

Study/Action Issues - First Year

The five Study/Action Issues presented here were selected by certified congregations to be placed on the Agenda. The vote on the following SAIs will be to determine which one shall be referred to congregations and districts for further review and study in the Statement of Conscience process, pursuant to Bylaw Section 4.12. An implementation session on the chosen SAI will be held on Monday at 10:15 a.m.

S-1 Women's Rights Worldwide

Issue: What can Unitarian Universalists do to secure fundamental human rights for women?

Background and Reasons for Study: “Women’s rights are human rights,” declared the Beijing Accords, an outcome of the 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women. Nonetheless, oppression of women continues in many places in our world, including this country, where public rhetoric and private reality often do not mesh. Women suffer discrimination that is subtle in some spheres of life and oppression that is overt in other spheres. From nuanced professional discrimination to political and religious discrimination to condoned domestic abuse to sexual trafficking and sexual slavery to torture, women are still struggling for parity in the marketplace, the village square, and the home front. In our own country, over three decades of reproductive choice are threatened with reversal of what women have come to regard as a basic right. Women whose education and experience are comparable to that of men still do not draw, on the average, salaries that match those of men.

Popular culture routinely features violence against women. Domestic abuse is overwhelmingly abuse of women. Worldwide, women continue to struggle for parity in economic, political, civic, and socio-cultural arenas, even though the occasional head of state is female. Gender injustice runs deep and wide across developed and developing nations. The feminization of poverty varies domestically and internationally only as a matter of scale. From the most marginalized of villages in the developing world to the most urban of metropolitan areas, women take the brunt of poverty second only to their children, serving as the caregivers and domestic managers on the shabbiest of shoestrings.

Significance to Unitarian Universalism: We proclaim respect for the dignity of all individuals within the interdependent web. We herald the right of conscience. We sing of faith and liberty in one breath. Those of us who are women have taken this rhetoric at face value. Unitarian and Universalist and Unitarian Universalist women have been at the forefront of campaigns for women’s suffrage and reproductive choice and educational opportunity. Women still struggle to claim the rights that emerge from the passion and logic of our rhetoric—freedom, reason, tolerance, justice and equity and compassion, and democracy in our congregations and society at large.

Even within Unitarian Universalism, where over half of our ministers are women, it is not uncommon to hear references to a minister who is a woman as a “woman minister” while

35 one literally never hears references to a minister who is a man as a “man minister” or for
36 congregations to expect women to accept financial packages that would be deemed
37 unacceptable to men.

38 **Possible Study Questions:**

- 39 • How can we work to improve the record and sustain achievements on women’s rights
- 40 in the United States, particularly those rights of economic parity, reproductive choice
- 41 and freedom from violence?
- 42 • Can we build bridges across barriers of cultural and religious difference so that we
- 43 can abolish policies and practices that are harmful to women and girls?
- 44 • On what basis can women and men challenge cultural and religious traditions that
- 45 deny women equal access to education and health care?
- 46 • What can we do to advance women’s economic, political, and civil rights worldwide?
- 47 • What needs to be done to implement the Beijing Accords and urge United States
- 48 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of
- 49 Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)?
- 50 • Educate ourselves by reading first-hand accounts of women from other cultures.
- 51 • How can advocates of the rights of women act in solidarity with resistance
- 52 movements to other forms of oppression?

53 **Possible Actions:**

- 54 • Enact and enforce laws that protect women from violence. Find ways to support
- 55 community-based programs that help women and our families escape from abusive
- 56 physical and economic situations in our own communities.
- 57 • Participate in literacy and educational projects that afford opportunity to women
- 58 around the world.
- 59 • Advocate for economic parity through comparable worth policies in the marketplace.
- 60 • Educate women, men, and children in our local communities about the importance of
- 61 gender equity and shared responsibility for caregiving and fiscal support.
- 62 • Collaborate with the Unitarian Universalist Women’s Federation, the Unitarian
- 63 Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office
- 64 and other organizations that work for women’s rights.
- 65 • Lobby the United States government to ratify CEDAW. Urge members of Congress
- 66 to lift the current restrictions barring funding for international family planning.
- 67 • Work to achieve the level of access to reproductive health services promised by
- 68 national governments at the 1994 International Conference on Population and
- 69 Development (ICPD) in Egypt.
- 70 • Resist the feminization of poverty by supporting organizations that give micro-loans
- 71 to businesses created by women in developing nations.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements: Women’s Rights Anniversary (1998 Bus); Population and Development (1996 Gen); Violence Against Women (1993 Gen); Federal Legislation for Choice (1993 Gen); Right to Choose (1987 Gen); Ending Gender-Based Wage Discrimination (1987 Gen); Equal Rights Amendment (1983 Gen); and United Nations Convention for the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1981 Business).

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S-2 Safety of All Children and Youth

73 **Issue:** What can Unitarian Universalists do to ensure the safety of children and youth in
74 our congregations, communities and world?

75 **Background and Reasons for Study:** Children are the most vulnerable among us.
76 Fifteen years after the adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the
77 Child, the government of the United States has still failed to ratify it or hold itself
78 accountable to its standards. In many parts of our country and world, the plight of
79 children and youth continues to deteriorate. Child sexual abuse and wide scale trafficking
80 of children are reported both in this country and abroad. All too many families and
81 family support systems, including religious communities, do not yet ensure the safety of
82 children and youth who are left in their care. Many children grow up with parental
83 neglect that leads to children's values formation by peers, by advertisements, and by
84 gratuitous television and video violence. Our society has a responsibility to respect the
85 innocent trust of our children and to prevent violations of that trust.

86 **Significance to Unitarian Universalism:** In numerous resolutions over the past 40
87 years, the Unitarian Universalist Association has urged its member societies and
88 individual Unitarian Universalists to work for the rights, protection and welfare of all
89 children and youths. We have decried rising rates of child abuse and neglect. We have
90 opposed the marketing of violence and the declining condition of schools, healthcare, and
91 basic human services available to children. The Family Network of the Unitarian
92 Universalist Association has proclaimed "with our congregations we will intentionally
93 affirm the infinite variety of families and provision and affirm them as they grow in
94 spirit, love and justice." The Unitarian Universalist Association's Ethics in
95 Congregational Life Program has among its stated goal "to support leaders in creating
96 safer space within their congregations" and provides a model safe congregation policy
97 that underscores our commitment to the wellbeing of our children and youth.
98 Congregations and individual Unitarian Universalists need to reawaken ourselves and
99 take responsibility for these shared commitments.

100 **Possible Study Questions:**

- 101 • How is the safety of children protected in such programs as foster care, adoption
102 services, child welfare and juvenile justice?
- 103 • How can policies, such as those contained in the United Nations' Convention on the
104 Rights of the Child guide our local proactive witness, advocacy, and support?
- 105 • What does research reveal about the effects of corporal and other harsh punishments
106 on child development?
- 107 • How can sexual abuse be prevented and justice and healing realized for the victims of
108 such abuse?
- 109 • How are children and youth affected by sexual content and violence in popular
110 culture and media messages targeted toward them? How can they be protected from
111 and educated about these influences?
- 112 • What "best practices" can we identify for families, local communities, and support
113 services to promote the wellbeing and safety of children and youths?

- 114 • How can we express caring and affection for our children while respecting the
115 boundaries that ensure their safety?

116 **Possible Actions:**

- 117 • Offer parent training and support programs in our congregations to members and
118 community visitors.
- 119 • Get involved in Religious Education for children and youth at your congregation.
- 120 • Provide and participate in after-school, vacation enrichment, tutoring, and
121 recreational programs open to children and youth of the greater community.
- 122 • Organize support groups for Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Questioning children and
123 youth since they are disproportionately targeted for ridicule and abuse.
- 124 • Adopt and maintain congregational policies that ensure safety and provide nurture for
125 those who have been abused or neglected.
- 126 • Form partnerships with local schools and children's service providers of all kinds.
- 127 • Become part of the Children's Defense Fund's "Movement to Leave No Child
128 Behind."
- 129 • Work with legislatures and school districts to abolish the use of corporal punishment
130 in schools and other institutions
- 131 • Work with elected officials and social service agencies to ensure that those making
132 decisions about child welfare, including judges, are specifically trained in matters of
133 child welfare and that such agencies are funded and regulated.
- 134 • Advocate for strengthened child abuse laws and for the designation of churches and
135 clergy as mandated reporters of child abuse.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements: A Moral Response to Youth Violence at Columbine (1999 AIW); Addressing the Health Insurance Crisis (1998 AIW); Speak Out for Children (1996 Gen); Oppose the Marketing of Violence (1995 Gen); Youth in Crisis (1990 Gen); Materials on Sexual Abuse (1985 Bus); On Children, Poverty, and Violence (1984 Gen); Child Care (1982 Bus); Care of Young Children (1979 Gen); Child Abuse and Neglect (1977 Gen); Abolition of Corporal Punishment ("David Copperfield") (1973 Gen); Alternatives in Education (1971 Gen); Child Care Centers (1971 Gen); and Youth Welfare (1963 Gen).

136	S-3 Peacemaking
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137 **Issue:** What can Unitarian Universalists do to bring about the conditions for peaceful
138 relationship in our congregations, our communities, and our world?

139 **Background and Reasons for Study:** The world seems to be growing smaller as human
140 population increases and technology advances. Interdependencies are becoming more
141 complex, and our livelihoods are more dependent upon their peaceful operation. Peaceful
142 coexistence globally, economically, socially, and spiritually are threatened as personal
143 and cultural differences among people become more readily apparent and as truth claims
144 and deeply held moral values compete. We must remember, reclaim, and practice
145 principles of peacemaking from varied spiritual traditions that promote conflict
146 resolution, nonviolent intervention, mediation, tolerance, acceptance, and love to make it
147 possible for us to live at peace. Accepting the mystery of life and granting that others
148 may act and believe in ways that we do not fully understand through suspending
149 judgment and allowing ourselves to be curious and open are the first steps toward moving
150 into reflective wisdom that enables us to step outside of ourselves and embrace the
151 “other.”

152 **Significance to Unitarian Universalism:** We, Unitarian Universalists, have a
153 responsibility to ourselves to live out and uphold the seven principles of our faith so that
154 this and future generations can make peace through compassionate justice among
155 ourselves, within our families, and in dialogue with our communities, among nations, and
156 in the world. Compassionate justice is deeply grounded in the Judeo-Christian traditions
157 from which we most centrally draw our spiritual inspirations and can also be found in
158 other faith traditions. The power of compassionate justice is expressed not through
159 power-over relationships, but through power-with relationships, power-within
160 centeredness, and power-surrounding perspectives of the wisdom traditions. As a global
161 faith community, Unitarian Universalists are called to redefine ourselves in the world and
162 to discipline our practices of compassionate justice so as to better accommodate ourselves
163 to the complexity of our world.

164 **Possible Study Questions:**

- 165 • Should the Unitarian Universalist Association become a Peace Church in order to
166 learn how to live and advocate for peace more effectively? Alternatively, can the
167 Unitarian Universalist Association through its social witness process adopt a “just
168 war” policy to guide its future advocacy and social justice efforts?
- 169 • How might global institutions such as the United Nations effectively create and
170 maintain the conditions for peacemaking?
- 171 • How does justice that is compassionate and mindful diverge from retributive justice
172 and how does this distinction inform our peacemaking?
- 173 • What is our understanding of the content and applications of such concepts as
174 nonviolence, peacemaking and pacifism?
- 175 • What are the costs and consequences of our indifference to peacemaking?
- 176 • How do we open our hearts and our congregations to those who may disagree, who
177 may support war, or who may favor a different form of compassionate justice?

178 **Possible Actions:**

- 179 • Read, discuss and report on our shared history and current thinking to improve
180 prospects for a more peaceful world.
- 181 • Offer curricula based on the theology of and scholarship on of peacemaking.
- 182 • Advocate for mediation councils and classes in peacemaking and non-violence in
183 local schools.
- 184 • Study ways to empower our community-based and national peacemaking institutions
185 through legislation e.g., Universal National Service Act, Department of Peace.
- 186 • Identify and work to eliminate the root causes of war, violence, civil disturbances and
187 terrorism.
- 188 • Support the work of affiliated and associated organizations of the Unitarian
189 Universalist Association involved with peacemaking.
- 190 • Participate in peaceful actions of protest, including civil disobedience, non-
191 cooperation, public objection (e.g. to the military draft), and documentation.
- 192 • Join other religious communities in annual observances of “A Season For
193 Nonviolence” to learn and promote peacemaking within our congregations and
194 communities.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements: Beyond Religious Tolerance: The Challenge of Interfaith Cooperation (SOC 1999); Establishment of the U.S. Academy of Peace and Conflict Resolution (Gen 1983); Sharing in the New Call to Peacemaking (Gen 1979); and Disarmament (Gen 1970).

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195 S-4 Need for Affordable Housing

196 **Issue:** What can Unitarian Universalists do to promote affordable housing?

197 **Background and Reasons for Study:** The promise of “a decent home and suitable
198 living environment for all American families” made in the 1937 Federal Housing Act
199 continues to elude close to one-third of all Americans. Almost 95 million people
200 experience a range of serious housing problems including high housing costs relative to
201 income, overcrowding, inadequate living conditions, and homelessness. Over 13 million
202 households spend over half of their income for housing thereby limiting their ability to
203 access health care, quality education for their children, adequate food, transportation, and
204 other basic necessities. Over six million households live in overcrowded conditions,
205 meaning that the number of people living in a house or apartment exceeds the number of
206 rooms. One of every seven low-income families lives in housing with severe physical
207 deficiencies, such as no hot water, no electricity, no toilet, or neither a bathtub nor a
208 shower. Up to 3.5 million people, including 1.35 million children, experience
209 homelessness each year.

210 Housing costs in the United States have escalated over the past four decades, outpacing
211 income for a substantial percentage of families. Yet the federal government’s
212 commitment to low-income housing has fallen 49 percent over the period from 1980 to
213 2003 even at a time when the federal government spends in housing-related expenditures
214 and tax breaks nearly two times the amount on the top twenty percent of households
215 (incomes above \$148,000) than it does on the twenty percent of households with the
216 lowest incomes (those with incomes below \$18,500 in 2004). It is time for an equitable
217 housing policy that ensures safe and secure housing, both home ownership and rental
218 housing, is available to all regardless of income.

219 **Significance to Unitarian Universalism:** To affirm the worth and dignity of every
220 person includes recognition of how basic a home is to any person’s sense of worth and
221 dignity. To promote justice and equity for all includes the advancement of housing for all
222 and equity of opportunity for a home, whether owned or rented, that is secure and
223 affordable. To acknowledge the interdependence of us all suggests that each of us is best
224 served when all are served.

225 **Possible Study Questions:**

- 226 • What is the mean salary for the immediate neighborhood of your congregation? For
227 your city or county? What are the housing costs as a percentage of income in those
228 areas?
- 229 • What is your community’s “housing wage” – i.e., the hourly amount a full-time
230 worker (40 hours a week) must earn to afford a two-bedroom unit at your city’s Fair
231 Market Rent as established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban
232 Development? How does that compare to the federal minimum wage? Where do
233 individuals and families earning the minimum wage live in your community?
- 234 • What forms of shelter are provided for the homeless in your city or county? What
235 services does your congregation provide to assist homeless individuals and families in
236 regaining a safe and affordable residence of their own?

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- 237 • What role does discrimination in housing continue to play in your community?
238 • Is affordable housing available with appropriate services to individuals with
239 disabilities and older individuals? What innovative methods of financing home
240 purchase and providing rental assistance are available in your community?
241 • What are some proven strategies for advocating just and sustainable housing policies?

242 **Possible Actions:**

- 243 • Form an Affordable Housing Task Force to identify actions that your congregation
244 might undertake to improve the supply of affordable housing in your community.
245 Consult with and include on affordable housing task forces individuals and families
246 who have experienced homelessness and other serious housing problems.
247 • Contact the local office of Habitat for Humanity for information on how your
248 congregation might support their efforts. Contact the Unitarian Universalist
249 Affordable Housing Corporation (Silver Spring, Maryland) to learn how your
250 congregation might involve itself in housing renovation and construction.
251 • Work with an interfaith council to advocate fair housing policies and building
252 programs for low-income families, individuals with disabilities, and older individuals.
253 • Hold an affordable housing conference with bankers, developers, builders, and
254 community activists. Confer with lending bankers and other lending agents about
255 equity of access to competitive mortgage rates and down payments.
256 • Advocate for rent stabilization in your community. Promote affordable housing at
257 local government meetings. Communicate your support of affordable housing
258 programs to elected officials.
259 • Promote “inclusionary zoning” whereby developers may increase the number of units
260 in multi-family housing developments in return for their commitment to keep this
261 housing affordable and/or to allocate a certain percentage of units for low-income
262 housing.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements: Economic Injustice, Poverty, and Racism: We Can Make a Difference! (SOC 2000); A Job, a Home, a Hope (GEN 1995); Housing for the Homeless (GEN 1988); Rights of the Poor (GEN 1971).

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S-5 Moral Values for a Pluralistic Society

264 **Issue:** How might the moral and ethical grounding of Unitarian Universalism be given
265 greater voice in the public square?

266 **Background and Reasons for Study:** Throughout the 1980s, religious conservatives
267 have gained credibility in politics asserting their religious values should be incorporated
268 into public policy development to the exclusion of other faith traditions. Their influence
269 has only increased with the election of President George W. Bush in the 2000 election,
270 and again in 2004. Their vision for the United States—indeed the world—is one that
271 results in oppression, discrimination, and domination, reserving power for a small
272 number of government and business elites. As the gap between rich and poor expands in
273 the United States and the ill effects of globalization intensify, the exclusion of religious
274 liberals from this civic dialogue is dangerous.

275 **Significance to Unitarian Universalism:** Theodore Parker, the 19th century Unitarian
276 minister, proclaimed, “I do not pretend to understand the moral universe; the arc is a long
277 one ... And from what I see I am sure it bends towards justice.” In the faith that we share,
278 amid the pluralism that we celebrate, in the pluralistic society that we inhabit, we are
279 challenged to articulate the elements of that bend in the arc of which Parker spoke.

280 Unitarian Universalists exhibit a high degree of theological and philosophical diversity.
281 Despite our differences, we have developed congregational communities and have
282 covenanted to be institutionally associated, respecting and affirming our differences of
283 belief. We also have a history of involvement in public witness. Our collective voice can
284 be found in annual statements of public witness that date from the first General Assembly
285 of the Association in 1961, and long before in statements adopted by the American
286 Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church of America. Within Unitarian
287 Universalism, we are challenged to offer our message of public witness in a framework
288 of moral values that is recognized with an affirmative nod within our own ranks and well
289 beyond our own ranks if we are to be relevant at all. Yet Unitarian Universalists have
290 been historically and theologically resistant, if not repulsed, by the notion of codifying a
291 set of so-called moral values for ourselves and others or of having such a set of principles
292 imposed upon us or other people. The dilemma is how to ensure our moral values are
293 heard in the square of public opinion and in the halls of government?

294 The Reverend William Sinkford, President of the Unitarian Universalist Association,
295 voiced his view on moral values in a November 9, 2004 statement: “Moral values are not
296 just particular opinions on ‘hot button’ topics in a divisive election year. Moral values
297 grow out of our calling as religious people to work to create the Beloved Community ...
298 Moral values instruct us to ‘love our neighbors as ourselves’ and always to ask the
299 question, ‘Who is my neighbor?’ They are fundamentally inclusive rather than exclusive,
300 and they call on generosity of spirit rather than mean spiritedness.” It is understandable
301 the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke frequently of the Beloved Community and that
302 he often quoted the Reverend Theodore Parker on the direction of that moral arc of the
303 universe. As a community of liberal faith and equally liberal doubt, we have an historic

304 opportunity to engage in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue to discern a core morality
305 that would bend the arc of our current moral universe toward compassionate justice in our
306 pluralistic global society.

307 **Possible study questions:**

- 308 • What is the difference between “morality” and “ethics?” How do we understand
309 morality? How do we understand it in a Unitarian Universalist and civic contexts?
310 By what authority does our understanding of morality derive?
- 311 • Is it appropriate for Unitarian Universalist congregations to collectively speak out, as
312 a faith community, on moral and ethical issues? How are dissenting voices within the
313 congregation honored while allowing the majority to speak out?
- 314 • How do our actions move us to bend the arc of the moral universe toward or away
315 from compassionate justice? How might we build ever more compassionate bridges
316 across differences and avoid temptations to exploit these differences in the service of
317 being “right?”
- 318 • How can we as Unitarian Universalists contribute most effectively to the public
319 dialogue on the role of shared moral values in our changing, global, pluralistic
320 society? On what basis do we evaluate our social witness efforts?

321 **Possible Actions:**

- 322 • Form covenant groups and sponsor congregational forums for people to discuss
323 morality, what it would mean for us to reclaim the word, and what the goals of
324 congregationally-based social witness are.
- 325 • Establish a process that respectfully discerns the will of the majority within the
326 congregation on issues of public witness and that enables the congregation to
327 collectively voice its opinion while recognizing and honoring the views of those
328 holding different opinions.
- 329 • Actively participate in the social witness process of the Unitarian Universalist
330 Association by proposing Study/Action Issues, forming task forces to engage issues
331 selected annually by the General Assembly for two years of congregational and
332 district discernment, submitting comments on proposed Statements of Conscience of
333 the Unitarian Universalist Association, and working to implement adopted public
334 policy statements.
- 335 • Work collaboratively with neighboring Unitarian Universalist congregations on issues
336 of public policy. Participate in district-wide advocacy efforts.
- 337 • Sponsor interfaith and civic discussions on the role of religion and morality in the
338 public square. Sponsor meetings with other faith communities to explore and discern
339 common values.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements: Beyond Religious Tolerance: The Challenges of Interfaith Cooperation Begin with Us (1999 SOC).