



## The Social Justice-Rooted Congregation A Congregational Rubric for Best Practices

### Praxis and the Social Justice-Rooted Congregation

A simple definition of “praxis” is an ongoing cycle of action-reflection-action. Praxis demands that we not wait until we are perfectly comfortable, or perfectly ready, to “do something;” rather, praxis requires that we enter into an ongoing cycle in which we act boldly, reflect upon and learn from our actions, and then act again, informed by our new knowledge and experience.

AREA OF PRACTIS	EXAMPLES
<p><b>1.) Public Witness and Prophetic Voice</b>  <i>The congregation regularly, boldly, and accountably uses its institutional capital to publicly proclaim its yearning and solidarity work for social justice and equity as a natural outgrowth of its religious values</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Arranging a carpool among members of your church to build large turnout for local public witness events; sending delegations to represent the congregation at national gatherings and calls-to-action</li> <li>- Clergy and/or lay leaders writing Letters to the Editor, specifically identifying themselves as people of faith and articulating why our UU tradition calls us to the work of social justice-making</li> <li>- Creating a network of “rapid responders” who are ready to go together to local social justice actions and events. [NOTE: this is particularly effective if people have “protest buddies,” who covenant to literally show up with each other so that nobody is alone]</li> <li>- Training a small “protest choir” to learn songs and chants frequently used by local social justice activists so that they can be prepared to participate at actions and protests</li> <li>- Hanging a #BlackLivesMatter banner on your building or distributing buttons, lawn signs, bumper stickers, t-shirts, etc. to congregants</li> <li>- Creating a cohort of people who are trained in direct action and non-violent civil disobedience tactics and strategies, and who are ready to both plan actions in solidarity with community groups and show up for arrestable actions planned by frontline communities with whom the congregation is in partnership</li> </ul>
<p><b>REFLECTION QUESTIONS:</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.) What is your congregation already doing in this Praxis Area?</li> <li>2.) What was the process/who were the players in creating these programs/activities? (i.e., minister, board, committee, congregational vote, etc.)</li> <li>3.) List at least three <i>new</i> things you dream of your congregation doing in this Praxis Area.</li> <li>4.) What kind of process would have to happen for the things you listed in question 2 to take place? Who would need to be consulted?</li> </ol>



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<p><b>2.) Service &amp; Solidarity</b>  <i>The congregation offers material, human, and infrastructural support and service to resource movements for social justice, allowing frontline communities to strategically channel their energy and resources into leadership</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Providing a meal for the public gathering or organizers' meeting of a grassroots social justice group</li> <li>- Driving striking workers who normally use public transit to and from a meeting, gathering, protest, etc.</li> <li>- Using your social media and/or newsletter to lift up organizing done by frontline communities and organizations</li> <li>- Letting an organization led by/for frontline communities use office space, meeting space, your industrial kitchen, or copying/printing equipment for their organizing work for free</li> <li>- Offering physical sanctuary to refugees or undocumented immigrants being targeted for deportation</li> <li>- Creating an "accompaniment ministry" where congregants are ready to be present with undocumented immigrants at court hearings</li> <li>- Organizing a supply drive for an organization who needs materials they can't afford to purchase on their own</li> <li>- Being the fiscal sponsor for an emerging justice organization (501(c)3 tax status)</li> </ul>
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<p><b>3.) Interfaith &amp; Organizational Partnerships</b>  <i>The congregation cultivates cultural and spiritual humility, and develops deep and mutually-fulfilling partnerships with other faith communities, interfaith coalitions, and secular organizations and coalitions working for social justice</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Joining the local Congregation-Based Community Organizing group or interfaith justice network</li> <li>- Doing a pulpit exchange, a joint worship service, a film screening, or a book study group with a congregation of a different tradition, exchanging ideas about what each faith says about social justice</li> <li>- Organizing a rapid response in solidarity with congregations targeted by hate crimes, violence, unjust policy, etc. (making sure your congregation is responding to the needs and wants of the congregation who has been directly impacted!)</li> <li>- Practicing saying “yes” to neighboring congregations who invite us to partner with them; doing cultural and theological competency work with UUs to prepare ourselves for interfaith and intercultural partnership</li> <li>- Creating a regular people of faith worship service, vigil on the steps of the capitol, or other opportunity for ongoing relationship building and shared commitment to justice</li> <li>- Using your State Advocacy Network to convene UU congregations in your area for training, public witness, and theological reflection</li> <li>- Developing official partnerships with secular organizations and coalitions doing policy change work, direct action, and community organizing for social justice</li> <li>- Bringing in local movement leaders (and paying them fair consulting fees) to provide political education, organizing training, issue orientation, and skills development</li> </ul>
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<p><b>4.) Financial Partnership &amp; Fundraising</b>  <i>The congregation is self-aware about its financial resources and networks, and is willing to leverage this power to channel money into movement building for social justice beyond the congregation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Taking special collections to support the work of local social justice-oriented organizations</li> <li>- Making long-term (3 years or more) financial commitments to social justice-oriented organizations led by and for frontline communities (i.e., standing budget line-item)</li> <li>- Establishing a discretionary fund to support the work of activists, organizers and movements in times of crisis, and/or contribute to salaries for otherwise-unpaid activists/organizers</li> <li>- Cultivating a list of donors—large and small—who are willing to quickly and with no strings attached make special contributions to social justice-related causes in critical moments</li> <li>- Developing a culture of openness and transparency about money in the congregation, and helping members have theologically-grounded conversations about abundance, generosity, and fundraising as both spiritual practice and a tool for movement building</li> <li>- Using a “reparations model” for hiring and paying organizers and activists of color in which you pay significantly more than “market rate” for POC speakers, and guests who you are asking to help train and teach in a predominantly white context. Never ask POC to do work for your congregation for free. Make sure this commitment is enshrined in your planned budget, and your policies.</li> <li>- Taking a weekly parallel collection to the Offering, asking every person present to contribute \$1-\$5/person every week to a Social Justice fund, to be given away regularly, transparently, and without high reporting requirements to local social justice organizers and organizations</li> </ul>
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<p><b>5.) Theological Reflection</b>  <i>The congregation sees social justice work as a natural expression Unitarian Universalist values and beliefs, can articulate a theology of social justice, and are able to evaluate issues and actions through the lens of their faith</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offering an adult curriculum about historical roots of our tradition(s)' history with social justice work</li> <li>- Building a "Responding to Our World" reflection ministry, in which people gather each month to consider current events of the world and the local community through both a social justice and a UU theological lens</li> <li>- Holding listening sessions, rooted in theological reflection and pastoral care, when the congregation is poised to make a significant decision regarding institutional commitment to social justice work (i.e., hanging a BLM banner, investing in a social justice curriculum or consultant, incorporating commitment to social justice in the bylaws)</li> <li>- Inviting justice leaders to develop "credos" (<i>à la</i> Coming of Age) articulating the intersection of their faith and their work for justice</li> <li>- Doing regular reflection upon historical and contemporary UU theologies of social/social justice in Board meetings, committee/task force gatherings, worship, and leadership development</li> <li>- Creating a praxis model for people participating in protests, direct actions, or other events out in the community, in which congregants gather together before an event to develop shared theological grounding, the group participates in the event together, and then there is a space to debrief the experience and mine theological learnings and challenges together afterward.</li> </ul>
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<p><b>6.) Sustainability, Resiliency, &amp; Humility: Spiritual Care &amp; Formation for Activists</b>  <i>The congregation prioritizes nurturing the spiritual and emotional health of its justice leaders, and equipping them with the competencies to be faithful and effective leaders</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Offering a small group ministry program specifically designed to connect social justice leaders to one another, and address issues of burnout, heartbreak, disappointment, forgiveness, discomfort, humility, etc.</li> <li>- Placing term-limits on social justice leadership, building a culture that values shared ministry and regular turnover of power</li> <li>- Offering opportunities for social justice leaders to learn about and engage in both individual and corporate forms of spiritual practice</li> <li>- Creating a team of “social justice chaplains” who understand the particular spiritual and emotional impacts of sustained engagement with struggles for social justice, and who can respond to these needs as they naturally arise among those participating in justice work</li> <li>- Offering opportunities for people of color in the congregation to regularly gather together, without white people present, to share experiences and fellowship [NOTE: this should NOT be a space in which people are expected to talk primarily about race and racism. It is a radical thing to empower people of color to claim a space in which their spiritual and emotional needs—rather than the needs of white people—are prioritized.]</li> <li>- Building a team of people, including clergy and lay leaders, who are able to pastor and respond to the resistance, fragility, and disequilibrium that privileged people inevitably encounter within themselves when they first engage in serious social justice work</li> </ul>
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<p><b>7.) Political Education, Study, &amp; Training</b>  <i>The congregation offers regular opportunities for members to learn about justice issues, gain concrete skills, and develop political analysis</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Launching a book group to read <i>The New Jim Crow, This is an Uprising, Emergent Strategy, Between the World &amp; Me</i>, etc.; hosting film screenings of <i>Whose Streets, Fruitvale Station, Race: The Power of an Illusion</i></li> <li>- Holding regular educational forums featuring reflections on social justice issues and movement-building by local and/or national activists, in particular those who come from frontline communities (and compensating speakers appropriately!)</li> <li>- Doing regular programs intended to increase congregational capacity to have dialogue about race, such as <i>Beloved Conversations</i> or <i>ADORE: A Dialogue About Race &amp; Ethnicity</i></li> <li>- Hiring a congregational consultant who works specifically with institutions trying to embody a social justice commitment</li> <li>- Bringing in trainers and facilitators from movement organizations to increase congregational capacity and competency</li> <li>- Working with local social justice activists to plan a solidarity action in which the risk will be largely or entirely shouldered by people from your congregation whose privilege makes arrest and violence less likely and/or risky. Provide training to participants, pay outside organizers well, and do a debrief of the action together afterwards.</li> <li>- Investing in community organizing/movement building training (offered by organizations/trainers outside of the congregation) for leaders who will hold social justice leadership positions within the congregation</li> </ul>
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<p><b>8.) Institutional Transformation</b>  <i>The congregation engages in critical self-assessment and seeks outside consultation to ensure that power structures and practices align with stated social justice values and make space for diverse leadership and participation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Amending congregational bylaws, ends statements, and strategic plans to include an institutional commitment to justice, complete with measures for assessing compliance and success</li> <li>- Building strong leadership development programs for new and returning leaders; cultivating leadership among people who represent identities and experiences outside of the dominant culture of the congregation, and investing - financially and with human resources - in their development</li> <li>- Doing a congregational audit, examining the ways in which the congregation has and has not done faithful and accountable work for justice throughout its history, and in which areas. Make this information available to the whole congregation.</li> <li>- Hiring consultants and outside trainers (e.g., capital campaign planners, governance consultants, financial advisors, retreat leaders) who explicitly bring an intersectional justice lens to their work</li> <li>- Ensuring that staff are fairly compensated, and that real authority and decision-making power is accorded to women, people of color, people from poor or working-class backgrounds, queer and trans people, etc.</li> <li>- Bringing all service and justice ministry teams together for a quarterly training and/or reflection about the intersections of the issues they are working on, the systemic roots of the problems, and the theological grounding that calls us to work for justice</li> <li>- Assessing accessibility of decision-making models and processes (e.g., Robert's Rules of Order at congregational meetings), modifying structures that consistently leave out or disempower people from marginalized groups</li> <li>- Creating policies that ensure outside contracting, hiring decisions, investment choices, and other commitments are made with a central commitment to social justice</li> </ul>
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<p><b>9.) Worship, Ritual &amp; Celebration</b>  <i>The congregation regularly expresses its commitment to building a socially just and loving world through communal worship, embodied ritual, and practices of joy and gratitude</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extending regular invitations to community partners, justice workers, and members of marginalized communities to speak in your pulpit</li> <li>- Ensuring that people of color, trans people, queer people, disabled people, and people from poor and working class backgrounds are regularly empowered as worship leaders, including preachers, worship associates, worship committee members, musicians, liturgists, etc.</li> <li>- Holding a vigil at your congregation in response to a police shooting, a discriminatory law, a local hate crime; turning out members of your congregation to attend vigils led by other congregations/communities personally impacted by such events</li> <li>- Creating opportunities for congregants to engage in rituals of confession, atonement, forgiveness, and re-commitment</li> <li>- Incorporating social justice themes as a regular part of worship throughout the liturgical year. Social justice concerns are reflected not only in issue-based sermons, and not just on holidays, but in prayers, offerings, readings, hymns, covenants, etc. throughout the entire year.</li> <li>- Planning opportunities for fun, socializing, and relationship building, both among congregational social justice teams and with external community partners (e.g., the Penultimate Unitarian Church Block Party and Barbecue, or the annual All Souls Social Justice Ministries Ice Cream Social); gathering in celebration when there is a “social justice win”</li> </ul>
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## Characteristics of the Social Justice-Rooted Congregation

### Accountability

- Congregation accepts, seeks out, and trusts leadership from members of frontline communities, both internally and in external partnerships
- Congregation has a process for candid self-reflection, responding to critique, and making amends for causing harm or falling short
- Congregation adopts a posture of “how can we say yes” to asks for support, even when what is being asked is not what the congregation would have envisioned
- Congregation views its stakeholders as both its own members and the broader community

### Systemic Integration

- A justice lens is applied to all activities, programs, and structures of the congregation
- Social/social justice projects, teams, and activities are not “siloeed,” but seen as core, integrated ministries of the congregation
- Members of all ages, skill-sets, and identities are encouraged to engage in work for social justice; a wide variety of opportunities for participation are offered

### Outward-Facing Orientation

- Congregation has diverse institutional relationships with local and national organizations and movements for justice; members are knowledgeable about, feel personal investment in, and demonstrate commitment to partnerships
- Congregation sees its mission as extending beyond the walls of its building, and sees value in becoming a known and trusted entity in the community

### Nimbleness & Flexibility

- Congregation is able to respond to unexpected events, and the spiritual and practical needs that arise as a result, without being held back by rigid decision-making structures

### Ability to Tolerate Ambiguity

- Congregation can engage with partners with whom they do not always completely agree
- Congregation can move forward even when there is disagreement, resistance, or dissent

### Commitment to Mission

- Fulfilling the congregation’s mission is widely seen as more important than accommodating every individual member’s desires and preferences
- Congregation’s mission is in service of communities and values that transcend Unitarian Universalism

### Spiritual Grounding

- Leaders consistently model using UU theology, history, polity, and practice as resources for interpreting justice issues and discerning how the community is called to respond to them
- Justice-making is seen as religious work, and a part of regular spiritual practice for both individuals and the community

### Theological and Cultural Humility

- Members are self-aware about their own identities and experiences, and can pro-actively avoid or address their own triggers and modify their behavior to make space for others
- Congregation is able to establish and maintain mutual relationships with groups who have very different cultures and theologies
- Congregation knows that its ways of doing things are relative, and not “the only way”

### Power Analysis and Self-Awareness

- Congregation is aware of and willing to strategically leverage its human and financial resources in service of its mission
- Power and authority are shared and accountable; access to power through leadership development is transparent and accessible



## Tips for Building a Social Justice-Rooted Congregation

### **Minister to the faith development and spiritual needs of people of color in your congregation:**

The spiritual and emotional costs of being a person of color in a predominantly white institution can be huge. Many UUs of color arrive at our congregations and are quickly reminded that white supremacy is rampant, even among “progressive” white people. In consultation with members of color, and fairly compensating those who are asked to provide expertise and services, offer pastoral care, faith formation opportunities, and people of color-only spaces and programs for congregants of color that specifically address the spiritual and emotional challenges UUs of color navigate in our faith and our world.

### **Don’t try to do everything at once:**

Prioritize your work, and launch new things strategically. Consider your congregation’s size, capacity, staffing, leadership structure, and local context, as well as what seems urgent and important in the world. Better to have a few well-run, effective initiatives than dozens of smaller “pet projects” with no sense of unity or tie to the mission.

### **Clearly define roles:**

Who does which parts of social justice work broadly, and social justice work specifically? What are staff, clergy, lay leaders responsible for? How will these groups be in communication with each other? Who has final say on what is done? How are decisions made? How can members who are not in “power roles” shape the agenda and present new ideas and suggestions?

### **Use transparent, strategic communications to build buy-in:**

Make sure that social justice work is regularly publicized through all communications channels (print, verbal announcements, online, social media), with clear information about how to participate. Don’t use acronyms or “insider speak.”

### **Use Organizing Practices to Build Involvement:**

Do one-to-ones to let people know about the work. Use phone calls, face-to-face asks, and individual emails to invite people to participate. Be clear about what you’re asking people to do, what will be happening, what commitment you’re asking for, and what their role will be. Provide training and education as needed.

### **Be Willing to Say “Yes”:**

While it’s important that social justice activities be integrated and strategic, not everything has to be done by a committee or approved by the Board. When community partners (actual or potential) make an ask of you, be willing to adopt a “posture of yes,” and build relationship by showing you’re willing to be flexible and accommodating. Make space for passionate people to lead social justice activities that are not planned in a committee meeting, and develop communications structures and support systems to allow these activities to happen in accountable—but not stifling—relationship.

### **Be Willing to Say “No”:**

Most congregations can only work effectively on a few big justice initiatives at a time, and having too many programs or cause-based groups both dilutes the congregation’s power and undercuts the sense of unified work and direction. Furthermore, not having an intersectional analysis in ALL justice



programs can result in a lack of systemic buy-in to dismantling interconnected systems of domination (white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, patriarchy, ableism, etc). Involve the whole community in discernment work about where people’s passions intersect with our faith values, and make commitments to a few things, with a requirement that an intersectional lens be applied everywhere—and then be willing to say no to those who insist the church must put energy and resources into their “pet issue.”

**Make sure your justice activities are accessible to a wide range of people:**

Does the environmental justice team meet at a time when people who work during the day can’t attend? Is the immigration march planned along a route that will allow people with mobility challenges to participate? Does the community forum offer childcare with culturally competent providers so single parents, non-English speakers, people of color will be able to attend and comfortably bring their kids? Do you have the budget to pay a translator for the upcoming Sanctuary training? Is the local interfaith coalition willing to re-schedule your event from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon so your Jewish neighbors can attend?

**Model talking about social justice work with a theological/spiritual lens:**

Always draw connections between issues and our faith. Why is police brutality an issue that our faith/tradition calls us to respond to? Why do our values compel us to provide sanctuary to an undocumented migrant or make reparations through financially supporting Black organizers?

**Expect resistance, and minister to underlying discomfort:**

When someone objects to a term, a program, a budget line item in social justice work, try to understand the resistance. Is that person’s authority, leadership, or power being challenged? Is the program inaccessible to them in some way? Do they feel unheard or undervalued? Do they fear that the congregation is changing and leaving them behind? Use trained spiritual caregivers who also have an analysis about the spiritual issues that arise for privileged people entering into justice work, and who are able to meet people where they are while helping them heal from those wounds in order to move forward.

**Prioritize Relationships:**

People will get deeply invested in work for justice when they feel nurtured and fulfilled by the relationships that are created through the work, both with fellow congregants and with partners in the community. Trust and accountability--critical to effective work for justice--are built slowly, through personal connection. No agenda should be so full and no issue so pressing that there’s no time for people to talk to one another about their lives.

**Cultivate Joy, Gratitude, & Meaning:**

Celebrate wins. Throw parties. Create opportunities for people engaged in serious justice work to hang out, socialize, spend time together. Praise volunteers, give thanks to generous donors, lift up exceptional leadership.