

UU Justice Ministries: Organizing from the Heart

by Susan Leslie, UUA Congregational Advocacy & Witness Director

There's a new dynamism in Unitarian Universalist congregational justice ministries springing from a deeply relational approach to faith-based organizing. Increasingly, congregations are developing interfaith and community partnerships and joining congregation-based community organizations and UU state action networks.

Rather than beginning a congregational social justice program by simply asking, "What issues do we care about?" congregational leaders are asking, "What are our core values and who do we know or need to get to know to build Beloved Community in our communities? Who is excluded? Who is vulnerable? Who is standing up for their communities and would welcome our support? Who are our neighbors? Who shall we partner with?"

Standing on the Side of Love

The above approach forms the core of the Standing on the Side of Love campaign. Standing on the Side of Love is a public advocacy campaign that seeks to harness love's power to stop oppression. It is sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association, and all are welcome to join. Over eighty percent of UU congregations have connected with the campaign.



Because of its open source nature, the Standing on the Side of Love campaign has encouraged congregations to ask, "Who do we need to be standing on the side of love with in our communities?" While the national campaign focuses on and highlights efforts to stand with immigrants, people of color, Muslims, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, individual congregations have also taken it up to build relationships with homeless populations, Walmart workers, people impacted by mountaintop removal, and many more groups facing injustice.

UUs show up at justice events as “the Love people,” an identity that has set a religious, spiritual tone for justice-making, captured imaginations, and garnered public attention. This has helped congregational leaders in their efforts to give justice-making a central role in congregational life and to grow their justice ministries. Congregations that have brought this message into community organizing and partnerships efforts have honed their effectiveness and deepened their community relationships.

Partnering Builds Capacity

A 2011 survey of UU congregations found that most UU congregations are engaged in community partnerships. These range from interfaith partnerships that run food pantries and soup kitchens, to collaboration with immigrant and civil rights organizations that challenge human rights violations, to joining forces with workers’ centers taking on wage theft, to local coalitions that support homeless LGBTQ youth or advocate for climate justice. Congregations are partnering with each other, with state action networks, and with congregation-based community organizations.

In a few districts, congregations are joining together to support joint organizing efforts, and some have a paid staff person who connects the congregations with state-wide organizations. Many community ministers are now seeking these kinds of positions rather than just congregational sponsorship to work for local service organizations.



UU state networks exist in nearly half the states in the United States. They have been key players in state campaigns for marriage equality, immigrant friendly policies, clean energy, and protecting safety nets for those living in poverty. These

organizations enable UUs to work efficiently with interfaith and advocacy partners.

The UU state networks also connect with social justice staff at the Unitarian Universalist Association’s national and regional offices, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, and the Standing on the Side of Love campaign to work on national issues together, including compassionate immigration reform, raising the minimum wage, addressing climate change, resisting the “new Jim Crow” of police brutality and mass incarceration of people of color,

and restoring voting rights for all. Many of the state network partners also have local and national affiliates, so that a whole web of relationships is being woven.

Almost 200 UU congregations are members of congregation-based community organizations (CBCOs), local interfaith organizations that are part of one of five major national networks for building power and creating justice at the local, state, and national level. A 2012 report documents the bridges being built across the divides of race, class, and faith by these organizations and a dramatic increase in racially and religiously diverse partnerships. These highly effective organizations often create solutions through agreements at public meetings with government and business officials and faith and community organizations that result in shifting funds from prisons to schools, changing economic development priorities to affordable housing and green jobs, and securing agreements from banks to stop foreclosures.



An advantage of congregational participation in state networks and congregation-based community organizations is that most of the state organizations and all of the CBCOs have staff. Member congregations are able to tap into professional organizing talent. Since most congregations lack staff devoted entirely to justice making, this model can help build capacity. Additionally, all the CBCOs are part of networks that offer leadership training, and the state networks often offer leadership development as well.

Spiritual Justice-Making & Transformation

State networks, community organizers, and congregational leaders have found that bringing the Standing on the Side of Love message into their coalitions and partnerships has helped give Unitarian Universalism a real identity within interfaith settings and transformed secular activism into a spiritual experience. UUs are no longer known as the religious people who have no creed—UUs are standing on the side of love. Secular partners have enthusiastically welcomed this presence and adopted some of it as their own. Less polarizing language and positions are a trend among a new generation of organizers, and UUs are a part of that movement.

What are the keys to strong justice ministries? Committed, organized, and engaged leaders are one component. The most successful congregational justice ministries also:

1. Learn about their own social location: who is their community, who are their neighbors, and what is their own status relative to power and privilege in their community? Simply put, how are they known and who do they know in their community? Provocatively put, they have asked themselves, "What would the community lose if we were not here?" and they have asked the same question of others in the community.
2. Hold a series of one-to-one conversations, focus groups, storytelling sessions, collective visioning, and/or Appreciative Inquiry processes to find out what people in the congregation are concerned about and dream about.
3. Engage in processes to find the best fit between congregational members' passions and urgent community needs. Some use criteria found in the UUA Witness Ministries approach to social justice work—"Grounding, Accountability/right relationship, Fit, and Opportunity"—to develop congregation-wide support and participation. Others encourage the formation of as many small groups as possible as long as they engage in spiritual justice-making with community partners.
4. Imbue justice-making with UU values and language of welcome and inclusion, spiritual and caring community practices, reflection, covenants, prayer and song, and community-building activities that are practiced by justice teams and groups.
5. Integrate justice ministries into all of congregational life from religious education to worship, from employment practices to hospitality and inclusion. More and more congregations are developing liturgical calendars with key justice Sundays.
6. Ensure that there is a balance of experiential activities from service and education to advocacy, organizing, and witness and build bridges between them (e.g., local partners and/or petitions are on-hand at film showings, and soup kitchen volunteers go on economic justice advocacy visits).
7. Invite partner groups to the congregation, sharing the pulpit; attend partner activities and participate in partnership efforts; share Sunday offerings with key partners as part of an intentional plan; and/or create what Rev. Eric Law, director of the Kaleidoscope Institute, calls "grace margins"—dialogues with partner groups that create space to explore what sustains and supports them, the congregation, and the partnership.



8. Develop members' multicultural competence by using UUA Multicultural Institute trainings and curricula, and debriefing about community organizing experiences.
9. Offer multigenerational activities and childcare as part of all of their social justice programs and efforts.
10. Celebrate achievements in worship and on special occasions.
11. Bring multicultural art, music, and worship into the congregation to inspire faithful, relational justice-making, and attend or host dinners, dances, concerts, and art shows with community justice partners.



Create a radically hospitable, loving community and culture dedicated to justice and inclusion—a Beloved Community model for justice—based on congregational mission, vision, and covenant.

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Additional Resources

- UUA National Social Justice Resources (uua.org/justice)
- Congregations Take Action: Resources for Justice (uua.org/action)
- Standing on the Side of Love (standingonthesideoflove.org)
- UU State Advocacy Networks (uustatenetworks.org)
 - "What's Your State of Justice?" (youtube.com/watch?v=t_mEpk5INyo)
- Congregation-Based Community Organizing (uua.org/CBCO)
- UU College of Social Justice (uucsj.org)

Tools & Models for Successful Partnership

- “Deepen Justice Ministries and Engagement with Standing on the Side of Love” webinar (standingonthesideoflove.org/webinar-on-deepening-congregational-involvement-with-standing-on-the-side-of-love)
- “Partnering Congregations and Community Organizations” video of a panel discussion with four UU ministers, social justice leaders, and community activists (uua.org/action/ga/200429.shtml)
- “Beloved Community Practices” webinar on engaging with a love-based, faith-based model of social change, November 2012 (pwr_uua.org/pacific-western-region-webinars)
- “Solidarity is a Spiritual Practice: Multicultural Justice-Making Partnerships” audio recording of a 2014 panel discussion (smallscreen.uua.org/videos/solidarity-is-a-spiritual-practice-multicultural-justice-making-partnerships)
- “Story of Self, Us, Now” guide for creating a shared call to mobilize around a particular justice topic (standingonthesideoflove.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/storyofus-storyofnow-guide.pdf)
- “Inspired Faith, Effective Action” social justice workbook on building effective congregational justice programs (uua.org/documents/washingtonoffice/ifea.pdf)
- “Collective Visioning” guide from the organization Spirit in Action (powerupnetworks.org/uploads/1/6/0/9/1609876/cv_guide_final_final.pdf)
- “Social Justice Empowerment Handbook” that includes Grounding, Accountability, Fit, & Opportunity, and other criteria and practices (uua.org/documents/aw/sje_handbook.pdf)

