



Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice in the National Capital Region

UUSJ's Vision: Amplifying the UU Voice

Unitarian Universalists for Social Justice in the National Capital Region (UUSJ) is a partnership of congregations, organizations, and individuals deeply committed to social justice. UUSJ has the opportunity to be a visible and viable presence on Capitol Hill, giving voice to our UU principles, with the power to influence public policy to address the most compelling social problems of our day. Our liberal religious voice is needed now more than ever.

History and Background

In 1998, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) President Buehrens, with input from local leaders hired Bob Johnsen, community organizer, to discern interest in a regional social justice organization perhaps similar to the historic UU Urban Ministry in Boston. If there was adequate interest, Bob was to convene a meeting of religious and lay leaders to initiate the establishment of such an organization. After conducting over 30 one-on-one meetings with ministers, UU organization leaders and lay leaders Bob convened an organizing meeting in April, 1999 at Beacon House for the purpose of choosing among three options that summarized what he heard from his interviews. The meeting composed of 30 leaders from 20 congregations and UU organizations including Beacon House, the UU Affordable Housing Corporation (now OpenDoor Housing Fund) and the UUA Washington Advocacy Office (closed in 2010) decided to support the "big vision" option -- that the interests of both the urban-based organizations and congregations, joined with the suburban congregations, would be better served if UUSJ would support members' social justice efforts through technical assistance, networking, education and training opportunities. Rev. Roger Fritts, then Senior Minister at Cedar Lane, agreed to convene the organizing committee to implement this important decision and Bob Johnsen continued as consultant to the organizing committee. UUSJ was officially incorporated in April, 2000.

Our first educational programs focused on skill building -- establishing and growing congregational-based social justice programs. In 2001, we identified public education as our single issue and focused on advocating and providing support for public education. The focus expanded in 2003-04 to include needs of children and families. We distributed 1,000 copies of our "Education Network Directory" featuring congregational "best practices" to encourage networking and replication of successful programs and advocacy efforts.

For a number of years "Feeding the Flame of Justice" was the theme of a series of UUSJ annual educational programs, all with an advocacy component. Marian Wright Edelman gave the keynote address on the second celebration of Leadership Day. UU Legislative Ministry - Maryland, grew out of a February 2005 UUSJ advocacy workshop in which participants expressed a need for UUs to have a voice in Annapolis and focus on education, advocacy and coalition building.

Over the years, UUSJ chose several issues, which were important to the social justice community, such as civil liberties, freedom to marry, women's issues and voter mobilization. A task force was formed for each issue to plan programs and activities. Subsequently, we held a series of forums on selected topics to educate attendees and encourage participation in social justice activities. In addition, UUSJ recognizes outstanding social justice efforts through its annual awards gala banquet, the proceeds of which support grants for collaborative social justice projects.

Our New Vision

In 2013-15, UUSJ will add another dimension to its social justice work. Since its inception, UUSJ has been involved with educating *about* advocacy. Now UUSJ will *do* advocacy -- that is, *become* advocates. The basic purpose of this shift is to bring critical issues to the attention of policy-makers, getting the message to the people and places where action can take place.

To do so, we will ramp up our efforts to:

- collaborate with interfaith and other organizations who share our concern on issues;
- educate our members;
- provide a monthly presence visiting legislative offices on behalf of our regional members;
- coordinate and participate in witnessing and advocacy opportunities; and
- encourage members to contact legislative offices, write to policy-makers and media outlets -- all designed to give voice to our UU principles.

Planning for Change

To achieve this expanded vision, UUSJ engaged in a strategic planning process from January through June 2013. We considered the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) facing UUSJ if we made this change in our focus. We took into consideration our strategic location in the Capital region where there are strong non-profits and interfaith groups, the fact that we have the highest concentration of UUs of any area in the country, and with significant public policy experience of many UUs in the area who may be willing to step up to the opportunity to advocate for UU principles. We are all too aware of our challenges with limited human resources (e.g. two part-time staff members) and financial resources (e.g. flat budget), requiring an aggressive development plan, needing to expand our membership base and increase our fair share expectations and seek outside funding (e.g. grants). Other limitations include competing personal priorities and competition for time, talent and treasure of area UUs. Further, the widespread disaffection, by many, in the political process and eroding confidence that they can make a difference is also of concern, as well as the competition for ministerial support with so many demands for their time and attention. Upon reflection we decided to move forward and to prepare a strategic plan for 2013-2015, which describes the procedures to enhance our ability to engage more fully in actions that increase the impact of UU influence on national public policy, while addressing the realities of the situation.

Implementing our Vision

Beginning in July 2013, we moved into the implementation phase, first focusing on enhancing our internal communication, information technology and organizational infrastructure, and now developing specific strategies and tactics to implement each goal. The plan also proposes upgrading our information technology and enhancing our use of social media to reach out to new members, and to connect with current members more effectively.

The implementation plans will lay out a more active role in social justice advocacy and witnessing, and proposes developing stronger ties with UU congregations, interfaith communities, faith-based and other organizations. This will include more public witness opportunities such as through rallies, demonstrations, and various other forms of public action, in collaboration with other interfaith and other organizations that share our UU values. We will continue to collaborate and work in coalition with other organizations to achieve critical mass.

Coordinate with UUs

UUSJ has consulted with the UUA Director of Congregational Advocacy and Witness, Susan Leslie, and the Director of Multicultural Growth and Witness, Taquina Boston and staff at the Washington, D.C. office. We intend to consult and coordinate with the UUA Witness Ministries staff regularly, and other UU advocacy groups and leaders, as appropriate, that are mutually beneficial and will give voice to our UU principles.

Priority Issues

UUSJ's current priority areas of focus are immigration, the environment, income inequality, and LGBTQ issues. Periodically, our areas of focus will be reviewed to determine if adjustments are required. We will consider the aspirations of member congregations and individual members and our available resources. We will also select areas of focus and legislative issues using a lens that takes advantage of legislative opportunities that are grounded in our liberal religious faith and reflect our UU principles, are a good fit for UUSJ, can be supported by our available resources, and where we can have a positive impact. We will be flexible and opportunistic as current events develop.

Now is the Time!

Our liberal religious voice is needed now more than ever. We will strive to give voice to our UU principles, our advocacy work will be spiritually grounded, and we'll speak to the moral imperative of our social justice issues. This is a bold vision, but we feel we need to do everything we can now to make a positive and more just world. It's up to us to make this potential a reality.