

Unitarians drop Jefferson's name from group

Yonat Shimron Religion News Service | May. 3, 2011

DURHAM, N.C. -- To many Americans, Thomas Jefferson is a symbol of liberty and religious freedom, the architect of American democracy and a standard bearer for progressive politics.

But to members of America's most liberal denomination, the slave-holding legacy of the nation's third president has become a liability.

On Saturday (April 30), delegates to the Thomas Jefferson District of the Unitarian Universalist Association voted overwhelmingly to drop his name from their organization.

Under the change, the district that spans North and South Carolina, as well as parts of Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee, will be known as the Southeast District.

"It's an issue of how Americans grapple with the heroism of Thomas Jefferson, and at the same time stand for all that comes tomorrow in terms of being an open congregation, growing in our faith and sending a message of love," said LaTonya Richardson, a delegate from the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Winston-Salem, N.C.

Or to put it more succinctly, the district wanted to send a message that it was open to African-Americans and sensitive to those put off by Jefferson's complex relationship with the institution of slavery.

A motion to change the district's name failed to get a necessary two-thirds majority in 1997 and again in 2010. On Saturday, fewer than 10 of the 160 people who attended the meeting at the Eno River Unitarian Universalists Fellowship in Durham voted "no," but those who did spoke passionately.

"We cannot dump Jefferson and claim forgiveness and redemption are part of our spirit," said Gae Pinschmidt, a delegate from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg, Va.

The change to the district's bylaws had been in the works since 1993. That year, the denomination scheduled a Thomas Jefferson Ball and encouraged members to come in period costume. African Americans objected, asking whether they should wear "rags and chains."

The Thomas Jefferson District, which includes 62 congregations, began a two-year study that looked at Jefferson's commitment to liberty alongside evidence he owned hundreds of slaves and fathered seven children with Sally Hemings, a slave he inherited.

It also examined the many reasons Unitarian Universalists claim Jefferson as one of their one -- he, like other Unitarians, rejected a belief in the Trinity and said Jesus was a great prophet but not God. Jefferson even produced his own version of the Bible that deleted all of Jesus' miracles.

Although African-Americans represent a tiny minority of the 200,000 Unitarian Universalists in the U.S. and

Canada, the denomination proudly upholds the principle that every person has inherent worth and dignity.

After Saturday's vote, Anita Lee, a delegate from Richmond's First Unitarian Universalist Church, said she felt proud to be a member,

"I feel like this group of Unitarian Universalists," she said, "is living up to its principles."

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