

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL JUSTICE MINISTRY

By Kate Lore, Social Justice Director at First Unitarian Church of Portland, Oregon

At its worse, Social Justice work can divide a church. It can spark political battles, alienate members and set a climate in which everyone is self-righteously pointing fingers at one another. At its best, Social Justice work can strengthen and enlarge a congregation. It can build community, nourish the spiritual life of members, and shape public life. This article is designed to map out ways in which you can avoid the pitfalls inherent in this type of work and help you be successful in developing a Justice-Seeking Congregation based on love and respect.

"We are here to awaken from the illusion of our separateness" Thich Nhat Hanh

Things you want to DO!

- **Do Be the change you want TO SEE.** As members of a spiritual community, we are called to live out our shared values, to "walk our talk". Bring your Highest Self into this work. Demonstrate compassion, respect and patience with everyone -- even those with whom you differ significantly. Try to base your ground your work in love, as opposed to self-righteous indignation.
- **Do start and/or end your gatherings with a spiritual reading or prayer.** How does church-based social justice work differ from political work? If a congregation is truly engaged in a social justice ministry, a natural cycle will occur: *your work will feed your spirit and your spirit will feed your work.* By incorporating a spiritually based ritual into your meetings, you intentionally ground your work in the Sacred. You also provide a wonderful way for members to share with one another as they take turns leading this ritual.
- **Do be democratic by determining the Social Justice passions of the congregation as a whole.** If a Social Justice Ministry is going to be successfully embraced by the entire membership of the church, it is important to attain a sense of which issues are of greatest concern of everyone. This information can be gathered via surveys, focus groups, special retreats or with the help of consultants from the UU Faith in Action office.
- **Do find your focus.** If a congregation can successfully name it's passions, it is important to narrow those passions down to one or two major issues (unless you are a large church). Hence, the congregation will need to take the time and energy to prioritize its concerns. Resist the temptation to do "a little bit of everything", as this will only dilute your power. Warning: this procedure will surely irritate "single issue" people if their issue doesn't make the top priority list. It may be helpful to look at the common threads that weave through various expressed concerns. For example, our current global economy impacts food, jobs, the environment, world cultures, peace, etc. By choosing to focus on something as broad as Globalization, a congregation can consecutively address several

- “single issues’ while working jointly under the same umbrella. Similarly, if a congregation names the issue of Homelessness as it’s main passion, there are enough related issues (hunger, worker’s wages, affordable housing, access to Recovery programs, mental health issues, domestic violence, and legislative advocacy) to capture the interests of the bulk of any congregation. Note: subgroups do well to have at least 5 persons and to be in good communication with other subgroups. Coordination amongst subgroups is highly recommended.
- **Do provide varying types of engagement:** Once a congregation has found its focus, it is important to remember that different people will want to do different types of activities. There is no right or wrong way to work for Social Justice. Please remember that people run a gamut of interests, understandings and have varying amounts of free time. It is wise to plan accordingly.
 - 1) Hands-on Activities (e.g., making sack lunches for homeless teenagers, organizing a benefit for a jailed activist, conducting a food or clothing drive). Hands-on activities take place on-site to provide: a) short-term commitments for busy congregants; b) fellowship opportunities for long-time and new members alike; and c) direct assistance for people in need.
 - 2) Education (e.g., study groups, classes, forums, debates, teach-ins, developing curriculum) Education is essential to effective Social Justice Ministry in that it: a) grounds your work in current information; b) sparks dialog; and c) motivates people to get involved. Don’t let your work stop here, however!
 - 2) Community Activities (e.g., building/working on a Habitat for Humanity home, volunteering together at a homeless shelter, partnering with community groups to conduct a teach-in or special event, joining a community organizing effort). Community activities provide a way in which to: a) build bridges/relationships between those people *inside* and *outside* the walls of the church; b) deepen congregants understanding of social problems -- and the people most impacted by them -- by grounding congregant knowledge in the real world; and c) enlarge the scope of a congregation's Social Justice Ministry by increasing the number of people involved.
 - 3) Working for Systemic Change (e.g., writing to legislators as a group on a regular basis, gathering signatures for, or co-writing, a ballot measure for campaign finance reform (yes, you can do this without jeopardizing your 501(c)3 status), studying fair trade issues and acting in accordance to your conscious, starting a community bank or credit union). When a church starts working for systemic change, it begins to: a) positively effect the public domain; b) discovers it's own power and thereby starts taking itself seriously; and c) draws new members who have heard or read about your congregation in the news.
 - **Do continually develop new leaders.** Social Justice leaders need to be "big picture" types who can facilitate meetings and help respectfully moderate conflict. Not everyone who is interested in providing leadership has these skills, however, so training should be arranged on an ongoing basis. If you need advise in

providing leadership training, contact the Faith in Action office or a local Technical Assistance organization. The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) groups also provide excellent leadership training.

- **Do be inclusive.** Our memberships are complex. Some members are long-term "pillars", while others are brand-new. Some are wealthy; others struggle to make ends meet. We are youth, young adults, folks with children, folks with grandchildren, single, married, divorced, GBLT and straight. Our ethnicities vary, as do our cultures, our politics and our understandings of the Sacred. *It takes intentionality to be inclusive amongst such diversity -- but it is well worth it!* Following is a sampling of some little things you can do to be more inclusive:

1) When writing meeting announcements, always include inclusive phrases such as "all are welcome", "new members are especially welcome", "seeking members of all ages", "you needn't be a member to attend", or "bring a friend".

2) Provide childcare consistently, even though it costs money. More times than not, the parents are willing and able to pay the costs. In some circumstances, it might be wise to offer childcare at no cost. Use your own discretion.

3) Provide scholarships and/or sliding scale fees for any event that costs money. Be sensible and respectful in the way you advertise this. An example for your newsletter might be: "Scholarship monies have been set aside to ensure that everyone who wants to attend this event is able to do so. Please contact so-and-so at 555-5555 for more information" When someone calls to inquire about scholarships, they might express some embarrassment about needing to ask for financial assistance. Please be especially sensitive in your response. Try to focus the conversation on how delighted you are that they will be attending the event. Help them feel welcomed and honored. Don't waste your energy trying to assess whether or not this particular person actually needs a scholarship.

4) Reserve a few minutes at the start of any new meeting to welcome new faces. Have everyone present introduce themselves. Collect names, addresses, email addresses and phone numbers of new people. Assign someone to call new people before the next meeting, telling them how thrilled you are that they were present. Encourage them to come again.

5) Don't alienate people by making a big deal about having "someone like them" at your meeting or event, whether it be a youth, a person of color, a homeless person, etc. Avoid questions like, "As a black woman, can you tell me why the African American community isn't doing more about this issue?" or "what do Youth think about the WTO?" People want to be seen for WHO they are, not WHAT they are. No one likes to be objectified, or to be asked to speak for all people of their race, age, sexual orientation, etc. With time, experience and the development of relationships with people unlike yourself, you will learn their varying perspectives.

- **Do get organized.** Fellowship and spontaneity are fine and good but . . . they can derail social justice work if they are not a structured part of an organized agenda. One must show people respect by following these:
 - 1) Start and end meetings on time.
 - 2) Assign a facilitator and a timekeeper for each meeting.
 - 3) Stick to your agenda. If an item arises that must be discussed, check in with the group to determine which agenda item/s will be omitted until next time.
 - 4) Establish 1-year, 3-year and 5-year goals. Check-in with those goals from time-to-time.
 - 5) Keep everyone (minister, DRE, and other church groups) informed of your plans. Invite them (but don't badger them) to partner with you in areas of interest to them.
 - 6) Deal directly with conflict when it invariably pops up. Ask group members to agree to and abide by the following ground rules:
 - Count all voices equally*
 - Listen to Hear*
 - Leave baggage at door*
 - Take no cheap shots*
 - Look for the Light in one another.*

Things you DON'T want to do!

- **Don't let a small group of people set your Social Justice agenda.** All too often, the Social Justice focus of a church is determined by a few, loud, opinionated people who convince/badger other members (usually their closest church friends) into taking up their own favorite causes. This technique breeds small, insular groups of people who work for good causes but do not work "in the name of the church". This is a common pitfall and will greatly limit the effectiveness of your Social Justice work.
- **Don't be judgmental.** In an attempt to "enlighten" people in to living or speaking the "right" way, many well-intentioned people put all of their energy into laying blame, assigning guilt, or catching people in politically incorrect acts. The result of this style of "enlightenment" is ALIENATION. This is not an effective way to mobilize people. Please don't do it.
- **Don't say that you're working in the name of the church when you're not.** It is important to distinguish your own work, or the work of a small group of church members, from the work of the church. Neglecting to do so can lead to unnecessary conflict and dilutes the power that a church can have when it intentionally decides to take a public stand on an issue.

- **Don't allow Burn Out to infect your work.** If it's not feeding your soul, don't do it. Social justice work should add to your enjoyment of life, stimulating both heart and mind. If you feel depleted, you are either taking on too much work or the wrong kind of work. Don't do something because "if I don't do it, nobody will". If nobody else is willing to do it, it is very likely that the work you're doing is *yours* and not the *churches*.
- **Don't give up.** It is not easy to alter long-established patterns. Change takes time, especially if that change is to be long lasting. We will not fix all of the world's problems in our lifetimes. Rather, we must just "keep on keeping on" in the most loving, compassionate, equitable and effective way possible.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for help.** If you find yourself struggling to move ahead with Social Justice work in your church, please contact the Faith in Action office at your earliest convenience. They are there to help you.