

Passion to Action

3 October 2010

Given by co-chairs

Debbie Bailly

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Debbie Bailly:

Being with several thousand UUs at our General Assembly was an exciting, energizing, joyful, informative, and thought-provoking experience. Oh, and exhausting at times too. I'm going to focus on the theme that gave me tremendous inspiration, and that is the idea of Social Justice as a congregational mission, a collective effort throughout the church, not just an individual effort or the responsibility of a committee of 5 or 6. First some background.

There are several means by which the UUA develops and articulates UU policies & religious principles. And by the way, we are the UUA. Our 5<sup>th</sup> Principle affirms & promotes the right of conscience & the use of the democratic process. In keeping with this, our denomination arrives at consensus on various social issues by a democratically agreed upon process called the Social Witness Process, named because we bear witness to social inequity. This process is facilitated by the Commission on Social Witness & periodically generates a Statement of Conscience, which results from study & action on a Congregational Study Issue selected at GA.

UUA by-laws state that the purpose of the Study Issue process is to provide congregations "with an opportunity to mobilize energy, ideas, & resources around a common issue. The end result will be a deeper understanding of our religious position on the issue, a clear statement of UUA policy as expressed in a Statement of Conscience, and a greater capacity for the congregations to take effective action." This is a 4-year process, beginning with congregations or other UU groups sending proposals to the Commission on Social Witness, after which all congregations have an opportunity to vote on them (which we have never done, but we can). The top 5 are voted on at GA. Then for the next 2 years congregations learn about the topic, educate their communities, and take direct action. In the 4<sup>th</sup> year a Statement of Conscience is drafted and voted on at GA. This year the process culminated in a Statement of Conscience on Creating Peace. Immigration as a Moral Issue was chosen as the study issue for the next 2 years.

Jacqui Lee:

Wait a minute! That's not the whole story! It didn't happen quite like that this time. Here's what actually happened.

It was five years ago, not four, that UU Churches submitted proposals for new Study/Action Issues, and the top five were submitted to the General Assembly. That's the year the Peace study was chosen. For the next two years, congregations around the country studied this topic with UUA Resource Guides, then sent their comments on the subject to the Commission on Social Witness, who prepared a draft Statement of Conscience, which everyone had the chance to critique over the next year.

In the 4<sup>th</sup> year, UU Churches voted to approve putting the draft Statement of Conscience on Peacemaking on the Agenda of the 2009 General Assembly. That's the statement I mailed out in June of 09, just before I went to GA for the first time. Many of you responded with your thoughtful opinions, and I proudly took them to Salt Lake City, intending to represent you.

At the Plenary for discussion of the Statement of Conscience, there were well over a thousand people ready to focus on this one issue. It was amazing! I never had to walk up to the front of the room and stand at the mike to tell them all what you thought, because there were others who thought the same things, and they spoke eloquently for us. Whew! There were also many more opinions shared, and there were so many facets to this issue, so many perspectives, so many concerns in this vast, well-researched work that had been missed – that had not been considered. Before the Plenary there had been mini-sessions where folks who were passionate about the issue discussed the various points of contention, and they had prepared statements for amendments that were lucid, thoughtful, and concise. People would line up behind the pro and con mikes to debate a number of different amendments to the statement. This went on for four hours!

Finally we voted, and it was a very close vote. Usually we would just hold up our ballot cards, and the designated counters would do a quick visual count, but on this vote, it was so close that we had to be individually counted. It takes a long time to count a thousand plus votes, and your arm can get really tired!

The Peace Statement of Conscience was voted down in the end. Emotions had run high, though speakers were always respectful. One person came up to the mike after the defeat and demanded a recount – she was clearly very upset. She just couldn't believe that after all that work, we had failed. That was one of those moments when I understood what incredible heart and skill is involved in moderating a crowd of that size. Gini Courter, who has been the moderator of General Assembly for a while now, refused the recount. Then she asked to see the ballots of all the people who were deeply disappointed, even hurt, by the failure of the Statement of Conscience on Peace. Many ballots were in the air. She asked us all to look around, recognize our fellow committed UU's, and comfort them. With one sentence, she reminded us that we're in this together, that we all voted our conscience, and that we stand on the side of love. It was a moment I will never forget. The animosity in the room just dissolved into love and respect.

Next, a delegation came to the mike to expressly request that the Statement of Conscience be redrafted and brought back to GA again in 2010. This is highly unusual, but everyone wanted a Peace Statement, just not with the particular flaws that many felt would have misrepresented our principles.

So, that's what led up to this year, when we discussed and debated amendments and the SOC itself, for another four hours, until we finally came up with a SOC on Peace-Making that we could be proud of.

So, do you want to hear it? I'll only read the six main points, or we'd be here all day. Following those points is a section grounding us in Historical Context and UU Theological Principles, then the Calls to Action.

There will be copies of this Statement out front after the service for anyone who wants to read the whole document. I promise you – it's a good read!

### Creating Peace

#### 2010 Statement of Conscience

We believe all people share a moral responsibility to create peace. Mindful of both our rich heritage and our past failures to prevent war, and enriched by our present diversity of experience and perspective, we commit ourselves to a radically inclusive and transformative approach to peace.

1. Our commitment to creating peace calls us to the work of peacebuilding, peacemaking, and peacekeeping.

Peacebuilding is the creation and support of institutions and structures that address the roots of conflict, including economic exploitation, political marginalization, the violation of human rights, and a lack of accountability to law.

Peacemaking is the negotiation of equitable and sustainable peace agreements, mediation between hostile parties, and post-conflict rebuilding and reconciliation.

Peacekeeping is early intervention to prevent war, stop genocide, and monitor ceasefires. Peacekeeping creates the space for diplomatic efforts, humanitarian aid, and nonviolent conflict prevention through the protection of civilians and the disarmament and separation of those involved in violent conflict.

2. We advocate a culture of peace through a transformation of public policies, religious consciousness, and individual lifestyles. At the heart of this transformation is the readiness to honor the truths of multiple voices from a theology of covenant, grounded in love.
3. We all agree that our initial response to conflict should be the use of nonviolent methods. Yet, we bear witness to the right of individuals and nations to defend themselves, and acknowledge our responsibility to be in solidarity with others in countering aggression. Many of us believe force is sometimes necessary as a last resort, while others of us believe in the consistent practice of nonviolence.
4. We repudiate aggressive and preventive wars, the disproportionate use of force, covert wars, and targeting that includes a high risk to civilians. We support international efforts to curtail the vast world trade in armaments and call for nuclear disarmament and abolition of other weapons of mass destruction. We repudiate unilateral interventions and extended military occupations as dangerous new forms of imperialism. In an interdependent world, true peace requires the cooperation of all nations and peoples.
5. For Unitarian Universalists, the exercise of individual conscience is holy work. Conscientious discernment leads us to engage in the creation of peace in different ways. We affirm a range of individual choices, including military service and conscientious

objection (whether to all wars or particular wars), as fully compatible with Unitarian Universalism. For those among us who make a formal commitment to military service, we will honor their commitment, welcome them home, and offer pastoral support. For those among us who make a formal commitment as conscientious objectors, we will offer documented certification, honor their commitment, and offer pastoral support.

6. Our faith calls us to create peace, yet we confess that we have not done all we could to prevent the spread of armed conflict throughout the world. At times we have lacked the courage to speak and act against violence and injustice; at times we have lacked the creativity to speak and act in constructive ways; at times we have condemned the violence of others without acknowledging our own complicity in violence. We affirm a responsibility to speak truth to power, especially when unjust power is exercised by our own nation. Too often we have allowed our disagreements to distract us from all that we can do together. This Statement of Conscience challenges individual Unitarian Universalists, as well as our congregations and Association, to engage with more depth, persistence, and creativity in the complex task of creating peace.

Debbie Bailly:

What does all this mean for us, the UU Church of Belfast? Many individuals here give of their time & money to further social and environmental justice in the world. And several committees focus on social & environmental issues – the Welcoming Cmte, Green Sanctuary, & Social Justice. Last year the study issue chosen at GA was Ethical Eating, which Green Sanctuary is now weaving into the fabric of church life in a variety of ways – thru adult & children's RE, services, & partnering in the community.

Let me present an approach to social justice, called an All Church Project – a common commitment to a common focus, something like what Green Sanctuary is doing. In his book *Moving on from Church Folly Lane*, UU minister Robert Latham suggests there are 2 major ways that congregations approach social action – with a shotgun or with a rifle. Jacqui suggested I use a non-violent gardening metaphor, especially given the topic of creating peace we're addressing, but. . . this one works better. My apologies. The multiple pellets of a shotgun blast represent the resources (money, time, energy) dispersed in a wide pattern toward a variety

of concerns. This approach addresses the individual concerns of a few, but generally has little long-term impact due to the wide dispersal of resources among several social issues. The single bullet of the rifle concentrates resources on a single social issue, and because of the concentrated power being expended at one target, it has more likelihood of having a long-term effect. “While the shotgun approach feeds the spirit of individualism and acknowledges variety, the rifle approach feeds the spirit of community and acknowledges commonality.” Which of these approaches might we want to pursue?

Latham describes several principles governing religious institutions. One is that “The most profound form of community is created by a common commitment to a noble & transcendent purpose.” This moves beyond the notion of an insular community for its own sake, and instead suggests community in which individuals bond together for a wider cause, a noble purpose. He also says, “The greatest power to create social change derives from a common commitment to a common focus.” Think of the potential power of hundreds of congregations in the US & elsewhere joining together in a common cause – it helps define who UUs are. The last line of our mission statement reads “Together, we will promote justice and respect for life in our local community and beyond.” How might we join in a collective effort to further the ideals of our mission?

Jacqui spoke of the concepts embodied in the Peace-making Statement of Conscience. There are also suggested Calls to Action, based on the premise that creating peace calls for action at all levels of human interaction. I’ll read just a few.

#### Creating Peace in Our World

- \* supporting the UU-United Nations Office in implementing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights;
- \* supporting the UU Service Committee in ending torture and addressing institutional violence; and
- \* influencing public policy decisions made by Congress and the Administration.

#### Creating Peace in Our Society

- \* supporting UUA initiatives aimed at eradicating all forms of cultural, political, and economic oppression;

- \* supporting UU Ministry for Earth in advocating lifestyles and policies that promote harmony with our natural environment.

### Creating Peace in Our Congregations

through worship, religious education, and social action by:

- \* developing Peace Teams to provide training in compassionate communication and conflict resolution;
- \* developing and honoring behavioral covenants in all aspects of congregational life;
- \* becoming a resource for creating peace within our communities in cooperation with other faith traditions and community organizations;

### Creating Peace in Our Relationships

As individuals we covenant to:

- \* learn and practice the skills of compassionate communication; and
- \* adopt lifestyle changes that reflect reverence for the interdependent web of all existence.

### Creating Peace within Ourselves

We recognize that peace begins with each person and covenant to:

- \* develop spiritual practices that cultivate inner peace & are the foundation to wholeness, forgiveness, and reconciliation; and
- \* practice loving-kindness and compassion toward ourselves.

In reverence for all life, we covenant to practice peace at all levels of human interaction.

There's a wealth of information from the UUA, affiliated organizations, & activist congregations about hundreds of specific actions that have been taken for Creating Peace. The UU Peace Ministry Network is a grassroots volunteer organization that's an outgrowth of the Creating Peace Study Issue. They act as facilitator, clearinghouse, & archive in identifying resources, disseminating information, and evaluating methods to create a culture of peace on all levels. One valuable program they offer is based on the models of Green Sanctuary & Welcoming Congregations, in which thru a series of actions, a congregation can be certified as a Peace Advocate Congregation, declaring to the world their commitment to seek peace at all levels. What if we were known in the community as, "The UUs?, oh, they're the peace makers."

In our current transition process of seeking a settled minister, we're defining who we are as the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast. What is our unique identity? We spent time last winter trying to come up with a pithy statement describing who we are, but didn't come to any conclusion. We have the opportunity to articulate anew our distinct religious identity, our mission, describing why we exist. Where are we going? What is our business in the world? We need to define our ministry, which is everything a congregation does to fulfill its mission. How will we get there? How will we accomplish this business? Ask yourselves, "Are we a comfortable social club for liberals or are we a congregation that impacts its social environment through its ministry presence?" What is the ideal and what is the reality?

The Dalai Lama said, "It is not enough to be compassionate. You must act." We have wonderful, compassionate, activist individuals in this church. How can we also act in concert with one another to unleash the potential power to effect change for a noble purpose? Are we interested in an All Church Project, one chosen by the congregation that over time can be integrated into many aspects of our church - Sunday services, children's RE, youth programs, adult religious exploration, leading to education & direct action in the greater community? The minister, Church Council, and Program Council can help implement such, but it needs to be a cause that the church as a whole supports and has a passion for. Is there some issue that will stir our passion to action? You all have a voice in this. Let the discussion begin. Blessed be.

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