

LGBT Human Rights: An International Perspective

David Overton, November 2016

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Good morning!

I am very happy to be here today to talk about international UU justice work, and especially global LGBT human rights. It is a good story.

In our reading, we heard some of the words of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These words don't sound strange to us. In fact, there is a very tight connection between the aspirations expressed by the United Nations, and the principles embraced by Unitarian Universalists. Even the language sounds similar. And that is no coincidence – UU's have been a big part of international justice work since long before the founding of the United Nations.

But despite those brave words affirming the rights of everyone, we know that the world that exists today is far from the ideals expressed in the Universal Declaration and in our UU Principles. As UU's, this gap bothers us. And, we have a long and proud history of working to help close that gap, and to further the cause of justice - from abolition of slavery, to women's suffrage, to civil rights, and the justice issues that command our attention today, including economic inequality, climate change, and LGBT rights.

Today I would like to cover three things:

1. Why do we as UU's think about JUSTICE in global terms? Why isn't enough to just work for justice in our own communities?
2. How do UU's do international justice work? and
3. How can you get involved in this work if you are interested?

And in covering those three questions, I would like to touch on some of the UU organizations that are involved in International human rights, including the UU Service Committee and the College of Social Justice, and especially the UU United Nations Office, which has been a leader in global LGBT human rights.

Before I get into all that, I would like to share a little bit about what got Mary and me involved in international UU justice work to begin with.

Our daughter, Liz, attended Barnard College in New York City, which is a part of Columbia University. One Sunday morning in 2003 she decided to go to church at All Souls Unitarian on the upper east side. After the service, she attended a meeting about Peace, and happened to meet Reverend Fran Mercer, who was at that time the Executive Director of the UU United Nations Office. After taking a few minutes to get to know each other, Fran asked Liz to consider becoming an intern at the UNO. It was a very attractive offer – twenty hours a week, in a small, dingy basement office with no windows, and with no pay! But, Liz was interested, and she accepted.

She could have easily said no. She was busy with school work and extracurricular activities, and had a challenging schedule, with majors in Psychology and Religion, and a minor in Human Rights.

But Liz said yes, and that started a long series of events. First, Liz had a great internship, and got to spend a lot of time at the United Nations and to learn a lot about UU international justice work. She organized projects, led meetings, met people from all over the world, and gave presentations to lots of congregations. She loved it.

Through that internship, Mary and I learned about the United Nations Office, and after Liz's internship, Mary was asked to join the UNO's Board of Directors. Through that experience, Mary realized they could use some help with strategic planning, and arranged for me to lead a strategic planning retreat. After Mary's board term ended, I was asked to take on the role of Chair of the UNO Advisory Board, which replaced the board of directors in 2012 when the UU United Nations Office was merged into the UUA. And through all of this, Mary and I have had the opportunity to meet UU's from all over the country, to get to know the staff and the interns of the UNO, to visit Ghana in Africa, have a Queen Mother stay at our house, and, eventually, wind up here in Plano, talking with you.

This is a great example of what can happen from a random meeting of two strangers. But this also all happened because of two other things: because Fran Mercer asked, and because Liz said yes.

So, now that we are here, lets look at that first question, “Why is it important for our justice work to be global?”

Our UU Principles are a good place to start.

Our sixth principle speaks to this most directly. It establishes “the goal of world communion, with peace, liberty and justice for all.” Living our UU values can’t help but draw us into the larger world.

Our seventh principle applies here too. It calls us to “respect the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part.” We often think of this in terms of our responsibility to the environment, but it applies also to our global human society. We now know that events that happen far away affect us here at home. Inadequate health systems in Africa create risks of infection, as we saw with Ebola here in Dallas. In our interconnected world, economic turmoil, violence and natural disasters in one part of the globe ripple out to the rest of the world. Bill Schulz, a past UUA President, and more recently the President of the UU Service Committee, captured this idea in his book “In Our Own Best Interest”. He points out that international justice, which is important in its own right, is also in our own best interest. **More justice, in more places, strengthens the web of which we are a part, and on which we depend.**

So our principles call for us to work for global peace and justice, and to respect the global web of all existence. But I believe the principle that most directly speaks to global justice is our very first principle, which affirms “the inherent worth and dignity of every person”. This principle in no way stops at borders. Just like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with its frequent use of the word “everyone”, when we say “every person” we mean exactly that.

Just to clarify one thing – I don’t believe we do international justice work because our principles tell us we have to. They aren’t commandments. And it’s a good thing, because UU’s aren’t very good at following orders! Instead, I see the principles as a reflection of who we are and what we believe, and our actions are based on that.

So, how do we do this international work?

While most UU congregations work effectively for justice in their own communities, and in partnership with local organizations, it is not easy for a congregation in Texas to work on global justice issues by itself. But fortunately, our UU denomination has strong organizations already in place that enable us to join in the work for global justice, wherever we are.

First, our governing organization, the Unitarian Universalist Association, or UUA, includes a Vice President over International, Reverend Eric Cherry. The International Office at the UUA oversees a range of programs, including:

- The partner church program, in which churches in the US build connections with UU churches in other parts of the world
- The Holdeen India program, which works on the ground in India to further the human rights and living conditions of people in the lowest caste of Indian society
- Relationships with other progressive religious organizations and leaders in other parts of the world
- And the United Nations Office, which we will talk more about later.

Another major organization, which is separate from the UUA, is the **UU Service Committee**. **This is the first of the three organizations I mentioned earlier.** UUSC protects human rights, primarily by responding to humanitarian crises around the world. They have been active after earthquakes in Haiti and in Nepal, and in refugee crisis situations. UUSC also works in depth on the human right to water, and to protect the rights of workers.

UUSC has a very innovative model for supporting and protecting human rights. They work through partner organizations that are located in the areas being served. For example, UUSC partners with HomeNet Pakistan to help protect the human rights of low-paid women across Pakistan. HomeNet is run by Pakistanis, and it knows the people, the culture, the needs, and how things work in that part of the world. By partnering with organizations like HomeNet, UUSC can have much more impact, and do work that is more relevant and effective. And in turn, HomeNet can accomplish much more with the support and resources provided by UUSC.

This local partner model also applies to humanitarian disasters. For example, when the tsunami struck the Indian Ocean in the last days of 2004, killing over 200,000 people, UUSC already had relations with local organizations that could assist in getting the most important aid to the most severely affected people. UUSC also stays with these partners for years, to help with the long process of rebuilding. This model of partnership is consistent with our UU values, to work together, rather than just to provide charity.

And it is no surprise that the UUSC website today focuses on their work to help Haiti cope with the effects of hurricane Matthew. And they are working with long-established partners. Whenever you hear about a humanitarian or human rights crisis in the world, I would encourage you to check the UUSC web site to see how UU's are helping, and to consider supporting that work.

A second organization I would like to share is the UU College of Social Justice. This is a relatively new organization, and was created as a joint project by the UUA and the UUSC. The College of Social Justice creates opportunities for UU's to visit areas affected by human rights challenges, and to work directly with local people and organizations to make a difference.

The College of Social Justice has taken several groups of UU's to Haiti, to learn first hand about the challenges there and to work directly with partner organizations. True to its name, the College of Social Justice also creates an educational experience, and participants develop a deep understanding of human rights and effective advocacy.

Another example, closer to home is with the Immigrants' Rights organization Raices, in San Antonio. The College of Social Justice has recruited lawyers and Spanish speakers to help represent immigrants, many of whom have valid asylum claims, but have little chance in the legal system without representation. And many of these immigrants are children. The request by the College of Social Justice for volunteer lawyers and Spanish speakers got a huge response, and that included a large number of non-UU's, who will come in contact with our UU traditions through this experience.

The third organization I want to share with you is the UU United Nations Office, or UNO. The UNO has been directly involved in LGBT Human Rights on a global scale.

As we have already seen with the Universal Declaration, the goals of the UN are very closely aligned with the aspirations of Unitarian Universalism. And many of the most difficult justice challenges, including immigration, economic dislocation, military conflict, and climate change are global issues and require global solutions. So it just makes sense that we work with and through the UN, and we do that through our United Nations Office. The UNO represents UU values on issues like Women's Rights, the Right to Education, Immigrant rights, and Climate Change.

Our UU United Nations Office is **our voice** at the UN. The Office is located right across the street from the UN, in what is referred to as the "Church Building". The Church Building contains offices for just about every religious denomination you can think of – Mennonites, Presbyterians, Methodists, you name it - because they also understand the UN's importance in global justice. And our UN office works with many of these other religious organizations on common goals.

In fact, LGBT human rights is a great example of interfaith cooperation, and one in which UU's have played a critical leading role. On the global scale, this is not about the issues we deal with here in the US, such as marriage equality, or what bathroom you can use. Instead, global LGBT rights are about prison time and the right to life. This is because in many countries, just being gay can get you arrested and put in prison, and in some countries even carries the death penalty.

In over 70 countries, being perceived as gay can get you put in jail or worse. In at least seven countries, gay consensual sex can bring the death penalty. In addition, many of these governments tacitly encourage vigilante violence against people who are thought to be gay, with no due process, no protection.

According to a report last year by the UN Human Rights Council, "Since 2011, hundreds of people have been killed and thousands more injured in brutal, violent attacks" because of their sexual orientation.

For too many people, being perceived as gay also means lack of access to education, health care, jobs and housing.

And consider this irony: imagine that you fled your home country because you feared for your life, and you applied for asylum in the US or another country in the West. To win your asylum claim, you need to demonstrate that you are in danger in your home country because of your sexual orientation or gender identity. But here's the thing: you have spent your entire life carefully hiding that part of yourself. There is no documentation, no photographs, no evidence.

Many of our religious allies shared our concern about this basic violation of human rights, but they could not take the lead on this issue. But the Unitarian Universalists could, without any hesitation. Our United Nations Office, and its Executive Director, Bruce Knotts, was able to raise this issue at the UN. In fact, he raised the issue at a human rights conference in Paris in 2008. The attendees were representatives of global non-profit organizations that work with the UN. And at that time he was the lone voice for LGBT human rights. But a lot has changed since then, because Bruce was effective and persistent.

We are fortunate that Bruce is a 25 year veteran of the US State Department, and has worked in numerous countries, and has strong contacts around the world.

Before Bruce raised this issue, the UN just did not talk much about LGBT rights. But partly because Bruce spoke out on behalf of our UU values, LGBT rights are now openly discussed and recognized at the UN, and included in discussions about human rights. In 2013, the UN launched UN Free & Equal, a global education campaign to combat homophobia and transphobia that has so far reached more than a billion people around the world through events and via traditional and social media.

One more indication of the progress that has been made in this area: Just this summer the UN Human Rights Council appointed a new high-level position to work on LGBT violence and discrimination. Our United Nations Office began advocating for this position in 2009, and since then it has gone from impossible, to unlikely, to maybe, to a reality.

And these actions are making a difference in people's lives. The UN reports that more and more countries are adopting laws to protect people from discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. And shining a light on the issue, being willing to talk about it, is forcing countries to recognize that people are entitled to basic rights, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This is an area where our values as UU's have made a difference on the global stage.

So we have heard a little bit about the UUSC, the College of Social Justice, and the UU United Nations Office and the work they do for international human rights.

That brings us to the third question, "**How can you get involved in UU international human rights work?**" Well, there are lots of ways. Here are a few ideas: You could...

- Become a member of the UU Service Committee
- Become a supporter of the UU United Nations Office (Mary has envelopes you can use for this).
- Attend the United Nations Office Intergenerational Spring Seminar in New York City. The Seminar next April will focus on violence and the arms trade. UU's of all ages, including lots of high school students, attend to learn about human rights advocacy and have fun in New York.
- Sign up for a blog about UU international justice work.
- Check out a trip organized by the College of Social Justice.
- Attend General Assembly – next year it is in New Orleans! And it will focus on Justice.
- Pick an area you care about, learn about it, and write a letter to the editor

I mentioned early on that the reason that Mary and I became involved in this was a chance meeting, 13 years ago in New York, between our daughter and the Director of the UU United Nations Office. And because someone asked, and someone said "Yes". So, today we are meeting, and I will ask.

I am not asking you to take a 20 hour a week job for no pay, or not even to join a committee. But I want to ask you this, if you think you might be interested in

UU international justice work: in the next few days, go out on the internet and google something about global human rights that you care about. Maybe one of the organizations we have talked about. Or, take a global issue you care about, and Google that issue and add the words “and Unitarian Universalists”. I tried that with “lgbt human rights and Unitarian Universalism”. I found a lot of resources, including a statement by the UUA, work by the UNO, reports on projects in Uganda, and lots of actions within individual churches (including the workshop on LGBT human rights held here at this church yesterday!). Do some googling, and see if there is something that you would like to learn more about, to get involved in, or to support.

The world is a long way from where we would like it to be. But I believe in the idea expressed by the 19th Century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker – **“The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice”**. And through organizations like the UU Service Committee, the College of Social Justice, our UU United Nations Office and many more, UU’s are working on a global scale to bend it just a little faster. That is a part of Unitarian Universalism that we can all be proud of, can be thankful for, and can take part in.

On behalf of all these great UU organizations I invite you on this global journey.