

## The Leading Edge

Reflections by Rev. Fred Small, Karin Lin, Marcia Yousik, and Susan Leslie-Pritchard  
First Parish in Cambridge

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### Rev. Fred Small

Last month, six of us from First Parish—Susan Leslie-Pritchard, Terry Lewis, Karin Lin, Chris McElroy, Marcia Yousik, and I—traveled to New York City for *The Leading Edge*, a national conference for religious leaders committed to a multiracial, multicultural future, sponsored by Middle Collegiate Church in the East Village.

Middle Collegiate descends directly from a congregation gathered in 1628 in the Dutch colony of New Amsterdam—yes, folks, they are actually older than we are!

In 1985, Middle Collegiate nearly gave up the ghost. Sunday worship was drawing perhaps two dozen elderly Polish- and Ukrainian-American women. Often the choir outnumbered the congregation. Their building had been mostly taken over by a theater company. But rather than close the church, the congregation called as their minister Gordon Dragt, a middle-aged white man from the Midwest who had never lived in New York City, never served an urban church.

Gordon didn't know from New Yawk, but he knew from transformation.

By the time he retired in 2005, Middle Collegiate had 450 members (it now has 750) and hundreds in the pews each Sunday—European-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Latino. The church now has four ministers (two African-American, two European-American), two choirs, a resident dance company, and numerous adult education offerings. If you go to their home page at [middlechurch.org](http://middlechurch.org), you're greeted joyfully by a welcoming video from their effervescent Senior Minister, Jacqui Lewis.

The transformation of Middle Collegiate Church began with an explicit commitment to racial and cultural diversity and unfolded through deliberate long-range planning toward that goal. One key to its success has been its embrace of worship as celebration—they don't even use the word "service" for what happens Sunday morning, they say "worship celebration." Another is developing partnerships with the community—showing up at neighborhood events and reaching out with relevant ministries.

We experienced firsthand the power of Sunday worship celebration at Middle Church. Following a Bach organ prelude, the multiracial Gospel Choir sang an introit from the balcony, then processed in their robes and stoles down the center aisle, swaying as they sang. Christian scripture was read aloud by a Japanese Buddhist *roshi*. The sermon was shared between Jacqui Lewis and visiting minister Alan Boesak, a leader in the South African anti-apartheid movement. Woven throughout the service—I mean, celebration—was a liturgical dance performed by two ministers (one a former professional dancer) and a lay leader. The Middle Church Choir sang a Kenyan folk song during the offering, then joined the Gospel Choir to close out the service—I mean, celebration—with a Quincy Jones arrangement of Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus that brought us all to our feet, singing and clapping.

Gordon Dragt offers 16 tips for a church revitalization. Here are my favorites:

- Be intentional. The journey from here to there won't happen automatically or by faint-hearted efforts.
- Make the vision big. Keep the journey simple.
- Keep opening more doors into the church from the community and into the community from the church.
- Be prepared for hard work, perseverance, and an adventurous journey.

To tell us more about our journey and hers, here is Karin Lin of our Transformation Team.

### **Karin Lin**

I've attended four conferences now with Unitarian Universalists on the subject of creating multiracial, multicultural congregations. They are always educational, inspiring, and renewing, but for me the most valuable thing they have in common is that they provide me with an experience I get almost nowhere else in my life: the feeling that I am truly not alone. During these few days out of the year, surrounded by friends who are equally passionate about this work, I can put down a burden I've carried for so long that I forget what it's like not to carry it.

As an only child with no extended family in the United States, as an Asian-American growing up in Kansas, as a woman with three physics degrees, and as a Unitarian Universalist person of color, my life has been characterized by solitude. As anyone who's ever been in an extreme minority knows, that solitude is accompanied by the responsibility, often unwanted, of defining the stereotype. To my cousins, I'm the American who can't speak Chinese. To my grade school classmates, I was the kid with the funny eyes who won all the math contests, but to my graduate school professors I was the woman who failed her preliminary exams twice. And to some of my fellow Unitarian Universalists, I was the congregant who brought race into the church and disturbed their conflict-free existence.

For my entire life, nearly every action I've taken, every major decision I've made, has been influenced by the feeling that the world is watching, ready to form their beliefs about an entire group by who I am and what I do.

It's for all these reasons that diversity is so important. Not just in our schools or our workplaces or our neighborhoods, but in our churches. I've known this on a theoretical level for a long time, but I didn't realize how vital it was to me personally until I went to the Leading Edge conference and experienced multicultural worship at Middle Collegiate. I found myself liberated from the bonds of societal expectations that I had internalized so well. There were Asians in the gospel choir! I didn't think we were allowed to do that. I found myself liberated from the burden of representation. I wasn't the only person of color in the room. I wasn't the only Asian in the room. I wasn't even the only Asian *woman* in the room! I no longer had to worry that my voice would not be heard or that my cultural perspective would not be shared.

And with that feeling of liberation, I finally felt safe enough to feel. Safe enough to cry. Safe enough to examine my own blind spots about other races and cultures. Safe enough to succumb to the grief that after so much time, so much work, and so much pain, we are still a people so divided.

I've been an atheist my entire life, and so I've always believed I could never belong to a religion other than Unitarian Universalism. Worship at Middle Collegiate is unequivocally Christian, a tradition I don't generally find very pertinent to my own faith. But sitting there in that incredible celebration with all its diverse participants, I began to wonder whether theological barriers might be easier to overcome than cultural barriers. I asked myself, if Middle Collegiate were in Boston instead of New York, would I defect?

The question unsettled me, because I love First Parish and I love being a Unitarian Universalist. But like many UUs of color, sometimes I wonder whether there's really a place for us in this faith. A friend of mine who draws wisdom from several religions once remarked, "I've thought about going to a progressive Christian church, except that it wouldn't recognize all of me. But then I realize, UU churches don't recognize all of me either."

I know how she feels. And yet, there is hope. The name of this conference, "The Leading Edge", invokes an expression I last heard in a very different context. In a former congregation, frustrated and hurt by the lack of progress toward racial and cultural inclusivity, I was told by my minister, "Well, Karin, you're on the leading edge of this stuff, and so you've got to understand that it's going to be lonely for you"—which I took to mean, "Sorry, kid, you're on your own."

He was right about the first claim; we *are* on the leading edge. We are blazing the trail, sometimes getting lost or stuck as we venture into uncharted territory.

But the second part, the part about it having to be lonely and having to do it on my own? He was wrong about that. Because there is, actually, one thing about my experience at this conference that was different from all the rest. For the first time, I was there with a delegation of five others from my congregation, including the senior minister, all of us committed to the process of transformation and to each other, no matter how long or difficult the journey.

For my friends who walk with me, for the love that carries us through all of our challenges, I feel blessed, grateful, and proud to be a Unitarian Universalist at First Parish in Cambridge.

### **Marcia Yousik**

I feel fortunate to have attended the Leading Edge Conference in New York in late April and I would like to share some thoughts about it with you. It was a challenging and exciting time for me, I have so much to learn. I heard new ideas and had discussions with spiritual people who are leaders in racial justice offering practical ideas and sharing personal experiences. This was a large multiracial, multicultural group gathered to learn and support each other in our efforts to "work toward a future free of racism." This was the kind of group we often talk about but rarely achieve.

Rev. Jacqui Lewis, minister of Middle Collegiate Church and convener of the conference, writes about story telling as a powerful tool in the development of

community and individual identity. I am very attracted to this idea as it matches my own experience both at the conference and in the rest of my life.

On the first day of the conference we were asked to find a group of three or four people. We continued to work in these groups for the four days of the conference. The groups were given assignments, suggestions, and ideas to make the material that was being presented our own during the conference. In my group, we told each other our stories, as people do when getting to know each other. Over time, our stories deepened and became more personal.

One member of my group is the religious education coordinator in the UU church in Tulsa. We heard about this church last year when some of our members returned from a conference in Tulsa on working in multi-racial, multi ethnic congregations. It is the story of two culturally disparate churches working to make one community. You won't be surprised but I was surprised that music during the service creates some of the most painful and difficult to resolve controversies. Once again I am reminded not to assume I know about anyone else's feelings until I have been told.

There were three ministers in my group of five. How did I happen to be working with so many ministers? That surprised me too. Well, all of them are working on creating change in their congregations just as we are here.

Everyone in my group also happened to be a mother. Some of us had children in the city whom we could spend some time with outside of the conference. The time I was able to spend with my daughter was certainly important to me. For another group member, it was vitally important to connect with her grown son who had become somewhat distant from the family. I found it confirming that everyone in the group could understand the importance of the time spent out of the conference and with family. Sharing other aspects of our lives seemed to deepen the work we could do together.

Many stories I have heard make me think that our hope for our families can bring us to seek justice. Wanting justice for everyone in my multiracial, multicultural family motivates me to work for culture change here at First Parish that I will feel proud of.

Time spent with the First Parish team was inspiring. We did spend time making plans and talking strategy over good food and maybe a glass of wine after the conference ended each day. But there was also plenty of time was spent staying up late, telling stories, sharing laughter and tears. I learned a lot about Facebook and my old fashioned ideas about privacy. I kept saying—Wow, I wouldn't share that story on Facebook, it's too public. Karin, a generation after me, has totally different ideas about privacy.

It seems to me that not having your stories heard is like being invisible. Everyone has multiple stories or identities, such as a sister, a UU, a parent, et cetera, and telling just one story is not usually enough. Family stories are particularly powerful. I have come to believe that respectfully hearing each other's multiple stories in this congregation can be a powerful tool for making us feel safer as we move forward toward change.

### **Susan Leslie-Pritchard**

Good morning – I'm Susan Leslie-Pritchard, a member of the Social Justice Council.

What was wonderful about going to The Leading Edge Conference at Middle Church is that I got to not only see and feel what a multicultural multiracial justice-making

congregation looks like but to meet with the pastor and its leaders to learn how they created it.

I learned that they intentionally set out to understand their own social location—that is where they were situated demographically and socio-economically. They started getting to know their neighbors, especially those traditionally at the margins of society and those not represented in the congregation.

They cultivated a culture in their congregation of what their pastor Jacqui Lewis calls becoming border people. They had one-to-one conversations with leaders and people involved the community and they started offering group discussions and classes that were of interest to the community. Meetings for men of color, parenting groups, coming out groups. They have Sunday morning brunch workshops, Sunday afternoon discussion groups, and film showings and classes during the week. They have special days—“How Dr. Martin Luther King’s message speaks to us today on MLK Sunday,” “Sex in the City—theological reflection on sexuality before the PRIDE march,” May Day and Cinco de May celebrations, as well as series such as “Restoration: Restorying Race—a monthly discussion group that examines race through current literature and film,” and Justice Works—ongoing conversation and activities toward a more just society.

One of the presenters at the conference, Rev. Eric Law, a Chinese American Episcopal minister, shared a model he called the Inclusive Boundary that helps a congregation get on this path. The model has you examine your current boundary—who is already here—who is included—that’s your safe zone. Who is outside that can be invited in—to explore the issues of living in community in a spiritual, authentic, just and reciprocal way? Rev. Law calls inviting people in to this space—the grace margin—the grace margin moves your safe zone toward a larger inclusive boundary. Who could we at First Parish bring into the grace margin? To come and explore—perhaps just for one conversation that’s part of a series of community conversations that are explicitly spiritual and justice-oriented.

I thought of Adam, the director at the youth center that my son attends after school. When we toured the center and some Harvard Law students were conducting a mock trial with the middle schoolers I was impressed and Adam quickly said, “We also have know your rights workshops. A lot of these kids are already getting stopped by the police when they hang out and walk around town.” I would love to invite Adam into a conversation with some folks here at First Parish about challenges facings the youth he works with and what he thinks is needed—and the spiritual challenges he faces in his work. Maybe a conversation with Adam would lead to a conversation among parents or a parents group here. Or to our youth group connecting with the center. Maybe a hip hop Sunday.

Once I got thinking this way—I realized there are so many people in our community I have met or know of that I would like us to engage with—city councilors, service providers, teachers, neighborhood grassroots leaders—and how wonderful it would be to hear their perspectives on our community and ways that we might know each other better and partner. Most people will be glad to come by for a conversation and explore together. In fact, many people yearn for a reflective spirit-filled place from which to compassionately listen and meaningfully engage about the real challenges and joys in our community. It’s a way to learn and to develop relationships and to be relevant in our community. Imagine a series of such conversations involving many different people at First Parish and the broader community and what that could lead to.

So the question for transforming our congregation is not only who do you want to invite to come to church? The question is also who would you like to invite to come explore with us? Who do you know on the border or working on the border? Who do you know who could come into the grace margin?

Together we can expand our inclusive boundary—our safe zone—through developing meaningful authentic dialogues on our borders.

I brought back some materials from the conference that I would be happy to share at coffee and that I can get scanned and sent to the First Parish list. I'm excited about the things we can do here together.

### **Rev. Fred Small**

The Leading Edge Conference ended on a sparkling spring day. As I walked the two miles from Middle Collegiate Church to the Bolt Bus pick-up spot at 34<sup>th</sup> Street and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue, I passed every color and nationality of humanity—white, tan, and every shade of brown, European, Latin, African, and Asian, Dominican, Haitian, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Chinese, Taiwanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian.

And I thought, in the religious language of my childhood: this is the world the Lord has made. And behold it is good. It is very good.

I want my church to reflect this world, to embrace this world, to nourish this world.

This is the church, this is the steeple, open the doors—*open the doors*—and see all the people!

*All* the people.

All the people.

Amen and Blessed Be.