

What Are We Even Trying To Do?

A Sermon by Rev. Rob Keithan featuring Ruth Goins

Delivered at All Souls Church Unitarian, Washington, DC, on March 13, 2022

CALL TO WORSHIP

In the words of Rev. William F. Schulz, a former President of the Unitarian Universalist Association and later Amnesty International USA:

Come into this place of peace, and let its silence heal your spirit.
Come into this place of memory, and let its history warm your soul.
Come into this place of prophecy and power, and let its vision change your heart.

Come, let us worship together.

READING

Our reading comes from an article entitled "[What is the Mission of Missions?](#)" by a professional church consultant and author named Dan Hotchkiss. In it, he's talking about why churches SAY they do social justice work, and how he thinks that answer needs to shift. He writes:

Why do they do it? In budgeting and planning for this work, most congregations say their mission is to help others. That's a good answer. For many congregations, though, a better answer is to say the purpose of social ministry is instead to change the lives of its own members.

The mission of a hospital is to heal the sick. I am suggesting that for many congregations, a better analogy would be a medical school, whose mission is to train doctors and nurses. Medical schools (and their associated teaching hospitals) treat lots of patients; you can't train doctors without giving them a chance to practice. The purpose of the medical professions is to heal. The purpose of the school, though, is not to heal but to create healers.

SERMON

Hello All Souls! It's nice to be back here. My entire family got COVID via our daughters' school, and the sequencing of when we each tested positive meant that we had to be quarantined at home for two entire weeks. Thankfully our cases were relatively mild, and everyone is fully recovered. It turns out that even a wide variety of scientifically proven safety protocols are still no match for the disease-spreading power of a preschool classroom.

In the description for today's service, I set up some key questions about what we're trying to do in our social justice ministries. It starts with a basic recognition, which is that All Souls, and Unitarian Universalists and UU congregations generally, have done a great deal over the years to promote justice locally, nationally, and even internationally. Our bottom line is clear—we want to have a positive impact. Social justice is one of the things our congregations are most known for in our communities, and it's consistently at or near the top of the list for why people get interested in joining.

Beyond this desire to make an impact, however, there are many choices about how to focus our limited time, energy, and resources. And, in particular, what we can do to ensure that our work is rewarding, effective and—perhaps most importantly—sustainable.

Let me offer three perspectives to get this conversation going.

The first is about our overall calling right now, as a Unitarian Universalist religious community. It's no understatement to say that we are at an absolutely critical time in history. This is true for the world in general, and I expect that we are all gravely concerned with what's happening in Ukraine. Today's offering is dedicated to the UU Service Committee's Relief Efforts there.

For my words today, I'm thinking especially about the United States. As just a little personal and historical context, I'm from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I was raised in the Unitarian Church of Harrisburg and my parents are still active members there. As a kid, I took many trips to the Gettysburg battlefield. There's a physical place there, on Cemetery ridge, that is called the high-water mark of the Confederacy. It marks the farthest Northern point reached by Confederate forces during Pickett's Charge on July 3, 1863.

Although the current national struggle won't be marked with a physical location, I think it's fair to wonder where the high watermark of the current confederacy, ie the latest incarnation of colonialism and white supremacy, will be. People committed to preserving racism, sexism, and Christian extremism at any cost—including the cost of our democracy itself—are fighting as hard as they can, with considerable success. Personally, I would love to think that Trump Presidency's was the high watermark, that it couldn't possibly get that worse again. But both my intellect and my gut caution me not to rest idly in that hope. With the conservative majority on the Supreme Court, the censorship of teaching actual facts and history related to racism, the obsession with making abortion illegal, and so much more, it is not a time for anyone with progressive, liberal, or even moderate values to rest. Too much hangs in the balance.

Our religious ancestors set themselves apart by choosing to worship a God of love rather than a God of judgment. By affirming the value and worth of all people, not the depravity of all people. Were they always on the side of justice? Of course not! But some of our forebears were passionate leaders in the fight against slavery, in the struggle for women's suffrage, in the civil rights movement, and the work for LGBT equality. And now, we are called to both (1) build on that positive legacy, and, (2) be honest and humble about the ways we have fallen short, and in

particular the ways we have failed to address racism within our congregations and within ourselves.

I believe that the challenge of our time, the calling of our time, is to build equitable, multicultural congregations and an equitable, multicultural society. We need to show up with the information we have now, both about what's wrong AND about how to work for solutions in ways that don't just replicate white supremacy culture and power differentials but rather create new collaborations and approaches that center and support leadership from the margins.

So what does that look like? Here's the second perspective I want to offer. My sense is that, in a given year, perhaps 20-30% of people in an average UU congregation will participate in at least one action of the social justice ministry. The number of people who are consistently active, meaning that they are a regular and contributing member of an action group, is probably less than 10% of the congregation.

This means that the vast majority of congregants—perhaps 70-90%--are only going to impact justice *outside* of the congregation. The congregation can have a much larger impact on justice overall if it can help develop the knowledge, skills, commitment, and courage of this group.

This brings me to the third observation, which you already heard in the reading. Dan Hotchkiss suggests that we view ourselves more like a medical school, where our purpose is “not to heal but to create healers.”

So where do we go with this? What are we even trying to do? I think Hotchkiss makes a good point, but it's not an either/or. It's both/and. The church should ground and mobilize people for action in their individual spheres, AND it should take actions as an institution.

For most UU congregations, including All Souls, implementing the above conclusions requires, or at least invites, some shifts in approach. When we acknowledge that most of our folks are doing their justice work (if they're do it at all) somewhere outside of the congregation, it begs an obvious question: how are we preparing, inspiring, and supporting people do that? If that hasn't been a clear goal previously, what does it look like to make it a clear goal? How can the congregation help train people to be healers in their spheres of influence beyond the congregation?

At All Souls, I'm getting more and more excited at the prospect of having a core curriculum for spiritually grounded, counter-oppressive activism and leadership. Rather than one-off classes and trainings, we would offer some of the same trainings again and again, year after year, so that every new person who connects to our congregation and every new leader has access to the same guidance. The more folks have a shared experience, frame of reference, and language, the more progress we can make on both internal and external transformation.

Speaking of transformation, I have some specific news to share about All Souls' internal work in this arena. For people new to Unitarian Universalism or All Souls, there are seven principles agreed to by congregations as part of joining the Unitarian Universalist Association. A growing number of congregations are adopting another, which All Souls did in December 2017. In this 8th Principle, All Souls has committed to:

... journeying towards spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.

In April 2018, our Board of Trustees established an ad hoc committee called the Transformation Team to advise and assist the Board on potential staffing, accountability, and governance changes related to implementing the 8th Principle. This group was intentionally designed to be time-limited, with dissolution happening by a decision of the Board based on a recommendation from the team.

In the last few months of 2021, leaders of the Transformation Team and Board held a series of meetings and mutually agreed that the time for dissolution had come. The Board had adopted a large number of policy changes recommended by the Team, and the church's transformation work was shifting more into the operational level, which is carried out by staff, rather than the policy level, which is for the Board and Board committees.

Additionally, the conversations identified that it would make sense for the 8th Principle Task Force to also dissolve. That group started in large part to advocate for the adoption of the 8th Principle, and they did an enormous amount of work with the Transformation Team. But the 8th Principle Task Force leaders agreed that it made sense to end it as well and consolidate the work in a single new entity going forward.

The new group will perform three types of work:

- Practical, meaning education, resourcing, and coaching to implement the 8th Principle in the ministries and operations of the church;
- Advisory, which means helping the Executive Team, Board, and other groups think through the transformation needs of the church; and finally
- Strategic, which means helping church groups and people identify what similar transformation activities are happening to help create synergy and avoid redundancy.

The tentative name is the 8th Principle Advisory Team, or simply: the 8 Team. The exact size and composition is yet to be determined. Our early tasks will be highlighting and celebrating the incredible work of the Transformation Team and 8th Principle Task Force, and identifying the best ways to carry that forward. If you are interested in serving, please email me (rkeithan@allsouls.ws). This news will also go out in an all-church email tomorrow.

In the year of our Bicentennial, I think it's fitting that we are launching a new, ongoing group dedicated to implementation of the 8th Principle. Taking this work to the next level requires new ways of doing things.

In addition to this internal training, to create healers, I do still believe that it's imperative for us to take actions as a congregation. There are many reasons for this, but here's my take on the most simple and important one: we have an imperative to act as an institution because as an institution we have the power to make a real difference. With our words, with our labor, with our money, with our buildings, sometimes with our out-front leadership and sometimes with behind-the-scenes solidarity, Unitarian Universalist congregations can absolutely be forces for justice and liberation in our communities.

I want to lift up two ways that All Souls does this, and invite everyone to join in a simple and yet impactful upcoming action.

The first is through our Beckner Advancement Fund. To say more, I'm thrilled to introduce our incredible Beckner Fund Program Officer, Ruth Goins. Ruth joined the All Souls staff in this capacity in December 2020, and works 10 hours a week to help administer both external and internal grants. Take it away Ruth!

RUTH'S TEXT:

Happy Sunday everyone. Thank you for the privilege of standing in this historic sanctuary to speak with all of you for a bit, those within these walls and those joining virtually. My title is program officer for the Beckner Advancement Fund. When trying to describe that role for people out in the world I typically say that I serve as a bridge for the Beckner Fund Committee's relationship with the nonprofit social justice community in the District and vice versa.

For quite some time – certainly preceding my arrival – Beckner Committee members have been talking about their desire to share their work more directly with the congregation. My few minutes here this morning are the beginning of that. Periodically, we intend to pass the mic to some of the groups Beckner has supported so they can share with all of us what they're doing to advance social justice in this city.

First a little history.

The Beckner Fund wasn't always the Beckner Fund – because Earl and Meta Beckner, who were active members at All Souls, wished to make the gift anonymously. It came in the form of real estate investments originally made as retirement protection for the couple because Earl Beckner's status as a diabetic made him ineligible for a federal government pension. The anonymous gift was announced to the congregation in 1974 and the first grant was awarded in 1975. It wasn't until 1979, following Meta's death, that Mr. Beckner agreed to allow the church to acknowledge them as the Fund's benefactors.

The Church was charged to use the earnings on their gift to build "a more collaborative, attractive, and forward-looking community that fosters human rights and dignity, and enhances the influence of All Souls Church in the Washington metropolitan area."

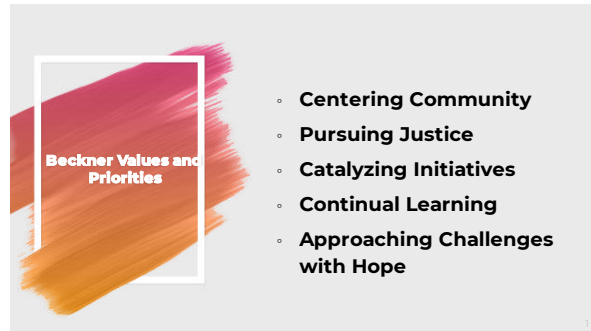
In 1998 another active member, John Shively, made a bequest to All Souls and the decision was made that the committee charged with responsibility for managing the Beckner Fund would do the same for the Shively gift. Together the two endowments are the Beckner Advancement Fund.

There are two more things I'm charged to do today and the first is to share with you the vision and values that guide the Beckner Fund's work.

Here's our vision: a city where all residents have the opportunities and resources they need to live with dignity and share in the District's prosperity and vibrancy. So clearly -- there's lots of room in this city in 2022 for us to help. And the way Beckner chooses to work towards that vision is to provide flexible funds that will accelerate community-driven social change in the District.

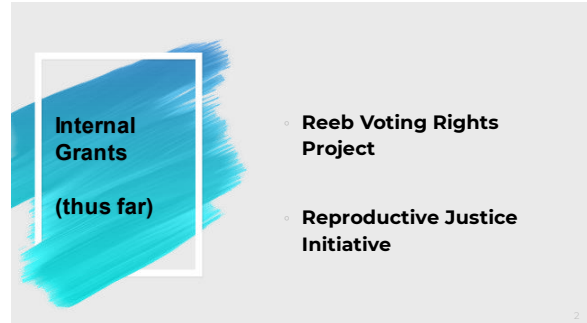
Our values.

I think most all of us will resonate with the first two values of centering community and pursuing justice but let me say a few words about how the others play out in the Beckner committee's work. If you were to look at our webpages (all-souls.org, Social Justice dropdown, to Beckner Advancement Fund) you would see that "catalyzing initiatives" often translates to an emphasis on newer organizations or fresh initiatives from more established groups. The list of community groups I will share shortly is a good example of this – many of them are new to Beckner and didn't exist 6 or 7 years ago.



And finally, the business of hope. When I read Beckner's job description 18 months ago this value really stood out for me because I don't believe I had ever seen it spelled out before so explicitly. Yet, of course, a church-based philanthropic initiative would lead with hope because in Rev. Rob's words "that's what we think we're doing here" isn't it – acting out faith.. with hope that better is possible?

Finally, here's a quick view of the grants the Beckner committee, confirmed by the Board of Trustees, has awarded thus far this year. First, Beckner makes grants to internal groups – with the same lens of our vision and values – every year. So far this year grants have gone to the Reeb project and the Reproductive Justice initiative. However, the committee is in the middle of its spring cycle of internal grantmaking, and we anticipate awarding additional grants this month.



And here's the list of community groups that have been awarded a total of \$85,000 for 2022. It would take too long to describe all of them; and that's why we'll be coming back periodically to interweave their stories with the spirit-filled work that happens in this building. What I can say is that they represent trans rights, worker self-determination, criminal justice reform and accountability, migrant and refugee support and so much more.



If anyone has questions, feels compelled to inquire about the responsibilities of committee membership, or anything else that has come up during this time you can find me at ascu.beckner@gmail.com. Thank you for this opportunity.

END RUTH'S TEXT

Thanks Ruth! As part of our Bicentennial observation, there will be a program about the Beckner Fund and values-based philanthropy on Monday, May 23. Look for info on that in the future.

In addition to this incredible grant-making work, it's critical that the church show up and take action. And the reality is that the most impact happens when church staff and lay people are working closely together. Within the social justice ministry now, there is widespread agreement that we should do less things, and do them more collaboratively so that the work is more effective and more sustainable.

One such thing is happening now, through All Souls' membership in the Washington Interfaith Network, WIN. Washington, DC, will hold elections for Mayor, Attorney General, Council Chair, and several Council seats this year. Elections like this present the greatest opportunity to educate both candidates and voters about the policy changes we want to create more affordable housing, black equity through home ownership, stronger environmental policies, legal support for immigrants, real public safety, and more. WIN is holding an on-line action with candidates on Sunday, March 20, at 3:00 PM. All Souls has committed to turning out at least 50

people for that action, but we're hoping to get 75. We have 43 people registered now. I encourage you to join us. There's no easier way to show your support for real policy change and learn about what WIN and All Souls are working for.

<https://www.windc-iaf.org/wins-election-season-action/>

Let me close with a final observation, and hope, for where we are now in our nation and our faith community. As we continue to negotiate the threats and impacts of covid, we're going to be resuming more and more in-person activities. But we have to admit that it's not going to feel exactly the same or be exactly the same as before. We live in a changed world, and our congregations have to change as well.

Long before the pandemic, congregations were already recognizing that to stay relevant and become more multicultural we need to abandon one-size-fits-all ways of doing church and instead create more accessible and flexible ways of doing things and being together. The pandemic has made this exponentially more true, so it's a great time to reconsider the approaches we're taking to our social justice work. And if, alongside the importance and power of having an impact as a congregation, we recognize the importance of preparing, inspiring, and supporting people to agents of change in their lives beyond the congregation, then we might very well have an impact that is rewarding, effective and sustainable.

We can and should be proud of the incredible justice work that this congregation and its congregants have done in the last 200 years. And, this pride needs to go hand-in-hand with humility and honesty about our shortcomings as well. And these are not mutually exclusive. We can feel a sense of appreciation and a sense of responsibility at the same time. Together, I think it's a helpful combination to propel the work forward. Let's see what we can do together in the next 200 years.

Amen.

Benediction

May we honor the courageous commitment of our ancestors by taking up the work that is ours to do now. And regardless of where we choose to live out the calling of our faith, may we dedicate ourselves to doing so grounded in spirit, motivated by love, and with a fierce passion for the liberation of all people. Amen.