watched after me. He was actually my landlord for a while and gave me gay activist rates on the rent. He came in from Mexico, where he and his lover have retired. Yeah, so there's...yeah, we're not going to say goodbye to those folks. I have a regular attendee from Chicago who was on the board of the Chicago congregation, and she's been coming in like... And she may relocate to Atlanta, but until then she's been more faithful than some of my core team members. Don't tell them.

Mark B: Thank you, Duncan. This is a very valuable addition to the oral history that we're posting that Dan did with you. Anything just in closing that you'd like to add about your ministry?

Duncan T: Yeah. That I am really grateful, because we're not the first attempt at an African American Unitarian Universalist congregation. But I'm grateful to the people who tried before with Thurman Hamer Ellington and to the people who dared go into this crazy venture with me, and the folks all over the country who have sent us money, who had me preach. Because it's digital, so they don't have to fly me in. So they've had me preach in pulpits all over the country and have supported us and loved us. And the national movement has tried to do the same.

And it feels like in addition to all the social justice stuff that everybody knows Unitarian Universalists for, that we're also ready to grow our hearts

and maybe be a part of growing our movement, and that I'm in on that.

And that feels like a real privilege, a sacred one.

Mark B: Thank you very much for sharing this, Duncan. Take care.

Duncan T: You do the same.