

ENGAGED SPIRITUALITY

Workshop: Large Church Conference Opening Remarks: Marilyn Sewell

Unitarian Universalists are a very special people, with a special mission—what characterizes us as a people? We are bright, articulate, informed—a small group, nationwide, but full of leaders. Therefore, we can be the “yeast in the loaf”—and the world needs us now, and our values, bogged down as it is in superstition and division, with fundamentalism of various kinds bringing in new converts everyday and driving people, and nations, apart. In such a world we offer justice-seeking and tolerance, we offer a God of love and inclusivity.

But why have we not had more impact, as a movement? And why, specifically, have our social justice programs not always been as effective as we would like them to be?

One reason is that we have focused on programs and issues, rather than being grounded in the Spirit—so there is division among activists, as they compete for resources, not understanding that all the different issues ultimately are connected. Oppression really is of a piece: racism is related to poverty is related to empire building is related to war is related to greed is related to global warming. So groups within the church need to stop focusing on their passion for their little issue, and stop trying to force others to see that their issue must be first on the justice agenda.

At First Unitarian in Portland we are not doing justice work because we believe we will save the world. We are doing this work to save our own souls. We are trying to live with some kind of integrity the only life we have to live. Humility is the proper attitude to assume when doing justice work.

Without spiritual grounding social justice activists will tire out, give way to cynicism and despair. With it, they can be sustained for the long haul—working in community, together.

A second reason we become ineffective is that we give the program away to a little group of activists, rather than understanding that justice work is the work of the whole congregation, flowing out of their spiritual maturity as a religious people. This small group of activists all too often are set apart as “nags,” and they irritate the other congregants by frequently reminding others of their responsibility to make the world a better place, often in all-too-specific ways. And sometimes the most disgruntled people in the congregation somehow end up leading the various social justice efforts, thus making the work unappealing to others.

Third, Unitarian Universalists are all too often satisfied with reading and studying about issues, having talks and debates, engaging in endless discussions—but never

getting around to taking the next step and acting in the world. As the Rev. Earl Holt once said, “We think because we’ve said it, we’ve done it.” Talk is not enough. We have to be bold enough to act.

Fourth, Unitarian Universalists are ambivalent about power. Congregants are ambivalent about their own personal power, about the minister’s power, and about institutional power—the power of the church to act in the real world. We, in fact, distrust institutions and power, and so we pull back from wading in there and getting our hands dirty, our shoes muddy with the troubles of the world. We say, “We can’t act until the whole congregation approves—if one person doesn’t agree, then we mustn’t speak out.”

We must find a way to speak out. The church must not be silent in the face of the moral abuses of our day. How will history view us? When great evils are noted, will they say, where was the church?

Fifth, most churches, including most Unitarian Universalist churches, are more comfortable with charity than with justice. So we give away our money and our talent, rather than making our congregants into effective change agents. It’s one thing to minister to persons in need, to make sandwiches and open soup kitchens—we do that, too, at First Church—but we emphasize systemic change. At some point, instead of opening more soup kitchens, we need to ask, why are there so many hungry people, and then address that question. Policy change is what is called for, not just help for the victims of bad policy.

ANOTHER MODEL

Today I’d like to suggest another model for churches to consider. What would characterize this alternative model?

We would see ourselves as a people called out to a larger purpose in the world, a purpose larger than our own needs. Our mission would be more profound than intellectual stimulation, or building community, or whatever—we will gain these things in a church community, yes, but in the context of a devotion to something larger than ourselves. We would be aware that we are called to use our power for the good in a world in which the worst hold power through greed, and the people follow sheep-like in an endless line of consumption and entertainment—or consumption as entertainment. Who will redeem such a world?

We would indicate our dedication to that larger purpose/mission by committing resources of person and money to the work of making justice in the world. At First Unitarian in Portland, we hired Kate Lore as our Director of Social Justice ten years ago. I invited some congregants who were interested in justice issues and who were people of some means to my home for dessert one evening, and I told them that we would never be really effective with our justice work unless we had professional staff. They pledged enough money that evening to fund the position ½ time the first year, and after that the

position became full-time. For several years, it was generously supported by the Veatch Foundation. Kate has now become an ordained minister and serves as our Social Justice Minister.

Having full-time staff has made all the difference in what we've been able to accomplish. Volunteers can only go so far in organizing and supporting a strong program in the church, and in seeking out and joining with others in coalition, in the larger community. Volunteers have their own lives, and they come and go according to their own personal needs—programs need a consistent leader and a wise, supportive presence.

Further, in this alternative model, we deepen our knowledge with study, lectures, discussion, reading, debates—with many of these activities open to the whole community. Our church is known in Portland as a central place where people come to become well-informed about current issues, such as economic inequity (David Cay Johnson spoke recently, for example), trade, immigration, Darfur, environmental concerns. People are drawn to the church in this way, and most people now say that they join our church because we are the church that “walks its talk.”

In addition, we build in spiritual components into every meeting, every retreat, every dinner—this is not just any secular group getting together about an issue. Every meeting has a sacred dimension because that meeting is generated by and held in a church. People are sustained by being grounded in the Spirit.

We try not to get into that “ranting and raving” indignant and enraged place where we all can go so easily when unspeakable things happen. We try to understand that, yes, these things are happening—these deaths in Iraq, this devastation to the planet, this genocide in Darfur—and then make room to grieve. For underneath the ranting and raving are the fear and the sadness—the deep grief for what we have lost and are losing and will surely lose. Our Peace Group keeps the names of every soldier who has fallen in Iraq—and every month we have a ritual in the Parish Hall in which we place stones in water, to remember the ones we have lost that month.

We offer support—covenant groups of various kinds, and classes—for those who need that kind of support. We did everything we could to stop the war in Iraq from starting, and when it did start anyway, we offered classes in Buddhist meditation, which overflowed with activists who were devastated by this turn of events. People need a place where they can come to grieve and meditate and pray and play—a place to be in community and be renewed.

We are joyous, in spite of it all. The model we offer—let me be clear—is not one of drudgery (“You should do this or that; you should fight this thing or the other) We offer information, inspiration, and most of all, an invitation to a larger life, in a community of people who have also chosen that larger life. We want to feed the passion of the people in the program—we never try to talk anyone into doing anything. We ask an individual, what excites you, what will help you grow? Choose one area and jump in, we say.

So we inspire and invite. One way that our model functions well is the combination of the prophetic message from the pulpit—passionate and informed, hopefully—followed by an invitation to do something that very day, right after the service. Generally, we will offer 3 or 4 or 5 options—petitions to sign, groups to join, marches that are happening, posters to make, or whatever. Kate has all this arranged downstairs in the Parish Hall during the coffee hour, and people go down after the service and sign up for various activities. I never preach about some justice issue without giving people concrete ways to act, to make a difference. People want to do the right thing—but they need leadership and encouragement.

So when people come together in the name of something larger than themselves, to work for change, they feel their power, their creativity, their unity, and their joy. These are sustaining feelings that will take people through the tough times, keep them focused, give them courage, and help create hope in their hearts. We may not save the world—or literally, the earth—but we are going to try and save one another, and we're going to try to live with integrity in these very challenging times. That is all we are called to do, and that is enough.