

FIRST UNITARIAN CHURCH OF DALLAS
WELCOMES SPECIAL GUEST MINISTER

ADAM LAWRENCE DYER
**Caribbean
Radical**

Sunday, August 10th, 2025
In-person worship at 9:30 and 11 am
Online worship at 9:30 & 11 am and 7 pm CST

I'll begin by thanking you for having me first of all. It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you to Reverend Daniel, Reverend Beth, and of course Reverend TJ, our amazing music team, amazing tech folks, and always, as always, thank you to my ancestors.

On September 24th, 1931, Jacob Alexander Dyer and Marjorie Emma Lewis were married in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. They had met at McMaster University where she was studying nursing and where he was studying to be ordained as a Baptist minister. They had originally been introduced by Marjorie's brother Ray, when Jacob and Ray were working on the Canadian and Pacific Railroad as Pullman porters in between his school terms. It was shortly after their marriage that the newlyweds traveled by rail and then by ship to Jacob's home in Maldon, Jamaica, British West Indies. He had been called to serve as the Minister of the Baptist Church in St. Anne, and this is where they would settle for the next 12 years.

Over time, they would see Jacob Circuit Riding between congregations in St. Anne Parish and along the north coast of the island, and yes, he literally rode. Yeah. Here's a picture of Marjorie, a stride horse. And judging by the stylish heels that she's wearing, this is probably not what she had in mind back in Hamilton. They would also have three children, Marcia the oldest, James the youngest, and between the two, my father, Charles.

Now, when people ask me why immigration and immigrants mean so much to me, this is why. It is quite literally what I come from and who I am. In addition to being a minister, my grandfather was a deeply political person. He was a strong public advocate for Jamaican independence and was also affiliated as a socialist. As you can imagine, when he served as a chaplain in the Pacific Theater of

World War II, that didn't go down so well. As a result, I also have an FBI file of him sitting in my living room detailing all of their surveillance of him and various unfounded assumptions and accusations leveled at him. Ultimately, he never tried to take over the country or the government and instead successfully served churches in South Carolina and then New York City until his retirement with my grandmother in 1970.

I wanted to share a little bit about my Jamaican family because my doctoral studies at the University of Virginia are about another Jamaican, the Reverend Ethelred Brown, the Jamaican Unitarian founder and minister of the Harlem Unitarian Church from 1920 until his death in 1956. There he is.

As it turns out, I have a personal connection to Ethelred Brown. Going through some of his papers at the Schomburg Center for Research and Black Culture in Harlem, I came across the list of officers of the Jamaican Progressive League, and Brown founded, co-founded this league for Jamaican independence in 1936, and lo and behold, there was Jacob A. Dyer. So it turns out that not only did my grandfather know Ethelred Brown, but he worked with him on one of the projects that was dearest and nearest to both of their hearts, independent rule for the Black people of Jamaica.

Last September, Reverend TJ ... I guess I ... I don't know if I ... Do I do that? Yeah, there we go. Okay. Last September, Reverend TJ preached about Reverend Ethelred Brown, but I'll recap a little bit of it here for you now. Born in Falmouth, Jamaica in 1875, Brown was first introduced to Unitarianism through an uncle in his youth, when he began to raise questions about the Trinity at the Methodist Episcopal Church, where he was also the choir director and organist. Professionally, he became a civil servant, and in his young adulthood, he unfortunately lost that job. But that prompted a reawakening of his passion for religion and ministry, and shortly after the turn of the century, it compelled him to write a letter that said literally on the front of it, to any Unitarian minister seeking a way to serve this faith.

In this early period, the Unitarian Association repeatedly resisted and refused to support his efforts. The president of Meadville Theological School At the time, Franklin Southworth originally refused admitting Brown, insisting that no white church would accept a Black minister. Eventually, due to Brown's persistence, Southworth relented. Once Brown was accepted, it took him three attempts to enter the United States and attend the school at its original location in Meadville, Pennsylvania starting in 1910.

He completed his training and was ordained in 1912, returning to plant the flag of Unitarianism, as he would often say, in Jamaica. Though there was solid interest from the local Jamaican population in Montego Bay and then Kingston, there was little to no financial capital to support a church, and Brown's requests for financing from both the US and the British Unitarians who had invested in other missions, received limited or conditional commitments, eventually being rescinded altogether in 1918.

But determined to establish Unitarianism among the Black population, Brown moved to Harlem in 1920 and began the ministry that would occupy him for the next 36 years, but not before being removed once from Unitarian Fellowship during the 1930s because the association didn't believe his

ministry could ever be successful by white standards, and because he kept asking for financial support from colleagues.

In this time, he also lost one of his children and his wife had a mental breakdown that she would never recover from. He had to work as an elevator operator in order to keep food on the table. Brown was eventually reinstated in fellowship and provided with a pension, but by this point, he was already in his 60s.

Today's Unitarian Universalist narrative about Ethelred Brown tends to focus on these challenges and asks, "Why didn't the Unitarian Association do better?" Reverend Dr. Mark Morrison-Reed has written several excellent books that include the full story of Ethelred Brown and his ministry. In fact, it was Dr. Morrison-Reed who secured Brown's papers from Brown's last remaining relative in the 1970s.

Morrison-Reed, as a historian, is critical and rightly so, of the ways in which Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism have failed Black people in leadership and in the pews, and he points to Brown as an early example. My dissertation, while inspired by Dr. Morrison-Reed, and inspired by the other major work on Ethelred Brown by Reverend Dr. Juan Floyd-Thomas at Vanderbilt University is focused less on biography and history and more on the philosophy within Brown's sermons.

I'm eager to share Brown's thinking and what he had to say about the experience of blackness as a Unitarian and as an immigrant during the Harlem Renaissance. What I hear in Brown's word is not pathetic or pitiable. He did not regard himself as put-upon or helpless or feeble. Quite the opposite. He regarded himself as a noble advocate for Unitarianism, and he considered his efforts as one part of an influential group of Caribbean leaders who were exceptionally literate and well-informed. They were clear about two things, their personal capabilities to lead, and the ability of people of African descent wherever they are in the world, to chart their own course.

Among the founding members of Brown's Church were Richard B. Moore from Barbados, W.A Domingo from Jamaica, Women's Advocate Grace Campbell born in the US to Jamaican parents. Among Brown's close colleagues were activist Hubert Harrison, also a Jamaican, the Jamaican poet Claude McKay, Puerto Rican-born Arturo Schomburg for whom the library is named, as well as US-born civil rights activists A. Philip Randolph, both Reverends Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and Sr. of the prestigious Abyssinian Baptist Church, and occasionally W.E.B Du Bois.

Quite notably, they were all in close relationship with Pan-African movement firebrand Marcus Garvey, who Brown, Harrison and Domingo all knew in Jamaica. In addition to their work being central to the early movement for Jamaican independence, these figures expanded on and continued the efforts of Ida B. Wells public resistance to lynching in the US, and they supported Black uplift globally.

Brown was a central figure in this network that published magazines, poetry, books, papers and pamphlets, organized community groups and initiatives, and spoke on street corners and on the radio and in public halls. Reverend Ethelred Brown was the voice of liberal religion and faith in the midst of this crucial moment in Black history.

One wonders what motivated these leaders. As mentioned, many of them first coalesced through Marcus Garvey's work and the Pan-African movement. Ultimately, however, they rejected Garvey's counterproductive political positions and questionable business practices, and they would establish and become visible through other centers of influence. This included organizations like the African Blood Brotherhood, the National Urban League, and magazines like *The Messenger*, *The Crusader*, and *The Amsterdam News*, and the NAACP's *The Crisis*, which are still in print today. They mobilized unions and resistance to anti-Black violence in the wake of what James Weldon Johnson called the Red Summer of 1919, and of course, ultimately they helped pave the way for Jamaican independence.

Brown's work and how he attempted to apply Unitarianism are a direct response to all of this. His sermons are philosophically rich. They are as inspirational and as well researched as any of his white Harvard educated contemporaries. Brown's sermons have the added weight of directly responding to the needs of people of African descent in ways that his Unitarian colleagues either misunderstood or completely ignored.

Ethelred Brown and his fellow Caribbean activists worked to improve the experience of being a person of African descent everywhere, not just in the US or the islands. Being embodied as the other in the United States, while also bringing with them the experience of racial majority in their homelands was I believe, the motivation to make real change in the world. They experimented with socialism and communism, atheism, humanism, progressivism, Marxism and capitalism, and a host of other ways to find their way out of no way. Brown preached about all of these things to his community. This moment in history required creativity and leadership, and there was no option to turn away.

We call this community of practice that surrounded Ethelred Brown Caribbean radicals, but really they were only radical in the eyes of white nationalist racism. Truly, the most radical thing they did in the face of politics and cultures that were dominated by white racial resistance was to publicly and unapologetically declare themselves as full human beings.

What I hear in Ethelred Brown's expression of Unitarianism is much more than the failure of white leaders. For me, Brown is in the driver's seat. I read Ethelred Brown for what his experience allowed him to describe as a saving Unitarianism, a saving Unitarianism from a Black immigrant perspective, not for what Unitarianism missed by ignoring him. His was a Unitarianism that had the potential to be so much more. Proclaim the blessed message of our Unitarian faith, an oasis of liberation in a desert of conservatism and reaction, a light to dispel the darkness of superstition and fanaticism, the very power of God himself, invincible. This is a Unitarianism that is ripe and ready to be fully activated in service of full humanity, not one to be politely endured or sidelined by narrow bigotry.

Though I was born in New York City, I was raised to think of myself as being not only a US citizen, but also being very much Jamaican and Canadian, to always think of myself through what it means to come from immigrants. I bring my ancestors with me always. It is not about assimilation, but rather amalgamation, blending, joining, coming together.

White racial standards accused these Harlem Renaissance Caribbeans of being radical. Again, they were not radical. They were full with experience, resources, creativity, adaptability, ingenuity, and resilience. This is the Caribbean experience. This is the Black experience. This is the immigrant experience. This is the experience that guided Ethelred Brown's theology toward grand aspiration, through an actual lived fight for liberation, not just liberation in theory or as a slogan or as a wish, or as an academic concept of some reflection of a someday beloved community.

I am convinced that today's immigration problem carries far too much of the same language, paternalism, shade, and in-group out-group limitations that were once exclusive to what was called the Negro problem. That was in the early 20th century, including during the Harlem Renaissance.

The problem isn't immigration or immigrants. The problem is in the hearts and minds of those who don't think of themselves as immigrants. Many who use the word immigrant as a weapon are much more immigrant than the vast majority of the people who are being targeted under the current US policies, especially when you consider that many of these immigrants come from indigenous backgrounds thank you very much. Most of us would do well to embrace spiritual practices that make us at all times conscious of ourselves as immigrants on stolen land. Now, that would be a land acknowledgment.

Language, dress, skin color, food, family, all of these may be the outward signs of what many of us label as immigrant. But that is not all there is to anyone's story. No one should be defined by an oppression that they didn't create. The people riding an elevator with Ethelred Brown or asking my grandfather to turn down a bed on a train, they never considered that they might be in the presence of a brilliant theological mind or pivotal community civil rights leader. This is something to remember the next time you accompany someone to an immigration hearing, or talk with an Uber driver who has an accent, or greet the people who clean and maintain your spaces, or who cut your grass.

The most radical thing the Caribbean immigrants to the US of the early 20th century did was to declare themselves as full human beings in the face of white racism. What I learned from my grandfather and what we as Unitarian Universalists can learn from Reverend Ethelred Brown is that we have an obligation to rethink our relationship with those we would call immigrants and recognize everyone as full human beings before seeing anyone as a single issue or cause. That is what Unitarianism and Unitarian Universalism have to offer. That is beloved community. May it be so.