

TUNNELS, TRAINS, AND TRAFFIC—WHAT CAN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY  
DO ABOUT MODERN GEO-POLITICAL PROBLEMS?

In the Chicago area where I grew up and in Arkansas where I lived most recently for 9 years, there is rarely any discussion of a shortage of rainfall or drought. Though with climactic changes currently in process, who knows what will happen, even much of Arkansas was drier than normal a couple of years after an annual rainfall record of almost 82 inches was set in 2009. For California the situation has often been different, with a scarcity of water resulting in the water wars to obtain fresh water for Los Angeles and the Central Valley. Even the massive amounts of water already shipped south from the Delta region have not met the needs of agriculture in the lower Central Valley and of the Los Angeles metroplex. The infamous Tunnels project is the solution of choice for Governor Jerry Brown and many others to insure that an uninterrupted supply will always be available.

Chicago grew from a trading outpost in the early 1800s into the nation's crossroads for railroads by the late 1800s. Railroads have always been a part of the complexion of Chicago since the Civil War era and remain a major source of commerce today. Railroads became a major source of commerce a bit later to much of California, but today railroads transport an amazing amount of material from coastal ports into the western half of the nation and beyond. Across the country, railroads were also the main mode of transportation from the mid-1800s thru the mid-1900s. Settlers followed the railroads across the country in far greater numbers than those who came on foot, horseback, or wagon train. For good or ill, the development of the inland territories west of the Appalachians largely happened because of the railroads, though the development of early coastal California was initially more dependent on ocean travel. And of course history is written by the victors, so the indigenous peoples of North America received little respect for their ancient claims upon the land.

The development of the automobile insured the settlement of areas railroads might not have reached. Cars and trucks, especially after Henry Ford's development of the assembly line, made it possible for people to go almost anywhere in a much shorter timeframe than in the days of travel by foot or horseback. By the 1950s, passenger rail service was suffering as people took to the highways. In the 1970s most of the long distance passenger rail services were merged into Amtrak, which maintained a few corridor services, mostly in lease agreements with freight railroads which resulted in slow travel in too many cases. Air travel became sufficiently affordable and available to replace long-distance passenger trains beginning in the 1960's, and the combination of heavy regulation for railroads, public expenditures for airports and highways, and increasing efficiency of autos, buses, and airplanes all contributed to the demise of passenger rail travel by the 1970s.

Over the last 30 years in Europe and China, passenger rail transportation has made a resurgence, largely as a result of dedicated high-speed rail lines. Except for Amtrak's Northeast Corridor from Washington D.C. to Boston, little equivalent progress has been made in passenger rail services in this country. A few other rail corridors, such as between Chicago and St. Louis and Detroit have begun to see progress in the movement toward high-speed rail travel. The distance between Los Angeles and the Sacramento and the Bay Area does make it a prime candidate for high-speed rail, especially with the amount of congestion on LA highways and the cost and air pollution involved in flying. The cost involved in creating a new dedicated high speed rail line is immense, and the payoff will take years to realize, but the environmental costs of not making such changes may be far higher.

Many religious communities have traditionally stayed out of the political arena, though others in recent years have sought to gain political power over certain issues. Unitarian Universalists have often joined the public debate on critical issues historically, on issues such as slavery, civil rights, access to mental health and health care generally and more recently freedom of choice, GLBTQ civil rights and environmental concerns. Of all the current social and political concerns, over which are we sufficiently united to take a stand? In the current geo-political landscape, where can we and where should we try to make a difference? As a small congregation, can we make a difference?

Obviously, we can have a greater impact if we partner with other UU congregations, or other like-minded non UU congregations, or with our larger UU movement or larger groupings of other religious communities, but it can be hard to build coalitions, to find sufficient common ground to work together. Even on Delta water issues, it is not clear to me how other UU congregations feel about them, much less other religious communities. In the short term, agriculture in the Central Valley would likely be positively impacted by more steady water flows but even in those areas many people are concerned about the costs, financial and ecological for a project like the tunnels. Similarly, people in the central valley would share the financial costs of the high-speed rail project, but would bear a larger share of the land use changes, while gaining fewer long-term benefits than those at each end. When you add in construction and maintenance jobs for either the Tunnels or Trains, the picture becomes even more complicated.

The Little Rock UU congregation had rarely taken stands on political issues over the years, other than to declare itself a Nuclear Free Zone and to oppose the Iraq War, and an effort to restrict adoptions and foster care placements from unmarried families (especially GLBTQ families). A couple of years ago, I suggested looking at a series of issues on which we already had pretty wide agreement which were likely to come before the Arkansas legislature and one board member took it upon himself to collect those and some other issues and write a resolution for the congregation to consider adopting. That resolution passed easily after discussion and was updated a year later. The resolution described the congregation's stands on immigration justice, opposition for the death penalty, support for the Occupy movement's concerns about social and economic inequality, support for Women's Rights and Reproductive Health, peacemaking, opposition to Animal Cruelty, Support for the ERA and GLBTQ marriage equality, and concern about the Environment. Among other things, the passage of that resolution empowered the Board President and the Minister to report those stands publicly and to help put the congregation on record in ways that would not otherwise have been possible without a congregational meeting. This is one way that we too can potentially make a difference, and I would challenge you to consider taking stands on several such continuing issues of concern.

Individually, Unitarian Universalists make a tremendous difference with our involvement in a myriad of good causes, programs, projects, and organizations. Getting us to work together as a congregation on any issue or project is more of a challenge when we are already busy with so many other good things. Taking the time to figure out which critical issues we strongly agree upon could help lead us to one or two projects to which we would be willing to give time and energy.

The one issue that UUs most strongly support is education, though even in the area of education, we will not likely agree on how best to support the ideal of education! Within our own wealthy and advanced nation, the most difficult issues are in the area of poverty and homelessness, and the lack of affordable healthcare and treatment for mental illness are often a cause for problems in this area. The gap between rich and poor continues to grow even as the middle class may be disappearing. This whole area at its core is often beyond the reach of most small churches, except through shared advocacy programs and attempts to respond to a few symptoms of this problem area. In a nation devoting so much of its wealth to the defense budget, there will never be enough left to address the needs of so many poor people. With Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid so often targeted for reductions, even the middle class persons cannot feel safe as they approach retirement age. Until people-centered values return to the forefront of our national commitments and budgets, there will be far more issues to address than the churches and the whole non-profit sector can handle.

So what can we do in the face of such massive challenges other than hide our heads in the sand and pretend that we can't see the problems? We can take a multi-faceted approach to join together with other people of good will in advocacy for the poor, the unemployed, the mentally ill, the homeless, and all those who have not been able to maintain a decent level of life in this richest nation ever on the face of the earth. We can undertake direct service efforts within our abilities and energy level to try to address those in need nearest us. We can also advocate for affordable educational opportunities and the extension of the affordable care act to insure that everyone is covered. At the same time, we should continue to engage in the individual good works that we have already made part of our routines. Additionally we ought to find

some programs and projects affording us the opportunity to work together as a congregation for the betterment of society.

As many of us are no longer young, we need to choose such projects mindfully, aware that our ability to accomplish hands on efforts is limited by our age and our own health issues. There are still things that we can do and things that we ought to do to make our city and society better for all persons.

If we can address the larger issues through advocacy and collaboration with groups like the UU Justice Ministry of California & other such larger bodies, then we can address our hands on efforts to simpler local projects. We may not be able to stop the tunnels and we may not want to stop the train, but we should take the time to see where we are on such issues and work to support groups that are taking the lead in advocacy for positions we support.

We also have our UU Service Committee to address problem areas in this country and around the globe. UUSC works at both advocacy for justice and some hands on projects and UUSC is an extension of our outreach ministries if we support it. We are just finishing collecting for the Guest at Your Table program for UUSC, but they will gladly accept donations at any time.

With so many problems to address around the globe, we cannot make progress on all of them. We can tackle a few things in our neighborhood and we can collaborate and support groups that are working on things further away. We cannot do everything, but we should never let that stop us from doing all the good that we can. And like our experience at the Boggs Tract Community Garden, may we discover that we can have some fun along the way! So let's get out there and do some good building a better world!

*And now, since we have a few minutes, I would like to give you a chance to share some more of your thoughts about how we can make a difference in the world. Raise your hand and we will get you a microphone!*

Thank you for sharing your thoughts! Now let's see what good we can do!

So may it Be! Amen!