

Reflections on Shared Concerns about CONECT Membership

How does CONECT relate to our UU values and identity?

UU's have a long history of partnering with other faith traditions in order to pursue justice. During the abolitionist period both Unitarians and Universalists joined with other faiths to both advocate to outlaw slavery and to shelter those escaping through the underground railroad. After an extensive campaign and a devastating war, this goal was achieved. Following the Civil war, both the Unitarians and Universalists worked with other people of faith to improve social conditions through direct service and by advocating for systemic changes.

In the 20th century, the commitment to going beyond our faith's doors continued. Both Unitarians and Universalists joined other religious groups in helping rescue people of all faiths from the Nazis. The similarity of commitments to justice among Unitarian and Universalists led to the 1961 merger, despite theological differences (many Universalists retained their Christian beliefs, while many Unitarians were Humanists). Following the merger, UU's joined with people of diverse faiths including Jews, Baptists, and members of Orthodox traditions to abolish Jim Crow and secure voter rights, a long campaign of witness, protest, and advocacy.

Recently, at Unitarian Universalist Association General Assemblies and through UUA publications, we, UU's, have been encouraged to join with other faith groups in order to strengthen our calls for justice. At the 2014 GA, congregations were explicitly urged to consider joining Congregation Based Community Organizations (CBCO) like CONECT. Since that GA, UUs have benefitted from the insights of Rev. William Barber II (Baptist), Eboo Patel (Muslim) and Rev. Seekou (Evangelical) who are all active in interfaith work and have urged us to join an interfaith movement for justice - one that focuses on humanitarian issues that we hold in common, while accepting that there are differences in theology. Please see Rev. Barber's Youtube video "Let's Stand Together".

Most CONECT congregations are theist. Should we form a coalition with a predominantly theist group?

Those of us supporting the CONECT initiative seek to "Side with Love" with peoples of other faiths, not oppose their theology. CONECT is not about imposing faith beliefs, but about our shared beliefs in feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, housing the homeless, and treating everyone with respect. As you may know, there are theists in our congregation whose views are more traditionally Universalist, than Unitarian and we are doing well working together for justice.

How can we be sure that the CONECT initiatives will fit our values?

Ideas like solar panels on government buildings, solutions to homelessness, and addressing income inequality are just the type of systemic issues we would be able to bring to CONECT, if we choose to belong.

Issues that are not shared among the CONECT congregations, e.g., "freedom to choose" can continue to be pursued by individual congregations or by partnerships. Similarly, CONECT does not pursue issues that we are unlikely to support. This is ensured in part by the democratic grassroots method by which CONECT issues are chosen.

How are issues CONECT works on chosen?

Issues chosen for work in CONECT arise through a grassroots process. Within congregations, people meet one-to-one and in-house meetings to discuss their concerns. Through both consensual and democratic processes congregations decide what, if anything, to bring to delegate meetings where the issues are discussed and the

group decides on issues they can most effectively take action on. This is how initiatives on healthcare and driver's licenses for undocumented folks arose. Perhaps some of the issues referenced above could be raised in the future if our congregation is committed to them.

What about direct service. e.g., feeding the hungry, tutoring children?

CONNECT is focused on advocacy; it is assumed that the direct action *will continue to occur in individual congregations and through relationships among congregations* that grow out of membership in CONNECT. At the November delegate meeting members of USNH were able to connect with a racially diverse Catholic congregation doing anti-racism work using some of the same resources we do.

USNH addresses the direct-action leg of the Social Justice table very well. We also do well with education and witness. CONNECT would allow us to address advocacy, the fourth leg, more effectively in order to achieve systemic change. We need to work for systemic solutions, rather than simply responding to the needs resulting from our current structures. Rather than continuing to stick one finger after another in the dyke, we need to participate in a coalition to design and construct better dykes.

Can't we work on policy changes on our own?

Systemic change is slow and difficult as evidenced by the Civil Rights movement of the 60's. While we seek to alleviate current suffering, we also seek to prevent future suffering through changes in policies. Because CONNECT represents a large constituency, the group has access to leaders that a suburban church of 300 does not. Our money goes to helping coordinating these efforts so that we, with our partners in justice, can create the beloved community. As people of a small faith we need a large coalition. It's like joining a union.

Couldn't we use \$7000 for something else? What does CONNECT use our money for?

The \$7000 that we have for CONNECT is just that: a matching grant *specifically* for joining a CBCO, an anonymous donation given for this purpose, funds from Task Forces that support the ways CONNECT would facilitate their work, a dedicated collection plate, and the courage and humility of our minister to try something new where we may follow, rather than lead. Most of this money is not available for other uses.

The dues we pay CONNECT go to the trained professional organizer's salary and that of his assistant, as well as typical overhead, i.e., telephones, websites, printing, etc.

The dues feel like we are paying to work for justice. Why do that? Can't we just find others to work with?

With regard to the concerns about paying to work for justice, it seems we do that when we pay a pledge to this congregation, when we support a political campaign, or when we contribute to any non-profit. CONNECT is about uniting with a coalition with clear guidelines and expectations rather than casting about hoping another group will join with us.

Finally, CONNECT is also about being part of a coalition that allows us to develop relationships with people who are different from us in race, social class, faith, and geographic area; it is about hearing their stories and sharing ours. Perhaps, we will learn through this process to enlarge our understanding of justice and to accept that sometimes we need to follow those most affected by injustice, rather than assume we know the answers.