

Living Our Values in the World

“The good news is that we are in control of what we do with our daily living. If we, each one of us, represent a missing remnant in the fabric of our collective future—then together we can lean into a possibility that we have yet to fully experience in human history. A collective wholeness. An unassailable good. That is the kind of salvation I am here to fight for in the small moments of every single day.”

—Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt, “The Missing Remnant”

“Protest is telling the truth in public. Sometimes protest is telling the truth to a public that isn’t quite ready to hear it. Protest is, in its own way, a storytelling. We use our bodies, our words, our art, and our sounds both to tell the truth about the pain that we endure and to demand the justice that we know is possible. It is meant to build and to force a response.”

—DeRay Mckesson, *On the Other Side of Freedom*

Background and Trends

The work of becoming more equitable, inclusive, and diverse within our congregations is justice work. If we cannot do this well, we cannot be effective as justice partners.

A frequent criticism of anti-oppression and hospitality work is that people are tired of us focusing internally, “navel-gazing,” rather than working on issues in the world. Yet greater awareness of the practices within our own institutions is complementary work to our justice. We cannot do accountable justice work if we are not able to remain in good relationship with those most affected by the conditions of injustice.

One of the principles for being a more accountable community is the ability to think in inclusive ways that are also nonbinary (i.e., work to make our own institutions more just and work to aid others). If we fail to address our own injustices, we are not only hypocritical, but we are probably working out of an outdated, paternalistic model of “helping others” rather than acting out of the recognition that our lives are interdependent with those of our neighbors.

Consider these comments from our research:

- “I was very disappointed that there was no mention of Martin L. King, Jr. on MLK Sunday. There is political turmoil and a resistance movement going on, but there is no mention of it. There is a huge disconnect between what is going on in the world and what is said in the pulpit. I know my concern for what is going on in the world is much more personal than my fellow white UUs’, yet we need everyone’s concern and voice in this fight.”
- “We need embodied theology. If we don’t ground ourselves in the real work we can’t embrace the fact that it impacts real lives; my people are dying. If we are not saving the earth and our bodies, then we are not being saved. We need a salvation theology. A ‘They-ology.’ We need a world where our bodies matter. That is real, not imagination.”
- “We need to articulate a theology of people. Our social justice work is a theological response to evil. This allows us to leave it outside our doors. When we need to do this work on the inside, it is harder because we left it outside.”

We frequently heard that we should be focusing on climate change rather than antiracism work. This is another false binary in the face of extensive research that climate change is already

affecting Black/Indigenous/people of color communities more quickly than it is affecting other communities. [21]

And yet, as one person submitting testimony said,

I'm hoping that we can build a group of white people teaching other white people and do it in a way that is sustainable so that this isn't a passing fad. So that our congregation understands that what we do inside our walls is just as important as the protests that we go to outside.

Our internal work as people of faith is to become more inclusive, equitable, and diverse while our external work is to be accountable to those most affected by injustice. For us to be able to be good, accountable partners, we must do both. As Vann R. Newkirk II put it recently in a video published by *The Atlantic*, issues of the environment and climate change are rapidly becoming the new Jim Crow. [22]

At their heart, issues around climate change are issues of resource distribution, and any issues of resource distribution tend to disproportionately affect Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color. Our ability to work together and to cooperate in ways necessary to radically change our interaction with the environment and our economy will be dependent upon our ability to recognize that our future and survival are bound together.

By heeding the knowledge of those impacted “first and worst” by climate change and other justice issues, we can better grasp the problems, and answers, by the root. Not only are Indigenous cultures more likely to retain knowledge on how to coexist with the ecosystem that mainstream white culture has divorced itself from, but they've developed effective means of resilience by resisting oppression and genocide.

Finally, new generations are interested in being part of organizations that are making a difference. [23] An important recognition in today's justice landscape is that while we may need to do restoration work to ameliorate the impact of inequitable distribution of resources, truly just and long-term justice work cannot be based in a charitable model that assumes that people of privilege have more knowledge of what is needed than those who have faced limited economic and social opportunities because of discrimination within organizations, communities, and systems. [24]

Environmental Justice

It has long been understood that unpopular environmental decisions often follow the “path of least resistance,” but we should expand that assertion to include the path of structured or institutional discrimination. To say that the decisions follow the path of least resistance takes the focus off of the systemic nature of oppression; specifically, who gets to make decisions. There are many examples of communities of color and low-income communities that are at risk due to pollution from the placement of industrial sites, environmental waste disposal, resource retrieval or use, and air and water pollution. These communities often bear the negative historical impact of racial and ethnic segregation, income inequality, and limited access to resources and policy makers.

—Paula Cole Jones, “The Formation of the Environmental Justice Movement”

We can come to know the world as paradise when our hearts and souls are reborn through the arduous and tender task of living rightly with one another and the earth.

—Dr. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rev. Dr. Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise*

The intertwined devastation of the Earth and dehumanizing living conditions for the most vulnerable people, often women, children, and peoples of color, are morally and aesthetically ugly. Both justice and beauty are violated when what is inherently valuable is devalued, defaced, or destroyed.

— Dr. Alison Downie, “A Spirituality of Openness”

Our theology tells us to choose faith and hope and deep, abiding love over fear—to act from the knowledge that we will save what is of great worth and sacredness to us. Let us refuse to be made immobile by fear and despair, instead choosing one more faithful action in every moment.

— Rev. Dr. Adam Robersmith, “Cherishing Our World”

Faith-rooted solidarity is not transactional. It might be described as universal relational because its adherents say, “I know that my well-being is totally and irrevocably tied up with yours. My liberation is dependent on yours.”

—Pam Sparr, “Transforming Unitarian Universalist Culture”

Four Levels of Oppression: Analysis and Change Model, from VISIONS, Inc.

In thinking about creating change, identifying and addressing the following are needed:

- Personal Level: What are the reported attitudes, beliefs, values, and feelings about various aspects of inclusion and equity? Of these, which ones support the desired goals within the organization, and which ones serve as barriers?
- Interpersonal Level: How are people behaving toward each other on a variety of dimensions at the UUA? How do different members in various roles experience the cultural climate of the organization? Again, what behaviors maintain or enhance an inclusive, open, and supportive environment and which create or reinforce barriers, particularly with regard to personal demographics and other cultural variables?
- Institutional Level: What are the ways that the UUA conducts its work? How do both formal and informal policies, practices, and organizational structures support the related goals of the organization, or not? What are the similarities and differences across, age, race/ethnicity, gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, role, length of service, and other variables?
- Cultural Level: What are the currently valued norms, customs, and “ways of being and acting right” endorsed by the UUA? How are these working and/ or not working for various members of the organization and its constituent community?

Recommendation

A liberatory faith will remember the mandate from our theological legacy: to privilege those most affected in our justice work, which should follow the voices of those most at risk.

Younger people who might be attracted to liberal religion want meaningful work as well as volunteer opportunities consistent with their values. [25] They are also more sensitive to the need to empower those most affected by the issues that we face and less likely to want to prescribe top-down solutions. This sort of accountable justice work requires the ability to be in authentic

relationships with others and, in an increasingly diverse world, this means relationships across difference.

Hands-on and experiential educational experiences are particularly effective for all ages. These should be seen as important destinations for youth groups, as important as heritage trips to Boston, since racial injustice is part of our common heritage and one that our theology particularly calls on us to address.

- **Action:** Study income inequality and racial history in areas served by Unitarian Universalist communities as well as the impacts of injustice on Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities.
- **Action:** Expand accountable service-learning and action-education trips to allow real-life contact with difference and a hands-on experience of inequalities as this kind of action learning reflects generational learning norms. Screen justice trips to ensure that they are not tourism but rather actual service-learning experiences with an action-reflection model that includes preparation in anti-oppression practices for every trip that will cross cultural barriers and boundaries. Encourage legacy trips such as the Living Legacy [26] tours and border trips.
- **Action:** Develop and apply antiracism and anti-oppression approaches for Unitarian Universalist justice organizations, including state advocacy networks. This will allow for accountable partnerships at the international, national, and state levels.
- **Action:** Consult with identity-based groups on justice issues that affect their demographics disproportionately. This will allow the UUA and other UU communities to be in accountable relationships with Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities. Ground accountability in organizations rather than individuals.

Recommendation

Through its regional structures, the UUA should promote education for those who would accompany and co-journey with Black, Indigenous, and people of color communities and their leaders and groups to ensure more competency in this area.

Allyship can be an important part of a more inclusive strategy, as was seen when more than five hundred Unitarian Universalist clergy joined the Oceti Sakowin camp and other Indigenous leaders to oppose the Dakota Access Pipeline. For those who were able to follow orders from the Indigenous leaders, it was a powerful experience. [27]

White justice leaders should recognize that their privilege can interfere with building authentic relationships and accountability. It can also be a powerful tool on behalf of those impacted. Yet for the strategies to be effective, accompaniment must be done in an accountable way. [28]

Unitarian Universalist congregations and other organizations must also become more skilled in being accountable to groups rather than to individuals. Too often, individual Unitarian Universalists who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color are asked to speak for an entire group of people in whose community they may not even be currently living. Authentic partnership can offset this.

- **Action:** Identify and spread partnerships that illustrate how to be allied across lines of race and class so that this can become a standard practice in Unitarian Universalist justice work.

Recommendation

Develop more theological resources to center our justice work in our faith and make clear the interconnection between action in the world and spiritual development.

Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color within Unitarian Universalism repeatedly point out that too often our justice work is not grounded in our faith and our theological mandates. A better articulation of this could help make the connection between justice making and anti-oppression work clear. Without this, too often work for justice has a “charitable” bent that can be patronizing and demeaning.

- **Action:** Articulate the faith basis for our justice work both within our communities and to the larger world. If we can engage our theological schools and other theologians in doing this, it will offset the tendency to approach justice efforts from a paternalistic basis.
- **Action:** Support theological schools that articulate a Unitarian Universalist liberation theology that calls for accountability and reparations, deepening our approaches to inequities.

Recommendation

As people of faith, our call to collective justice work, through accountable partnerships, is our salvific path.

Accountable partnerships are critical to actually fulfilling our theology and mission as Unitarian Universalists. Methods of approaching justice work that do not honor the full worth and dignity of those who are affected by societal inequities are not consistent with our beliefs and cannot be part of our justice work if it is to be sustainable.

In our justice work, we also need to be able to maintain relationships with, and privilege the voices of, those most affected. One of the reasons Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color find time in our congregations challenging is that they have seen the biased way we treat partners in the community, acting as if we are better than others.

- **Action:** Amplify models of effective and accountable partnerships with organizations led by people of color as well as other marginalized leaders as part of the Promising Practices Congregation recognition at each General Assembly.
- **Action:** Learn from and take note of the work of organizations led by Black people, Indigenous people, and people of color on the issue of climate change, as these communities have been (and are now) feeling the effects of these issues for generations.
- **Action:** Deepen and strengthen connections with Black, Indigenous, and people of color–led organizations in the area of immigration.
- **Action:** Encourage donations to organizations led by people of color and Indigenous people who are working on justice issues critical to our faith beliefs at the congregational level.

Take-aways

- Our theology calls on us to respect the worth and dignity of all, and that is the foundation for our justice work. That foundation, along with our understanding that we are bound together, means that we need to center justice work in accountable partnerships.

- The lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion should be applied to all areas of justice work—including climate change.
- Accountable partnerships are dependent on our ability to educate ourselves and avoid microaggressions, tokenizing, and other forms of modern racism.
- Accountability in our justice work should be to organizations with which we have partnerships. We should not ask individual members of a particular racial or ethnic group (or other group such as transgender individuals) to serve as our accountability partners.
- Anti-oppression work is a necessary foundation for justice work.