

UUJEC Economic Justice Spotlight

Unitarian Universalist Church West--Brookfield, WI

Ann Heidkamp, Social Action Council Chair for UUCW, shares their work:

Tell us about the economic justice work in your congregation.

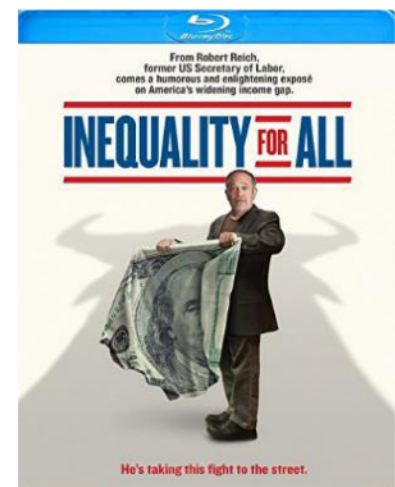
Our Social Action Council decided to use "Escalating Inequality: Our Call to Action" as our on-going social action theme for the foreseeable future (at least as long as the Study Action issue). We saw it as a way to show the systemic underpinning of the work we were already doing on various issues -

- Food collection and serving at The Guesthouse, a homeless shelter;
- Home building locally through Habitat for Humanity and in biennial trips to Nicaragua through Bridges to Community;
- Reducing mass incarceration through a statewide faith based organization, WISDOM;
- Engaging in community organizing in metro Milwaukee through membership in a grassroots organization, Common Ground;
- Participating in increasing the minimum wage through local organization, WI Jobs Now, and
- Participating in rallies and marches of the Coalition for Justice for Dontre Hamilton, an unarmed black man killed by a police officer.

To introduce the theme, our minister and social action team collaborated on a full Sunday worship service on Escalating Inequality. We began with a short video on growing wage inequality from Politizane and explained why we selected the theme and how it relates to our current social action projects. We reflected on statistics about the vast differences in race, education, and income between the city and the main suburbs of our members and did an interactive exercise related to the myth of bootstrapping oneself up the income ladder. The sermon was on the systemic nature of inequality, both economic and racial.

We provided everyone with a calendar of upcoming Escalating Inequality education and action events in the spring and fall, including a multi-generational poverty simulation called "Food for Today" lead by our local Hunger Task Force. There were opportunities to participate in actions around no public funding for the new NBA arena without equal investment in city neighborhoods by Common Ground. Participation was sought in Fight for \$15 rallies with low wage workers from WI Jobs Now.

A 10-mile bus trip was arranged with UUCW members and low wage workers from WI Jobs Now driving from our suburban church through working class and poverty stricken neighborhoods. We ended the trip reflecting together about the impact of low wages on all aspects of our lives. UUCW showed the "Inequality for All" film as a public event co-sponsored with Catholics for Peace and Justice.



We participated in WI Council of Churches “People of Faith United for Justice” lobbying day to advocate for reducing mass incarceration and for budget items that affected those in poverty. We also offered the Class Conscious: Class and Classism in UU Life course.

In late Fall of 2016, we used our Escalating Inequality theme to begin a deeper look at issues of racial injustice. We joined with the other 4 UU congregations in our metro area to begin a collaboration around Black Lives Matter, particularly in cooperation with the Coalition for Justice for Dontre Hamilton. Milwaukee is the most segregated metro area in the US and our racial divide underlies all of the other issues we are working on - wages, housing, incarceration.

In January, 2016, our UUCW congregation overwhelmingly passed a motion in support of Black Lives Matter and taking public stands to show our support. We had a banner blessing and public witness along our busy suburban street on 4-10-16 that received favorable coverage on 3 local TV stations. On April 30th, UU's provided the children's activities at the Coalition for Justice's Dontre Day on the second anniversary of his death. With the other congregations we are participating more visibly in local racial justice programs and actions and are offering a series of workshops on racial justice for our congregations to better examine our own white privilege and racism and to increase our ability to be effective white allies. Work on all the other issues continues, but with what we hope is to gain a deeper understanding of the way racism and economic inequality perpetuate the current systems - especially in our hyper-segregated city/metro area.



Photo from “Black Lives Matter to Wisconsin UU’s” Facebook page

How is the leadership of your congregation involved in your economic justice work?

Our ministers weave social action into almost every sermon and at least several times a year have worship services explicitly around topics related to Inequality. As described above we had a full service on our Escalating Inequality theme to introduce it to the whole congregation. The ministers have also spoken a number of times on racial inequality and how systemic forces keep it in place - and the need for action to oppose them. These messages have been well received by the congregation. The senior minister is also the staff person for the Social Action Council and plays an active role in it.

The Board is very open and receptive to social action initiatives. For example, for a number of years our funds have been ethically invested, they approved a Split the Plate program about 8 years ago, they approved membership in Common Ground, a grassroots community organization in our area, and they endorsed, beginning in 2004, the biennial trips our congregation takes to build houses in Nicaragua and allow for fundraising for that project. The impact of these trips on our congregation has been profound.

Since 2004 over 150 adults and youth have participated in the 10 day house building trips to Nicaragua (through an organization called Bridges to Community) and seen first-hand the poverty of a third world country. In the program they work side by side with the Nicaraguans in the villages where the houses are being built and reflect with them on issues of first world - third world justice. The members come back with a deeper understanding of their own privilege and want to take action - both on local social justice issues and in leadership in the church. As a result, the majority of Board members since 2004, have the Nicaragua experience and are much more willing to take bolder stands on social justice issues that come before the board than was previously the case.



UUCW members in Nicaragua Photo from UUCW website

In terms of the staff, the Religious Education Director has been a big proponent of building multi-generational social action in to the RE curriculum and has partnered with the Social Action Council on a number of projects, the most recent one being the poverty simulation "Food for Today" which was about the impact of low income and food deserts on adequate diets for poor people. She has also promoted the educational events related to our Escalating Inequality program through the Adult Religious Ed programs and takes care of the registration and logistics for us. This included our North Ave. bus tour and Class Conscious programs. She usually attends our Social Action Council meetings.

How has economic justice become a sustainable part of your congregational life?

By introducing Escalating Inequality as a multi-year theme that underpins all our social action work, we have helped the congregation understand the need to examine the systemic nature of the social problems we are trying to address. It also helps the congregation understand that solving social issues is not fast and requires dedicated effort over years.

In our Escalating Inequality work, we have emphasized the need to work with partners and so for every issue we want to work on we have consciously sought out community groups that share our values that are already organizing around the issue. This approach has allowed us to have groups of members actively engaged in particular issues they care most about and bringing their experience and learning back to the congregation without us as a congregation having to organize the work ourselves. This is a much more sustainable model than trying to figure out ourselves how to work for change around an issue of concern.

In the late 1990's our church established a Social Action Endowment fund, that produces about \$3000 a year in interest that the Social Action Council can decide on how to use to further the church's social action mission. Originally the money was mostly used for small grants to various social service projects that applied for help. Since we now have the Split the Plate program that funds a different social justice organization each month, the Social Action Council changed the policies of the fund to allow for funding of projects that help engage the congregation in social justice education and action. So recently we have used

the fund to help pay our dues to Common Ground; to pay for the bus and lunch expenses related to the North Ave. tour with WI Jobs Now; to cover the costs of the Black Lives Matter banner and to support a series of Poverty Summits (listening sessions about the concerns of poor people) put on around the state by the WISDOM organization. Having this fund definitely helps sustain our Escalating Inequality work now and into the future.

What results or changes have you noticed because of your activity?

Our social action work has changed in recent years from a focus on social service and education to a focus on service, education, advocacy, organizing, and witness. The Social Action Council had been moving in this direction since about 2012 as we utilized UUA resources about effective social action to do more strategic planning and as the cumulative effect of ministerial messages and a critical mass of members having the Nicaragua experience began to coalesce.

However, I would say that it was the Escalating Inequality Study Action issue that helped us really bring this vision of social action to a reality. Members could recognize in the Escalating Inequality theme how our own middle class lifestyle is threatened by the existing system of economic and racial inequality - and could also see how our own privilege is sustaining those systems. As a result of offering both targeted educational programs along with a variety of options of working for specific systemic changes with partner organizations more members are engaged in work for economic and racial justice. This is creating an important feedback loop - the more members engaged, the more members encourage others to get engaged, the more experience and understanding in the congregation results in a willingness by the congregation to take bolder steps.



UUCW Members working with Habitat for Humanity Photo from UUCW Website

And on it goes...

Additional Resources:

To learn more about UUCW, contact Social Action Council Chair Ann Heidkamp at heidkama@wi.rr.com

UUCW Website <http://uucw.org>

UUCW Nicaragua Brigade Brochure

http://uucw.org/files/2016-Nica-Brochure_2-pg_Rev_2015_11_15_v9.pdf

UUCW Escalating Inequality Presentation

http://uujec.com/Portals/0/PDFs/MidAmerica_Assembly_Escalating_Inequality_UUCW.pdf

Black Lives Matter to Wisconsin UU's Facebook page:

<https://www.facebook.com/Black-Lives-Matter-to-Wisconsin-UUs-104090156617591/>

"Class and Classism in UU Life" course <http://www.uufames.org/class-conscious>

"Food for Today" Educational Presentations

<https://www.hungertaskforce.org/learn-about-hunger/educational-presentations/>

Politizane Wealth Inequality in America <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsm>