Panel Speech and introductions

Good morning, my name is Bruce Knotts and it’s my honor to direct the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office. Before beginning my remarks, I want to thank The Mission of Fiji which partnered with us and made our presence here possible. I also want to thank Salote Soqo at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee for organizing this panel and for agreeing to moderate it. Unfortunately, she must undergo a surgical procedure today, so I’m filling in. We send Salote our healing wishes and prayers. I want also to thank and recognize the work our partners at the UU Service Committee do to help with this seminar and with all our work together at the United Nations.

In 1961, U.S. President John F. Kennedy’s Ambassador to the UN, Adlai Stevenson, who was also a Unitarian Universalist, suggested we connect our congregations to the United Nations. In response to his appeal we have had an official presence at the United Nations for 56 years.

Shortly after Robert West took office as the UUA’s second President in 1969, he discovered that bankruptcy was looming. He faced ferocious backlash from people angered by staff reductions. Many black UUs felt betrayed by his proposal to change the timeline from four to five years for the distribution of $1 million to the Black Affairs Council. This history is well-known and is currently discussed among UUs.

What is less known is that at the same time as Robert West defunded civil rights, he also defunded the UUA’s international engagement including the employment of Rev. Homer Jack and he defunded the UU-UNO. UU congregations banded together to save the UU-UNO, making it the only independent faith-based office not supported by its denomination at the UN from 1970-2011. In 2011 the UU-UNO returned to the UUA in the hopes that by doing so, UU’s would better know about and support the work we do here.

In 1970 Unitarian Universalists started Religions for Peace at the UN together with Buddhist and Jewish clergy.

Beginning in 2008, our office started the first faith-based advocacy for the equality of **all sexual orientations and gender identities.** When we started, there was hardly any discussion of LGBTI equality at the UN. Today the UN fully supports this equality in all its agencies, policies and programs.

In 1971, our office founded the NGO Committee on Disarmament, Peace, and Security. I currently chair this important committee founded by Rev. Homer Jack in 1971. This position gives me a seat on the NGO Security Council Working Group which meets regularly with all the ambassadors at the U.N. Security Council. We have open and frank discussions on all the matters facing the U.N. Security Council, such as North Korea, Yemen, Syria, Venezuela, Israel/Palestine, South Sudan, nuclear weapons proliferation, violence against women in armed conflict, climate change and the global migration crisis to name just a few.

The UU-UNO is working to build a coalition of faith-based voices to call for immediate talks to find ways to end all testing, development and enhancements of nuclear weapons. We agree with Pope Francis that even possessing nuclear weapons is immoral. We work very closely with the UN Office of Disarmament Affairs. We are in conversations the many member-state missions to work for a nuclear-weapon-free world before it’s too late.

In the 1990s this office led the faith-based caucus to establish the International Criminal Court and helped negotiate the Rome Statute to especially ensure the safety of women and girls. I hope that gender equality and making the world safe for everyone will be our seminar topic next year.

When I was the regional refugee coordinator for the U.S. Government in West Africa from 2000-2003, I spent most of my time working to protect the safety of women and girls in refugee camps. I ensured that there was an adult woman in every refugee classroom after I learned that some students had been abused by their teachers. I ensured that there was lighting in bathroom areas and that women’s bathing and toilet facilities were locked and could only be unlocked by the women using those facilities.

Today, the world has a growing migration crisis with over 68 million people forced to migrant away from their homes. With the **growing** crisis, the **political will and funding to deal with the crisis is diminishing.**  When UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres took office, he said, “We need to assert the value of multilateralism, **only global solutions can address global problems.**” **The growing migration crisis is a global problem which can only be solved with global solutions.** So what’s happening and what will happen if we don’t address this problem?

There are many causes of migration. Some of them are covered under existing international law and some are not. The only international legal norms applying specifically to refugees at global level are the 1951 UN Convention relating to the status of refugees (The Geneva Convention) and the 1967 Protocol relating to the status of refugees.

Refugees are a special class of migrants who under international law deserve specific protection by their host state. According to Article 1 of the 1951 UN Convention, a refugee is defined as a person who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.’ This definition implies that several qualifying conditions apply to be considered a refugee: (1) presence outside home country; (2) well-founded fear of persecution (being at risk of harm is insufficient reason in the absence of discriminatory persecution); (3) incapacity to enjoy the protection of one’s own state from the persecution feared. The definition of refugees was actually intended to **exclude** internally displaced persons, economic migrants, victims of natural disasters, and persons fleeing violent conflict but not subject to discrimination amounting to persecution. These agreements responded to conditions arising from the Second World War.

In today’s world, there are more migrants who are forced to leave their homes due to the excluded categories that I just mentioned than there are that fit the legal definition of a refugee. The Government of the Tuvalu is proposing adding climate change as legal grounds for claiming refugee status. After all, if sea levels rise due to global warming, people must leave their island home and seek refuge elsewhere. **I** also **believe** that people such as those in Central America who must flee intolerable levels of organized crime and people such as those in Venezuela who are fleeing economic collapse leading to starvation should also have legal grounds to apply for refugee status.

However, **with growing numbers of refugees, the political climate is tending towards building walls and turning our backs on refugees and other migrants**. **There is little political apatite expand the grounds to claim refugee status**. We have seen this anti-migrant attitude in the United States under both Presidents Obama and Trump. Brexit, the United Kingdom voted to withdraw from the European Union due to fear of immigration. Anti-immigration parties have gained strength in most European countries. Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, Israel and many other countries around the world have made it clear they don’t want immigrants.

Desperate people will defy laws and overcome obstacles to find a safe place for themselves and especially for their children. So migrants will migrate regardless of the barriers put in their way. Millions will die in the process, but the migration will continue.

25% of the people in Lebanon are recently arrived migrants and Lebanon is unable to cope. It cannot accommodate migrant children in their schools. Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Turkey also host large numbers of Syrian refugees and Uganda hosts large numbers of South Sudanese refugees. These are countries with very little capacity to deal with the migrants, nor do they have to capacity neither to prevent their entry nor to expel them. **Such situations will inevitably result in failed states, the growth of terrorism, the spread of epidemics, and the death and destitution of millions. All of these conditions are intolerable and they lead to global chaos which will affect us all, regardless of the walls we build.**

So what is the answer: A Global Strategy and **burden-sharing** where the rich nations with greater capacity accept migration to their countries and also that they will fund and otherwise support refugee, and IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps and other settlements where people forced to migrate for whatever reason **can be safe and lead dignified lives**.

I once escorted Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner (Republican from Wisconsin) who was then the chair of the U.S. House of Representatives Judiciary Committee around refugee camps in West Africa for two weeks. We saw camps with over 30,000 refugees. In horror, Congressman Sensenbrenner turned to me and said, “How are we going to keep these people from coming to the United States.” I responded, “Easy, take care of them over here with decent housing, education, work, food and all that’s necessary for a safe and dignified life, and they won’t want to come to the United States.” We see refugees and asylum seekers here in New York, and in other parts of the Western world and our hearts go out to them; **or** **at least that’s what I hope**. They need our help and they should be welcomed and integrated into our societies. **However**, **the migrants in the greatest need are not here for us to see. They are in camps, or in bombed out towns, or in swamps or deserts without even the most basic necessities of life.** Many adults can willingly undergo the most difficult of circumstances, but they are unwilling to see their children suffer, starve and die without doing all they can to save them. It is those millions **that we don’t see** that are in the most need of our support on a large scale. **We have the resources to fix this problem.**

The World Food Program’s Syrian response, the biggest and most complex of its worldwide campaigns, has been crippled by funding shortfalls, caused by the reduction in U.S. contributions. (Please remember that the World Food Program is one of 108 UN agencies). The WFP serves 1.6 million Syrian refugees in camps in neighboring countries. Most refugees fleeing Syria’s civil war have found temporary shelter in Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt, but as the camps grow more crowded and resources more scant, refugees have left the camps in search of better conditions, sparking a crisis across Europe as nations debate how, or even whether, to shelter them. “The needs are outpacing the contributions.” In 2016, WFP needed $8.84 billion and received $5.92 billion.

UNHCR’s 2018-2019 Financial Requirements based on a global needs assessment of people of concern asks for about $15 billion for the two years.

The Trump Administration has cut funding to the World Food Program and to United Nations Relief and Works Agency the international agency responsible for the welfare of 5.6 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank—while effectively freezing additional funding for the foreseeable future. On January 16, the State Department cut funding by $65 million. Two days later, the State Department announced that it would also be halting a $45 million payment it had pledged in December for food aid for the West Bank and Gaza.

It is estimated that Trump’s Border Wall will cost $70 billion to build and $150 million a year to maintain. The U.S. plans to spend $1 trillion to enhance and miniaturize its nuclear arsenal. The U.S. Government spends **$3 million a week** on Trump’s **weekend visits to his golf courses**. **We have the resources to solve the migration problem. We just need to prioritize our resources** in ways that help people have a safe and dignified life close to home, or in those countries like Canada which realize the value migrants bring to thriving multicultural societies. Every country which accepts migrants has experienced benefits from welcoming the new and fresh perspectives and ideas that migrants bring. I’m happy to expand on these remarks during the question and answer period.

**Thank You**

**Jenifer Fenton** is the Poynter (Journalism) Fellow-in-Residence at Yale, where she studies truth, media and refugee narratives. Prior to Yale, she worked for UNHCR as a senior press adviser covering information, reporting, advocacy and inter-agency UN coordination. She also worked for OCHA in Jerusalem. For 15 years, Jenifer worked in the television news industry in the US, the UK and the Middle East. She has held a variety of senior positions for CNN and Al Jazeera, most recently as an executive producer.

**Roy Gutman** has been a foreign affairs journalist in Washington and abroad for more than four decades. He’s reported on the Middle East for the past six years, first as Baghdad bureau chief and then Middle East bureau chief for McClatchy Newspapers, based in Istanbul. He freelanced for Foreign Policy, the Los Angeles Times, The Nation, Politico Europe and The Daily Beast in 2016-17. At Newsday, his reports on “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including the first documented accounts of Serb-run concentration camps, won the Pulitzer Prize for international reporting (1993), the George Polk Award for foreign reporting, the Selden Ring Award for investigative reporting and other honours.

**Teresa Blumenstein** has worked in the civil society community at the UN since 2015. She currently serves as a UN representative for UNANIMA International, a coalition of over 23,000 Catholic women Religious who live and work for justice in 80 countries. She represents the coalition on the NGO Mining Working Group and the NGO Committee on Migration (CoM), a coalition of NGOs dedicated to advocacy for the protection of the rights of migrants in all policies and practices put forth by the UN General Assembly, agencies, and member states through persistent advocacy.