

## UUSJ Board Consideration of policy priorities for August 19, 2021 Discussion

### Overview:

The Board needs to review and determine which policy issues are priority ones for UUSJ to follow in 2021-22. Our current four policy action areas are based on a 2018 survey of UUSJ members. A new and much more expansive survey was conducted in the first half of 2021, and we have also changed our approach to the work from trying to lead on all fronts to partnering in a more intentional way and supporting the leadership efforts of organizations led by impacted populations, a key moral owner of UUSJ's work and the central voice of import in conversations related to social justice.

To date, UUSJ has counted on volunteer-driven policy action teams to do the research, engage with external partners, propose key issues for which to educate/advocate within their area and suggest the most relevant Congressional and Executive branch offices to be contacted. The teams also develop sub-priorities (e.g. in Immigration, pathways to citizenship and reducing detention) within their issue areas that can guide decisions about sign-on letters, witness events and other partner actions.

Current UUSJ priority issues (based on 2018 survey and board decisions) include:

- Defending our Democracy
- Environmental/Climate Justice
- Immigration Justice
- Addressing Economic Inequality

Results of UUSJ 2021 survey<sup>1</sup> on priorities, in order of importance to respondents :

- Racial Justice (RJ) -- (top priority)
- Climate and Environmental Justice
- Economic Justice
- Immigration Justice
- Defending our Democracy
- Criminal Justice

Note also UUSJ's [Action of Immediate Witness](#) (AIW) approved in 6/21 General Assembly on countering voter suppression as well as the increasing number of UU congregations and organizations including UUSJ which have endorsed an 8<sup>th</sup> UU principle on anti-racism.

For several years, there has not been a full economic justice team. Rather, the Executive Director participates in the Poor People's Campaign: A National Call For Moral Revival (PPC: NCMR) and, together with one board member, manages that area directly. In addition, the Environment Action Team is in search of new leadership.

Over the past year, UUSJ has had a special board committee, Policy & Advocacy Review Committee (PARC) to (i) review and propose updates to policy priorities, (ii) review requests and make recommendations for any actions UUSJ is considering that fall outside of the priority areas and (iii) recommend metrics for evaluating effectiveness of advocacy. In parallel, an Advocacy Implementation team (AIM) was identified to carry out the advocacy work under Executive Director's leadership, to clearly separate the oversight functions of the board with the implementation function of the staff and

---

<sup>1</sup> 237 individuals (2/3 of whom were UUSJ Members) participated in the 2021 UUSJ survey.

volunteer staff. AIM has operated in a transitional mode since last August, with ED, advocacy consultant, Admin Assistant and whatever policy action team members were relevant to the (rotating) issues to be addressed.

**Decisions:**

Now, we must consider what our priority areas should be for the next two-three years. The crucial question relates to how to incorporate racial justice, given our limited bandwidth overall, volunteer interests, and the status of the existing four priority areas. Among the four teams, two are operating in a steady way (Immigration and Democracy), a third is undergoing a more drastic leadership transition/search (Climate and Environment) and our fourth has a public relationship with the multi-faith PPC: NCMR, but no team of volunteers backing up that work.

PARC presented a paper to the June 2021 session of the outgoing board, to get feedback to share with the new board. An updated version will be shared with the board before the August meeting.

The following options were presented:

- Add to the existing four areas a fifth new stand-alone priority on racial justice
- Reduce 1-2 of existing policy action teams and replace with an RJ team
- Combine 1-2 issue areas, for example, economic and environmental justice or RJ and economic justice
- Intentionally embed racial justice components in each of the current four policy areas, in recognition of the intersectionality of racial justice.

PARC indicated that it needed more information before making a clear recommendation to change the current issue areas. This would involve follow-up questions to survey respondents to better understand what the drivers were for their choices, and to discern what respondents envisioned as UUSJ engagement on RJ, given our focus on federal legislation and national policies. Also, added data could help us better understand if the emphasis on racial justice was intended as a policy priority area or a reflection on UUSJ's image internal to UUism – in other words, is UUSJ a sufficiently diverse, inclusive, equitable organization to be able to authentically advocate for dismantling racism?

**Context:**

As part of its strategic transformation, UUSJ has revised its mission, vision and values, voted in a completely new board (three of eleven trustees as of July 2021 are carryovers from last board) and carried out learning sessions on Widening the Circle of Concern and 8<sup>th</sup> Principle, both UUA-wide movements to integrate anti-racism more firmly and accountability in UUism.

The survey results are only one input to discernment about future policy priorities. We also must take into account UUSJ's capacity and that of its current policy teams, existing and potential volunteer interests and how each area meets the test of grounding, accountability, fit and opportunity – are there federal/national level issues with education/engagement/advocacy actions to be taken or is an issue more readily dealt with locally or via state actions?

Currently, UUSJ rotates through the various priority issues to organize “full-tilt” outings every other month. This is a modified approach implemented in 2020 in response to a change in volunteer leadership and the COVID epidemic, and is something the internal AIM may want to reconsider in the future once the Board has weighed in on the policy priority areas of focus. If the existing structure of UUSJ's advocacy program were to continue on this schedule, having five priorities would mean that we

only touch on some issues once a year. However, the current teams also regularly participate in sign-ons for partner petitions, issue action alerts and can directly contact Congressional offices regarding timely issues. UUSJ also strives to mobilize for witness, and we anticipate this area of our portfolio to grow as we continue to expand our collaborative work with organizations led by impacted populations.

#### **Questions:**

1. What does the new UUSJ board believe our 2021-22 national policy priority areas should be?
2. Would you add, combine or eliminate a priority?
3. What changes would you articulate?
4. What, if any, additional information would you want prior to making this determination?
5. Do you feel it is appropriate to embed RJ throughout our policies regardless of whether we have an added RJ priority? Or are there specific areas of Racial Justice (voting rights, breaking down the school-to-prison pipeline, etc.) that UUSJ should focus its efforts toward?
6. Are there policy areas that may involve state level actions that warrant our engagement with state action networks? For example, voting rights (particularly during election years where the outcome would have major implications for federal politics)?

#### **References: Core Policy Priority Issues of Key UU Organizations & Other External Partners**

- Side with Love 2020 justice priority issues:
  - Immigrant Justice (overlaps with UUSJ)
  - LGBTQ Equity (UUSJ is supportive, as Marriage Equality is a legacy issue)
  - Racial Justice (could overlap with UUSJ)
  - UU the Vote (overlaps programmatically with UUSJ regional projects)
- Side with Love 2021 “intersectionality” justice priority issues:
  - Climate Justice (overlaps with UUSJ, as well as UUMFE)
  - LGBTQ+Gender Justice (UUSJ is supportive, as Marriage Equality is a legacy issue)
  - Democracy and Voting Rights (overlaps with UUSJ)
  - Decriminalization (overlaps with UUSJ activity under Economic Justice, maybe UUJEC)
- UUSC justice areas:
  - Climate Justice (overlaps with UUSJ)
  - Central American Migrant Justice (overlaps with UUSJ)
  - Crisis Response
  - (also a legacy partnership on Burma)
- 8th principle (accepted by 100+ congregations/UU orgs): *“We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote: journeying toward spiritual wholeness by working to build a diverse multicultural Beloved Community by our actions that accountably dismantle racism and other oppressions in ourselves and our institutions.”*