

Congregational Decision-Making about Controversial Social Justice Issues

By the Rev. Bill Gardiner
Director for Anti-Racism and Social Justice Empowerment Program
Advocacy and Witness Staff Group, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations

In some Unitarian Universalist congregations there is real controversy about involvement in social justice programs. Possibly the minister preaches a sermon on a divisive issue. Or the social responsibility committee votes to get involved in an unpopular community cause. Or the UUA General Assembly decides to take a stand on an issue that is very controversial. These actions may be upsetting to some of the members of the congregation.

In recent years some of our Unitarian Universalist congregations have been seriously divided by social justice issues such as the Vietnam War, the Black Empowerment Controversy, gay and lesbian rights, women's rights, being a Sanctuary congregation, and investing endowment funds in an ethical way.

There are a number of reasons why members of congregations disagree about engaging in social justice issues. There are disagreements about whether the congregation should respond to social justice issues in any way as an institution. There may be agreement that the congregation will be involved in the community but then disagreements about how it should be engaged and what issues to focus on. And there are concerns about whether the congregation should take stands on controversial issues and who speaks for the congregation on matters of public policy.

SHOULD THE CHURCH AS AN INSTITUTION BE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

Some Unitarian Universalists oppose having the congregation involved in social justice issues in any way.

Some Unitarian Universalists see the congregation as a refuge from the turmoil and conflict of everyday life. They argue that the congregation should be a place of serenity and a refuge from the conflict in the world. One UU minister has written, "The main purpose of the church is that it is a community of healing and wholeness...But how can a church be a place of healing if it is a place of acrimonious debate?"

Opponents of social justice in the congregation also argue that taking stands on issues or forming action groups violates the freedom of conscience of some members and compromises their beliefs. They say that if one group in the congregation takes a stand - and they may even be the majority - that group will be imposing their views on others. They assert that this infringes on their freedom of belief. They argue that the liberal church does not impose a theological point of view and it shouldn't impose political points of view either.

Now it is important to recognize that those who argue from the "freedom of conscience" point of view break down into a couple of different groups.

In one group are those who think that no social action program should be carried out in the congregation whatsoever. For them the congregation can be a place that supports individual persons in their social engagement in the world. In this context, the role of the congregation is to assist people in shaping their own political views through worship and educational programs so that they can act in the world as their conscience indicates. They believe that members of the congregation can be involved in causes, but they should be involved as individuals.

A second group believes the congregation can provide a forum where social issues can be discussed. For these people the congregation can have an active role in educating people about issues through forums, films, and discussion groups. Hopefully persons with differing viewpoints can meet for reasoned discussions. Then when members of the congregation have raised their consciousness they can go into the community and form organizations for making social change.

In each of these approaches the emphasis is on protecting freedom of belief and individual action in the world.

But there are also other reasons that people oppose social justice programming in our congregations.

Some people are concerned that addressing a controversial social justice issue can be too divisive in the life of the congregation. These folks have legitimate concerns about the health and long-term institutional viability of the congregation.

Some people may have concerns about the skills of the leaders in the church in processing controversial social issues. When they see how poorly some congregational leaders process difficult issues they lack confidence in their ability to facilitate change.

Other people express concerns about the rights of political minorities in the UU movement. With so many of Unitarian Universalists voting for candidates from the Democratic Party they wonder how members of the Republican Party feel. They continually ask the question: How do we respect political diversity in our religious movement?

In communities that are very conservative or are dominated by the military people are concerned about sticking out, being alienated from their neighbors, or even being attacked. This is a legitimate concern when you realize how many of our churches have been firebombed or vandalized because of their involvement in community issues.

WHY THE CHURCH SHOULD BE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES

I believe that it is important for our liberal faith that we be engaged in social issues as congregations.

We are a religious organization that has emphasized individual freedom of belief and conscience. And we should continue to do so. But I have several concerns about those who say that because of freedom of conscience, congregations should not be involved in social issues.

One of the difficulties with this point of view is that we couldn't even have an institution if everyone had complete autonomy of thought. We wouldn't be able to hire a minister, build a church building, or run a church canvass if we couldn't set organizational goals.

A second concern that I have is that the principle of freedom of conscience does not exist by itself. It exists in relation to other important principles of our faith like the responsibility to seek the truth and the commitment to act on those beliefs that are passionately held. A vital liberal faith will find a creative balance between these three important principles.

A third concern I have with the freedom of conscience point of view is that the individual is seen in isolation or outside of the matrix of groups and institutions. But this does not jibe with the social nature of reality or the fact that we are so interdependent with one another. It does not take into account the realities of power and the terrible consequences of unjust social structures in our society.

One of the underlying assumptions of those who disapprove of social justice in the church is that individuals acting alone can change the world. But I see little evidence of that. What I find is the most important thing individuals can do is to organize others into groups who can have enough power to make a difference. That is what all of our great Unitarian Universalist social reformers did.

The point at issue here is not that the church can't be a place of personal support and healing for individuals - for that is very important - but that it is seen as only that. I believe that in the liberal church we must be able to both comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. We need to remember that individuals live their religious lives most fully by acting upon the values of love and justice in the world.

I also agree that the church can have an important role in developing moral persons and educating people about issues. And I think we should actually be doing more to support our members as they engage in their ministries in the world.

A significant number of members of our congregations are involved in doing ministry in the world. Examples include people working in social change professions, teachers, and social workers. They also include all the people serving on community boards for organizations like Planned Parenthood, the Sierra Club, the NAACP and the ACLU. And we have many people working in business, government and universities, who are trying to make these places more just and caring institutions.

Many of these folks are working long hours under difficult circumstances. They face problems of burnout and loss of energy. They need affirmation and spiritual resources.

Congregations can support these people by providing healing services, giving a Humanitarian of the Year Award, or organizing a service based on how people are living their faith in the world. These are just some of the possibilities.

However, I do not think we can limit ourselves to simply education, discussion, and providing support for members - as important as that is. The questions become: What happens when the discussion is over? Is discussion sufficient when we see such critical human needs are not being met, and we know our congregations have the capacity to make a difference?

Engagement with the issues of the world is certainly consistent with the tradition of our faith. Our heritage is one of heroines and heroes who have struggled for justice and freedom. We remember Francis David, Susan B. Anthony, Theodore Parker, Dorothea Dix, Whitney Young, and John Haynes Holmes as being people who witnessed to their beliefs.

Engagement with the issues of the world is also consistent with our Principles and Purposes which call for respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice equity and compassion in human relations; and the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

But these fine principles can become abstractions unless we are involved in the concrete issues that people struggle with every day.

James Luther Adams reminds us about the importance of using our institutional power in responsible ways. He writes,

"The faith of a liberal must express itself in societal forms; in the forms of education, in economic and social organization, in political organization. Without these, freedom and justice in community are impossible. The creation of justice in community requires the organization of power. Through the organization of power, liberated persons tie into history; otherwise they cannot achieve freedom in history. Injustice in community is a form of power, an abuse of power, and justice is an exercise of just and lawful institutional power."

With Adams, I would argue that the effectiveness of our faith is determined not so much by the beliefs that we hold but by how we act in the world.

Finally, the idea that the church should take no position on moral issues seems to be self-contradictory- for taking no action is in itself a form action. This was clearly shown in the case of the German churches that did not speak out against Hitler as he rose to power. This unwillingness to speak out led to terrible consequences for millions of people across the world. The result of not taking a position on issues is to support the status quo. Not to decide is to decide.

DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT HOW TO BE INVOLVED

Other Unitarian Universalists agree that congregations can be involved in addressing controversial social justice issues. But within their ranks there are disagreements about whether the focus of the social justice program should be service, education, advocacy, witnessing, or community organizing. Should the focus of the program be local, national or international issues or some combination thereof? Should there be an emphasis on "safe" issues where there is a strong consensus or more controversial issues that will require personal and institutional transformation?

In my experience our best congregational have a good balance of local and national, safe and controversial issues. Moreover they develop programming which provides a good balance of service, education, advocacy, witnessing, or community organizing.

DETERMINING HOW THE PROGRAM SHOULD BE STRUCTURED

There are also disagreements about how the program should be structured. For example, should the program be run by a small group of people involved in the social justice committee? Or should people be involved in action groups? What are the roles of the congregation and the Board in providing leadership? And how shall the program be funded - by a line item in the budget or by special fund raising?

One way for congregations to approach these issues is to spell out the roles for individual members, social justice committees, action groups formed on particular issues, the Board of Trustees, and the congregation as a whole.

I believe we need to give greater importance to the role of the whole congregation in setting the direction for the social justice program and determining its moral identity. There are a number of ways that the congregations can vote on social justice issues. These include:

1. Provide funds in the annual budget for social justice programs.
2. Make decisions about General Assembly Resolutions.
3. Establish priorities for task forces and action groups in the life of the congregation.
4. Make commitments to major projects like setting up non-profit housing corporations or establishing a summer program for youth.
5. Write a mission or vision statement stating the congregation's role in the world.
6. Determine the ethical integrity and moral identity of the congregation. Examples are: defining a socially responsible investing policy, becoming a Green Sanctuary, deciding to be a Nuclear Free Zone, becoming a Sanctuary church for political refugees, becoming a Welcoming Congregation.
7. Vote on controversial social issues in the wider community.

The Board of the congregation also has an important role. Since the board and the ministers have the responsibility for the total life of the congregation they can work to make sure that social justice concerns are integrated into the education, worship, and community building aspects of the congregation's life.

The Board also provides leadership in ensuring that the congregation is a moral community that exemplifies the values its members think are important. This includes non-discriminatory hiring practices, socially responsible investing policies for endowment funds, and purchasing church supplies with environmental values in mind.

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE CONGREGATION ON MATTERS OF PUBLIC POLICY?

Some of the most volatile disagreements in the life of the congregations have to do with who speaks for the congregation on controversial issues.

Some Unitarian Universalists argue that a congregation should never take a public stand on an issue. But suppose the neighboring synagogue was firebombed in an act of anti-Semitic violence. And suppose the local clergy group approached the leadership of the UU congregation about taking a public stand condemning this terrible act. What would people do then?

Let me say at the outset that I do not think that there is any disagreement about the right of an individual UU to speak out personally on a controversial public issue. Nor do I think that many UUs would disagree with the right of a person to speak out on an issue and say she or he is an individual Unitarian Universalist.

But there are disagreements about whether members of the congregation can participate in a demonstration as an identified group. And there are also conflicts about whether people can use the congregation's name or banner at public demonstrations.

There are also disagreements about whether a member, or group of members, or committee of the congregation can make a public statement on an issue or take out an ad in a newspaper using the name of the congregation in that statement.

I recommend to congregation that they develop policies to provide guidelines for who has the power to make what decisions and which groups are responsible for responding to certain situations. Below is a grid that outlines some of these decisions.

Decision-Making Group ->				
Areas of Concern	Congregation	Board	Social Justice Committee	Action Group
Make a public statement				
Hold a press conference				
Put an ad in the paper or in other media				
Participate in a public demonstration as an identified group				
Carry the congregation's banner or a sign identifying the congregation in a march or demonstration				

Congregations use different policy guidelines for votes on controversial social justice issues:

- The congregation in Honolulu Hawaii elects a special committee at its annual meeting (along with the Board.) This committee has the responsibility for studying major social justice issues, making recommendations to the congregation, and setting up processes for education and voting.

- The Mainline Church (Devon, Pennsylvania) in its congregational vote on the issue of sanctuary for refugees from Central America called for a 75% vote. The issue did not receive the necessary percentage so the congregation did not become a sanctuary church.
- Some congregations make use of a disclaimer. After the majority has voted they state: "This decision only reflects the votes of those who were present at the meeting and does not speak for the congregation as a whole."
- In some congregations the social justice committee or an action group can vote to take a stand only for itself and not the whole congregation. In these situations the congregation has turned over its decision making power to a duly constituted group.

SUGGESTED GUIDELINES FOR PROCESSING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES

There are also disagreements about whether or how to process social justice issues with the members of the congregation.

Church leaders need to give serious consideration to whether an issue should be acted on or not. Ask yourselves:

- How central is this issue to the identity and core values of the congregation? If you can't identify core values or how this relates to your congregation's identity then the issue is not one to bring to the congregation.
- What is the level of controversy about this issue? Is the issue one in which members of the congregation need some education and they will move on it? Is it one in which a minority of people have strong feelings? Or is it one in which people are really polarized? Judgments about the level of conflict are important in deciding whether and how to process the issue. Sometimes the choices here are very complex and difficult.

If you decide to bring the issue up for discussion, thought also needs to be given to how to process the issue in the congregation. How much time should be taken to educate the members of the congregation? How much information do people need? Who will be in charge of giving the information? How will meetings be structured?

Below are listed some suggested guidelines for processing controversial social issues or major projects in a congregation:

1. Plan for several months of discussion and debate. It is better to err on the side of talking too long about an issue.
2. Use as many opportunities as possible to educate people, making use of the Sunday service, adult forums, discussion groups, and so on.
3. Allow proponents of all positions on the issue to be represented with adequate time.
4. Set guidelines that focus on facts and issues rather than personalities.
5. Make it clear that the integrity of all participants will be respected at all times and any behavior that does not treat people with dignity will not be tolerated.
6. After the agreed upon time of education and dialogue has passed, use a voting method that affirms the spirit of an inclusive democratic process and maintains the dignity, and, if necessary, the anonymity of the individuals voting. One possibility is to have a preparatory meeting at which people can deal with clarifying the language of a resolution.

7. Make sure there is ample time for discussion before a vote is taken at the meeting. Set aside a minimum of an hour for dialogue and debate if needed. Give everyone who wants to speak an opportunity to do so.
8. If after education and dialogue it looks like a vote will destroy the community, DON'T VOTE. The congregation isn't ready. Sometimes, this means more information or dialogue is needed. Sometimes it means that everyone needs more time to absorb the information. Sometimes it means the issue should be dropped.

CONGREGATIONAL VOTES IN EMERGENCY SITUATIONS

The above guidelines emphasize taking lots of time for discussion and using good group process methods. But sometimes we do not have adequate time to use good group process.

A good example of this occurred in 1990 when UUs had to respond quickly to the prospect of a war in the Middle East when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Congress was going to vote within the month on whether the United States should be part of a United Nations effort to drive the Iraqis out of Kuwait.

In some of our congregations members wanted the congregation to vote to oppose US involvement in such a war.

Personally I would not favor a congregation taking a vote in this situation. Few of us know very much about the politics of the Middle East. There is not time to adequately study the issue. There would not be sufficient time to educate people about the issues. Many members would be critical about some position being pushed too quickly.

Moreover, it would be possible for people who are concerned about the issue to mobilize themselves for action without taking a vote of the congregation. In some cities UUs organized some members of their congregations to work with people from other religious communities to lobby their Congress people. Others visited the editorial boards of local newspapers to plea for a more balanced presentation of the news. In my opinion these were more effective actions to take than trying to get the congregation to take a vote on the issue. And in the heat of the moment, they had a greater impact.

IMPORTANT POINTS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE ADVOCATES IN THE CHURCH

Discussion about controversial issues can sometimes be heated and divisive in the life of a congregation. Sometimes there isn't time for full discussion, and maybe only one side is presented. Pressure or coercion is used to get votes, rather than persuasion. And appeals are made to guilt and not to reason. These are examples of bad process. And they alienate persons and divide congregations.

We are trying to live by our Principles and Purposes and respond to crucial social issues at the same time that we honor the values and traditions of our democratic religious communities.

That is why social justice leaders need to take special responsibility for using effective and fair processes that respect the individuals involved and provide ample time for discussion and reflection. It means honoring individual rights as we move for group consensus. It requires that we make sure there is time for full discussion and that all sides of the argument are presented.

Remember, how the issue is processed is as important as the issue itself. If you are successful processing one issue, then you can come back to other issues in the future.

Social justice leaders need to avoid attitudes of arrogance, and self-righteousness. It is dangerous to divide the world into those who are "moral" and those who are "immoral". They need to understand that not everyone in the church or community is going to agree with them about issues, and that is okay.

Social justice advocates need to be responsible in how they conduct their business. Sometimes programs are not well conceived or presented. Persons who speak on issues are poorly prepared. Statements are

made that are not thought through or are hastily put together. Simple solutions are offered for complex problems. Social justice leaders need to do their homework. They need to be well prepared for meetings and show that they have studied the issue in depth. They need to be particularly aware of both sides of the arguments.

Social justice advocates need to remember that social justice is not the only reason the church exists and that the music, religious education, and worship programs have their importance as well.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT DEALING WITH CONTROVERSIAL SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES IN THE CHURCH

1. Conflict doesn't only happen around social justice issues in the congregation. Many (some would say all) decisions in the life of the church involve conflict. Questions arise: Should we build a new organ or keep the old one? What kind of hymns should we sing? What kind of music should we have on Sunday morning? Should the minister wear a robe or not? Sometimes people can get very heated about these issues.
2. It is unfair to single out social justice as being especially conflict laden. Oftentimes the congregation needs to address how it processes controversy in any area of its life.
3. The decision not to take stands will alienate people just like the decision to take stands will.
4. Leadership in situations involving controversy involves walking a fine line. Activists need to remember that we need to build the institutions that are our base of support. Institutionalists need to remember that Unitarian Universalism stands for some very important principles in the world. A good way to create a win-win situation is to vote only on controversial issues that will build the ethical integrity and moral identity of our congregations. Then let members of the congregation who are concerned about particular issues in the community organize action groups or lobbying groups around those issues.

As many of our congregations learned during the Vietnam era, being right on the issue is not necessarily worth the cost of losing dedicated, participatory, members of the community.

FOOTNOTE: #1. See page 6 of the Social Justice Empowerment Handbook entitled "The Role of the Congregation and the Board of Trustees in Social Justice Ministry" for further information.