



**LOVE**<sup>TM</sup>  
BEYOND BELIEF

**The Spiritual Vitality Program**  
for Unitarian Universalist Congregations

**The Rev. Dr. Thandeka**

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## Executive Summary

How can Unitarian Universalist congregations support life's journey at vulnerable stages for children, young adults, families, and aging adults? We propose an eight-day on-site Love Beyond Belief™ vitality program custom designed to enhance the emotional development work of congregations through a series of workshops for clergy and laity. The goal is to revitalize congregational life. Love Beyond Belief™ congregations can become a network of congregations working together to create local, regional, and national initiatives that will help heal and transform the world.

## The Problem

Loss of spiritual vitality is a major concern in progressive congregations today. Current anti-racism programs focused on shaming and blaming heighten the distress by leading congregants to conclude that their congregations are racist and elitist. The congregations that have gone the farthest in these critiques “have had the largest losses in membership and resources. Prospects for reversal of these trends are poor, and morale is poor.”<sup>1</sup>

Members of the Millennial Generation want “emotional rescue” (*The New York Times*, June 21, 2015, “Oh to Be Young, Millennial, and So Wanted by Marketers”), but they aren't getting it in our congregations. When they attend Sunday services, they don't find the emotional connection and sense of community to meet their spiritual hunger. So they withdraw. Millennial activists want new racial narratives that relate to their feelings, but they are not getting them in Unitarian Universalist congregations. Alisha Sonnier, 19, the president of Tribe X formed to

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<sup>1</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr. *Spiritual Bankruptcy: A Prophetic Call to Action* (Nashville: Abington Press, 2010), 175.

protest Michael Brown's death, puts it this way: "At the end of the day all of us are dealing with similar feelings and similar emotions. There's a disjointment in how we feel we should go about it" (November 28, 2014, *The New York Times*).

Unitarian  
Universalist  
and mainline  
congregations  
are not making  
emotional  
connections  
through  
spiritual  
leadership:  
93% of  
mainline senior  
ministers self-define as leaders, but only 12% believe they have the  
spiritual gift of leadership.<sup>2</sup>



Mainline Protestant churches, like the Methodists, United Church of Christ, and Presbyterian, still have the most buildings. But they have the fewest people in them: about 75 on a typical Sunday, on average. Less than 2% of these adults are 25 or younger. Almost half of America's churchgoers, as the National Congregation 2006-7 study discovered, attend the largest 10% of America's churches. And these largest churches, for the most part, are Southern Baptist, Catholic, or nondenominational Christian.

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<sup>2</sup> Summary of The Barna Report Examines the State of Mainline Protestant Churches  
<https://www.barna.com/research/report-examines-the-state-of-mainline-protestant-churches/> (Accessed October 28, 2012).

## The Proposal

Create Love Beyond Belief™ congregations to enhance spiritual vitality. Begin with a Love Beyond Belief™ workshop program designed to create openhearted spiritual communities that attend to brokenheartedness through acts of lovingkindness. Each step in this faith development program begins with the discovery of connections that create awe, care, and joy. The experience of unconditional love heals broken hearts, mends ruptured souls, and calms restless minds because unconditional love is felt.

In the language of theism, the experience of love beyond belief can be described as an experience of God. In the language of Humanism, the experience of love beyond belief can be described as a flash of insight and understanding bringing humanity together. These experiences mark the beginning of wholeness in our broken lives.

The Love Beyond Belief™ program also includes a public lecture on racial identity-formation, which shows how racial identities were “invented” in America to keep both blacks and whites in their place, resulting in compromised emotional integrity and broken hearts. This historical overview and review of its contemporary results, combined with Love Beyond Belief™ spiritual insights and practices create the new vision and emotional strength needed to heal and transform individuals, communities and the wider world.

The Love Beyond Belief™ program uses liturgical strategies in Sunday services to connect their members together anew through contemplative practices and through music, song, and poetry. The result is new church programming such as midweek vespers programs and community activity nights. The congregation learns how to heal itself and through this process learns how to work with other congregations to heal the world.

## The Strategy

**Phase One:** Interviews and work with ministry to design an on-site Love Beyond Belief™ program tailored to the needs, vision, and goals of the specific congregation. Eight days on-site working with the minister, ministry team, music director, lay-leaders, and congregants using the following program format.

**Saturday:** An all-day workshop for the ministry team and the music director to develop a set of Love Beyond Belief™ strategies and practices for Sunday services.

**Sunday afternoon:** A critique of the Sunday service based on the insights developed in the Saturday workshop.

**Monday:** Individual meetings with key members of the ministry and music team to focus attention on specific visions and strategies needed to move the Sunday service and other church programs forward.

**Tuesday and Wednesday:** Work with the minister, ministry team, and the music director to tweak the following Sunday service.

**Wednesday evening:** Public Lecture—“Got Race? America’s Most Successful Ad Campaign.”

**Thursday:** Meeting with staff members to implement new Love Beyond Belief™ strategies to improve church administration policies. Also a rehearsal to work out the details for the Sunday service.

**Friday evening and Saturday:** A Love Beyond Belief™ Faith Development Workshop for congregation leaders and laity. New strategies and programs spearheaded by volunteers will emerge from this workshop. New small group ministry programs will be designed to attend to brokenheartedness in the congregation. These small groups

become the micro-engines within each congregation that drive the rebuilding of the lives of its members as they rebuild their congregation and the wider community.

**Sunday morning:** The minister, ministry team, and music director launch the new Love Beyond Belief™ program of liturgically rich services.

**Sunday afternoon:** The minister, ministry team, and director of music meet to assess the Sunday service and lay out next steps to strengthen the Sunday service and other programs.



**First Results:**

The report from the Rev. Dr. Marlin Lavanhar, senior minister at All Souls Unitarian Church of Tulsa:

Just finished an incredible week with Rev. Dr. Thandeka who came to All Souls in Tulsa as a consultant. Her work with me, our staff and lay leaders was the most powerful and positively transformational consultation I have ever experienced. I have never before felt so equipped to lead dynamic worship with theological depth. The congregation on Sunday responded very positively to the outcome. Moreover, her work with us has shown us how to bring the same level of depth and impact into

all aspects of church life from small groups and classes to meetings and individual interactions. If it were up to me I would have her spend eight days with every UU congregation in the country. It would not take long for Unitarian Universalism to grow into the movement it has long promised to be. Even as the minister of one of our largest churches for 17 years, I feel I have just learned some of the fundamentals that can make our congregation come alive and support people in their personal and spiritual journeys and in how to love beyond belief.

**Phase Two:** Successes and failures from the initial projects will be evaluated. New congregations will be selected and funds sought for this new work. The goal is to create a critical mass of Love Beyond Belief™ congregations so that through a website, social media, and word-of-mouth they network and continue to expand.

## **The Vision**

This project will advance mainline congregations as communities that love beyond belief, model racial diversity and harmony, and work to transform their wider communities. Using feedback from these congregations, the project will develop a replicable model of Love Beyond Belief™ congregations in other cities. The models will multiply. We envision a nationwide movement of Love Beyond Belief™ congregations by the 10th year. Funding will be sought to create seminars, retreats, and conferences to train ministers, clergy, seminarians, and laity to expand this work.



## Why Thandeka?

Thandeka is the creator of the [Love Beyond Belief™](#) initiative and the founder of [Contemporary Affect Theology](#), which is designed to explain, support, and enhance emotional development in congregational life. She is a congregational consultant, Affect Theologian in Residence at Andover Newton Theological School (Newton Centre, MA), an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister, an Emmy Award-winning television producer, a Westar Fellow [[Thandeka - Westar Institute](#)], and “New Race Work” founder and advocate [[Why Anti-Racism Will Fail Thandeka - Meadville Lombard Theological...](#)]. During the 2012-13 church year, Thandeka tested a core premise of her work: spiritual, communal attention to human distress can heal broken hearts. The 2012-13 fieldwork protocol was principally made possible by grants directly to the congregations by a donor-advised fund at The Dallas Foundation. As the Rev. Sam Trumbore, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, NY noted: “Thandeka has a vision of ‘tweaks’ in worship that preserve our signature intellectual focus while integrating the emotional far more intentionally into our services. When the mind and emotions are better integrated to support each other, the heart is moved and lives are transformed.”



Thandeka has worked with Senior Interim Minister David Keyes in eight of the largest UU congregations. His comments to her summarize the power of the program: “You propose replacing guilt and pain with love and trust, and I have seen this happen in congregations thanks to your leadership. But if I hadn’t seen it, I might not

believe it.” John B. Cobb Jr. [[John B. Cobb - Wikipedia](#)] told Thandeka: “You are so far ahead of the rest of us in diagnosing the cultural crisis and proposing response.... you are addressing the fundamental issue of the culture of the nation.... What is needed is a core of people dedicated to this project.”

## Board of Advisors

John B. Cobb Jr., David Keyes, Mary Elizabeth Moore (Dean, Boston University School of Theology), Javier Viera (Dean, Drew Theological School).

## Cost

\$12,500 for the eight-day on-site program.

