

## A New Vision for Immediate Witness at General Assembly

### Prepared by the **Commission on Social Witness**

In response to discussion concerning re-envisioning of Immediate Witness after the 2011 General Assembly Dr. Dan McKanan, Ralph Waldo Emerson UUA Senior Lecturer in Divinity at Harvard University and author of *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*, offered these principles and guidelines:

- Social justice action and dialogue should be a part of every General Assembly.
- **Action** should be the priority for social justice issues on which we have already achieved consensus, such as marriage equality and the human rights of immigrants.
- **Dialogue** is needed when we have not yet achieved consensus on a particular issue (e.g. the war in Afghanistan, prison abolition, the ethics of adoption) or when we suspect we have consensus on a newly emerging issue (e.g. the Citizens United decision).
- Activists based in local congregations should have the opportunity to inform the General Assembly of important activist campaigns, and to invite local action elsewhere. Since Unitarian Universalist individuals and congregations will exercise conscientious discernment no matter what the General Assembly does, this goal does not require the Assembly to agree on the precise phrasing of a statement.
- In some cases, we can be very helpful to our allies in social justice by endorsing particular campaigns. In these cases, it will be necessary for the Assembly to agree on a precise statement. But such statements will ordinarily be extremely brief. It should be possible for the GA to vote only on the most essential part of the statement, avoiding wrangling over "whereases."
- In some cases, the General Assembly can be helpful to our national social witness staff by clarifying a consensus position on a particular issue. Again, agreement on a very brief statement may be helpful for this purpose.
- *Wordsmithing in plenary is almost never helpful.*
- The democratic process of the mini-assembly can make helpful contributions to social witness, and decisions of mini-assemblies should be respected whenever possible. More time should be available for networking, sharing of information, and debate on big ideas.
- The role of the Commission on Social Witness should be to facilitate the process.
- To facilitate creative experimentation, the bylaws should not mandate the details of the process, but simply empower the CSW in conjunction with the board and GA Planning committee, to develop an inclusive and democratic process.

Agreeing with the spirit and vision of these suggestions by Professor McKanan, the Commission on Social Witness proposes the following alternative ways to perform immediate witness at General Assembly:

1. AIWs proposed by congregations, as CSAIs are now. Everything else would remain the same as the 2011 revisions, except to include a follow-up workshop. Requiring AIWs to be proposed by congregations would increase the authority of the proposers. The follow-up workshop would be held at the next GA to report on implementation of adopted AIWs.
2. Congregations propose Social Action Project to be performed at General Assembly.
  - Proposals must be submitted to the CSW two weeks before General Assembly.
  - The CSW will qualify up to six proposals, using present criteria of grounding, fit, opportunity, immediacy, and specificity, plus stating minimum number of participants they will recruit.
  - The delegates will be asked to approve up to three in the Thursday morning Plenary.
  - Supporters of approved proposals will recruit participants and complete task.
  - The Projects will be performed and a 10 minute oral report made to the delegates in a Sunday plenary.
3. AIWs would be handled somewhat like Responsive Resolutions, being without petitions and mini-assemblies.
  - Proposed AIWs would be submitted to the CSW. The CSW could qualify up to three, using present criteria.
  - Proposers would be given five minutes to advocate for their proposal in Plenary, followed by up to 20 minutes of debate, with no amendments allowed.
  - Adoption of an AIW would require a two-thirds majority vote, and the AIW would become the policy of that GA.
  - A workshop would be held at the next GA to report on implementation.
4. Set aside GA time for issues formulation by delegates. CSW would create the space and provide facilitation. Delegates would propose topics/issues for discussion prior to the event time. CSW would select up to 5. At the formulation events, the proposer(s) could explain their interests in such a discussion; others could share resources, concerns, ideas for congregational involvement, etc. If there is a consensus that the UUA should take collective action, that could be proposed and submitted to the appropriate UUA Office. If there is a feeling that formal GA action is needed, an AIW statement similar to #3 above could be proposed. If some participants want to do collective action at GA, they propose it to CSW who would manage it similarly to #2 above. Creation of new listserves for post GA follow up with interested individuals would be provided.