

Congregational Implementation of Current Study Action Issues and the Statement of Conscience

Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations Advocacy and Witness Programs



Congregational Advocacy and Witness (617) 948-4607 sleslie@uua.org www.uua.org/justice
Washington Office for Advocacy (202) 296-4672 rkeithan@uua.org www.uua.org/uuawo

While the UUA Offices for Advocacy and Witness advocate for legislation and sponsor initiatives that support General Assembly Social Justice Statements, the overall responsibility for their implementation lies with the congregations. Hundreds of Unitarian Universalist congregations studied the statements on criminal justice and prison reform, civil liberties, and economic globalization, wrote comments for inclusion in the final statements, and engaged in activities to implement them. The following report highlights congregational action on these major issues.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PRISON REFORM

The Study Action Issue (SAI) on Criminal Justice and Prison Reform was selected at the 2003 General Assembly in Boston. Dozens of congregations sent in comments on the proposed statement and the Office for Congregational Advocacy and Witness has received several reports. Given this SAI is in its first year much of the activity has been educational with criminal justice and prison reform projects just getting launched.

The 2004 Bennett Award for Congregational Action on Human Justice and Social Action was awarded to the **Berrien UU Fellowship of St. Joseph MI** for their work on criminal justice and prison reform. On Martin Luther King Day this small fellowship of 42 adult members co-sponsored, with a local radio station, a city-wide public forum on criminal justice reform that was attended by over a hundred people from the community and broadcast live. The forum was called in response to outrage in the community sparked over the death of an African American man killed in an accident during a police pursuit. "Weighing the Scales of Justice" brought together a wide array of criminal justice officials—from a Circuit Court Judge, two criminal attorneys, the County Sheriff, the Police Chief, an officer of the State Parole Board and others—with leaders and members of the community to examine strengths and weaknesses in the justice system. Much needed reforms were identified collectively, including jury recruitment and selection, the judicial electoral process, racial profiling and racial imbalances in sentencing, overly harsh sentencing, setting of high bonds, lack of training for indigent-defense lawyers, issues of venue, and a history of wrongful convictions. The forum provided an opportunity for honest dialogue and accountability for instituting reforms was established. Congratulations to the Unitarian Universalists of Berrien UU Fellowship for their courage in standing up and putting their faith and beliefs into action. Contact: Tricia Johnson, BUUF President, tandhjohnson@sbcglobal.net.

First Unitarian Church, Madison WI is focusing their attention on recently released prisoners. They sponsored a program on prison reform that included a simulated exercise in which participants learned about the confusing regulations and obligations that people who are newly released from prison have to face. Following the program, church members met with public officials to advocate for prison reform and for the rights of prisoners and former prisoners. Research shows that 2/3 of the Wisconsin prison population, on any given day, is incarcerated on parole and probation violations. Only 1/3 of the prisoners are incarcerated on new offenses. The congregation is working with a local interfaith group on a project called "Circles of Support." The project includes three components -

general community education about the difficulty of succeeding with parole, the simulation exercise that allows participants to experience parole, and the creation of small interfaith groups to provide support/accountability to parolees as they try and re-enter the community (with a six month minimum commitment). Contact: Wendy Cooper, Social Justice Staff at wendyc@fusmadison.org.

A Restorative Justice Group was formed at the **UU Congregation on the Catskills in Kingston NY**. Following several study sessions on the issue, advocacy at the state level has begun including work to reform the Rockefeller Drug Laws. Contact: Wanda Goldstein, Chair Restorative Justice Group, STANWAND@aol.com.

The UU Society of Greater Springfield MA as part of its work in the Pioneer Valley Project has joined a campaign for a moratorium on all new prison construction in the state. They and the UU Urban Ministries have joined the Criminal Justice Policy Coalition which organized testimony before the Public Safety Committee regarding the Department of Corrections policies and procedures and the state of the prisons and are advocating for the establishment of civil review boards. Contact: Andra Hornbein ahornbein@earthlink.net.

The Criminal Justice Task Force of the **First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia** in partnership with the Philadelphia Ethical Society co-sponsored a forum, "Crime and Punishment: Is Justice Being Served?"-- a National Issues Forum (Kettering Foundation) led by the executive director of the Pennsylvania Prison Society William DiMascio. Subsequent forums have examined juvenile justice, the death penalty, helping women in prison and their families. As a result of their educational efforts a congregational prison project is being formed. Contact: Marilyn Ashbrook, Chair, Criminal Justice Task Force at MarilynAshbrook@aol.com.

The **UU Church in Meriden CT** hosted a forum with Juan Melendez who sat on death row for 17 years in Florida before new evidence proved his innocence and led to his freedom. Melendez has taken his story on the road in conjunction with Citizens United for Alternatives to the Death Penalty based in Gainesville, Florida. Contact: Rev. Lucy Ijams at reveleye@cox.net.

First UU Church of Essex in Orange NJ hosted an advocates' forum on immigration and detention issues for organizers/advocates and immigrants. Over a dozen church members are in a program to visit asylum seekers held in the Elizabeth Detention Center (INS/Homeland Security). Contact: Rev. Anthony Johnson at apjohnson@uuma.org.

First Parish Norwell MA has been active in a prison ministry program for several years. There is an interfaith prison ministry program called Partakers, Inc. which operates in a number of prisons in Massachusetts in concert with Boston University. This is one of only seven remaining prison education programs (there were 350 in 1990). Most programs ended when Congress passed a law forbidding the use of Pell Grants for prisoners in the early 1990's.

The Social Action Committee of the **UU Fellowship of Kerrville TX** passed a resolution calling for a moratorium on the death penalty in Texas. They issued a press release that brought an invitation for four members of the Social Action Committee to appear on a community television station, KVHC Kerrville, for a half hour Q and A with the program host. They will be hosting a community program in the fall for non-violence in prisons. Contact: Jay Doubleday, Social Action Chair, jdoubled@kvc.com.

For the text of the Study Action Issue and the Study Action Guide with resources and information on criminal justice and prison reform see www.uua.org/csw/sai1.htm.

CIVIL LIBERTIES

The SAI on Civil Liberties is up for vote as a Statement of Conscience at the 2004 General Assembly in Long Beach CA. Defense of civil liberties is a core Unitarian Universalist value and this is reflected in the virtual explosion of congregational activity in this vital arena. UU congregations participated broadly in the interfaith Civil Liberties Weekend of October 24-26th. Across the country, UUs hosted forums to defend civil liberties from the UU Fellowship of the Eastern Slopes in Chocoma NH to the First Unitarian Congregational Society in Brooklyn to the UU Church of Boulder CO and First Unitarian Church of Oakland. Eleven Northeast Ohio Unitarian Universalist congregations and the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee presented an all-day forum on protecting civil liberties. Dozens of congregations have been instrumental in passing bill of rights resolutions and provisions for non-cooperation with some of the more egregious aspects of expansion of government powers included in the Patriot and Homeland Security Acts.

UU Church of Restoration in Philadelphia hosted a major forum on the Patriot Act in March to explore the tension between increasing security and defending against terrorism and protecting civil liberties. Speakers included a representative from the US Department of Justice, Temple University Law School professors, and the ACLU. Contact: Sandra J Fulton, Social Justice Committee at medieval_student@earthlink.net.

All Souls NYC Peace Task Force was at the forefront of an effort to make New York City a civil liberties safe zone. New York City became the 250th legislative body in the country to pass a Bill of Rights resolution. An article in the congregational newsletter explains, "It was largely in the name of New Yorkers who perished on 9/11 that the federal government adopted these antiterrorism policies, which have sacrificed many of our fundamental rights and freedoms. By adopting this resolution, New Yorkers said "No"—to the rounding up of thousands of innocent immigrants, to detentions without charges of U.S. citizens, to snooping into our private records, to the stifling of political speech." The All Souls Peace Task Force is a coalition member of the New York Bill of Rights Defense Campaign (NYBORDC), which is comprised of community organizations, including the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, that have endorsed the campaign. All Souls Peace Task Force members organized an advocacy effort to send letters and make phone calls to City Council members and attended rallies in support of the Resolution. Contact: Hanan Watson at hswatson@nyc.rr.com.

UU Community Church of Southwest Michigan passed a congregational resolution this spring urging the congregation's federal, state, and local representatives "to actively work for the revocation of any sections of the USA PATRIOT and Homeland Security Acts and any federal legislation, including the proposed Domestic Security Enhancement Act of 2003 (PATRIOT II) and any federal legislation, orders or directives which limit or violate the fundamental rights and liberties enumerated and contained in the Constitutions of the United States and State of Michigan, treaties of the United States or the Ordinances of all local governments, and to restore the checks and balances inherent in our constitutional tradition."

Since the congregation passed the resolution it has been given to the Portage City Council, sent to the entire Michigan congressional delegation, and to the local newspaper, which did an article about their effort. They also sent it to their state representatives and senators, to county officials, and to the City of Kalamazoo which has since passed a resolution. Contact: Lin Foote at j.l.foote@wmich.edu.

The Social Action Committee of the **UU Society Unitarian of Peterborough NH** Committee's choice of topics closely followed the issues prioritized at General Assembly. Of particular note was the committee's work to raise awareness about the threats to basic rights posed by The USA Patriot Act federal legislation that was hurriedly enacted in the time period immediately following the 9/11/01

attack. The committee led a community-wide effort that culminated with the town passing a resolution to defend civil liberties. At the time of their town meeting Peterborough became the 68th municipality or state to have such a resolution. Since then the committee helped produce a large public event on September 20th designed to promote UU social action issues during the 2004 Presidential campaign. They also sponsored the Rolling Thunder Tour in Manchester NH which featured Michael Moore as the speaker. Contact: John W. Friede at jwfriede@earthlink.net.

All Souls UU Church in Kansas City MO presented a resolution to the Kansas City Council, which was passed, stating the Patriot Act will not be enforced when it is in conflict with citizens' civil rights. Contact: Caron Wells at CaronWells@aol.com.

For the text of the Study Action Issue and the Study Action Guide on Civil Liberties see www.uua.org/csw/saiy2.htm. For more resources and information on civil liberties see www.uua.org/programs/justice/issues_civilliberties.html and www.uua.org/uuawo/new/article.php?list=type&type=22.

ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION

The 2003 Statement of Conscience on Economic Globalization has moved many congregations to get educated and do what they can to disengage from the harmful effects of globalization. Many report hosting showings of the video *Trading Democracy*, a PBS documentary by Bill Moyers. More and more congregations are buying free trade coffee and using socially responsible shopping guides and websites. The UUA Committee on Socially Responsible Investing has receiving a steady increase of inquiries from congregations seeking ways to put their investments to work for social justice. (Congregational stories are on their website at www.uua.org/finance/sri/.)

First Unitarian Portland OR and UU Congregation of Miami FL took the lead on public witness to combat the harmful effects of globalization. First Unitarian Portland hosted a major Town Hall Meeting in July on the World Trade Organization, NAFTA (North America Free Trade Act) called Free or Fair Trade moderated by the producer and host of Oregon Public Broadcasting Radio's regional news show "Oregon Considered." Members from seventy-one environmental, labor, and social justice organizations from Oregon and Washington were at the event as well as several elected officials. A "Trade Yardstick," a set of criteria for fair trade, was introduced to measure future trade agreements. Contact Kate Lore, Social Justice Director, at klore@firstunitarianportland.org.

UU Congregation of Miami hosted a forum on fair trade and housed participants who had come to protest the FTAA (Free Trade Area of the Americas) meeting in Miami in November. UUs from around the country organized by UUJEC (Unitarian Universalists for a Just Economic Community), and a contingent from First Portland participated in the events. Participants, including UU ministers, publicized their experiences including their encounters with police repression at the FTAA protests. Contact: Rev. Lucy Hitchcock Seck at RevLucyMiami@aol.com.

For the Statement of Conscience, Study Action Guide and resources and information on economic globalization see www.uua.org/csw/soc/2003.html.

- For more congregational stories and resources on all these issues and others visit www.uua.org/justice/ and www.uua.org/uuawo.
- For information on the social witness process visit the Commission on Social Witness site at www.uua.org/csw.
- Subscribe to Advocacy-News & SAC-News at <http://lists.uua.org/mailman/listinfo>