

JUST
CONGREGATIONS

The Public Ministry of Unitarian
Universalist Congregations

Edited by
Stephen M. Shick

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS	1
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT.....	2
PREFACE.....	3
TOWARD JUST CONGREGATIONS	5
JUST CONGREGATION STORIES	
MID-SIZED CONGREGATIONS	11
LARGE-SIZED CONGREGATIONS	37
SMALL-SIZED CONGREGATIONS	49
WORKING TOGETHER.....	63
THE EMPOWERMENT PROCESS	72
END NOTES.....	94

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Just Congregations was first conceived as an educational resource for seminarians and UU congregations. The outline for this book took form as I was planning to teach a course on Public Ministry at Meadville/Lombard Theological School during the 1996-97 academic year. Judith Mannheim, Dean of the Independent Studies Program and Continuing Education at Meadville/Lombard Theological School had asked me to teach an Intensive Course on this subject. Encouraged and supported by Neil Shadle, Associate Professor, I planned to involve the students in the collection of congregational stories as a way of learning from those actively engaged in doing justice and providing service in their communities. For the most part *Just Congregations* is the result of their work.

I am deeply grateful to these students who worked hard in this course and who agreed to have their work published. They are Cheryl Leshay, Ruth Owen, Christine Reed, Alice Syltie, and Ann Willever.

In addition to the stories written by students this book contains stories written by Barbara Pescan, Co-Minister of the Unitarian Church of Evanston, Illinois, Art McDonald, Minister and Social Advocacy Director of the Allegheny Unitarian Universalist Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. And Elizabeth K. Ellis, Senior Minister, Unitarian Universalist Urban Ministry in Boston, Massachusetts. The generosity of their efforts and the quality of their ministry is a valued contribution. I was also encouraged in this project by my long time friend and colleague Bill Gardiner, Director of Training and Empowerment, UUA's Faith in Action Department. Bill expressed significant interest in *Just Congregations* and saw its potential for the UUA's training programs. The credit for editing the text and creating a useful and attractive format for on-line publication goes to Barb Greve who in the most friendly and professional manner "made it happen."

This project would not have been undertaken, let alone completed, had it not been for the encouragement and support of my wife Jo Ann Mulready-Shick and the patience of my two youngest children Dora and Michael. Their willingness to create the space--physical, psychological, and spiritual--necessary to work on this project freed me to focus on the task. The source of whatever grace allowed this work to proceed can in large measure be traced to these three good spirits. I was also influenced, as I have been for years, by my grown daughter Sarah, whose determination as an athlete and coach continually inspire me to keep going under the most difficult of times.

PREFACE

War and the threat of nuclear war; increasing poverty; threatening environmental destruction; strong and relentless attacks on democratic institutions; homelessness; attacks on women's rights to reproductive choice; discrimination and violence against blacks, Hispanics and bisexual, gay, lesbian and transgender people; growing disparity of income and wealth; governmental retreat from protecting and assisting the poor – these are among the litany of public ministry issues that challenge our liberal faith. The scope and complexity of these problems is often overwhelming and easily contributes to individual cynicism and congregational paralysis. Unitarian Universalists and their congregations and institutions have a long and distinguished history of overcoming such attitudes and postures through actions of advocacy and service. *Just Congregations* is a collection of brief stories about the public ministry of Unitarian Universalist congregations. These corporate biographies capture a time-bound glimpse of the dynamic life of a particular community of faith.

Working nationally with Unitarian Universalists for twelve years I became aware of a diversity of congregational styles and histories that would help students understand key elements that contribute to make a justice-seeking congregation. The stories you are about to read are not all the stories collected during the course I taught at Meadville/Lombard Theological School in 1996-97, and are by no means to be viewed as “the best” Unitarian Universalism has produced. So many more stories came to mind as I wrote and edited this material that I wish more time were available to compile them all. The stories shared here are, however, a good representation of perhaps a total of two to three hundred Unitarian Universalist congregations doing effective public ministry.

After completing the assigned readings each student was given a questionnaire and interview guidelines and asked to collect the stories from clergy and laity in two congregations. Each story includes the following:

- Congregational public ministry history and tradition
*examples of how justice and service became integral to the mission of a congregation--
the theological/spiritual or religious grounding of the congregation*
- Congregational size, growth rate and demographics.
- Congregational knowledge of and current participation in community, state or national issues
- Congregational process for selecting the focus of public ministries
- Role and support of members who are involved professionally or on a volunteer basis with public ministry
- Categories of goals and objectives
service, education, public witness, public advocacy, fund raising
- Process of evaluation
- Self assessed strengths and weaknesses including goals and objectives, congregation involvement, sustainability
- Future plans
- Summary of lessons learned

In addition to congregational stories, I have provided an introductory chapter which highlight three categories: mission, the democratic process and history. These appear through out the stories and are important to the development of localized public ministry. The third chapter tells the extraordinary story of the UU Urban Ministry of Boston. This is a story of how local congregations have joined together to staff, finance and sustain a ministry to poor people in Boston for nearly two hundred years. This story not only reveals the value of cooperative congregational efforts, but also holds significance for emerging community ministries. In the final chapter you will find “nuts and bolts” suggestions and processes developed by the UUA for building congregationally based public ministries.

It is hoped that this book will provide both inspiration and practical help for those who choose to continue the tradition of seeking justice, loving mercy and practicing compassion through their congregations of faith.

TOWARD JUST CONGREGATIONS

Rev. Stephen M. Shick

In the following stories you will discover the power of congregational actions to engage complex and ethically demanding social questions of our time. These actions in pursuit of “justice, equity and compassion” in human relations continue the Unitarian Universalist living tradition of public ministry.

The three categories used to introduce these stories are history, mission and the use of the democratic process. These are key elements for the development of successful public ministry and provide the common ground upon which our congregations stand ready at the dawning of the twenty-first century.

History

Before we sat down to talk, Mary Ella Holst . . . took me to the sanctuary to show me a bas relief of Henry Whitney Bellows, the founder of the United States Sanitary Commission (later to become the Red Cross) and minister at All Souls from 1838 to 1882. ‘We have a history here,’ she told me. ‘We know it can be done because we have done it before.’

There is power in a congregation’s history, which, if recognized, can be released into new acts of service, education and public policy advocacy. I have literally seen faces light up with pride when the mirror of their own history was held up before them. When I was candidating at the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill, Massachusetts (the church which I now serve as minister) I recall being told how they had converted their church basement into a homeless shelter a few years back when no other institution in the city would offer space to house the increasing number of homeless men. Some members seemed surprised when I told them that this was a unique and powerful story of religious witness and service of which they could be proud. Until then many had not taken their own story seriously. When they did they began speaking more hopefully of the next things they might do.

Each congregation’s story is different. As writers of our congregation’s story we operate as editors of the past, picking and choosing the highlights we value and wish to fashion into the next chapter. These stories, Carl Dudley notes “. . . live because they show us what is authentic in the congregation.”

The UU Church of Greater Lynn, Massachusetts, now a suburban congregation, was once located in the middle of the city. Its story has been shaped by its history as an established urban congregation. Once a “pillar church” and part of the Lynn establishment the congregation moved to the suburbs after their church burned down. Honoring its history and stimulated by new and highly successful interfaith efforts, the congregation voted to “put at least 5% of its total operating budget toward social concerns”

The importance of lifting up a congregation’s history will be seen in the stories that follow. New congregations and those that have little congregational history of involvement can begin building new traditions by claiming the rich social justice history of Unitarian Universalism.

Mission

“You Unitarian Universalists,” he told me with his passionate voice rising, “have a thin theology but a thick ethic.” The first time the Reverend William Sloan Coffin said that to me I wanted to protest and explain that some of us have thick theologies and some of us have no theology at all, but we all are religious people with strong ethics. Reverend Coffin, a nationally recognized civil rights and peace activist, has demonstrated time and again that his theology and ethics are inseparable. This too is the case with some Unitarian Universalists congregations. Yet, Reverend Coffin was stating his observation in categorical terms which have haunted mainline Protestantism for centuries, i.e. theology is one thing, ethics are another. The Reverend Donald Wheat told the Public Ministry students when they visited Third Church in Chicago: “Congregations have to work hard to overcome this dichotomy.” This intercity church is deeply involved in its community. Reverend Wheat noted that true justice seeking congregations are exceptional. He cited a 1990 Lilly Foundation survey that revealed that 76% of churchgoers did not make the connection between being religious and seeking social justice.

In 1984, five years after I discovered Unitarian Universalism, I was asked to serve as the founding director of the Unitarian Universalist Peace Network (UUPN). The position gave me the opportunity to travel around the country and work with Unitarian Universalists and their congregations on issues of peace and nuclear disarmament. I was delighted not only to meet so many activists, but also to experience the rich diversity of the religious orientation of Unitarian Universalist congregations. Whether it was a humanist congregation in the Midwest or a Christian congregation in the Northeast, I was pleased to work in settings where religion was the context of my peace and social justice work.

I soon discovered, however, that the unity of religion and social ethics was not recognized within most congregations. The disjunction between religion and social ethics that I had experienced in other mainline denominations also existed in Unitarian Universalism. I didn't have any illusion that it wouldn't, but I was disappointed. Two of my main observations were: (1) individual Unitarian Universalists engaging in strong social justice and peace activism without putting on their religious hats and (2) Unitarian Universalists are reluctant to recognize and use their corporate identity and power.

On enough occasions to be considered a pattern, I would be introduced to local activists who were the founding members of SANE, the Nuclear Freeze, or other local disarmament organizations; only to discover later that their own Unitarian Universalist congregation was not listed as a participant in interfaith or coalition efforts. During this time, before the spiritual awakening of the 1990s, I would frequently suggest that we begin a conference or workshop with spiritual centering or worship. The response was puzzlement. The question, "What would you want to do that for?" was often asked.

In those years I teased UU congregations by telling them I was an evangelical Unitarian Universalist. My grandfather, I would say, was an evangelical Lutheran minister, and I simply changed the denominational identification. Then I would go on to make the case that our religion demanded the active and corporate quest of peace and social justice and demanded a social ethic both for the individual and the congregation.

"It's no longer a joke," Scott Alexander preaches, "there are a growing number of evangelical Unitarian Universalists and they are helping to make us one of the fastest growing religions in our country by understanding more clearly their mission in the world." John Murray's (1741-1815) famous summons to the Universalist faith is being responded to by a new generation that believe what the world needs is the spirit of Unitarian Universalism: "Go out into the highways and byways of America . . . Give the people . . . something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women."

“Evangelism.” John Morgan writes in Alexander’s *Salted With Fire*, “Begins with a dream, a vision that has power to claim some ultimate demand on our lives. Evangelism is not about selling a commodity. Evangelism is about important issues, such as how to live and how to die, to what causes we are committed, and to whom we owe allegiance.”

An evangelistic mission transformed The Church of the Messiah in New York City from a church serving the wealthy only, into the Community Church that opened its doors to all and set out in 1919 to service the vision articulated by John Haynes Holmes. Holmes created a non-sectarian religion that would transcend class, ethnic and racial barriers. Today Community Church’s evangelistic spirit is carried out through a deliberate democratic process that unites its history with its mission. Anti-racism activism is deeply rooted in the history and mission of this Church. It is not surprising to see it linked to its vision of growth. “The congregation,” Rev. Bruce Southworth asserts, “does not aspire to growth patterns of homogeneity, but growth through diversity.” To the claim made by congregational growth expert Lyle Schaller that congregations will not grow much beyond 300 - 400 if they grow for diversity, Rev. Southworth’s responds, “we are out to prove him wrong. Growth through diversity is part of the mission of Community Church.”

Our sense of mission pulls us into the future and gives each day meaning. Victor Frankle, who gave so much to the development of modern psychology by reflecting on his experience in the Nazi death camps, maintained that the single most important fact contributing to prisoners’ survival was their ability to see a future vision beyond their immediate circumstance and to believe that they had important work to finish.

In four years the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Bridgeport developed a strong sense of the importance of its work.

“Today I was reminded of how incredibly proud I am to be a member of this church.”

These words were spoken to the Reverend Olivia Holmes, minister of the Church of Greater Bridgeport, after she delivered her annual “State of the Church” sermon. During the service she asked everyone involved in some way in the public ministry of the church to stand. There was, she notes, an audible gasp from the congregation in response to the large number of people who rose.

In four years the congregation had grown both in numbers (with a 100% increase) and in spirit and mission. In section three of the *Just Congregation Stories* (Small-Sized Congregations) you will read their unique and inspiring mission statement written in 1995-96 to celebrate their 150 anniversary. It reads in part: “We share a vision of humankind uplifted by human action - a vision clearly focused when we see our Church recognized for reaching out to those in need or for taking a stand against social injustice.”

The Reverend Holmes notes that an important part of the success of her ministry was the fact that the congregation encouraged her work in the community and saw it as part of the church’s mission. In *Salted with Fire* the late Robert Karnan notes that this was also an important part of his ministry in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. That congregation grew from a little over one hundred members to now over 1000. This growth required, according to Karnan, the empowerment of lay ministry, the discovery of democracy, and, for the professional minister, a “turning away from a focus on the inner life of the congregation and its existing members and . . . to look outward to the community and possible new members . . . We found that the professional ministry had to focus on the larger community and the social and moral issues there and also on newcomers and their concerns and on future envisioning.”

In Lynn Massachusetts both the ministry, the Reverend Anita Farber-Robinson, and committed laity brought their energy of mission to the work of the Essex County Community Organizing Project (ECCO). After working through a process that lasted a year the congregation voted to join ECCO, which meant, “paying dues equal to 1-1/2% of the operating budget. Through this the congregation has been part of a city-wide effort which won passage of \$3.4 million for ‘project Unity to increase community policing, after school programs, library hours, park renovations and youth jobs . . . and helped negotiate with area banks the creation of \$3.5 million in below-market-rate loans for low- and moderate-income buyers - and more recently an additional \$10 million has been committed.

Direct service in response to a social crisis can also give birth to and/or sustain an energizing sense of mission. Out of a sense of mission the Universalist Unitarian Church of Haverhill, which I now serve, responded to the growing number of hungry people in its community. The congregation launched a community meals program serving a hot meal on the first, third, and fifth Saturdays of the month, took leadership in creating the Haverhill Hunger Roundtable of service providers, and dedicated unused space in its basement for a major expansion of the Open Hand Pantry. In cooperation with the City, local banks and foundations \$200,000 was raised for this effort. Many of the fifty-five new members that joined the congregation in the past two years are quick to point out that their enthusiasm for becoming active members was sparked by their involvement in these social service programs.

These examples raise serious questions about the viability of the popular wisdom that states: “ For the well being of the congregation we must not let social justice be that tail that wags the dog. If we become too identified with this cause or that concern, the assertion goes, we will lose members and never grow.” Until recently this has been a Unitarian Universalist myth used to justify corporate indifference to social justice realities.

Today there are congregations with strong and impressive growth records, which are challenging this myth. In 1982 when the Reverend James Robinson came to the Brewster, Massachusetts church there were 140 members, today there are over 700. “He feels,” Cheryl Leshay reports, “that this is directly related to all the Social Justice activity the church is doing in the community. If done well and grounded in the theology of the church, ‘Social Justice’ can become the tail that wags the dog. It allows the people to put their values out in the forefront.”

A sense of corporate mission is strengthened by affirming the inseparability of spirituality from the quest for social justice. This unity of mind, heart and spirit, and how it can combine in individual and corporate action, is a key issue for justice seeking congregations today.

While it would be an over-generalization to assert that there is a trend toward integrating social action with spirituality, there are signs of this being successfully done. In the story of the Unitarian Society of Hartford you will read that Jon Luopa, the minister, leads a course on spirituality and social justice. He perceived the need for such a class when he saw that many of the activists in the congregation were burned out and many of those seeking spirituality had no focus to their quest. “Theologically,” Chris Reed writes, “Luopa understands the values this social justice ministry brings to the congregation, in terms of James Luther Adams’ idea of ‘corporate witness’, the witness of all believer, that the Body should be a corporate witness to our values. If the values are not being embodied in the work which the church does in the world, one asks if these are the real values.”

With similar determination the Reverend Bruce Southworth, of Community Church in New York City, sees his role “as helping with the understanding of this spiritual foundation, so that social action is not understood on a surface ‘program’ level but on the level of spiritual growth.” In Alexander’s *Salted with Fire*, the Reverend John Buehrens, President of the UUA, notes that many growing congregations are

doing so because “Social ministry projects are being seen as opportunities not just to change the world, but to change ourselves as well.”

Democratic Process

One minister told me that his Social Action Committee fell apart because it was not supported by the membership of the congregation. That, he maintained, was good news because the person with the strongest interest in something would attempt to harangue the congregation into cooperating. One by one, he explained, the people who were interested in social action became frustrated and disappointed, believing the members did not care. One by one they became angry and left.

What emerged from the ashes of this undemocratic process was a phoenix of new corporate public ministry involving the entire congregation. The old process that had led to individual ownership of “my social action project” was replaced by a new process that led to the involvement of the entire congregation. The Reverend Richard Gilbert outlined the conceptual framework used in this particular transformation in *The Prophetic Imperative*. In this model the church community overcomes the privatization of public ministry by holding up Worship as central to the common life of the community. Social issues and social actions are reflected and supported in worship, along with other life issues of the congregation.

A democratic task force model is then used to implement the values held up in Worship. The Reverend Richard Gilbert developed this model initially for use in the Unitarian Universalist church in Rochester, New York. Here the concept of “democratic religion”, articulated so well by Curtis Reese and other early Twentieth Century religious humanists, is combined with what leading Unitarian Universalist social activist and theologian James Luther Adams saw as the power of “volunteer association”. This conceptual framework set forth by Gilbert has been shaped into a model used by many Unitarian Universalist congregations and promoted by the UUA Department of Faith in Action. The success of the task force depends on organizing people around common interests and then using a democratic selection process to provide support from the entire congregation. The final chapter of this collection summarizes many of the key “how to do” elements of this model.

Establishing an effective democratic process takes time. In spite of what might be considered normal UU congregational activities on social issues, the Unitarian Society of Hartford was frustrated with what they had accomplished. Over the course of several years they had come to understand that their church, as a corporation, had a ministry. “In the fall of 1991,” Christine Reed reports, “the congregation declared its intent to become more involved in the community, and in the capital fund drive, set aside funds for this purpose.” They further knew that children in need would be the focus of whatever it was they were to do. But what to do, and how to do it? The congregation had the great fortune of working with Carl Dudley, one of the leading figures in organizing congregations for public ministry. The results: the congregation is now partners with the Center for Youth. Special events for the children are organized by the congregations, forty congregants tutor individual children, congregants work with parents in the neighborhood to form a clinic, the social justice ministry received 2% of the congregations total budget, in addition to funds from special appeals.

With this empowered sense of public ministry the congregation launched a new anti-racism program. These are impressive accomplishments for a congregation that only a few years ago had, according to Reverend Luopa, a self-image of being contentious and individualist.

Another dimension of the democratization of public ministry is how well it is structured to invite participation. Writing about the highly successful Promise the Children school partnership program of the UU church of Atlanta, Alice Syltie tells us: “Everyone can be involved. People were encouraged to hold on to their own love and to focus on a child. If their interest was environmental then they could come and take the kids on an outing. In this way the Sierra Club became involved. The Peace Network got involved and did a project with the children. Religious Education did seminars on conflict management, class discipline, and interpersonal relationship for teachers. It was a fascinating approach. They wanted it to be something the whole congregation was excited about.” The program has been so inviting to members of the congregation that half of the congregation participates in one-way or another.