

**Introduction to Community Organizing**  
**By the Rev. Ann Schranz**  
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We live in an imperfect world, and we are imperfect people. The primary impulse of religious life is to be engaged in restorative work that heals, binds, and makes whole what is fractured and broken. To provide the context for the remarks of community organizer Ken Fujimoto and for our dialogue later in the service, I share with you excerpts from a Unitarian Universalist document called “Congregation-Based Community Organizing: A Social Justice Approach to Revitalizing Congregational Life.”<sup>1</sup>

What gets in the way of more effective social justice work by Unitarian Universalist congregations? First, we frequently lack the relationships. We cherish our identity as a place for spiritual seekers. Personal conviction and matters of conscience are important to us. We cherish our independence. As an unintended consequence, we have fewer enduring relationships with people of color, low-income people, and people of other religions and backgrounds. Often these relationships need to be deepened by an authentic acknowledgement and understanding of our differences in relation to systemic power and privilege.

The second dynamic that gets in the way of more effective justice work is that we may falsely assume that the problems of poverty and systemic racism do not affect us. In fact, there are many Unitarian Universalists who live in poverty or on the edge of it, or who experience racial discrimination. Other barriers to more effective justice work are that we lack the avenues to pursue social justice, and we focus on short-term solutions instead of long-term change.

Finally, we shy away from types of social action which require that a *congregation* take a position on social issues. Before a congregation can organize activities, some degree of consensus needs to be forged. We do not take orders well – we want to make up our own minds. Congregation-wide decision making processes and endeavors regarding social justice are few and far between because of the controversy they may stir up. Yet inner transformation and outward impact may depend on such congregation-wide processes and endeavors.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.uua.org/leaders/justice/cbco/27243.shtml>.

Participating in community organizing as a *congregation* can help us over some of these barriers to justice work. A force for democracy is growing in the United States, the uninformed are participating, voices which have been muted are speaking, and the powerful are beginning to listen. Operating largely outside the media spotlight, these efforts are a significant force for change and for renewed democracy and democratic participation. I am talking about institution-based community organizing. Although community organizing in a diffuse form has gone on for over 120 years, the focus this morning is on institution-based organizing with local or statewide ambitions.

In the United States, there are roughly 160 local institution-based organizing groups with over 4,000 member institutions. The institutions that make up this movement have a combined membership of more than 1% of the U.S. population, a figure rarely reached by social movements in U.S. history. Currently, over 100 Unitarian Universalist congregations are involved in this type of community organizing, and we could be the next one.

Most Unitarian Universalist congregations are affiliated with one of four national networks: Direct Action Research and Training (DART), the Gamaliel Foundation, the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), or People Improving Communities Through Organizing (the PICO). Ken Fujimoto is an IAF organizer. At the Social Action forum after the service, Ken will go into detail about the process for a congregation to join and what a congregation does once it joins. At the risk of stealing his thunder, I'll say that once a congregation joins, typically what happens is that it works with the organizer to continue relationship building within the congregation (it's all about *relational* power, after all), then to identify justice issues to address, then to research the issues and develop solutions, then to meet with public officials, corporate officials, or both and ask for their support and assistance, then to celebrate winning on that issue, and then move on to the next issue.

Institution-based community organizing is an effective way to improve civic life, extend democracy, empower poor and working-class people, improve our health care, education, and housing systems, support and strengthen the family, and build strong communities. It does all

this in a way that honors religious, ethnic, and racial diversity. You may be wondering, “Why is Rev. Ann jumping on this bandwagon?” I am jumping on this bandwagon because I have seen the difference institution-based community organizing can make. I saw it during my two years as interim minister in Santa Cruz County. I have been following it from a distance for the past three years here.

It is a treat for us to be so close to Claremont. The natural beauty and cultural amenities available in Claremont are wonderful. Yet over the past three years, I have found it harder and harder to ignore a persistent inner voice that says, “Look east, not west. Claremont is in good hands. You and the congregation are needed to the east. San Bernardino County is where you live and where you worship. San Bernardino County needs you. San Bernardino County has much to teach you.”

When the existing Industrial Areas Foundation group in the Pomona Valley turned its eyes to the east, focusing on the corridor along I-10 between the 57 freeway and I-15, I said to that persistent inner voice: “OK, OK! Stop needling me. I’ll do my best to motivate the congregation to jump on the bandwagon, and I’ll jump first.” In recent weeks, I have attended multiple meetings with local leaders who are also on the IESC bandwagon. IESC stands for Inland Empire Sponsoring Committee, the clunky name for a great group working to use “relational power” to improve the quality of life in our corner of the world.

Historically, the institutional-based organizing movement has been predominantly Christian. It can be more effective in claiming moral authority if it contains more diverse religious groups. Having Unitarian Universalists on board is helpful because it signals to non-Christian congregations that they are welcome, as well. It is not unusual to see a UU congregation join, and then a Jewish synagogue, an Islamic mosque, or occasionally both.

The benefits from participating in this type of community organizing are more and deeper relationships among congregants and also with members of other religious traditions; leadership development; increased lay leader involvement in congregational work and public action; a heightened public profile for the congregation within the community; more effective social

justice work; enriching multifaith, multiclass, and multiracial relationships; and the potential for bringing new people into the congregation in a new way.

Is participation in institution-based community organizing a means to the end of becoming a multiclass, multiracial, multicultural congregation? That is a question worth discussing. For me, community organizing is not intended as a means to that end, though that end would be most welcome. For me, the end, the point, the purpose of community organizing is a redistribution of power so that the gulf between the relatively powerful and the relatively powerless is a smaller, more bridgeable gulf. For me, community organizing is about leadership development because the world cannot have too many leaders. By leader, I don't mean egomaniac dictators. I mean healthy, self-aware, open hearted critical thinkers who know that while they are not in control of what happens in life, they must influence what happens.

May we grow into healthy, self-aware open hearted critical thinkers. May we give up on control and take up influence in the service of life and its flourishing. May it be so!