

"NEW START IN THE INNER CITY"

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First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia

Today, I bring greetings from the members and friends of the Sojourner Truth Congregation of Unitarian Universalists in Washington, D.C. As I speak, they are discussing the presidential candidates, and raising concerns about the candidates' positions on issues that impact on us with an immediacy that is troublesome. How will the candidates address the drug problem? As I drive through the city at night, I see people on street corners making "connections." Recently, one or more children per month die in drug related incidents. (We have lost only one area policeman, who was killed by a fellow officer during a raid.) How do the candidates perceive the "right to life" of a child born to a parent who is without work, without family support, without a responsible partner, without skills, without training, and without shelter -- as too many young mothers are likely to be in our city? How do the political leaders propose to address homelessness that is related to mental illness or substance abuse? What national support would be available for AIDS research? Does the public have any clues about how our candidates might respond to the attempt of Congress to nullify District of Columbia human rights laws as they apply to Gays?

We are proud that there is at least one community in our town that is willing to look at the tough questions of our time with people who may not share their own perspective. We are proud that there is at least one religious community in our town whose members are committed to listen, no matter how hard listening may be. We are proud that, in a context where there is great economic deprivation, significant illiteracy, over 75% African-American population, and many limited English-speaking ethnic residents, there is a Unitarian Universalist presence being "planted."

As far as we know, Sojourner Truth Congregation represents the first attempt in over fifty years to start a new UU church in a context populated primarily by people not typically included in our movement. Our movement is over 90% white, middle-class, and college educated, in stark contrast to our neighborhood. We fought for this new start in the inner city because we are convinced that it is in the city that our social and religious values confront the realities of modern life in a way that most challenges us to exciting, new growth. Certainly, the vision is catching on as the UUA plants similar new start congregations in Tulsa, OK, Chicago, IL, and Atlanta, GA. The vision is catching on for UU's who have heard about the idea and have committed to support it in various ways. Our members come to Sojourner Truth Congregation because it is "an intentionally diverse religious community," reaching out by reaching in!

A "friend" commutes from California to be with us on occasion. A charter member who moved to take a new job, has committed to joining a new start modeled after Sojourner Truth Congregation in his new location. We must be on the right track, despite the significant challenges of our task.

Our task is rendered much more challenging than typical new starts because we are in the city. For example, real estate values -- even for properties that are undeveloped -- are out of our reach as a new start. Affordable rental space that will allow us to grow is scarce, to understate the reality. Schools in our neighborhood do not allow for the same accessibility as in our area suburbs, although the school board is currently re-examining the policies that make this true. More importantly, we are committed to growth with diversity. However, experience tells us that new churches tend to grow based on homogeneity, up to a size of about 250 members. Our experience with growth based on intentional diversity may allow us to provide a model for existing inner city churches to have a "new start"!

Think of First Church getting a new start in the inner city. What are some of the ingredients in making this happen?

For us, one of the first steps was to establish the intention of diversity as both a policy and as a part of our identity. We include the statement, "an intentionally diverse religious community" in our weekly ad on the religion page of the Washington Post. We announce our sermons in the events section of the local neighborhood papers. We are listed as a "welcoming church" in the Blade, a newspaper targeting the gay community, and widely read in the city. We advertise special events in the Washington Afro-American and the Informer as our budget allows. But, we are finding that the best strategy is to BRING a friend. For many UU's that may mean making friends with those who are different from ourselves in order to be intentional about diversity. For example, a friend I made on Star Island went home and made friends with her Black co-workers, overcoming her shyness and her fears of rejection. Eventually, she began to invite them to church activities that might be of particular interest. Finally, she got the Church to commit to a racial justice task force, where she helps to create the "common ground."

A second principal we have found for our new start in the inner city is that we must find ways to make people feel comfortable in our midst -- even when it makes us uncomfortable to do so. Most of us are discovering that we can expand our comfort zones with practice. For example, we often include traditional spirituals among our music selections. The theology expressed in these songs and the language, often make UU's uncomfortable. But the music awakens powerful responses for most African-Americans because of the memories and cultural history reflected. So, we modify the words when we can, and try to share the emotions when we can't get the words "right." We try to confront issues that speak to different constituency interests/values as we plan Sunday services or give examples in our service. We try to allow those who come to feel comfortable being who they are by making it clear that "to love is our covenant"; i.e., to love unconditionally. So, the young come with the old; we come dressed up or dressed "down"; we come agreeing and disagreeing with the minister and with one another; we come as singles or as couples - and we find comfort and community

- * because we care for one another;
- * because we are willing to trust one another;
- * because we are willing to insist on listening to one another.

A third step, that may be hard for us as UU's because of our history, is that we are going to have to be intentional in affirming our faith. It matters what we believe. We must get used to responding to the question, "What do UU's believe?" We should be able to say that Unitarian Universalists are united in their commitment to use Reason as a tool for discovering and testing our belief. We should know that we believe there need not, indeed ought not, be conflict between our intuitive understandings and our reasoned ones. If there is, UU's commit to struggle for harmony and inner peace through reconciling what we intuitively know with what we come to believe through analysis of our experience. We should be able to say that UU's stand for a "U-Unique" approach to religion that affirms that it matters what we believe, yet cherish doubt; that acts on faith, yet submits all catechisms to the test of reason filtered by personal experience. We should say that this "UU" approach to religion recognizes You as the authority where You are concerned, yet allows each to stand in awe of an Order in which we participate, but did not create.

Most of all, UU's believe that we have a responsibility to put our faith into our way of living and being. We know that this requires us to respond promptly to the issues and concerns of the community. With respect to our policy of being open, this means we must take steps to include greater diversity: that we must seek diversity; that we must include diverse expressions; and that we must allow those who are different from ourselves to find ways to be comfortable in our midst -- even when it makes us uncomfortable to do so! If we move forward acting on this faith, we will have a new start in the inner city, and wherever we are!