

Speaker: Unitarians must talk less, act more to build justice, empathy

BY STEVEN HENSHAW

READING EAGLE



Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin delivers the keynote on Saturday at the Pennsylvania Universalist Convention at the first Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County in Reading.

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From the time she was a small child, Dr. Takiyah Nur Amin felt a deep connection to the divine, but growing up and well into adulthood she did not feel particularly welcomed by any faith community.

And that included the faith that is often seen as a last refuge for those leaving or exiled from mainstream Christian and other dominant faiths, the Unitarian Universalist Church, she told a gathering of Unitarians in Reading on Saturday. Amin was the keynote speaker during the Pennsylvania Universalist Convention, being hosted this weekend by First Unitarian Universalist Church of Berks County, 416 Franklin St.

Growing up in Buffalo, she loved going to church with her Christian grandparents. But in Sunday school, she learned that unless she brought her Muslim parents into the Christian community, she would not get to see them in the afterlife.

That “spiritual trauma” led her through the doors of a Universalist Church in Buffalo as a young woman. The tenets of the faith — a global vision in which all people can share the wealth of the Earth, and bigotry and prejudice are replaced by a spirit of fairness — appealed to her. Though outwardly welcomed, Amin said, she got the sense of being regarded less as fellow Unitarian than as “an education opportunity.” She’s not alone, evidenced by the founding of BLUU: Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism.

Formed in the wake of conversation following the Black Lives Matter movement, the BLUU Organizing Collective, of which Amin is actively engaged, work to provide support, information and resource for black Unitarian Universalists and expand the role and visibility of blacks within the faith. Amin, an assistant college professor with a doctorate in dance and cultural studies, said she left the church in her 20s, but returned as an activist within the church.

Much of Amin’s lecture to the nearly all-white audience boiled down to a call for less talk and more action.

Unitarians are fond of hosting talks, conducting studies and studies of studies, she said.

She said she once talked to a UU board member who couldn’t say what the church stood for, beyond being open to all.

“While I’m glad our faith provides a safe haven for those who have felt exiled from other places, Unitarian Universalism has to do more than be an emergency room for spiritual trauma.”

Amin visits UU congregations around the country and is sometimes frustrated when she finds one that has more bridge or knitting clubs than opportunity for theological study and religious engagement.

"We talk about being a faith community that champions human relations," she said. "Well, the last time I checked, justice, empathy and compassion don't just happen.

"Those are things that we have to work towards and build and make it."

Contact **Steve Henshaw**: 610-371-5024 or shenshaw@readingeagle.com.