

Escalating Inequality

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Last Wednesday, we closed our Christmas Eve service with a reading from the African-American theologian, Howard Thurman, that said, in part, “The work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among people, to make music in the heart.”

How are we supposed to get all this done? Where do we start? Finding the lost, healing the broken, feeding the hungry, releasing the prisoner, rebuilding the nations, bringing peace among people and making music in the heart, too? What’s an inspiration on Christmas Eve turns out to be a lot of hard work the day after.

When you’ve got goals this ambitious, sometimes it’s important to find somewhere to start. This is where many Unitarian Universalist congregations have come up short. Our social justice programs have a tendency to try to solve all humanity’s problems at once, leading to a lot of effort in many directions at once but not necessarily getting much done.

Our parent organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association, or the UUA, has had the same problem over the years. When you’ve got a bunch of strong-minded individualists, passionately committed idealists dedicated to changing the world, there can be a tendency to saddle up and ride off at full speed in all directions at once. At the very least, this approach tends to be rather inefficient. At its worst it can lead to heated conflict between parties committed to mutually exclusive agendas. And it has also produced some embarrassing slipups resulting from taking strong positions on issues that aren’t yet clear.

This is why the UUA has developed a process for studying issues prior to taking action. There are three distinct steps that the UUA can take on an issue at our annual General Assembly.

The first is called an AIM, or Action of Immediate Witness, which expresses the conscience and carries the authority of the delegates at the GA at which it is

passed. Because AIWs have not been brought to all congregations for reflection and debate, they are not considered official statements of the UUA.

This past year six AIWs were considered: stopping deportations, support for a global climate treaty, gun violence prevention, stopping arresting victims of human trafficking, a call for humanitarian aid in Syria, and help for LGBT people in Uganda. After much debate and consideration, the top three were accepted by the Assembly: Affirming Congregational Commitment to Gun Violence Prevention; Supporting the Faith Summit on Stopping Deportations; and Support for Uganda New Underground Railroad to Safety.

Other recent AIMS have advocated a constitutional amendment stating that corporations are not persons and money is not free speech, and also a condemnation of racist mistreatment of young people of color by police.

Our Actions of Immediate Witness address important issues as they arise and are debated and voted upon by the General Assembly. But we have developed another slower, more carefully considered way we approach advocacy as well. It's a two-part process. The first can lead to an issue being designated as a Congregational Study Action Issue, or CSAI. Recent examples of these have included Reproductive Justice, Ethical Eating, and Standing on the Side of Love for equal treatment for all, whether LGBT or undocumented immigrants.

A Congregational Study Action Issue is considered as part of a four-year process during which congregations are invited to explore the issue, learn about it, and experiment with taking action on its behalf. This produces feedback, which is then sent to the UUA for consideration at subsequent General Assemblies. After four years of study, the Issue can become the basis for a Statement of Conscience, which carries the full weight of official advocacy of our Association and provides the rationale and guidance for further action by all congregations.

Recent Statements of Conscience have dealt with the threat of climate change, ethical eating, peacemaking and reproductive justice.

This morning I'd like to draw your attention to our current Congregational Study Action Issue. This year we considered six possibilities. "Escalating Inequality"

was chosen by majority vote. I'll be drawing on the UUA materials for much of what I say about it this morning.

First of all, it says that “Upward mobility – the American Dream – has become a myth. Concentration of wealth and power has skyrocketed. Dr. King’s dream of justice and equality has fractured. Half of all Americans are impoverished or struggling, as the middle class shrinks and billionaires take the profits. Where’s our commitment to the Common Good? Challenging extreme inequality is a moral imperative. The escalation of inequality undergirds so many injustices which our faith movement is committed to addressing: from economic injustice to mass incarceration; from migrant injustice to climate change; from sexual and gender injustice to attacks on voting rights.”

This CSAI invites us to study and learn about this complex issue that undergirds so many injustices in our society. First, we are called to engage with the complex history and realities of economic inequality, which exists at every level of human community, from local to global, and is composed of overlapping and interrelated systems of education, income, housing, taxation, democracy, banking, public health, workplace policies, and many others.

This engagement can help us to gain an awareness of how structures of oppression affect the systemic nature of economic inequality. These structures, including classism, racism, sexism, and others, privilege some and disadvantage others. The creation and perpetuation of economic inequality is rooted, in part, in these power differentials.

We are then invited to develop a spiritually grounded, foundational articulation of the impact of these structures on ourselves, our congregation, community, and wider society. It’s hoped that this would lead to our experiencing a call, based on our Unitarian Universalist principles, sources, and values, a call to bridge class divides and create a more just and equal world.

We are invited to be inspired and equipped to act against classism and economic inequality, through our Social Action Committee, building action plans, forming groups for action & reflection, as well as other activities.

This process is organized around a series of provocative questions for us to consider, as well as resources that help us to broaden our understanding of how these factors arise and how we can participate in systems of oppression without either our knowledge or consent.

There are questions like, “What are the different elements, factors, and signals that play into class?” “How has class impacted your life choices and opportunities? In what ways have elements of class made your life easier?” “Why do you think some people believe that the United States is a classless society?”

These questions can help us begin to realize that there are at least two narratives for American society: one that loudly proclaims that we are a land of equal opportunity, without of class distinctions of any kind; and another lived reality where biases of class, race, culture, religion, and sexual identity either enhance or severely limit our choices and opportunities.

If you wonder if this is so, I invite you to remember my youthful experience with the New York State Police and the Courts of Oneida County, New York some 45 years ago. I was arrested with a small amount of marijuana and sat in jail until a judge agreed to hear my case. I was let go with only a warning. I may have had long hair and some pot, but I also had a respectful demeanor, educated speech, and white skin. Can you think about what the outcome might have been if my behavior seemed disrespectful, my speech was considered crude, and my skin black? I might have had a very different life. I believe I benefitted from a culture of class privilege that systematically imprisoned certain people and freed others. I was lucky. You don’t have to look far into the incarceration rate to find that, for every 100,000 people, America imprisons 380 white people, 966 Latino, and 2,207 blacks. Can we still claim that we live in a classless society?

The study guide on Escalating Inequality asks us to look at our congregations and ourselves as well, with questions like “What assumptions and stereotypes do we make about class within our congregation? How do we define who ‘we’ are, and who does that leave out?” “Where could we make changes to get us closer to our shared vision?” After all, we say we are open to all, regardless of race, class, nationality,

gender or economic status, and yet if you look around, we're all more similar than different. What is our real tolerance for the diversity we claim to support?

We're invited to consider how we could take our new, deeper understandings of these issues, to interrupt the cycles of inequality. "What might be my contribution to my congregation or community's efforts against classism and economic injustice? What do I have to offer?" We are also asked to wonder, "What, if anything, do I fear about change? What will happen if our vision becomes a reality?"

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Bloomington, Indiana has experienced some of the challenges and rewards of taking on the work of race and class, crossing some boundaries that wouldn't have seemed possible earlier. A story on the UUA Social Justice web site illustrates this.

"One member, Guy Loftman says, 'We have nearly four hundred members, two services on Sunday mornings, and a growing congregation with two ministers. We are predominantly European American, and largely oriented toward Indiana University faculty and students. Minority population in Monroe county is three percent African American, three percent Asian American and three percent Hispanic, and the remainder is European American. Minority participation in our congregation is disproportionately small for our community. This has been an ongoing concern and frustration.'

"But members of this congregation haven't let those obstacles stop them in their antiracism work.

"For eight consecutive years, the Bloomington congregation has celebrated the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday by showing its commitment to continuing Dr. King's work. Each year, the congregation's choir joins forces with the choir of one of its neighbors, the Indiana University African-American Choir Ensemble, and visits the Wabash Valley Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison an hour west of Bloomington.

"The prison rents a 55-passenger bus for the two choirs to visit. The choirs sing together, travel together, and have lunch together at the prison.

"Over the years, members of the choirs have shared their concerns about the disproportionate rate of incarceration of men of color and the institutional racism

inherent in the criminal justice system. Members of the UU Church of Bloomington took the issue to the board of the local NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), with whom they had pre-existing relationships.

“The NAACP chapter led a study of race and criminal justice in Monroe County that was published in 2000 showing numerous racial disparities between African Americans and whites in the Monroe County criminal justice system. The report was highly controversial and led to the formation of the Monroe County Racial Justice Task Force, which conducted and issued its own study.

“ ‘We are deeply involved at this time in the challenging but exciting efforts to see more of our recommendations implemented,’ Guy Loftman said. ‘We have already achieved official documentation of racial information in all court records. Now we are working on getting funding to install video cameras in police cars to document all stops and arrests.’

“The Bloomington congregation’s work on dismantling anti-racism goes beyond annual visits of its choir to local prisons and collaborations examining racism in police detention and arrests. The congregation has also examined the issue of reparations. ‘Repairing the Breach: The Monroe County Race and Justice Project’ is a task force formed by interested community members. Their work includes producing a documentary film, ‘Living with Jim Crow in Monroe County,’ which gained wide viewership in the community through the Monroe County Historical Society, the local community access TV station, schools, and churches.

“The Monroe County Racial Justice Task Force also gained recognition of the original segregated ‘Colored School’ with the placement of a state historic marker last February at the site. The congregation and the Bloomington Black Business Association organized a multiracial community-wide celebration, which attracted hundreds of people. It is one of the few historical markers in the state that deals with African American history. Since then, other community organizations have begun planning other ways of recognizing African American history in the county.

“The congregation’s What Color Is Community? Racial Justice Task Force, established six years ago, sponsors an annual ‘Journey Toward Wholeness Sunday’ event, holds anti-racism trainings and workshops, and organizes a regular movie

and book discussion series on racial justice. Other anti-racist partnerships include outreach to local Muslims since the September 11, 2001 attacks, and an annual Ramadan fast-breaking in the church.

“ ‘What we have learned,’ Loftman said, ‘is that partnerships with groups outside the church are absolutely essential if there is to be a community impact. You must join with the people you want to ‘help’ on their turf and their terms.’ ”

I can recall one of the most moving times in my ministry during the year I served the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Wilmington, North Carolina. They had a long-standing partnership with a historically black congregation in that city, going back to the 1960’s and before. They shared memories of protests and actions taken together, and also memories of huddling down as bullets were fired into their church buildings. The two congregations join together each year for a joint service of memory, celebration, and commitment to a future free of race and class divisions.

We can do all of this and more, but I believe that, first, we need to study these issues, begin to understand them, and to learn how our ideals, principles and values call us to action on their behalf. How can we get all this done? We can begin by engaging our Congregational Study Action Issue on Escalating Inequality. Let’s get going. We’ve got work to do.

May it be so.