

## **MAKING A DIFFERENCE WITH THE UUS OF CALIFORNIA!**

When I first envisioned this sermon, and its title, I was expecting us to have hosted a training yesterday by the Unitarian Universalist Justice Ministry of California, formerly known as the UU Legislative Ministry. We may still host such a training this fall, but it was postponed due their inability to get PR out to churches of the region in a timely fashion. I thought about changing the title, but decided that I still had enough to say about colleagues, other UU congregations in California, and things that we might do together.

As most of you may know, before my nine year Arkansas interlude, I served as Co-Minister of Pacific Unitarian Church, in Rancho Palos Verdes 1996-2004 and also as Part-Time Consulting Minister for the UU Fellowship of Kern County in Bakersfield for the latter 4 of those years. When I was in the Pacific Southwest District, I was involved in Youth and Camping Ministries at de Benneville Pines, our UU Camp in Angelus Oaks (I even served on the board, briefly as President), and I joined in supporting the California UU Legislative Ministry as it began. I was an active member of the UU Minister's Association chapter in PSWD, as I have been since coming to the Pacific Central District.

One of the things I love about Unitarian Universalism in California is that, unlike much of the middle of the country, our congregations are close enough together to actually get to know each other and to work together to accomplish things that we mutually agree are important. Had I become a UU in my home area of Chicagoland, rather than entering Ministry as a United Methodist and serving mostly in Montana, I might also have experienced more of the collegiality I have enjoyed as a UU in California. To be fair, there are even more UU congregations in the Northeast, but I was still transitioning into Unitarian Universalism and was not as able to connect with colleagues or other UU congregations when I was in New Jersey and Pennsylvania due to my day job in child protective services for NJ.

Even with as many neighboring congregations as we have, in Modesto, Livermore, Sacramento, the Bay Area generally and several other locations, we don't do much together. I was hoping that the UUJM workshop would help us to form some bonds that would allow us to do more together. Only Mary Bullard and I were able to attend the District Annual Meeting in San Francisco back in April, so we were not as able to take advantage of that opportunity as well as I had hoped. Dave and Roseann and I are the only ones currently registered to attend General Assembly, even though it is as close as Portland this year. We have missed some opportunities for connecting with other UUs, but there will be more opportunities in the future.

Social Justice efforts have been an important part of the history of this congregation, as they have for many UUs and congregations. Locally, we are exploring possible collaboration with other non-UU congregations through PACT, the local PICO organizing affiliate. Tom Amato, their Exec. Director, helped to introduce PACT, People and Congregations Together, at the most recent UU Thursday. He shared various ways that congregations are banding together to make a difference. Other California UU Congregations, in Long Beach, and I think Fresno and others have been active with PICO affiliates.

Members of this congregation, and UUs generally are involved in lots of good causes for quality education at every level, for civil rights for all persons, for conservation, ecological concerns and animal rights, for music and the arts and for all kinds of specific local issues that are important. The one thing we don't do very well is marshal our energies to select one or two issues to be congregational issues for any period of time. Since we know all the issues are important we don't want to let any of them go, so we don't compromise to really put our energy into any of them as a congregational project. We each make a difference, but we don't accomplish as much as we might if we worked together for a year or two on any of them. And UUs become known as supporters of good causes, but the congregation doesn't become known for anything. I want to invite you to help us change that.

I can get behind any number of good and important causes to make our community and the world better. I like the idea of choosing one cause to address for one, two, or three years and then perhaps choosing another.

Even if we took up a new cause each year, we could do a lot of good, and still hit everybody's favorite causes in just a few years. As a small congregation, we might have more impact to join with other groups. That is one reason I wanted to host the UU Justice Ministry workshop and why I was excited to have Tom Amato speak about PACT and PICO. We don't have to reinvent the wheel, we can join the work that other groups are helping to organize. And this doesn't mean we have to stop working with the Western Farmworkers, especially since our biggest congregational role with them is to provide space for their events. I would like to see us really look at the needs in the community and state that we could address most effectively and then get started.

If we wanted to really work on conservation and water issues, we might start by re-making our grounds to emphasize conservation, perhaps with water barrels and drought resistant plants rather than grass. We could plant a demonstration garden for more ecological practices.

If we wanted to support education, we could establish a volunteer group to help at a local school, or start an after-school program in Jackson Hall for kids without a place to go. We could host forums on education, and lobby for educational funding and for a CSU campus in Stockton.

If we wanted to work on immigration issues, we could host forums to discuss the best ways to proceed to be more just and compassionate to undocumented workers. We could arrange legal clinics to help them with immigration. We could work with either UUJM or PACT or both on those issues.

There are so many ways that we could make a difference while also seeking to work with and establish relationships with other congregations, both UU and non-UU. It is easy to just be comfortable with things the way they are and not stretch ourselves. Just being a home for sharing progressive ideas and beliefs is important. Being a welcoming congregation for those who are not as well accepted in other congregations is important. Respecting a range of beliefs is important. These things are all good, but there is more that we are called to do by our principles, our history, and our beliefs in compassion and justice.

The organization now known as the UU Justice Ministry of California was started by several forward looking UU Leaders in the Pacific Southwest and Pacific Central Districts who thought that our UU voice could make a statewide difference through lobbying for progressive legislation and promoting UU views of the world. UUJM has been a model for UUs in several other states and it has helped to promote many good ideas. With a small staff it has accomplished a lot. But there is much more it can do, and we could decide to help by working with UUJM to make a difference.

### *UUJMCA Mission*

*The Unitarian Universalist Justice Ministry of California advances justice in our state by cultivating and connecting leaders and communities, and by empowering the public voice of those who share UU values and principles.*

*We seek to develop the skills of civic engagement that we may educate, organize, and advocate for public policies that:*

- *uphold the worth and dignity of every person*
- *further justice, equity, and compassion in human relations*
- *ensure use of the democratic process*
- *protect religious freedom*
- *promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence*

*Charitable activity is a familiar and important part of a religious life. However, when poverty, environmental degradation, inequitable access to health care, and higher education are part of the structures of society, rather than unforeseen exceptions, then we know that charity is not enough. Our faith calls us to change policies and structures that inhibit human development, harm the environment, and destroy communities. We are called to educate and organize for justice.*

*We aim to make the world more just by using the powerful network of UUs in California. By 2018, we aim to achieve the following:*

- *California Unitarian Universalists have access to and participate in statewide justice education, advocacy, and witness that deepens their faith and changes life for the better in California.*

- *California Unitarian Universalist justice leaders are trained, effective, inspiring and connected.*
- *California Unitarian Universalist congregations utilize UUJM to strengthen their justice ministries.*
- *California policy-makers and justice leaders value UUJM as a visible and credible partner in advancing justice in California.*

We could put our energy for Social Justice from First UU Stockton into supporting UUJM and it would be energy well-spent.

Even though we are not that far from several other UU congregations, we do not have much knowledge of what they are doing and what they are interested in doing. I hope that we will build stronger connections with our sister churches over the next few years, sharing in leadership trainings, exchanging choirs and preaching, and getting to know other UUs.

We are even nearer to many congregations of various faiths in Stockton and San Joaquin County, where PACT is working to bring People and Congregations together to make a difference.

#### *PACT Mission*

*PACT seeks through the congregations and community organizations of San Joaquin County to build a powerful, democratic organization, which will be the voice of low and moderate-income families. PACT helps leaders build their own local organizations capable of acting on issues of vital importance to their community and families. PACT is developing a network of leaders who have developed their expertise and organizational skills and who are acting to improve our county. PACT is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. It is nonpartisan, nonsectarian, and open to all who wish to work toward improving their community.*

*PACT helps leaders build their own local organizations that increase their capacity to act on issues of vital importance to their community and families. PACT is developing a network of leaders who have developed their expertise and organizational skills and who are acting to improve our county. PACT uses the PICO National Network community organizing model. Community leaders are the foundation of the organizing process, and developing leaders is the focus of PACT's work. Leaders are members of the community. They are people who commit to reach out to their neighbors (in "one-to-one" meetings) and work for the common good. They help make ordinary residents*

*more knowledgeable about civic issues and discover the issues that are most important to members of their community. Leaders support each other. Leaders come together and share feelings about their progress, their victories, and their disappointments. They also learn from each other. They reflect on their experiences with other leaders and become more effective in serving their community.*

*Leaders help move the community forward. They work to create a dialog between members of their community and public officials, and they help lead both groups towards action that addresses community concerns.*

Here at 1<sup>st</sup> UU, we can choose to ally ourselves with either or both of these organizations, or we can choose our own ways to make a difference. Part of our congregational heritage is to be active in the community doing our best to make the community and the world better. This is a noble calling and a big responsibility for a small congregation with a lot of gray hair! As we finish this congregational year, I challenge us to reclaim our heritage and become more active as a progressive justice-seeking congregation!

So May it Be! Amen!