

Subgroup 3. SOCIAL COMMITMENT

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Subgroup theme: A Religion of Deeds, not Creeds

a) Definition of theme area: From their beginnings, Unitarianism and Universalism both emphasized that religion is a matter of 'deeds, not creeds.' Following in the tradition of the great Hebrew prophets Micah, Amos, and Isaiah, and in the path laid out by such great UU preachers as William Ellery Channing, Thomas Parker, and A. Powell Davies, we Unitarian Universalists declare that it is social justice more than personal piety or ritual that is the hallmark of a religious life. We at River Road Unitarian Church are committed to social justice because we believe that we can and must strive to build a better world for all life on this planet here and now. We are convinced that we only find meaning and satisfaction in our own lives when we help others find meaningful and satisfied lives.

Because the imperative for social justice is fundamental to our religious life, acting for the betterment of others is critical to our vision of River Road Unitarian Church. Social justice is not an activity for a few members at occasional times - it is the grounding principle of our religious services, of our children's education and activities, of our youths' introduction to adult life. Furthermore, our adult members involve in social justice activities in a myriad of ways, ranging in the amount of time, the type of assistance (hands-on, mentoring, advocacy), and the opportunities for financial assistance.

What is critical to our vision is that social justice is not a sub-group activity that involves only a select set of the congregation, but it is central to our religious life and involves all the members of our congregation in some way and at some time. We believe that as we put our social justice values into action, our spiritual development advances. Almost all of our specific suggestions result from this core conviction.

b) Provocative Proposition:

- Social Justice holds us all together and makes religious values manifest!
- We all work for social justice, let us count the ways!

c) Key Actions and Activities to Make This Happen

(1) Social Justice is a regular and visible part of Sunday Worship Services! There is a place for social justice as a part of religious services. To make our values manifest we suggest that social justice be consciously built into the service in a spiritual and uplifting way - rather than as specific announcements. The message should be that social justice is integral to our religion just as are a story for kids, music, and personal joys & concerns. This could occur in numerous ways such as:

- a meditation given by the minister or a lay leader that focuses on current issues or on
- the spiritual imperative behind a current RRUC social justice activity;
- a lay led service(s) on the social commitment imperative, perhaps calling on the experiences of RRUC members who could tell of an event in their life when they realized they had to act on their convictions;
- a sermon on the current UUA Study/Action Issues & Statement of Conscience and that is followed up with a CC&C;

- the Time for All Ages often includes participation and dramatization by children and could offer an opportunity for them to discuss their social justice concerns and consider possible ways they could carry out social justice activities;
- we can acknowledge that there are numerous ways of doing SJ by having periodic testimonials.

(2) Annual all-church social justice projects attract an intergenerational following! All-church projects will be those that are non-controversial for the vast majority of RRUC and those that give people with different time constraints, energy resources, ages (children through the oldest members), abilities (hands on, research and education, advocacy) the opportunity to act on their convictions. There are current projects that in some respects meet these criteria and are appealing to many RRUC members; these might be restated as all church projects. For example -

- an all-church project focused on minority or diversity issues might encompass Beacon House, Minority Scholarship, La Clinica, Affordable Housing, and the Children in the Fields program;
- an all-church project focused on local hands-on help could encompass Shepherd's Table and Community Ministry Shelters, Beacon House (tutoring), and La Clinica (health care), and affordable housing (building homes);
- an all-church project focused on the environment could include the Green Sanctuary and the Earth Conversation Corp work in Anacostia (which could also link with minority issues and hands-on help).

Interfaith projects - those within the UU faith and those that reach out to coalitions among the larger religious community - might be considered for priority. Many of RRUC's current projects are already doing this.

(3) Proactive communication of social justice opportunities is a reality! Opportunities need to be regularly communicated to the RRUC congregation, to the UUSJ, and to other UU congregations. People often complain that there is too much paper, but not enough information. We need to brainstorm ways to make our communications more effective.

Possible ways include:

- better use of the SJ bulletin board in the Fellowship room to show a grid/calendar for upcoming SJ events and ongoing service; opportunities, including suggestions on what would be appropriate for different groups (ages, etc) and the multiple avenues for engaging in SJ activities;
- a dedicated time to make a social justice commitment such as the Fall Social Justice Fair that not only offers people a chance to sign up for an activity or a task force, but also offers those who do not have the time or inclination to join a task force the opportunity to sign up as volunteers for specific tasks as called upon (such as writing a press release or designing a brochure, program, or bulletin board display, do web-page work);
- improved visibility on the RRUC web site of the multiple avenues for engaging in SJ activities;
- regular notice in the Bulletin, Newsletter, Web Page, and on the Bulletin Board of small, discrete tasks that one could do given one's time and energy;
- a constant welcoming tone to all social justice meeting announcements;
- increased collaboration on join task force actions and activities.

d) How We will Know that this Has Become a Reality

- 1) Social justice is a visible (small or large) part of each Sunday Service;

- 2) A large part of the congregation can tell you what their social justice activities are (rather than saying I don't do SJ, I do...);
- 3) Each year, an all-church project includes participation by many different ages and groups within RRUC;
- 4) Written materials pertaining to direct hands-on social justice work and other activities are available on the bulletin board and web site and published in the newsletter and Sunday Weekly;
- 5) A comparison of the numbers of people who participate in social justice activities shows yearly increases;
- 6) There is a direct relationship between increases in social justice work/pledging and increases in the RRUC operating pledges/budget.

e) How Social Justice Integrates Other Areas of RRUC Life

Excellence in Worship Programs: an emphasis on 'commitment leads to action' could be a theme in many sermons, not just those dealing with social justice outcomes

Membership and Community: One's best friends often are those who share the same values and convictions. Social Justice activities offer the premier opportunity for this kind of deep friendship and the building of community.

Social Commitment: the social justice task forces and council are structured to make this easy

Fun and Enjoyment: All the social justice fundraisers should make this their goal

Religious values made manifest: 'Actions speak louder than words' - living our faith

Communication: All social justice task forces need to work on this and welcome help from members of this group

Building a diverse community: All-church Social Justice projects can be considered a way to engage with other communities. Because three of the social justice task forces work with minority populations, social justice is a natural link to other communities. (However, despite efforts by all of them, we have not attracted members from other racial groups, perhaps because of our location?)

Young adults involvement: Intergenerational activities would reach out to college age and young working people through social justice could provide them with a way to meet other young people of their age who share a concern for social justice. Also, perhaps some of the monthly coffee houses could include perhaps with time for a project (stuffing farm children bags) or a lecture, plus lots of time for socializing around food and discussion. Maybe mentoring opportunities could engage involvement of various age groups.

Intergenerational: All SJ task forces should try to create at least one project a year that is intergenerational and that young adults and teens leadership in designing it

Financial stability and stewardship: Giving to those in need or victims of a disaster is the most natural and basic form of charity. Pledging to a church is something that has to be learned.

Independent studies of RRUC pledging patterns by Bob Johnsen and Marc Narkus Kramer came to the same conclusion: outreach pledging seemed to predict operating pledging.

"In a rich social justice environment, our ministers should feel free to take the risk of standing for something - some issue that comes out of their very own conscience, mind and heart. They may or may not want to turn the issue into a movement. They may or may not want the support of the whole or part of the congregation. But they should be encouraged by a general sense that the church desires (expects?) moral leadership, and will not repay the risk-taking with resistance or reaction. For instance, when Ginger Luke spoke out forcefully for the Living Wage, there was not one word spoken against her for taking that position, because she did it so eloquently. On the contrary, the congregation loved every word of it, was and is still proud of her for taking the risk, standing up and speaking out."

--Virginia Richardson.