

Session 8C: Effective Social Action and Public Witness

Learning Objectives:

- To explore the concepts of social action and public witness
- To examine ways to be successful in doing social action and/or public witness
- To explore issues of accountability

Session Summary:

This session will explore the concepts of social action and public witness. Through questions and a case study, participants will look at what makes effective social action and public witness. The session will also explore the issue of accountability, *and* look at effective social action and public witness in the context of both this congregation and other congregations. Synthesis of information from this session and previous ones will lead to the beginning stages of developing a plan of action.

Background:

The previous sessions have laid the groundwork for knowing our history, knowing what is possible and what is needed for community service. This session will explore some of the meaning behind the work, who the work is being done for, and what impact this might have on the congregation.

In the first activity, the group will be answering questions about social justice. Help them to make the bridge from social justice to social action (a plan for social justice work). Many people confuse these two terms and it is important to understand the difference.

Materials:

1. Newsprint
2. Markers
3. Paper
4. Writing materials
5. Tape
6. Handouts (if not on newsprint)

Preparation:

- Have a copy of the case study and accompanying questions either on newsprint or as handouts.
- Prepare newsprint for activity on Examining Congregations and Social Justice/Public Witness

Workshop Plan

Opening Reading/Hymn (5 Minutes)

(You are invited to pick a reading and/or an opening hymn. Singing The Living Tradition is an excellent resource. Other options are a moment of silence, a prayer, or a brief check-in. You are encouraged to also begin with a chalice lighting. Please submit any readings and/or hymn choices that you have used successfully to the OBGLTC as feedback for possible inclusion in future editions of LWC.)

Activities:

Reflecting on Social Justice and Public Witness (30 minutes)

Ask the participants to find a partner to answer the questions below. Tell them that they will have 2 minutes per question and that the point of each question is to encourage them to think in greater depth about effective social justice and public witness.

1. What is social justice?

2. What makes for effective social justice?
3. What kind of impact must a social justice project make in order to be effective? How many people are required to make it happen? How many people must it impact?
4. What are some examples of social justice? How far reaching have these efforts been? What can be learned from these efforts?
5. What is public witness?
6. What makes effective public witness?
7. What kind of impact must a public witness effort make in order to be effective? How many people must it impact?
8. What are some examples of public witness work? How far reaching have these efforts been? What can be learned from these efforts?
9. What are the similarities and differences between social justice and public witness?
10. Do you think this group should work on a social justice project, a public witness opportunity, or both combined into 1 event?

Re-gather as a large group. Ask for any insights that arose as well as get a sense of opinions on the answers to the last two questions.

Examining Congregations and Social Justice/Public Witness (20 minutes)

On one sheet of newsprint write the words “Social Justice” at the top. On a second sheet of newsprint write the words “Public Witness” at the top.

Ask the group to list any projects the congregation has done that would fit under either category. Write the responses as they are given. If a project fits under both categories, ask if the primary intent was either to be a social justice project or a public witness effort. If the answer is unclear or equal, write the response on both sheets.

After a few minutes, tell the participants to expand their thinking by naming other congregations that have done any projects that could make the list. You may wish to list other UU congregations in a second color and other non-UU congregations in a third color, to distinguish the three for later conversation. After about 10 minutes stop and look at the lists.

Ask the participants to estimate how many people worked on each item listed, what was accomplished in the effort, and how it fit in with the mission of the church.

In the last five minutes, ask the group what can be learned for any project we might do from the information on this list.

Accountability (20 minutes)

Inform the participants that they are now going to discuss four questions that will inform what kind of project they do. Tell the participants that being in relationship with the larger community requires more of us than to tell them what they should do/should be doing. The following questions will help inform our project. Ask the group to work in groups of three to answer these questions themselves. The group will have 3 minutes to discuss each question.

1. What is important to you about doing an event in the wider community?
2. What can we learn from what the other groups have said they wanted? How does this inform what we might choose to do? Why is this important?
3. How should we be in relationship with specific groups in order to do this project well?
4. What responsibility do we have toward these other groups? Why can't we just decide what is best for them?

In the last five minutes, reflect on thoughts stimulated by the whole group and enter into a brief discussion as to why these conversations are important.

Case Studies and Thoughts on What Can Be Done (45 minutes)

Tell the participants that they are going to discuss and critique a case study to further their thinking on what community project(s) can be done. The case study should either be on newsprint or distributed as a handout. You may pick one to do with the entire group or to do two or three in small groups and report back to the entire group.

Tell the participants that what they are studying actually happened. Display or hand out the case studies. Ask the participants to read the case study and inform them that when they are done reading, they will be provided with a series of questions. The questions will help to critique the case study and to determine what project(s) this group might do. Allow for a few minutes of reading and then either distribute or display the questions for further study and discussion.

Tell the participants that this information will help in next week's session in which they will decide on a project and create an action plan.

Closing Reading/Hymn (5 minutes)

(You are encouraged to find a suitable one. The difference between the Opening and Closing is that we suggest that one reading and/or one hymn is selected to be used as the closing for all sessions. The Opening may vary from session to session.)

Suggested Hymns

Suggested Readings

Add Your Suggestion

Ask participants to hold hands as they are willing, able, and comfortable.

Case Study#1 UUA in Salt Lake City

At the 1999 General Assembly in Salt Lake City, Unitarian Universalists did some intentional thinking about the issue of family values. In response to the 1987 GA resolution which stated that the UUA must take some sort of action in states with laws that discriminate against bisexual, gay, lesbian, and transgender people, planners for General Assembly decided to focus on UU Family Values.

History and Background: There were approximately 9 pre-visits to Salt Lake City made by UUA staff, mainly the Office of B/G/L/T Concerns. These meetings involved knowing the site, meeting with local UU's, working with local UU's, meeting with local leaders from the B/G/L/T community, and learning about the culture of the area.

Downtown Salt Lake is an attractive, accessible place. It was only 42% Mormon at the time and is the most liberal place in Utah. There were two daily newspapers. The newspaper that was not owned by the Mormons had a Mormon as its religion writer. The paper owned by the Mormons had a non-Mormon religion writer. Christians who were not Mormon or fundamentalist tended to be socially liberal. One of the local UU ministers had good access to all of these leaders. The culture of Utah values politeness. There are a wide variety of Mormons from very conservative to very liberal. Generally one night a week is reserved for family activities in Mormon homes. There are 4 UU congregations in Utah, 2 in Salt Lake City, one in Ogden, one in Logan.

Local UU's informed the UUA staff that public demonstrations were not well received in Salt Lake City. Local b/g/l/t community leaders said there were many positive things happening in Salt Lake City but the places where the local UU congregations had been the most helpful were around being straight allies and supporting b/g/l/t youth.

With the input from a variety of people, the following plan of action was developed. General Assembly would have as a focus "UU

Family Values." This would include a presentation, celebration and discussion of family over the course of a morning. Beginning with a presentation for all attendees about our liberal family values, then the attendees were divided into smaller groups based on interest. These areas included interfaith families, geographically-dispersed or single-person families, b/g/l/t families, families of color and interracial families, adoptive families, families with youth, single-parent families, families with special needs, blended families, and a generic families group. In these small groups, attendees worked to define and answer these three questions:

1. How do you define "family"?
2. What are UU Family Values?
3. What are ways UU's can best minister to families?

The attendees were also asked to take these questions home to their congregations. They were told that their purpose here was not to challenge other's beliefs but to clarify their own and when possible engage in conversation. Buttons were distributed for attendees that read, "*Let's Talk Family Values*".

There was a program of various religious leaders invited to come and talk about b/g/l/t issues. The bishops from the Catholic and Episcopalian churches of Utah, along with the UUA president, and a Mormon Elder spoke. Presentations were also made by a lesbian mother from Alabama who had lost custody of her daughter because she was a lesbian, a co-pastor from an African-American congregation of 6,000 in Oakland doing family ministry, a film producer who does educational videos on family issues for youth, and the leader of the Mormon version of PFLAG. Another program featured a film about the troubles of b/g/l/t youth in schools.

Additionally, the Saturday night dance was entitled "The Prom You Never Had". Not only UU's but also local community members were invited to the prom. The local UU ministers distributed tickets to local b/g/l/t Utahns, particularly youth. The prom was evenly divided

between UU's and local b/g/l/t couples. Over 1,000 attended.

The results of this event's coverage in the media included local and national newspaper articles, including the Chicago Tribune. Local television stations came to report. Unlike the previous year when the Southern Baptists had sent 3,000 people to convert Mormons at their General Assembly, these stories highlighted our beliefs and family values and addressed the changing nature of the family today.

Case Study #2 *Supporting Gay Youth*

A congregation in a mid-size Southern town wished to get involve in the local b/g/l/t community. In talking with local b/g/l/t leaders, one of the most obvious needs mentioned was supporting youth as gay-straight alliances were not allowed in the high schools. They also talked with the youth of the congregation who wanted to help.

The group within the congregation was able to find a space where youth from the local high schools (there were seven) could meet. The adults agreed to contact the schools' guidance counselors and the UU youth agreed to tell their friends and other interested people in their schools.

Meetings were set up on a regular basis. Not all guidance counselors were open to the idea, but at least one was found at each high school. Programming for the group involved a check-in and from time to time a guest speaker. Attendance ranged from 10-25 youth once a month, with the meetings taking place at a regular place at a regular time. UU's from the congregation served as advisors for the group. No media were contacted.

After several years the group still exists and supports b/g/l/q/t youth and their allies.

Case Study #3 *Pride Event*

A state with no large city holds a state-wide b/g/l/t pride weekend event in June. Local UU's wished to be involved and agreed to find a prominent speaker for a Sunday morning pride service and to do a workshop as part of a series of workshops that afternoon.

The UU's found a speaker who would lead the worship service and do a workshop; coordinated these efforts with the pride committee; informed their membership of the events; and contacted the local papers for media attention.

Historically, some 100 people or so attend the service. The workshop is attended by 50-60 people. This has now become a part of the ongoing pride celebration for 4 years.

Reflections on the Case Study

1. What social action service was provided?
2. Was there public witness? Did it seem effective for the size of the event?
3. Public Witness often falls into one of six areas. It can be more than one and is often at least one from the first three, and one from the last three. What areas if any were covered by the event?
 - Awareness—exposing an audience to a message without knowing if the message will be heard, received or understood. This can range from bumper stickers to flyers to press releases on a web site.
 - Recognition—exposing an audience to a message but making sure that those targeted notice the message. This can include a press release mailed out but not followed up on, a speech or letter to the editor.
 - Comprehension—exposing an audience to a message and making sure you are noticed and understood. This could be a workshop, an interview, and/or a press release with follow up.
 - Opinions—exposing an audience to a strongly held opinion and encouraging dialogue on it. This can be a forum or debate.
 - Attitudes—exposing an audience to a strongly held opinion and trying to change their attitudes toward your opinion. This can be a speech or workshop.
 - Behavior—exposing an audience to a strongly held opinion and trying to change attitudes and behaviors toward your opinion. This could be a call to action. This could also be an action like-minded people are encouraged to take part. This would be a project open to media and people working on the project.
4. What can we learn from this case study that may help us decide what we can do? How many people were involved? What time commitments were made?
5. What went well in terms of interacting with others? In terms of results?
6. What kind of projects do you dream about doing?
7. What kinds of projects seem reasonable to do?