

Practicing UU Policy in our Every Day Lives...or not.

Presented Jan. 19, 2020 by member Roger Srigley

I have to warn you, some of my message today is going to be a little dry, and even a little complicated. The national board of the Unitarian Universalist organization, like a lot of committees, is guilty of trying to design a horse and coming up with a camel. It will be my job to translate that camel back into a recognizable horse.

Also, hopefully I'll be helping all of us better answer the question that we all get, at least sometimes: "What does your church stand for?" My standard answer is, "Well, we're open to anyone, and we believe in love, compassion, empathy and tolerance." This is of course true, but we are a part of an organization that believes in a lot more than that. Today we'll explore a few of those beliefs.

One more caveat before I begin. At UUCOP we have tried to be apolitical. Not too long ago your board agreed that it was not appropriate to ask a political candidate to share her views and goals at one of our services. Some, including me, voiced the opinion that we shouldn't invite a candidate from one party without inviting the opposing candidate. As you will see, in the view of our national organization, times have changed. Based on current events, it is now, in my opinion, impossible to separate the values, morals and ideals that we as Unitarians espouse, from the political views of the day.

The annual UU convention takes place every June. It is called the UU General Assembly. Every year about 4,000 delegates gather and decide what major positions our organization should take. This is where the

UU would decide, for example, whether to condone gay marriage, an issue which you may have heard is challenging the United Methodist Church right now.

At the 2019 convention the UU adopted what they call a “Statement of Conscience” and three “Actions of Immediate Witness.” In theory, they are deciding for us, for you and me, the goals and policies in the coming years for us as a national organization, goals for our more than 1,000 congregations, and our thousands of members.

The Statement of Conscience is a fancy name for something we agree that we as an organization are really ticked off about. We’re upset about the way this issue is being handled. And we think it’s time something is done about it. So delegates take a vote and decide that this is a very important issue, if not the most important current issue. And then, in theory, we agree that as UUs we’re going to do something about it.

In addition to the “Statement of Conscience” the delegates also vote and determine three “Actions of Immediate Witness.”

Usually there are six or seven “Actions of Immediate Witness” proposed. They are selected as a result of recommendations from congregations like ours, or from small-group meetings that take place at the convention prior to the general session. You may recall that in the past our congregation has offered suggestions for consideration as AIWs. All recommendations are considered and discussed, and the three which receive the most votes are adopted. Often there are a lot of similar proposals, so the redundancies are combined to avoid duplication.

This was done at the General Assembly in Spokane, Washington in 2019. The AIWs will be reviewed again in Providence, Rhode Island, at the General Assembly meeting this coming June.

After they are adopted, the national organization believes, that because of their importance, UU congregations and individual members across the country will act on them. The UUA hopes that in villages and towns and cities we're going to do more than go to a congregational gathering three or four times a month and listen to music and messages. They hope we're going to take action on these issues. It's up to us to decide whether they're right.

Let's take a look at the issues we're supposed to get excited about...the issues the national organization thinks are important enough to get us up off our ...behinds. First, the Statement of Conscience.

“Democracy should be an end in itself, an ethical ideal, a moral and spiritual way of relating to one another. “

The current “Statement of Conscience” is called “Our Democracy Uncorrupted”. Certainly can't argue with that as a desirable goal. But what does it mean? According to the description from the national board, this statement affirms the importance of democracy as an ideal and identifies historic and current dynamics that restrict its practitioners and beneficiaries. Further, the resolution says: *“Sadly, many of our Democratic institutions have been corrupted into being merely a means for giving powerful interests the appearance of legitimacy.”*

The Statement of Conscience discusses the importance of democracy at the congregational, denominational, and civic level. It calls for continued expansion of voting rights and participation in democratic processes at all levels of political life. It also calls UUs to attend to

democratic practices in congregational and denominational life because realizing true democracy requires expanding to include more diverse voices.

In the words of the UU National Board:

“The purpose (of the Statement of Conscience) is to provide the member congregations of the Association with an opportunity to mobilize energy, ideas, and resources around a common issue. The end result will be a deeper understanding of our religious position on the issue, a clear statement of Association policy as expressed in a Statement of Conscience, and a greater capacity for the congregations to take effective action.”

With this focus, the Commission will devote their energies to helping UUs implement the recommended actions in the Statement of Conscience on Democracy that the General Assembly voted to adopt, recognizing that in this crucial electoral year it is imperative that we all work for the goal of defending and expanding democracy.

Some might ask “Who says our democracy is corrupt?”

When you think about it, democracy in the United States has always been compromised. At the nation’s very founding participation in governance was almost entirely limited to white male landowners.

Wealth was created from those excluded: land seized from indigenous peoples who were forcibly assimilated....or even removed or exterminated. Labor was exploited from enslaved Africans, indentured servants, immigrants, prisoners, the working poor, and women and children.

Today, compounding this corruption is the existential threat of a global climate crisis that our current federal government is failing to address.

And the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour is enough to upset anyone with a conscience.

Our laws and systems continue to protect privilege and maintain value gaps. White supremacist values and practices permeate the United States' 400-year history. They continue today through policies that disproportionately lower voter participation and reduce representation among peoples of color, people with low income, young adults, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged people.

Such policies include denial of voting rights for people convicted of felonies, voter ID requirements, and restrictions on early voting opportunities. In addition, gerrymandering has limited the electoral power of people of color and less powerful political parties.

The outsized influence of wealthy individuals and corporations on elections, always a corruption of democracy, has worsened in recent decades.

Fixing our democracy requires examining how structural racism, sexism, money, environmental exploitation, militarization, and other systemic forms of oppression contribute to accumulation of wealth and consolidation of political power.

This situation begs the question: "So what can you and I do about it?"

The national organization has a few suggestions. You'll find scores of them on the UU's statement of conscience web site, but I've selected a few which seem to relate to us more directly:

1. Work with community leaders to do participatory budgeting in all levels of local and state government. This could mean attending township board or city council meetings and checking out what criteria they use for allotting our tax dollars.
2. Work with community leaders or organizations or assemblies to craft electoral platforms and run supportive candidates

3. Contribute time, talent, and money to democracy-building efforts and to non-profit civic organizations that represent economically oppressed or marginalized people.
4. Promote public financing of campaigns, and elimination of corporate donations.
5. Work toward elimination of the outdated electoral college.
6. Strengthen the Federal Elections Commission.
7. Partner with other UU congregations and with other faith communities, non-profits and unions to work on democratic reforms.

These are just a few of the ideas suggested by the national organization as a result of adoption of the current Statement of Conscience. You'll see scores more on line.

A UU Minister, Rev. Barbara Pescan, aptly described our challenge:

"The Nation's founders pointed in the direction of a horizon they themselves could not see. It falls now to us to make real the dream of democracy uncorrupted, a government truly of the people, by the people, and for the people."

Now let's look at the current "Actions of Immediate Witness." You will note some overlapping with the intentions of the Statement of Conscience.

To better understand current UU actions of immediate witness it is worthwhile to look at those which have been selected in the past:

Past Actions of Immediate Witness Selected and Nominated

- *End Family Separation and Retention of Asylum Seekers and Abolish ICE.*

- *Dismantle Predatory Medical Care Practices in Prisons and End Prisons for Profit*
- *We are all Related: Solidarity NOW with Indigenous Water Protectors*
- *A Moral Response to the March for Our Lives*
- *End Israeli Detention of Palestinian Children*
- *Join the Poor People's Campaign*
- *Escalating Economic Equality*
- *Reproductive Justice: Expanding Our Social Justice Calling*
- *Immigration as a Moral Issue*
- *End Family Separation and Retention of Asylum Seekers and Abolish ICE.*

The three currently adopted “Actions of Immediate Witness” are:

1. Build the Movement for a Green New Deal
2. Protect the Rights of Immigrants and Asylum Seekers
3. Support our First Amendment Right to Boycott on Behalf of Palestinian Rights

Let's look at them individually.

“Build the Movement for a Green New Deal

In this resolution, like the others, there are a lot of “Whereas's” and “Therefore's”. The “Whereas's” point out things like the interdependent web of an existence of which we are a part. The resolution emphasizes the escalating climate emergency. It points

out how economic pursuits have prevailed over equity and compassion and concern for our Earth.

As a result of these things the resolution suggests such things as “Continuous education on the accelerating threats to natural resources that feed and sustain our global civilization”

It also promotes a new morality, rebuilding our political and economic structures to prioritize the well-being of future generations.

Further, the resolution suggests that we ready ourselves for the alarming economic challenges ahead as nature’s limits to growth severely impact vulnerable populations and sectors such as heavy industry, aviation and global transport, all ill-suited for renewable energy

“Protect the Rights of Immigrants and Asylum Seekers”

This Action of Immediate Witness states that the current administration has systematically and officially prevented immigrants and asylum seekers from crossing the southern border. Further, it discusses the breakup of families, illegal incarceration, splitting of parents and children and deportation of parents without their children. Concluding, it resolves that the UUA condemns this treatment, supports those members who protect and aid legal immigrants; and finally it urges UUs to communicate with their Congressional representatives and condemns this administration’s policies.

“Support our First Amendment Right to Boycott on Behalf of Palestinian Rights”

This third Action of Immediate Witness urges us all to support Palestinian Human Rights. Among other things it points out the growing support of student groups, faith groups, unions, academic associations and other organizations which support the boycotting of and divestment from corporations violating Palestinian Human Rights. It condemns the 27 states passing laws prohibiting boycotts, especially in view of and in contrast to the US Supreme Court 1982 ruling which terms boycotts a form of free speech protected by the First Amendment. Looking to the future, this resolution points out how similar anti-boycott measures could be directed at farm workers, Black Americans, indigenous people, immigrants and LGBTQIA people.

Finally, the resolution calls on the UUA and UU organizations to oppose anti-boycott laws by reaching out to representatives at state and federal levels, and by signing UJME’s petition opposing anti-boycott legislation.

On the local level, we can support this move personally by such as divesting ourselves of Caterpillar company stock, and boycotting (and talking about) not purchasing products made in occupied Palestine such as SodaStream.

But wait a minute, as we’re going to see and as I mentioned earlier, it looks like the UUA is asking our congregations to get political. What about the separation of church and state? What about keeping politics

out of the pulpit. What about keeping religious institutions as sources of inspiration to live the caring life, not to get active politically or take a political stance? Isn't the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Petoskey supposed to be about spiritual uplift, implementation of values, and moral guidance?

The answer, of course, is yes to all of these questions. But some would say things are different today. Some would say that today we're looking at an overlap of politics and values, an overlapping of law and morality, that is now as obvious as the lynchings, voter suppression and segregationist policies were in the 50s and 60s and earlier.

Is it a moral or political issue when a poor young American girl has to stand in the spot where a cow was resting just to warm her bare feet?

Was it a moral or political issue when Mississippi blacks changed the words of the song "America" to refer to the "home of the grave, and the land of the tree?"

Is it a question of politics or of values, when a poll shows that 45 percent of respondents have experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days....that 58 percent have experienced housing insecurity in the previous year and 17 percent have been homeless during that year. Incidentally those numbers come from our own Petoskey News-Review.

It's easy for those of us attending the annual General Assembly to leave our hotel rooms with full bellies and discuss the problems of the world.

It's easy for those of us in the UU congregations to join in camaraderie and fellowship and sing, and meditate and discuss what's happening to others.

But what about doing something about it? This situation reminds me of the conversation between Ralph Waldo Emerson and his friend Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was in jail for refusing to pay taxes to a government which supported slavery. Emerson was visiting him, and said “Henry, what are you doing in there?” Thoreau paused for a minute and then replied: “Ralph, the question is: what are you doing out there!”

It is difficult for us to realize what is happening outside of our comfortable cocoons. It is easy for us to smear sweet sugar over the ugliness that is so near to us, and even simpler to just keep our blinders on.

The UUA will be in further communication about opportunities for the upcoming year to implement the SOC in “Our Democracy Uncorrupted”.

UUA asks us: Can we be equitable? Can we be generous? Can we listen with our whole beings, not just our minds, and offer our attention rather than our opinions? And do we have enough resolve in our hearts to act courageously, relentlessly, without giving up – ever – trusting our fellow citizens to join with us in our determined pursuit of a living democracy?

If you need a wakeup call about what is going on, I have a few suggestions. Go to the local Laundromat and ask people how they’re doing...start a conversation. Who knows where it will lead.

Or park on State Street between Howard and Waukazoo on a Tuesday morning. Count the people heading into the food bank at St. Francis.

Stop by the free lunch sites at local churches every weekday and talk to the people there about their challenges.

Visit the local social security office, or the local unemployment office and ask one of the workers what they think are our area's greatest socioeconomic problems.

Attend a meeting of the Nw Michigan Coalition to End Homelessness. Better yet, join this Petoskey-based group...I'm sure you have something to offer!

Join the Northern Michigan branch of Justice for Our Neighbors. They leave tomorrow for Tijuana, Mexico to visit the shelters for asylum seekers and fill hydration stations for those seeking to cross the border.

Go with the UUs for Social Justice on a four-day trip to the U.S./Mexico Border as a part of their "Solidarity through Sanctuary" program.

Hopefully, you'll agree with UU teenager Sandra Cason who, speaking in Minneapolis, said "I cannot say to a person who suffers injustice 'Wait!' Perhaps you can, but I can't."

At the very least, I ask you to give serious consideration to spending your 2020 vacation at a meaningful UU event - the 2020 General Assembly in Providence, Rhode Island next June.

As many of you know, I've attended several of the UUs annual meetings. (Again I want to thank this congregation for their support.)

And if you've heard my reports about my attendance you know I've returned enthused, inspired, and more involved in the UU quest.

If you go, I can guarantee you one thing. You will be received the same way that a 1964 civil rights worker was received in the Mississippi Delta.

She said she knew the reception she would find from a black woman there, or two, or ten.

“When we walked up, we knew they loved us before they even knew us” she said. And that was the first use of the term “Beloved Community.” If you wish to share the love of the “Beloved Community” You will find it at next June’s General Assembly in Providence, Rhode Island.

The UUA is asking you to get involved, in one way or another. There are lots of choices. Please don’t ignore their call. Our future depends on you.