

Social Justice Committee 2009-10 Annual Report

Background and Introduction

As described in its mission statement, the Social Justice (SJ) Committee is “committed to making our church a force for positive social change in our community and in society at large”. Social justice work comes in many forms: service, education, witness, advocacy, and community organizing. It ranges from alleviating immediate needs to changing the system. (May we never mistake one for the other).

In recent years, the SJ Committee has been structured around “action groups” focused on specific social concerns: community action, healthcare, peace action, and ministry for the earth. In the current church year, only the Community Action Group operated with a leader, while several committee members pursued projects outside the action group framework. There is also some overlap between the SJ Committee and other groups in which some of our members are active: the Granite State Organizing Project (GSOP), and the UU Action Network of New Hampshire (UUAN).

Our process includes monthly meetings, some held on Sundays after church and others in the form of pot-luck dinner meetings. At each meeting we review the progress of ongoing activities and consider new initiatives or emerging issues. At early meetings (October, November) we spent time identifying issues to address in the coming year.

Meetings this year have been attended by ten people on average. About twice this number have attended meetings on occasion, or shown interest. We maintain an email distribution list for everyone who has attended or shown interest.

We communicate with the congregation to share information about upcoming events and to educate people about social issues. We use the following channels: the church newsletter; the Sunday order of service; announcements during worship; a staffed Social Justice table during coffee hour; the email distribution list; a Yahoo! online discussion group; and a Web page on the church website. (Note that much of this communication is directed from the SJ Committee to the congregation, and not so much from the congregation to the SJ Committee).

Accomplishments This Church Year

This year, the SJ Committee moved away from the Action Group framework, primarily because there were not enough leaders to keep it going. Only the Community Action Group functioned with a leader this year.

Community Action Group (leader: Mary Ferguson)

This group’s current focus is to fight homelessness. Its primary activities are as follows:

Support the Nashua Soup Kitchen: organize church members to provide a monthly meal; provide volunteers to serve on the third Tuesday of each month.

Administer outreach collections: review requests from (or on behalf of) recipient organizations and schedule the collections for the church year. Allocations typically

represent one month's collection plate but some have been for multiple months, Fifth Sunday or Christmas Eve. This year's outreach collections were as follows:

<i>Date(s)</i>	<i>Collections</i>	<i>Recipient</i>	<i>Amount</i>
June – September 2009	4+	Habitat for Humanity	\$4,134.07
September 2009	4	Nashua Area Health Center	\$2,524.34
September – October 2009	4	Adult Learning Center	\$2,358.15
October 2009	1	Association Sunday	\$486.00
November 2009	1	UUA Living Tradition Fund	\$599.00
December 2009	5	Harbor Homes	\$3,265.87
January 2010	4	Gateway	\$2,567.75
February 2010	4	Upper Room Ministries	\$2,278.75
March 2010	4	White Wing School – Donna Purkheiser Scholarship Fund	\$3,940.60
April – May 2010	6	UUSC Haitian Relief	\$2,687.91
May – June 2010	4	Afghan Women's Mission	\$2,462.06
Total:			\$27,304.50

Health Care

The Health Care Action Group met once in October but there were only three attendees. At that time, health care reform was the subject of active negotiation between the U.S. House and Senate. Although the group did not meet again, some SJ Committee members did engage in communicating with elected representatives and monitoring the status of the bill in progress.

Peace and Human Rights

Although the Peace Action Group was inactive this church year, the SJ Committee engaged in the following activities concerning peace and the elimination of human rights abuses:

Human rights abuses in Honduras: the Social Justice Committee added its name to a letter signed by many organizations and individuals protesting the abuses of human rights in Honduras. We also provided educational material on the SJ Table including postcards to send to elected representatives.

Afghanistan Women's Mission: Ellen Barr organized a presentation of the documentary film *View from a Grain of Sand* and a discussion session with two speakers from the Afghan Women's Mission. The purpose of this event was to raise awareness of human rights abuses in Afghanistan and the plight of Afghan refugees, especially women and children. The film is still available for lending to church members who wish to view it or present it to other groups.

Peace Pole: Shirley Rayburn, a member of the SJ Committee, has donated a peace pole to the church bearing the message "May Peace Prevail on Earth in several different languages. The peace pole will be installed and dedicated this coming September 19.

Ministry for the Earth

In recent years, Adrian George worked intensively with this Action Group and others to implement the goals of the Green Sanctuary process. Although significant progress was made (especially in 2006-07) the effort dwindled over time. The Property Committee did some important work behind the scenes, e.g., replacing all light bulbs with energy efficient ones; changing over the heating system to use efficient, gas-fired boilers.

Green Sanctuary is a process of education and certification to raise awareness about environmental issues in UU congregations. Its purpose is to create permanent changes in the behavior of churches and individuals in the direction of sustainable, environmentally friendly practices, so that we will contribute to a solution and serve as a positive example to the public. Green Sanctuary potentially touches on every program activity, every committee or task force, and every specific action by church members that consumes natural resources or may generate pollution.

This year, the Social Justice Committee evaluated prospects for reviving Green Sanctuary but did not find the necessary "critical mass". We did gain useful insights into how the SJ Committee can be more fully integrated into the congregation as a whole and aligned with the church's current vision.

1. We shifted attention from finding the "right chairperson" to a more systemic view. The scope of an effort such as Green Sanctuary is larger than any one committee.
2. We shifted from discussion of why Green Sanctuary "fizzled out" or even "failed" to the recognition that it was successful while it lasted. Proponents carried the process forward a significant distance, and much was accomplished during that time.
3. We recognized that Green Sanctuary is not an all-or-nothing proposition. We can be "green" without Green Sanctuary. Better yet, we can achieve Green Sanctuary status not by focusing on that major milestone, but by working consistently towards smaller achievable sub-goals. Along the way, the *real* goal of Green Sanctuary (the raising of awareness and the changing of behavior church-wide) will be achieved.
4. We agreed that a committed core group is necessary to spearhead the effort – to share the leadership load and ensure continuity. Such a group should have access to the Board and various committees, and possibly include people from key committees.
5. An effort such as Green Sanctuary needs buy-in from the whole congregation. It should be called out in the evolving Strategic Planning document. Otherwise there is little reason to expect that sufficient energy or bandwidth is available.

UU Action Network of New Hampshire (UUAN)

UUAN is a social justice advocacy network committed to strengthening social justice work in NH congregations and building links with interfaith partners and progressive organizations. Bruce Taylor is currently a member of the UUAN steering committee. He kept the group informed about UUAN's activities, including this year's project to repeal the death penalty in the state of New Hampshire. (The NH legislature has appointed a commission to study the death penalty issue and will publish its recommendations in time for voting in the next legislative session).

Bruce invited members of the SJ Committee and the congregation to attend a UUAN sponsored forum and speak-out session on the death penalty at the UU church in Concord. Marty Storer attended. More recently, Marty and Bruce attended a public hearing in Concord with Steve Edington, who made a statement to the legislative study commission.

Granite State Organizing Project (GSOP)

GSOP is a coalition of religious, community and labor organizations working on issues such as affordable housing, jobs, health care, and education to improve the lives of all people. Bob Keating and Steve Edington regularly attend the monthly meetings. More participation by church members is desired!

As a member of the Social Justice Committee, Bob Keating kept us informed about GSOP's activities and progress:

GSOP has worked hard to pass legislation to give greater protection to tenants from unresponsive and absentee landlords. This significant piece of legislation passed both the Senate and the House.

GSOP is currently supporting the Nashua Adult Learning Center in a leadership program which had twelve parent graduates this spring. This new group of leaders has set two major goals: to obtain a youth community center in the French Hill area and a parent center in the Tree Streets area. They recently surveyed community residents for input and have enlisted the help of several community groups with connections to City Hall. An exciting new program!

Social Justice Activities around the Church

Many church members were involved in social justice activities outside the framework of the Social Justice Committee:

Religious Education led a number of social justice projects including Pennies for Peace; Senior Youth activities; and collections of money for UNICEF and blankets for a children's home.

Gil Dubray organized a major benefit concert, *Harmony at Home*, with the strong support of Jed Holland and the Choir. The concert was held in memory of Allison Myrick, daughter of Steve Myrick. Proceeds were donated to the organization Bridges: Domestic & Sexual Violence Support. Several local, talented *a cappella* groups performed along with our Choir. This was a powerful experience for church members and all of the people from the surrounding community who attended or participated.

Communications and Education

Social Justice Table: we recognized the importance of keeping an information table in the parish hall as a means to educate people about social concerns and encourage dialogue during coffee hour. We set up a regular rotation to ensure that the SJ table would be staffed each Sunday.

Newsletter submissions included a volunteer opportunity to work with resettled refugees; a request for food bank donations and volunteers to cook meals for Nashua Soup Kitchen; a letter against human rights abuses in Honduras; information on the death penalty study commission; an announcement for the Afghanistan Women's Mission presentation and film; information on the UUA 2010 Tennessee/Kentucky Flood Relief fund.

Web Page: Ellen Barr has updated the SJ Committee web page on the church website to keep it current. The web page could benefit from more content, including a way to post current events in a timely fashion.

Email Distribution: We maintain an email distribution list to include everyone who has recently attended meetings or expressed an interest in social justice activities.

Yahoo! Group: Thanks to Marty Storer, we are making the transition from email to an online Yahoo! discussion group to post announcements, and to share graphics, documents and flyers efficiently. (See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/uunashua-social-justice>).

Kudos to Paul and Sonya Hackel for welcoming us into their home for two potluck meetings. To Marty Storer for taking minutes at several of our meetings. To Barbara Pugh, Ellen Barr and Bob Keating for sharing this task. To all who participated this year!

Reflections

Individual members of the Social Justice Committee have been very effective this year. But social justice is the business of the whole congregation. It is an integral part of our mission and covenant. It is not the task of a single committee.

Our efforts to improve communications from the SJ committee to the congregation were well placed. We should also take steps to improve communication in the other direction (from the congregation to the SJ committee), as part of a larger effort to integrate the SJ Committee with the congregation as a whole.

It has been suggested that the Social Justice Committee would be more accurately named the Social Justice Council – that it not be seen as responsible for implementing the church's social-justice work, but rather serve in a coordinating role. I agree, although such a shift in perception may require more than a name change.

We should listen to the lessons that Green Sanctuary has been teaching us. Not only is Green Sanctuary useful for raising ecological awareness; it may also provide a vehicle, as this church continues to grow, for church members to learn how to work together in a coordinated fashion when dealing with complex issues to achieve a common vision.

Respectfully submitted,

Bruce C. Taylor,
Social Justice Committee chair