

**Policy & Advocacy Review Committee (A Special Committee of the Board of Trustees)**  
**Quarterly Report to the UUSJ Board of Trustees**  
**December, 2021**

**Overview of UUSJ's Current Focus on & Approach to Federal Policy Advocacy**

UUSJ is the only organization singularly focused on advocacy promoting federal U.S. policies representing UU values and with a physical Washington D.C. presence.

Our current priority issue areas are: Democracy, Immigration, Environment/Climate, Economic Justice. These are very broad and give a sense of having cast a wide net and engaging on numerous issues under each of these priority areas, although the breadth and depth of UUSJ's engagement has varied considerably across the Policy Action Teams. This is due to the current model, which is that the Policy Advocacy Teams are volunteer-driven, and thus have varying degrees of activity based on the number of volunteers involved, the subject matter expertise available within the volunteer pool on specific policy issues, the interests of the volunteers, and the bandwidth/capacity of the volunteers in terms of time commitment. In the past, the policy action teams have rotated months in terms of hosting letter-writing campaigns (Write Here, Write Now), Congressional visits (in-person or virtual), action alerts, virtual educational policy trainings, and engagement in partners' actions or events.

**Assessment of UUSJ's Current Model: High-Level View of Challenges and Impact**

For a long time, our current model has been based on our grassroots volunteer potential and has worked *relatively* well when:

- (a) expectations are right-sized with volunteer capacity;
- (b) there is some flexibility in both what policy issues are tackled and how policy action teams engage; and
- (c) we properly assess potential opportunities and make strong decisions regarding when to take a unique leadership role on an issue, and when to be a supportive ally.

However, there are times when we are scattered, and also times when it is not clear whether our work to date in certain areas is truly additive or successful in moving progressive policies forward.

UUSJ is occupying an unusual space as the federal advocacy wing for an entire denomination across the country, but has not been able to expand the number of UUs or UU congregations outside the DMV area in a substantial way into the work. There are a small number of congregations outside of the DMV that regularly engage in the organization's "*Write Here, Write Now*" campaigns, and the educational programs on specific policy issues are usually attended by anywhere from 50-200 people (many outside the DMV areas). But overall, the majority of volunteers engaging in the policy action teams and participating in the work are UUs that live in the DMV area.

For those that are engaged in the volunteer work of the individual policy action teams, the results have been mixed. We have seen tremendous contributions and progress result in the work of the Immigration Justice Policy Action Team, due largely to the presence of consistent, committed passionate volunteers that are part of this team, who also include a number of legal and subject matter experts with strong contacts on Capitol Hill and with immigration justice partners. On the other end of the spectrum, we have been challenged in recruiting new leadership for the Environmental Justice and Economic Justice teams, though these groups have managed to continue to engage as allies on a number of issues, and have engaged on key legislative issues throughout the year.

**Discussion**

*Where do We Go in the Future? Where do We Deploy Our Limited Resources for Greatest Impact? What is Our "Brand" that Distinguishes us as a Leader in this Work?*

Playing a leadership role as a national organization in this space requires us to revisit our model and determine how to use limited volunteer and staff resources for maximum impact. There is a careful balance to strike – and

tension that exists – in expanding awareness of and engagement in our work, and simultaneously assuring we have the proper resources in place to achieve what we commit to do. Many people still do not know who UUSJ is or what we do, and there may also be a lack of understanding of any expertise or unique leadership perspective we bring to the table separate and distinct from other more well-known UU entities. And yet, UUSJ is the only UU organization putting boots on the ground on Capitol Hill year round and it is that niche that needs to be elevated with UUs across the country.

There are times when it is more appropriate for UUSJ to show up as an ally in the work, which could take the form of signing onto a letter with other organizations, participating in coalition actions and meetings, and galvanizing our advocates to support an action alert or request made by a partnering organization. We should continue to build strategic relationships with communities disproportionately impacted by unjust federal policies and the national organizations that represent their voices. In developing meaningful relationships with strategic partners, we continue to build the trust and recognition that we are a denomination – and organization – that shows up when called upon.

At the same time that our work is gaining increased recognition from strategic partners, there is still a lack of understanding or acknowledgement of UUSJ's work and impact among UUs and UU congregations. Additionally, there is an interest by some on the UUSJ Board to position UUSJ as a leader in a few niche areas.

One of the questions we need to ask ourselves is, “Do we want to grow into something more than what we’ve been?” And if the answer is yes, then we need to define in very clear terms what we want to achieve in the federal government relations space that is different than what we’ve done up to this point.

Another question we need to consider is whether the policy priority areas we have had for a few years still make sense, and whether a policy action team needs to be dismantled, replaced by another policy action team, consolidated with one or more issues, etc.

At this point the Board and Executive leadership needs to discuss and make a determination on the direction it would like for UUSJ to pursue in 2022:

1. Option One would be to maintain the status quo in terms of our Policy Action Teams for 2022, and continue our current focus on the four policy action teams we have as well as the flexibility in the strategies and expectations among each of these groups.
2. Option Two would be to re-examine the existing policy action teams and make some changes to right-size the work with our current volunteer interest and capacity, while simultaneously standardizing some of the processes, strategies and expectations of the policy action teams so that they are all delivering a consistent set of actions, activities, and products. There has been a general consensus that decreasing the number of policy action teams from four to three would help right-size the number of issues the organization is undertaking with the number of volunteers willing to work on the topics. But how to organize the policy action teams continues to be an area where a consensus recommendation among the PARC has not come to fruition. Some examples that have been discussed include:
  - (a) Consolidating the Economic and Environmental Justice Groups to create a new justice policy action team focused on promoting public policies that lead to more equitable economic and environmental outcomes for all people and the Earth (could be a “Preservation over Profit” type action team).
  - (b) Creating a “Fighting Systemic Injustice” policy action team, which could include “A” above, but also may include other issues that marginalize people of color (i.e., education system, or criminal justice, or housing, etc.).
  - (c) Adding a Separate Racial Justice Policy Action Team, OR embedding racial justice into each of the policy action teams.
3. Option Three would be consolidating our existing efforts toward a more narrowly defined set of policy priorities centered under one national campaign that will bring UUs into the work at a national

scale. For example, bringing together our portfolio into a “Breaking Down Systemic Injustice” campaign, or simply focusing on just one of our policy areas, i.e. Voting Rights, or Climate Justice, etc. If we did this, we could partner with **and** differentiate UUSJ from UUA or others as the “federal arm” on the specific issue chosen, and could claim that space and dig deeply into mobilizing UUs to act at the federal level in a way that supplements existing community-based activism that UUA has been pushing in their organizing work.

**Request/Recommendations:**

The PARC has not come to any consensus recommendations on what is the best path for UUSJ to take, but there were some notable areas of agreement that are important for the Board to consider:

- UUSJ must continue to use the policy action teams to support our three-pronged approach to the work: Education, Advocacy, and Witness.
- UUSJ must right-size the work with the bandwidth and capacity of the volunteers and paid staff that are available.
- Strategic partnerships and being a strong ally in our work is critically important to our mission.
- Distinguishing UUSJ’s “brand” from other national UU organizations, and developing new strategies for galvanizing and engaging more UUs in our work, is also mission-critical. Part of this will require a focus on communications/marketing, and part of this will require making modifications and strengthening our internal approach and processes to the work.
- We need to emphasize UUSJ’s advocacy experience through more frequent, regular, and targeted trainings (i.e. educational webinars) to the broader UU network on how to conduct advocacy in any of UUSJ’s priority areas (seeking a small group of volunteers perhaps drawn from the past Advocacy Corps to support staff on this).

It is very important that the Board provide feedback to the PARC and also engage with the Executive Director and each other to develop a consensus strategy on how to move forward in the short-term and longer-term with this work. UUSJ’s approach to federal policy and advocacy will centrally influence our ongoing strategies related to membership, development, and communications.