

Poverty reduction: A UCN Social Justice priority

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; Justice, equity and compassion in human relations; The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.

The above three of our seven UU principles speak to our concern with poverty. Gandhi called poverty “the worst form of violence.” In discussing poverty at a recent meeting of the Unitarian Congregation of Niagara (UCN) Social Action Committee, it became clear that so many of the social justice issues we try to address have a connection to poverty. Of course homelessness is directly associated with poverty, but school dropout rates, street crime, suicide rates, mental health and relationship difficulties are all impacted by poverty.

According to a 2012 United Nations High Commission report, 3 Million Canadians are affected by poverty and one in 5 of those are children. In Canada, 13% of children live in poverty compared to the average of 11%. Only 4 of 21 developed countries have a higher percentage. A Niagara Region report places childhood poverty in Niagara at 15.6%! You are more likely to live in poverty if you are a child, an unattached non-elderly, a single parent, an Aboriginal Canadian, a recent immigrant, a person with a disability or a senior. These are not conditions which can be attributed to the stereotypic “person who is not doing enough to help themselves.”

Reducing poverty and alleviating the effects of poverty are often the targets of Unitarian Universalists, other faith groups and community programs throughout North America. Often, these programs provide food and/or shelter (locally e.g., *Out of the Cold*) while others introduce education, social integration, job training and job finding (locally e.g., *Start Me Up Niagara*). These programs are critical, even life saving, to the people who are currently living in poverty. These programs also provide outlets

for people who want to volunteer and make an active contribution. These are popular avenues for UCN social action initiatives and we will continue to participate. And there are bigger issues . . .

A UU congregation in the US expresses their view as follows: "*We live in a world where tremendous wealth and greed exist alongside unbearable poverty; we find too little compassion and wisdom among our national leaders. We believe that fundamental changes are needed -- changes in values, priorities, analysis and governance.*" (UU congregation at Shelter Rock). While the situation in the US may be marginally worse than here, we share the Shelter Rock view.

An important strategy for poverty reduction involves advocacy for systemic changes including increasing the minimum wage, social housing, job creation, health care and drug benefits and quality affordable child care. Such initiatives often stumble on feelings of helplessness; "We can't change the system." Typically, at UCN we encourage members to write letters to MP's and MPP's relating to these issues and in support of programs we believe will help. Occasionally, we act as a congregation with letters from the congregation. When appropriate, we try to involve the Canadian Unitarian Council and/or the Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice.

Among the advocacy positions we invite our members to support, Campaign 2000 is a cross-Canada public education movement to build Canadian awareness and support for the 1989 all-party House of Commons resolution to end child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. Campaign 2000 began in 1991 out of concern about the lack of government progress in addressing child poverty. While there has been some progress, we have fallen far short of the resolutions objective. Campaign 2000 is non-partisan in urging all elected officials to keep their promise to Canada's children.

As part of UCN's commitment to work to reduce poverty, we have invited Anita Khanna, Ontario Campaign 2000 Coordinator, to

provide the address for our September 29 service. We anticipate that she will provide current information about poverty in Niagara and will suggest strategies for further action. **All interested people are invited to this presentation at 11:00 am on the 29th at our sanctuary, 223 Church St. in St. Catharines (next to Delta Bingo). There is no charge.**