

## **UU Values in Public Policy: Tools to Build an Effective Advocacy Network**

UU state advocacy networks are bringing UU values to public policy issues ranging from global warming, poverty and homelessness, health care, and marriage equality. Learn about one advocacy network, Washington State UU Voices for Justice, and how you and your congregation can bring liberal religious voices to the shaping of public policy.

### **Reading**

I open this morning's workshop with the words of the Reverend Richard Gilbert, whose Unitarian Universalist ministry is inspired by his deep conviction that spirituality and social action are inseparable.

“As we embrace the spiritual, we need to remember that a vital source of religious meaning is through our participation in the actions and passions of our time. Meaning emerges in lived human experience.

“To seek justice, to work for the Beloved Community is simply part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Faith exists by mission as a fire exists by burning. Our faith gives us a place to stand in the midst of a world than seems to have lost its way.”

### **Welcome**

Good morning! If you believe you are in workshop 5, UU Values in Public Policy: Tools to Build an Effective Advocacy Network, then you are in the right place.

To learn who is with us today, let's go around the room and introduce ourselves, saying your name and your congregation.

I am Carol McKinley, a UU community minister affiliated with the Olympia UU Congregation. I live in Olympia, where I serve as coordinator for Washington State UU Voices for Justice, this state's legislative advocacy network. I am joined here by several members of our board of directors (name them).

The workshop description in the AGM brochure names three goals for our time together:

- To give you an understanding of what legislative advocacy networks are, and why and how they came about
- To give you some insight into how one network – WA UU Voices for Justice – is organized
- To offer some suggestions for how you as individuals and how your congregations can bring your liberal religious voices to public policy making.

I will talk for a while before giving you an opportunity to see how it feels to give expression to your UU values in the political realm in a brief role-playing exercise. We will also have time for your questions.

### **What Are Legislative Advocacy Networks?**

First, some background. Unitarians and Universalists have been in the forefront of social justice battles since the beginnings of the United States. We have fought for public education, women's rights, civil rights, and, most recently, for gay marriage locally, statewide, and nationally. On Equality Day in Olympia each year, the largest number of people on the steps of the capitol building by far stand with the banners of our UU Congregations and the banner of WA UU Voices for Justice.

You as individuals, along with your particular congregations, are politically active people! Yet the denomination, or association of congregations – the UU body politic – has not been a consistent presence in Washington politics, or in most other states. Here in Washington, as in other states, the public religious voice tends to be a conservative voice. And this conservative religious voice has dominated the debate on issues of public policy, particularly on issues around sexuality: gay marriage and domestic partnership rights, abortion, sex education in the schools.

These voices claim to speak for moral values. Again, those moral values focus on sexuality. They do not address poverty, equality, economic or environmental justice, do not address the issues we as UU's believe are the REAL moral values.

In the past six years, a unique, social justice ministry has emerged to make UU views a visible and dynamic force in issues of our states' public policies. WA State UU Voices for Justice is part of this social justice ministry, one of nearly 16 state legislative networks in state capitals in the United States.

The state legislative networks are the result of creating thinking at the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, which recognizes the growing need for our values to be heard in our states. The UUSC started the networks, and continues to support the states networks in several ways, including monthly conference calls and an annual conference in Boston. In the calls and at the conference we share ideas on ways to promote the work we do, and talk about the issues, including global warming and poverty, that we have in common. We share resources that we have developed, and are putting together a manual for state's to use as they organize new legislative networks.

The UUSC believes that the networks are the way to bring together individuals interested in advocacy at the state level. Former House of Representatives Speaker Tip O'Neal once said that all politics is local; it seems we are beginning to pay attention to that seasoned politician's words.

Once the networks began to form, the UUSC put its money where its mouth is. WA UU Voices, like other qualifying state networks, is the recipient of a \$10,000 annual grant from the UUSC. The grant provides the seed money to make a new network success, and is renewable for the next four years. At the end of the five years, each network is expected to be self-sustaining. I will talk more about that later.

As coordinator of Washington State UU Voices for Justice, my role is to stay on top of state legislation that relates to the social justice issues on our legislative agenda and to give liberal religion a presence at the capitol. I am also responsible for the day-to-day work of the organization. Our board develops policy and the budget, and takes on many tasks.

WA UU Voices, like all of the state networks, is designed to inspire UU's to work collectively for social justice and to give them the necessary tools to be effective.

This, then, is how legislative networks – Unitarian Universalist legislative ministries – have come about. My task, the task of WA UU Voices hardworking board and volunteers, is to get the word out to ministers, to congregational leadership, and to everyone in the congregations about the important work we do representing Unitarian Universalist values in Olympia..

### **How Is WA UU Voices for Justice Organized, and What Does It Do?**

First, some history about how this state’s network—WA UU Voices for Justice – came about.

In the summer of 2005, Corinne Kelly and Jerome Chroman, members of University Unitarian, received a call from the UUSC, with which they had been active for several years. Jackie Ladd at the UUSC told them that the UUSC was interested in developing legislative networks in several states, and that Washington was seen as a possible location for one. Jerome and Corinne took on the responsibility for establishing the groundwork for the a network – talking with members in various churches to discern the level of interest, and establishing a steering committee made up of UU ministers and lay leaders to provide input on the direction the new organization should take.

That fall Jerome and Corinne organized two gatherings – one at the Spokane congregation and one at University Unitarian – with speakers from UUSC and social justice advocates from several faith traditions. During the 2006 legislative session, they publicized social justice issues and lobby days around issues of poverty, economic justice, and marriage equality, and encouraged UU’s from around the state to attend those legislative advocacy days

In early 2007, a move of their business location required more of their time, and limited their availability to continue their part-time work with UU Voices, so both stepped down from their positions as co-coordinators.

Since late 2005 I had served on the steering committee. I became co-coordinator with Corinne in the summer of 2006, and assumed the role of coordinator in the spring of 2007. This past year we have focused on building UU Voice’s structure. We registered with the State of Washington as a nonprofit

corporation. Bylaws were developed and approved at our first annual meeting last June, when our first board of directors was elected. Our application as a 501c (4) organization is at the IRS as we speak. Barry Zickhur of Olympia is our webmaster, sending out weekly newsletters during legislative session and email alerts as needed. He is also working to update the site to keep information current. It is through our website and our newsletter that we keep our members and friends informed about UU Voice's development, workshops, and legislative conferences.

Our goal: to inspire UU's in Washington to work for social justice in the state legislative arena, and to give them the necessary tools to be effective.

Each year we have a legislative conference featuring legislators as keynote speakers. At the conference we select our focus issues. We are working to recruit representatives from each congregation who will bring their congregations' preferences to the selection process. We will be putting in place listening sessions to hear the issues of concern in each congregation during the next few months.

Next November we will be selecting issues for the 2009-2010 biennium in a delegate voting process. There are lots of very important issues: our very difficult task is to limit, limit, limit! The Quaker Public Policy group, for example, has only one issue: restorative justice. This focuses their work and lobbying efforts. We can follow their example by asking:

- What issues are not addressed by other groups?
- How can we bring a distinctive UU perspective to our advocacy work?

These are all questions to ask ourselves as we set our legislative agenda, and why it is important to have delegates from every congregation so concerns from Spokane, Wenatchee, Bellingham, Vancouver, and Seattle can all be heard.

When the agenda is established and we approach the January legislative session, we send regular emails – not an overwhelming number – to keep you informed of how the issues are moving through the legislature, to let you know about lobby days and rallies, and to suggest talking points when you contact your

legislators. Our newsletter, action alerts, and website are essential organizing and action tools for our statewide work. Our webmaster Barry Zickhur is working on finding the most effective web tools for our response to issues.

### **How Can You and Your Congregations Bring Your Liberal Religious Voices to the Legislature?**

Many of you are experienced political advocates. You have worked on candidates' and issues' campaigns. You have written and called your legislators. You have supported groups like Planned Parenthood, People for Puget Sound, Children's Alliance, Fair Campaigns, the Religious Coalition for Equality. You receive emails from these groups, and you respond with your input to your state or federal legislators.

When you send your emails or made those phone calls, how many times did you identify yourself as a person of faith – a Unitarian Universalist? This is what WA State UU Voices for Justice is all about: bringing our Unitarian Universalist values – our unabashedly liberal religious voices – into the political arena. It's about working together as a faith community to address systemic injustice – poverty, discrimination, degradation of our environment and this Earth – by working for positive social change.

WA UU Voices' 2007-2008 legislative agenda does exactly that. We are consistent supporters of marriage equality, one of the few religious communities united in standing up for the rights of gay and lesbian families. At the annual marriage equality lobby days and rallies in Olympia, UU congregations, with signs, banners and, in the case of East Shore Church, with matching vests, have consistently had the most visible presence on the steps of the capitol. Our ministers offer sermons about standing on the side of love, and are members of the Religious Coalition for Equality. Our voices were instrumental in supporting domestic partnership benefits in 2007, and in expanding those benefits this session. In my testimony before the House committee hearing that bill, I spoke as a Unitarian Universalist who believes in a society of inclusion, not exclusion.

Global warming is on our legislative agenda as well. In February at Environmental Lobby Day, many UU's participated. Cedars congregation on Bainbridge Island, and Quimper in Port Townsend had several members spend the day in Olympia, attending workshops on specific environmental issues and meeting with legislators.

Poverty and homelessness are also on our agenda. WA UU Voices tracks bills related to housing, in particular, and urges support for increased funding for low-income housing through the Housing Trust Fund and for the existence of tent cities.

Universal health care is our fourth legislative issue. Your support of legislation proposed by Insurance Commissioner Mike Kreidler has helped move two bills through this 2008 session. These bills are the first steps toward health care for all residents of Washington.

This year WA UU Voices is supporting a non-legislative issue as well. We were the first faith-based organization to endorse the Death with Dignity initiative, which will begin its signature-gathering campaign soon. You can learn more about the initiative, and sign up to be a signature gatherer, at their table in the exhibit hall.

WA UU Voices exists to be a moral presence, to represent our UU values and to be the catalyst for systemic change for equality and for quality of life for all citizens in Washington state.

Undoubtedly we do not speak for all UU's in Washington. You may not agree with our positions on all issues on our legislative agenda. However, we are developing ways to reach you in your congregations to identify issues that are most important to you! I urge you to attend our workshops, and, most importantly, our November legislative conference as a delegate of your congregation, to make your views known. We want delegates from all 31 Washington congregations to be at the conference to select the issues for WA UU Voices' 2009-2010 legislative agenda.

And we want all congregations as members of WA UU Voices. Congregational and individual memberships are important to insure the financial viability of this legislative ministry.

How do we get the word out to Washington congregations, or to those in other states in our district about the importance of this work? I am available to preach in your congregation on the subject of religion and politics, and our religious imperative to act in the public square. I will work with UU Voices' members and supporters in your congregation to arrange a workshop on effective public advocacy, and invite your district's senator or representatives to speak at the workshop. Our goal is to articulate the issues and concerns we have as Unitarian Universalists, and to base our advocacy work in the values and principles of Unitarian Universalism. Our goal is to unabashedly say, I am a Unitarian Universalist who believes that accessible health care is a justice issue, a right, not a privilege. I am a Unitarian Universalist who believes in a society of inclusion, not exclusion. As Richard Gilbert said in today's opening words, "To seek justice, to work for the Beloved Community, is simply part of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist." Working together, bringing our collaborative voices to this task, is to strengthen our work for the Beloved Community.

Legislative advocacy is ministry: we are carrying our values, our faith into the public square. Working together we can expand our social justice work beyond our congregations and local communities into a larger arena, to work for effective, systemic social change through state legislation. To do this effectively, we need to talk about what values underlie our commitment, how our UU faith impels us to continue this work.

Take my word for it: Your legislators want to hear this. My district 22 senator, Karen Fraser, said this in a talk at last November's legislative conference: She urged us to speak from our faith perspective so progressive religious views are heard.

And do not talk only to those who we know are friendly to our issues. Reach out and across the aisle to let more conservative legislators who you are, and what we as UU's stand for. Two weeks ago I was on a flight from Yakima,

and talked with a representative from there who was returning to Olympia after a weekend at home. I offered her a ride to Olympia, and we had an opportunity to talk about a number of issues, including housing and poverty, about which we agree. I doubt very much if she will ever vote for expanding domestic partner benefits, but she is someone I can – and did – lobby to support increased funding for the state housing trust fund.

Washington UU Voices wants to work with our faith allies, and we are actively building partnerships with other advocates around issues. We teamed with Poverty Action Alliance to co-sponsor Poverty Action Lobby Day; we work with the Religious Coalition for Equality on marriage equality issues, and with Earth Ministry and other environmental advocacy groups on global warming issues. I have recently begun participating in the Religious Coalition for the Common Good to increase our effectiveness in lobbying for issues addressing poverty, housing, and the environment. Among the members of the Religious Coalition are the Washington Council of Churches, Associated Ministries of Pierce County, the Lutheran Public Policy Office, the Quakers Public Policy Office, and the Intercommunity Peace and Justice Center, a coalition of Roman Catholic women's orders. Around issues of justice and equality, we have more that brings us together than divides us.

We continue to build WA UU Voices' collaboration with others, and to develop our own organizational structure. This year, we will be focusing on membership, fundraising, and education. We want to reach every congregation with our message, and to engage your congregation – and you – in this important work. Visit our table in the exhibit hall, and take copies of our brochure to your congregation. Talk with your minister and your congregational leadership to build awareness of the work WA UU Voices is doing, and how this organization can be voice for Washington UU's on matters of public policy. This is an opportunity to make our presence seen and heard, to carry our message of love and justice to those who make the laws and policies that affect the daily lives of all of us – especially the poor and disenfranchised.

## **An Opportunity to Talk as a UU**

Now you have heard my stump speech. Let's take a few minutes to practice talking to a legislator about an issue – from a faith perspective!

- First, find a partner – the person next to you.
- I am passing out some slips with an issue on them: global warming, tent cities, housing, and so forth.
- In this short exercise, you will each have an opportunity to be the UU talking with your legislator, and to be the legislator. Decide who you are. After five minutes, I will ring the bell; the legislator will then be the UU, and the UU will be the legislator.
- Some tips: When you call on a legislator during session, you may have two minutes of his or her time, so you need to be direct and succinct.
- What do you need to say?
  - Your name
  - Where you are from, and why you are there
  - The issue you support (or oppose), and why you support (or oppose) it
  - What you want your legislator to do about it
  - Thank your legislator

Remember: You only have two minutes! Have fun. When the bowl rings, switch roles.

## **Questions and Discussion**

- Q. What if members of our congregation are working for children, or clean elections, which are not part of the UU Voices' legislative agenda?
  - A. Work with those individuals and groups, but encourage them to become involved in UU Voices, where they can advocate for their particular interests when we set the next biennium's agenda.
- Q. Are our congregations at risk of losing their tax-exempt status by engaging in political advocacy?
  - A. No. UU Voices does not endorse candidates. The "separation of church and state" issue does not apply to advocacy for issues. An excellent

resource on political advocacy in our congregations is the handbook, *The Real Rules*, prepared by the UUA Washington Office for Advocacy. You can find it at their website. We have applied to be a 501 c(4) organization, since about ¾ of our work is educational.

- Q. You mentioned networking with other groups. How do you know what other organizations and networks are doing?
- A. Some of it is experience – and showing up at issues’ gatherings. Check out other groups’ websites too. Advocacy groups will have a legislative priorities page. Another excellent resource is the League of Women Voters organization in your community. The League keeps track of issues, and their supporting groups. The history of a given bill also provides excellent information. At the Washington State Legislature’s website, you can find what groups testified for (or against) a given bill when it was heard in committee.
- Q. Can UU Voices participate in the development of party platforms?
- A. UU Voices does not take a position as a Democratic or Republican group. It is within party structures that the platforms are built. However, many of us are active in our political parties, and can bring our values and perspectives to the writing of platforms.

Note:

Oregon congregations were particularly interested in exchanging email address to explore organizing an Oregon legislative network. Carol offered her help and support for their efforts.