

Strengthening Our Prophetic Voice: Social Justice at UUC

Background: Our Vision and Strategic Plan

On the threshold of our second century, University Unitarian Church adopted a mission and vision statement and a strategic plan in 2011-2012. That plan, and the extensive discernment process that generated it, identified UUC's social justice program as an area of strength, pride, and also opportunity for growth.

From our **vision statement**:

- ❖ We will vocally and actively oppose injustice and stand in prophetic judgment of all that would diminish the equality and dignity of human beings or harm the web of life. We seek partnership with those who share our goals and creative dialogue with those who challenge us in our search for larger truths.
- ❖ We will be responsible stewards of the gifts we hold in trust, endeavoring to leave a generous and sustainable legacy for those who come after us.

From the **strategic goals and outcomes**:

While we value the long legacy of social justice work in UUC's history, we also realize that new expressions, strategies and partners are needed to meet the issues of our time. We should encourage individuals to advocate/work for justice in personal ways as well as strengthen our collective voice and effort as a congregation.

- ❖ **Goal:** All people and groups at UUC are called on and empowered to engage in justice work as a responsibility of their UU faith.
- ❖ Some of the **desired outcomes** that relate to this goal:
 - Individuals and groups in the church are called to express their UU faith through involvement in service/justice work connected with UUC initiatives and partnerships in the larger community.
 - Individuals and groups work for justice as an expression of gratitude for the gift of life.
 - When justice issues requiring immediate witness are identified, church leadership is empowered to engage the congregation in action.
 - People feel that their own multicultural awareness, sensitivity and competence are nurtured as spiritual practices.
 - People who participate in Sunday worship and other church activities experience a richer balance between contemplative and activist dimensions of their lives.
 - All persons who participate in the life of UUC feel their experience is deepened as a result of covenants of mutual responsibility both in small groups and with the larger UUC community.

Even before the strategic plan was approved, the Social Justice Steering Committee began looking at ways to evolve the social justice program to align with the aspirations that were being heard in the discernment process. They focused on better aligning the structures of the social justice program with two strategic plan outcomes:

- *Individuals and groups in the church are called to express their UU faith through involvement in service/justice work connected with UUC initiatives and partnerships in the larger community.*
- *When justice issues requiring immediate witness are identified, church leadership is empowered to engage the congregation in action.*

The result of this work is a set of three recommendations.

1. Define **priorities** for our justice work, to better articulate what we stand for and have greater impact.
2. Establish explicit structures and practices for **taking positions on social justice issues** so we can be clearer and more responsive.
3. Be more **flexible in structuring and supporting social justice ministries** for the varied kinds of work we're called to do.

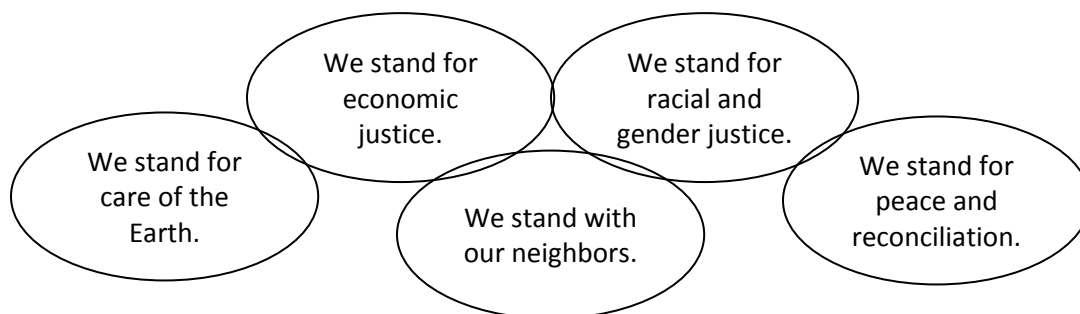
This work is informed by and connected with the work of a Strategic Implementation Team charged with Justice as Spiritual Practice. That team is focused on the strategic outcomes relating to integrating justice/service work with spiritual growth, balancing activist and contemplative dimensions of life, and multicultural competence. (To implement the strategic plan, eight Implementation Teams were convened to undertake the next level of discernment and recommendations. Each team works with a lead staff member and is accountable to a set of outcome statements from the strategic plan. Their charge is to develop recommendations in their area of work.)

Recommendation 1:**Meeting the issues of our time: Declaring what we stand for**

There are many pressing justice issues in the world, and we can't attend to all of them. When we try to stand for everything, our efforts and our voice are fragmented, and we can end up standing for nothing. By articulating what we stand for, we can have a more cohesive voice and stronger impact.

UU Ministers Deborah Holder and Meck Groot have described a social justice approach that they call Congregationally-Based Justice Ministry. By "congregationally based," they mean that the justice ministry *is grounded in the congregation's mission, and manifests the congregation's call and purpose*. This path is owned by the congregation, and is chosen through the discernment and decision-making processes about mission and purpose. Holder and Groot view majority voting on social justice issues as a "weak substitute" for discernment. Ministry connects social change with individual and collective transformation. As such, it is reflected in all aspects of congregational life: faith formation, pastoral care, worship, governance, social events, use of space, budget, and communication.

What stands does UUC take in response to our call to justice? We propose defining a few enduring **pillars** – stands that we take with deep roots that will likely stand the test of time. After listening to the congregation and studying our history, we propose five pillars.



Four of these are issue-based pillars. They are enduring, long-term aspirations. Societies may always struggle with these aspirations, though we hope to someday see them realized. For each pillar, a **statement of focus** defines the current manifestations of injustice that we see, and the moral call that we hear most strongly. Reviewed and revised every three to five years, these focus statements can help us prioritize and evaluate our efforts: *How close to our pillars does this activity or opportunity fall? Would it help us make progress on our statement of focus?* In the spirit of discernment, the pillars and focus statements should reflect the concerns expressed by the congregation in various ways – in conversations and feedback, and in where the congregation shows up to put its energy.

As we work to change the underlying systems that create injustice, there's also always a need to care for the hurts of the world. So we also contribute to efforts that address pressing human needs. Through ministries that **stand with our neighbors**, we share resources that we have in abundance with those who are in need. Because this is to some degree responsive work, it does not lend itself as well to focus statements. However we know that we do this work best through collaborative efforts in our neighborhood and our denomination.

Each of the pillars should have strong lay leadership, for example two co-leads, who are responsible for growing the congregation's work in that area, supporting leaders and groups, building partnerships, and assessing new opportunities and ideas. These co-leads could collectively constitute the Social Justice Steering Committee.

We stand for care of the Earth.

We will focus on protecting the natural systems that sustain life, and mitigating the impacts of unsustainable behavior. Our faith’s longstanding spiritual call to stewardship of the Earth has truly become a moral imperative, part of our covenant with future generations. Our current consumption patterns require the land and water of 1.5 Earths, which means our planet can’t regenerate the resources that sustain life. Climate change caused by fossil fuel consumption is already doing irreversible damage. Many environmental problems disproportionately affect people of color and those who are vulnerable, and increasing resource scarcity is a historical source of societal violence.

We stand for economic justice.

We will focus on restoring the dignity and economic viability of work, and ensuring equity in how society meets basic human needs and pays for the common good. Research shows that everyone is worse off in societies with high economic inequality and low social mobility. Yet economic inequality has grown to a scale unseen since the Great Depression. Wages from work have stagnated for over 30 years, while wealth and income have become intensely concentrated in a tiny slice of the population. Disparities are greater and more entrenched for people of color. As more people struggle to make ends meet, our social safety net programs have been dramatically cut despite historically low tax rates on wealth and commerce.

We stand for racial and gender justice.

We will focus on dismantling structures that perpetuate inequity based on race and gender. Racism and gender bias alienate us from one another, perpetuate systemic inequities, and touch the well-being of all. Today, people of color are criminalized and dehumanized through racial profiling, unequal prosecution and sentencing, mass incarceration, exploitation of immigrants, and legalized discrimination against people with felony convictions. Disenfranchisement limits communities’ ability to challenge policies through political processes. Gender justice addresses inequities experienced by women, girls, and LGBTQ people, often in a racialized context. Equal rights in marriage and reproductive choice are longstanding Unitarian Universalist priorities.



The pillars and current focus of our social justice work

We stand with our neighbors.

As we work to change the underlying systems that create injustice, there’s always a need to care for the hurts of the world. We contribute to efforts that address pressing human needs, through collaborative efforts in our neighborhood and our denomination.

We stand for peace and reconciliation.

We will focus on reducing violence and being a force for healing in the world. Violence and war leave deep damage and scars abroad and at home. Our society has become intensely polarized, and we seek more civil and respectful ways of finding solutions to problems. To deepen both our spiritual and social justice work, we want to become more compassionate, more skilled in working with polarization, and more adept at resolving conflict and fostering restorative justice.

Recommendation 2:**Vocal and prophetic: How we take positions**

We want to be bolder and more responsive in our witness and action. When we act, we are often committing ourselves publicly to some sort of position. Our democratic tradition has sometimes been interpreted to mean either that we must hold a congregational vote in order to take a position, or conversely that every member of the congregation is equally empowered to speak on behalf of the church. The result can be paralysis, the inability to speak with one voice at all, which is frustrating for a faith community that sees bold social action as one of its defining characteristics. Many UU congregations struggle with these inherent tensions.

What do we mean by “taking a position?” Taking a position can be narrowly construed to mean formally adopting or issuing a written statement, but UUC has not done that in recent years. We can be perceived as taking a position through a lot of other things that we do regularly: signing on to a campaign, signing a letter in support of or opposition to something, testifying before an elected body, appearing at a media or community event, permitting signature-gathering or yard sign distribution at church, providing people or resources to some endeavor, co-sponsoring an event, hanging a banner on our building. Joining coalitions is another way of taking a position, because joining a coalition implies support for its agenda. Coalitions often cut across issue areas and thus are not squarely in the charge of a specific social justice group, and they can also entail a financial commitment. One thing we *don't* do is take positions on political candidates.

In recent years, UUC's approach to these types of decisions has been multifaceted. Consistent with our bylaws, official social justice groups can take positions in the name of their group, but not UUC. They can pay dues or event sponsorships out of their modest annual budget. On many occasions, UUC as an institution has signed onto a campaign (e.g. Washington United for Marriage), supported a piece of legislation (e.g. on wage theft), joined coalitions (NW Equity Consortium, Sound Alliance, Faith Action Network), or co-sponsored events. Those decisions have been made through joint consultation among the social justice coordinator, senior minister, Social Justice Steering Committee, and knowledgeable lay leaders. This consultative process gives weight to UUC's past history on the issue, any formal denominational positions, and the perspectives of our partners and coalitions. Decisions about dues or other costs are made within the framework of the operating budget, in which the social justice coordinator is responsible for managing a program budget that is adopted through the annual budgeting process involving staff, finance committee, board and ultimately a vote of the congregation.

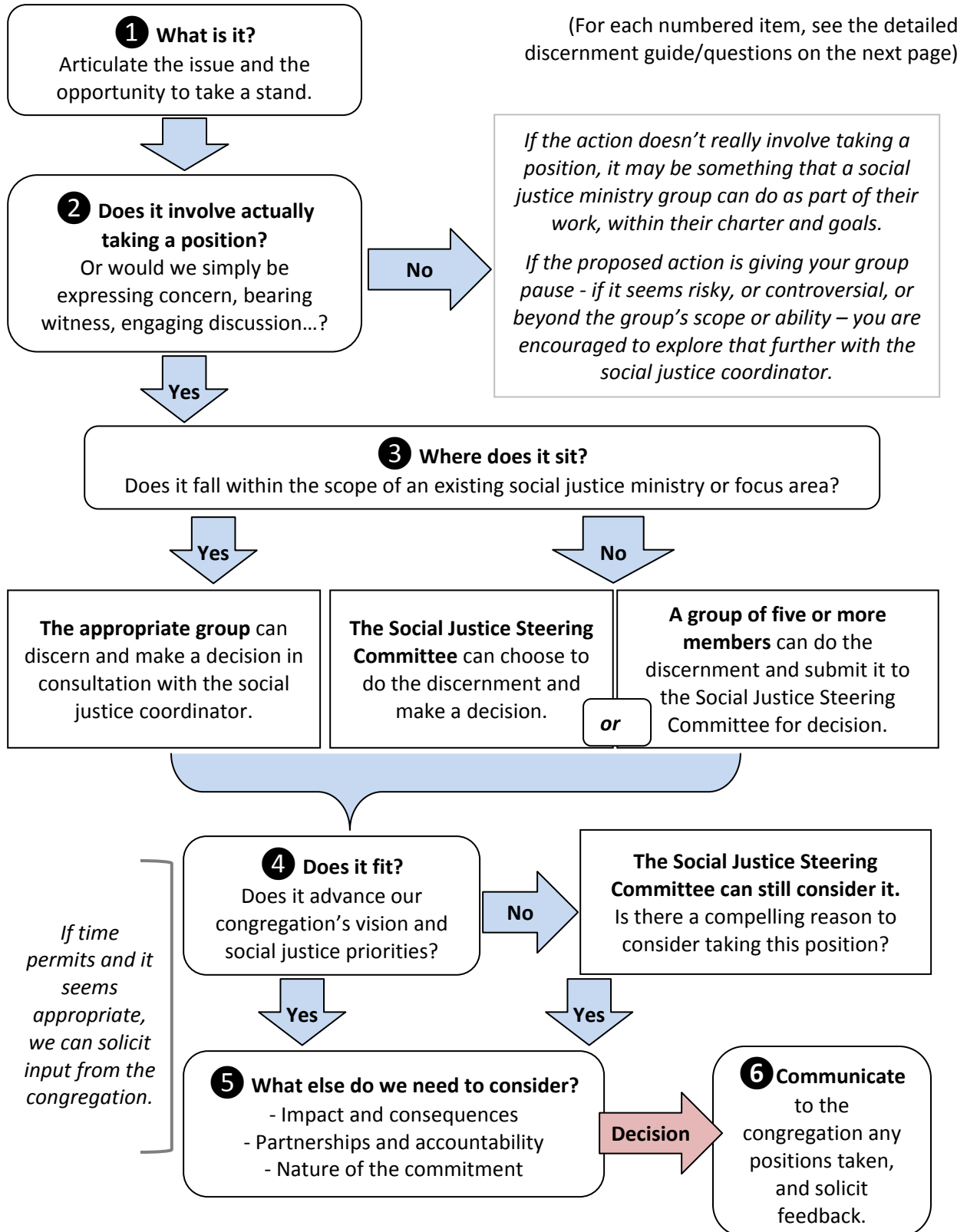
Following is a proposal for a refined process, which seeks to do several things.

- Build on what we do now that works.
- Give more clarity to what it means to “take a position.”
- Provide discernment guidance on what to consider in taking a position.
- Allow us to take positions more often in the name of the congregation rather than a subgroup.
- Incorporate the proposed areas of social justice focus.
- Empower our knowledgeable leaders in areas of long-term social justice commitments.
- Acknowledge that these decisions are judgments, not formulas, and ensure built-in transparency and feedback from the congregation

A set of detailed questions for discernment and vetting follows the high-level outline.



Process for taking positions



Discernment questions for taking social justice positions

Regardless of who is making the decision, there should be a cohesive frame for considering opportunities. This is a discernment process. Though this list of questions and considerations is long, it is not intended to require a lengthy discernment process – just a *thoughtful* process that is applied in a consistent manner.

1. What is the call or the opportunity to take a stand?

- a. What is the social justice issue (or issues) at stake?
- b. What would UUC do, specifically?

2. Does it involve actually taking a position?

- a. Are we simply expressing concern about a problem, attesting to its impacts, urging parties to hear and consider concerns, or participating in open discussion? Such expressions of concern may not commit our congregation to a specific position. For example: *We urge the city to meet with affected residents and hear their concerns. We are concerned about the impact of rising housing costs on our neighbors. We attest to the hardship felt by families separated by deportation. We are co-sponsoring an event to hear about possible solutions.*
- b. Would we be advocating for a specific action or outcome? Would we be staking out a clear claim about the source of, or the desired response to, a specific problem?
- c. What would we be doing? Would any of the following actions be involved? These **would** generally be considered a way of taking a position.
 - Signing on to a campaign (committing our name/logo)
 - Testifying in favor of, or opposition to, a specific action, ordinance or bill in front of a city or county council, state legislature, or other public body
 - Advocating a position at another public event in the name of UUC or one of our groups
 - Signing onto a letter of support or position statement created by another organization or coalition
 - Writing and issuing our own statement of position or support, to appear publicly
 - Putting a banner or sign up on our property
 - Formally joining a coalition
 - Collecting signatures or distributing signage related to a referendum, initiative or petition drive
 - Nonviolent civil disobedience

3. Where does the decision sit?

- a. Does it fall within the scope of an existing social justice ministry?
 - ▶ If so, the discernment and decision should follow the appropriate path for that type of ministry.
 - Exploratory Ministry: Would not normally take positions. Exceptions start with staff.
 - Rapid-Response Ministry: Can take positions as UUC within their narrow scope, in consultation with staff.
 - Growth Ministry: Core leadership is empowered to take positions and join coalitions in the name their group, or as UUC in consultation with staff.
 - Sustaining Ministry: Core leadership and staff are empowered to take positions on behalf of UUC.

- ▶ If not:
 - The Social Justice Steering Committee can choose to do the required discernment and make a decision, in consultation with staff. This should start with an assessment by the co-leads for the relevant social justice pillar(s).
 - A group of five or more members can do the required discernment and submit an assessment/recommendation to the Social Justice Steering Committee for decision.

4. How well does it advance our congregational vision, values, and social justice priorities?

- a. Which social justice pillar(s) is it close to?
- b. What opportunities does it offer to advance our current focus statement for that pillar?
- c. What is our congregation's past history on this issue? What is our sense of the congregation's point of view on the specific question or opportunity at hand?

5. What else do we need to consider?

- a. Timing: By when is a decision or commitment needed? If it's time-sensitive, why?
- b. Impact and consequences:
 - Why do we think that taking this position will be effective? What do we believe it will accomplish?
 - Look at what is being proposed or advocated through the lens of all of the other social justice pillars. Are there implications that should be considered? For example, when considering a position in the area of climate change, are there racial or economic justice implications that we should weigh? When taking up an economic issue, are there environmental implications we should consider? If we're not sure, who could help us think about that?
 - How would this help us to strengthen relationships? How might it negatively impact our relationships?
 - Do we foresee implications for UUC's image or reputation as a result of taking this position, or not taking it?
- c. Partnerships and accountability:
 - If there is a sponsoring organization or coalition, who is it? What is our history/relationship with them?
 - Are there organizations or efforts led by people who are directly affected by this problem? What is their position and their role on this issue/action?
 - What is the position or perspective of other organizations that are active and knowledgeable about this issue?
 - Does the UUA have a position or campaign on this issue?
- d. The nature of the commitment:
 - Should this be done in the name of the UUC congregation, or a group of the church?
 - Who would need to be involved from UUC, and how?
 - What financial commitment is required/requested?

6. Communicate with the congregation and solicit feedback.

- a. If time permits and it seems appropriate/helpful, you can solicit input before the decision is made.
- b. Regardless, the position should be shared with the congregation through the usual communication tools such as web site, Gateway e-news, Facebook.

Recommendation 3:***New structures and strategies: How we organize our work***

We need flexible ways to do justice work that can engage people in different kinds of issues, campaigns and approaches. Social justice work on any one issue can be a long arc. We often need to start by educating ourselves, and researching the opportunities for making change. As we engage in action, we become more knowledgeable, more connected to community partners, more confident in taking a stand, and better known for our work. Some activities require sustained education and organizing, while others require a rapid response. Our current approach to forming justice ministries is too one-size-fits-all. We would be better served by having different ministry structures with expectations suited to the varied kinds of work.

As we think about our social justice ministries, it is also helpful to articulate a perspective on *service* and *justice work*. Our strategic plan talks about both. How are they similar, how do they differ, and how do they each fit in our social justice program?

- ❖ **Justice work** is about challenging the status quo to change the conditions and behaviors that create and sustain injustice. Because the work is systemic, it is ongoing, and rarely completed with a single project. Justice work challenges the privilege enjoyed by those who benefit from the status quo. It may feel threatening to those who benefit from privilege, and powerful to those who do not.
- ❖ **Service** is about attending to the present, pressing needs of people and natural systems. Service is usually more bounded in time and purpose, like a project. If we approach service as charity, or “fixing,” we may serve to keep things the way they are, masking or bandaging a problem while keeping the root causes in place. We can create relationships of inequality and distance rather than equality and wholeness. So as Unitarian Universalists, we seek an approach to service that *does* challenge the status quo, and that deeply embodies our principle of equal worth and dignity of every person.

How do we integrate service and justice work in a way that lives out our UU values?

- Our service work should support our justice goals. Service can be an entry point to systemic justice work.
- Both service and justice work must be humble and creative in asking what is truly needed. They should be done with accountability to the experiences of people directly experiencing need or injustice.
- Both service and justice work happen in relationship. Service is personal, and facilitates a direct relationship. You have something that you can give, and you are enriched by giving; you share in another’s suffering and joy. Justice work involves deep listening, sharing stories, learning from others, and working in partnership.
- Service work and projects can be a vibrant part of any ministry – and, we probably want the weight of our efforts to lean towards systemic justice work.

With that context, UUC would be well served to have four different types of ministries. By formally naming the different types of work and stages of development, we can set clearer expectations and offer better support for the lay leadership in our social justice program.



Our Social Justice Ministries

We're getting started: Exploratory Ministry

Test, educate, research, organize, discern. When we begin to engage (or re-engage) with an issue, we focus on educating ourselves, gaging congregational interest, surfacing leadership, exploring ways to take action, and discerning whether/how to commit to sustained action.

- Leadership: At least two people willing to spearhead.
- Activities: Information and organizing events, speakers and films, outreach in the congregation, research. Discern whether/how to organize a longer-term ministry, and if so, develop goals and activities. Wouldn't generally take public positions.
- Short-term charter approved by staff or "pillar leads."

We know we're committed: Advancing Ministry

Educate, engage, partner, take stands, act. When we've discerned our commitment to action and developed a core leadership group, the work shifts to actively engaging the congregation and working with partners.

- Leadership: Core team of at least five people.
- Activities: Organizing multiple, ideally multigenerational, opportunities for the congregation to learn and take action. Participating in collaborations and forming partnerships.
- Core leadership is empowered to take positions and join coalitions in the name their group, or as UUC in consultation with staff.
- Annual charter, approved by Steering Committee.

We're called to move quickly: Rapid-Response Ministry

Educate, take positions, mobilize. Sometimes there is a need to organize specific rapid campaigns or public witness, or for immediate service work. The issue is focused and clearly within our priorities, and doesn't need much discernment. There are people willing and able to organize.

- Leadership: At least two people willing to spearhead.
- Activities: Coffee hour tabling, signature-gathering, phone banking, "talk to your neighbor" trainings, speaker events, service projects, attendance at public media or witness events. Can take positions within defined scope, in consultation with staff.
- Short term charter approved by staff in consultation with "pillar leads" and/or Steering Committee.

We're established leaders: Sustaining Ministry

Partner, connect, mobilize, take stands. Once we've been working on an issue for a long time, we develop knowledgeable leadership, well-known positions, and established partners. We focus on connecting individuals and UUC with what's happening in the community, and using our established moral voice effectively.

- Leadership: At least two people to serve as the congregation's "hub" and representatives.
- Activities: Participate in coalitions and partnerships, publicize and mobilize congregational participation for action/events initiated by partners, connect interested members with what's happening. Core leadership and staff are empowered to take positions on behalf of UUC.
- Annual charter, approved by Steering Committee.