

Recent Social Justice Work at Restoration, by Frank Gerould (09.08)

Thank you, Pat. This morning, I'm going to highlight some of Social Justice activities at Restoration since my wife Tess, our children, and I arrived at Restoration in 1990, and what Social Justice means for me.

Our UU Churches have congregational polity, which means we decide what social justice means for us, and on which issues we choose to focus. Annabel suggested we begin within the UU Principles in describing the social justice mission of Restoration. It is difficult to select one principle that directs us to work for justice; it pervades all the principles including:

(1) the inherent worth and dignity of every person

(7) Respect for the interdependent web of all existence, and

(5) the right of conscience and the democratic process.

But the principle that seems most apropos to me is the 2nd: Justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Particularly equity. The Webster's dictionary definition of "equity" is, "justice according to natural law or right; especially freedom from bias or favoritism."

Natural Law and rights are a big subject in philosophy and theology, especially Catholic social teaching, and would make an interesting subject for a sermon on its own. The basic idea is that there is a higher law set by nature that is universally valid and

above the law of nation-states or political communities, which are the source of human laws, and also its critic.

Natural law theory exercised a profound influence on the development of English common law and on the philosophies of Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke. It is also a component of the US Declaration of Independence.

Thomas Jefferson, whom we claim as a closet Unitarian, echoing Locke, appealed to our inalienable (or natural) rights in the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” Of course, in practice, Jefferson was a slaveholder and a hypocrite. However, other Unitarians and Universalists became leaders of the abolitionist and women’s rights movements, and even the labor movement at the end of the nineteenth century.

So, imbedded in the 2nd principle, “Justice, Equity and Compassion in human relations” is the intention to work for more justice, better justice, including opposing unjust laws. I feel the profound economic and social inequalities that we endure under the variety of Capitalism that we have in the U.S. presents us with many issues for our attention.

James Luther Adams, the great UU minister and theologian, described our social justice mission this way in the Prophethood of All Believers in 1986:

“...A church that does not concern itself with the struggle in history for human decency and justice, a church that does not show concern for the shape of things to come, a church that does not attempt to interpret the signs of the times, is not a prophetic church. The prophetic liberal church is not a church where the prophetic function is assigned merely to the few. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which persons think and work together to interpret the signs of the times in light of their faith, to make explicit through discussion the epochal thinking that the times demand. The prophetic liberal church is the church in which all members share the common responsibility to foresee the consequences of human behavior (both individual and institutional), with the intention of making history in place of being merely pushed around by it.”

So how does Restoration work for social justice? We are a small church so we must pick and choose issues that interest our congregation and are do-able. The UUA advises congregations to balance service, education, advocacy, witness and organizing in their social justice work, which we do at Restoration.

The first service Tess and I attended at Restoration was a summer service organized by Adrienne Morrison with the Philadelphia representatives for the African National Congress (ANC) in 1990, shortly after Mandela was released from prison. I also remember a service by Rosita Johnson from USG who was leading a group of Philadelphia educators sending books and aid to South African schools, and another by

Richard Cox from FUMCOG reporting on monitoring the elections in South Africa around the same time. I felt at home at Restoration and Tess and I joined in 1991.

In 1991, Restoration became one of the founding members of the Northwest Philadelphia Interfaith Hospitality Network (NPIHN) which provided shelter, meals and assistance to homeless families in Northwest Philadelphia. Each participating congregation would furnish overnight lodging and meals in their churches for 3 to 5 families for three or four weeks a year. The network employed a full-time social worker, at that time a woman named Gwen Hill, who helped families find permanent housing and employment by negotiating the city bureaucracy.

We had families living in our classrooms and even our Sanctuary, for 3 to 4 weeks a year. I remember moving pews with Carl Heinlein. We were active for 9 years. In the last few years, we partnered with USG. NPIHN remains active with Rachel Falkove as the Executive Director. Their office is at the NIM building on Germantown Avenue in Mt. Airy. They will hold their annual Empty Bowl Dinner fundraiser this year at Chestnut Hill College on Wednesday, November 12th, which is always a lot of fun.

Graterfriends was another long term commitment of the Social Justice committee when I joined Restoration. This project was to help prisoners at Graterford State Prison, initiated, headed and coordinated by Helen and Chuck Oerkvitz. We collected magazines and books for the prisoners; children's books and toys for the visitors' room, sent Christmas cards, donated cards for prisoners to send to their families,

sewed Christmas Stockings for the prisoners, and baked goodies for celebrations. Helen and Chuck would take church members and a couple of our pastors to visit prisoners every few months. The Oerkvitzes serve on the Board of Directors of People Against Recidivism which is a self-help program started and run by prisoners to help prepare for successful life upon release. Graterfriends disbanded a couple of years ago as its leadership aged and prison programs became more restrictive. Our new involvement with Reconstruction, Inc. is a continuation of a long-term commitment to prison and rehabilitation issues.

The last long-term project I would like to mention is Eastern Pennsylvania Organizing Project (EPOP) which Paul Mack brought to Restoration in 2000. EPOP is a multicultural organization made up of faith institutions, schools and neighborhood groups that trains groups like Restoration in community organizing.

Our church sits on the board of UU House, an assisted living and nursing care community on Tulpehocken Street in Germantown. UU House wanted to expand their facilities at their current location, but was opposed by one litigious neighborhood organization.

EPOP helped us campaign for UU House for several years, but eventually, UU House lost its bid to expand in the courts. Now UU House faces a dilemma: they may be too small to be viable in the long run; but to expand, they would now have to move which is very expensive. Our UU House board members, Sandy Fulton, Arnold Bradburd, Joan Doyle, and Adrienne Morrison are struggling with this issue. After the UU House

misadventure, EPOP worked with us for another year on healthcare and senior issues.

Steve Honeyman, the EPOP Executive Director moderated a forum on Medicare Part D here in our sanctuary on a snowy day in February, 2006.

Now to the present. Rita Fitzgerald and Sandy Fulton have prepared a flyer, which is stuffed in your order of service, which describes the current activities of the Social Justice and Community Action ministry. We are trying to focus on a few projects to be the most effective. The first is the UUPLAN, the Unitarian Universalist Pennsylvania Advocacy Network, founded by Pat DeBrady, which is a progressive religious statewide organization which hopes to shape public policy. UU congregations around the state will lobby our state legislators with one voice on progressive issues such as GLBT rights, green energy, or universal health coverage. Last weekend, 30 UUs from 10 congregations in Eastern PA met at Main Line UU to formulate issues. Another gathering for Western Pennsylvania is planned for November. It is very promising.

The second project is working with Reconstruction, Inc., a community based, family centered non-profit organization working against recidivism at the grass roots level. Seven members of Restoration have attended local meetings through the summer. Reconstruction, Inc. is fighting the root-causes of violence in Philadelphia.

Our third project is the Darfur Action Coalition which we joined four years ago. The genocide in Darfur seems overwhelming. There is a large Darfurian community in NE Philadelphia that has not given up, thought. They inspire and lead the Darfur Action

Coalition and now fund a project to educate women in one refugee camp in Sudan. We need to persevere, just like the anti-apartheid movement persevered and defeated white rule in South Africa.

We would be happy to have you join our merrie little band of activists on the Social Justice and Community Action Ministry. We need your ideas and energy. As Margaret Mead said,

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.”