

UUJEC Economic Justice Spotlight

Unitarian Universalist Society of Schenectady--Schenectady, New York

Robin Schnell, Chair of the UUSS Social Action Council shares their efforts with UUJEC.

Please tell us about the economic justice work in your congregation.

In April of 2015, our congregation voted to get involved in Economic Justice via a project that could involve all ages, connect us to the wider community, work toward solutions to poverty and educate ourselves. To that end, we joined Family Promise, a nationwide organization that houses homeless families with congregations for a week at a time. Congregants donated bedding, signed up to prepare meals, set up and take down bedrooms in our religious ed. building, stay overnight while the families were with us, and serve as task coordinators. Children have made welcome signs and have played with the guest children. Guests have come to our services and to a folk concert held in our Great Hall.



In order to better educate ourselves, we offered scholarships to Bridges out of Poverty training. Seven people did the training and we will offer the scholarships again when the program is offered. A small



Photo from UUSS webpage

handful of us have gone to the capital to advocate with legislators for raising the wage to \$15, and have rallied in front of fast food restaurants and city hall for this. A coffee discussion drew about thirty congregation members to discuss this issue. Our most recent activity has been to donate books to a local low-income elementary school so that each child can take home books of their very own at the end of the school year. On an ongoing basis, we collect diapers and personal care products for the local food pantry, homeless shelters and people reentering after incarceration. For many years, congregation members have worked in soup kitchens and a summer lunch program for kids. We

have had strong participation and continue to look for new ways to increase our understanding and activism. For the fall, we want to better understand privilege and its effect on society and poverty.

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

Turning our religious ed. building into a dormitory for three separate weeks so far has required the support of our minister, RE director, and our board. We are all proud of the success of this very ambitious project and look forward to hosting a meeting of the volunteer coordinators from participating congregations. One of the other things our congregation does is donate one or two collection plates a month to a non-profit. Social Action tries to tie the collection to the sermon theme, the board must approve all of the organizations. Our minister, Rev. Margret O'Neill, has been enormously helpful with encouragement and suggestions.



Photo from USS Facebook page

How have you made economic justice activity a sustainable part of your congregational life?

We witnessed an uptick in collections whenever the plate gets donated to organizations, which is a sign of congregational support. It's an established part of our services that makes us feel good. Family Promise, too, is something that we're proud of. Because the organization had just established a chapter in our area when we joined, we had to do our three weeks of hosting very close together, which caused us to see some volunteer burnout. Fortunately, we could enlist local college students and members of other congregations to fill some gaps, which actually fit with our mission to increase our involvement with the wider community.



Our collection bins often overflow as children grow out of a diaper size or members pick up extra toothpaste or sundries for the bins. I don't foresee a change there. Our sign-up sheets for the soup kitchen or the summer lunch program get filled in. In the area of international economic justice, our congregation joined Jubilee last year. This organization that fights for debt relief, asks that we take up one collection for them each year, and preach a sermon. We also participate in Justice Sunday each year with a collection for UUSC.

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

Having the umbrella of economic justice as a guide for our activities has broadened our thinking about what the roots of economic injustice are. Some of us went to a Black Lives Matter meeting. In the past, I think we would have thought about justice, but not made the tie to economic justice. Our congregation is predominantly white, middle class and well educated—white privilege is strongly in evidence. We hope that by understanding how that has affected our lives, we will be better advocates for systemic change. Joining Family Promise has energized the volunteer spirit in us. At least one member who hadn't been attending services lately came back to volunteer for this project, and new members are joining in.

Article developed in collaboration between UUJEC Administrator Rachel Bennett Steury and UUSS Social Action Chair Robin Schnell. To reach UUSS, please contact Robin at r.hary.schnell@gmail.com.

Additional Resources:

UUSS Webpage: <http://uuschenectady.org/justice/social-justice/>

UUSS Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/UUSSchenectady>

UUSS Twitter page: <https://twitter.com/uusschenectady>

Family Promise Organization: <http://familypromise.org/>

Bridges Out of Poverty: <http://www.ahaprocess.com/solutions/community/>

Jubilee: <http://www.jubileeusa.org/>

UUSC Justice Sunday: <http://www.uusc.org/justice-sunday-2017/>