

I'd like to begin my talk with a quote from "The Engaged Spiritual Life: A Buddhist Approach to Transforming Ourselves and the World" by Donald Rothberg

"The two paths of inner work and service of others 'deeply need each other', he writes. "and our times desperately call for both spiritual and social commitments. Without spiritual development, well-meaning attempts to change the world will probably unconsciously replicate the very problems that we are solving... We also run the risk of not having the kind of resources of wisdom, compassion, equanimity, and perseverance necessary to respond to the great need of the times without being quickly burned out by anger and frustration. Outer transformation thus entails inner transformation."

This talk is organized around the team ministry concept and structure at Unity Church-Unitarian, St. Paul, MN that began about seven years ago when co-ministers, Rob and Janne Eller-Isaccs started their ministry at Unity. They met with a group of congregants for about a year and a half to develop this very thoughtful program structure that "lives at the intersection of spiritual growth and social justice." Currently there are seven Community Outreach Ministry teams and three Community Outreach Leadership Ministry teams. If you are interested, more detailed information about these teams and the program structure, can be found on our church website (www.unityunitarian.org).

A. Choosing the social justice issues that reflect our ultimate values or our theological grounding.

1. **Structure of ministry teams.** The Ministry teams at Unity bubble up from the congregation as a group of people become interested in pursuing a particular justice issue. The structure and application process allows and encourages groups of people to reflect on their ultimate values in preparation for becoming a ministry team that is supported by the church.

In the written application that is approved by our executive team, these groups are asked to develop their team mission statement in relationship to the church mission statements. They are also asked to reflect on the service, education and advocacy dimensions of their future justice work, to determine an appropriate community partner and how they will develop and grow spiritually as a team.

Generally, this discernment time for groups planning to become an 'official' church team ranges from a couple of months to a year. After the team application has been approved, the final step to becoming a team is to participate in an investiture ritual in a Sunday service when the entire congregation gives their support to the work of the new team.

This structure takes people where they are—where they have experience. Maybe they've participated in a service project such as a Habitat for Humanity build or in the month long overflow shelter at the church for homeless families and are ready to look at the underlying reasons for this injustice. They may have participated in

a pilgrimage to another country or just want to reach out beyond themselves to be of use in this world---wherever they start is good enough—there is not one right way to think about social justice action in the process of becoming a team.

Overall the structure allows for the ebb and flow of this work as each team is asked to renew itself every two years with a renewal application. This gives teams a chance to reflect once again on their mission, their commitment to this work and in some cases whether they should end the work of the team.

B. Theological grounding.

Articulating our ultimate values, or our “god talk. What do we say? Where and when do we say it? For the ministry teams, this often means moving from inner to outer transformation or from action to reflection in a back and forth fashion. Team theological grounding does not necessarily come first but often happens along the way. Teams at Unity are at all places in this transcendent journey—some are moving quickly forward while others are still finding their way to their particular mission. Here are some of the ways this happens in ministry teams.

Team rituals. These often take the form of a team spiritual group practice—such as the lighting of the chalice at the beginning of the meeting or an opening and/or closing reading. Some teams have developed their own ritual unique to their group such as a couple of teams have collaboratively written a mission statement that is read in unison at the beginning or ending of their meeting.

Community building as a cornerstone of this ministry team process.

This takes many forms from check-in times at a meeting to social times with a potluck supper. This is a time to get to know people in the church who may have the same concern but may have different values and beliefs. Team members minister to each other in times of crisis and in times of joy by sharing their deep concerns and commitments. Teams are a place for people to learn to trust each other at a deeper level that in turn affects the quality of their outreach ministry. At a recent anti-racism peacemaking circle, one of the circle keepers suggested that we were built to trust each other—God or the mystery made us that way. So racism makes us blind to the possibility of trust and undoing racism means rebuilding that natural trust by examining institutional power and how it is used.

Team reflection time. When teams take the time --putting down all their agendas, their “service” projects, their organizing efforts, and even their need to “get it right”-- that is when transformation and team spiritual growth usually takes place.

Some ministry teams have identified ultimate values to which they are committed. For example, the Center for Victims of Torture team recently identified the healing work of their team as the antithesis to torture. Members of the

Sustainable Agriculture team see their work as a source of spiritual strength that has been lost in today's agribusiness world. As part of the Partner Church team work, pilgrims on a recent trip to visit their sister church in Transylvania took time out each day to reflect on the basic theological questions: What is the nature of God? What does it mean to be human? How is the divine present in our lives? What is the purpose of community and how do we live in the face of death and loss? The reflection allowed for a much richer understanding of this kind of pilgrimage while done in the context of living in a Transylvanian village.

Many of the teams take time in their meetings to reflect on some larger justice issues by reading and studying together. The Mano a Mano team that supports rural community development work in Bolivia has participated in several discussions of the difference between charity and solidarity. A central discussion of the Partner Church team is "What does reciprocity mean in an international relationship? In two recent Community Outreach ministry team leader meetings, participants reflected on the questions of "Why do you choose to lead a ministry team here at Unity versus committing your time and talents of an outside secular group?" What or who is the inspiration for your social justice ministry?"

This reflective process often helps teams understand more fully the underlying reasons for this unjust situation and helps in making decisions about which action they will take to address the injustice. An example of this is when the Restorative Justice Team members used the ancient peacemaking circle process to determine whether the team would support and participate in the national "Bell Tolling Project" each time someone dies on death row in this country.

C. Acting on our ultimate values,

Taking it into the public sphere.

As discernment and reflection of ultimate values (either before, during or after a project, service or trip) are central to teams, this ultimately affects how team members see the world and how others see Unity Church justice work.

Use of Community Partners

Team actions in the world are often connected to the team Community Partner. This is a way to extend a team's ministry and it's understanding of a social justice issue. Here are some examples of these community connections and perceptions.

As part of their volunteer training at the Center for Victims of Torture in St. Paul, members of the Ministry Team learn how to respect private boundaries as they 'befriend' a victim of torture. They also learn how to be present and carefully listen to stories of torture if and when victims are ready to share these painful experiences.

Building solidarity with ‘people of color’ leaders in our own community in issues of Affordable Housing through the legislative advocacy work of the Unity Affordable Housing Team through their interfaith community partners.

In support of their community partner, AMICUS (a non-profit agency with 40 years of experience partnering with offenders and communities to build successful lives and stronger communities), some members of the Restorative Justice Team will sit in a weekly restorative justice peacekeeping circle model called “Circles of Support and Accountability” composed of a sex offender (who has been released to the community) the offender’s probation officer, one or two police officers and 2 or 3 other interfaith community members.

And finally, outreach to the world often happens through pilgrimages to other countries. What does it mean to be present to others who are very different from us? How do we listen carefully and respectfully, to discover new ways of seeing the world? What does this tell us about our faith? How do we share our stories of pilgrimage and celebrate and/or continue our newfound relationships?

In a pilgrimage to Transylvania sponsored by the Unity Church Partner Church Team, travelers learned what it means to give and receive and to graciously accept the many non-material gifts of the villagers. A sojourn to Bolivia with Mano a Mano Team provides opportunities for people to learn what constitutes true community development in rural areas and how to gracefully cross boundaries of religion, culture, and language to be in solidarity with people-- if only for a few days. A pilgrimage to New Orleans to help in rebuilding the city, sponsored by the Unity Affordable Housing Team, provided transforming experiences for the many of the travelers. Leaving behind the comforts of home, stretching beyond their limits, engaging in discussions of racial oppression, seeing the perseverance and courage of Katrina survivors, and then once they were home, discovering how to share the continuing plight of the people there and planning next steps in addressing racial and economic injustice in their own St. Paul communities.

I’d like to end with a short quote from the UUA Washington Office of Advocacy that I think captures the essence of the social justice ministry we are embarked on at Unity Church-Unitarian. *“Your work will feed your spirit and your spirit will feed your work”*

Thank you.
Pat Haff