

Congregational Actions from GA 2020

This is a part of an ongoing series about discerning what part action plays in our mission. Today I am speaking about global actions that are suggested by the Unitarian Universalist Association via resolutions from delegates like me to General Assembly.

There are two types of actions allowed to be proposed at General Assembly. The first is Actions of Immediate Witness and the second is Congregational Study Action Issues.

Actions of Immediate Witness, called AIWs, are proposed, added to the agenda and accepted by delegates all in one General Assembly. This is what the UUA says about AIWs:

General Assembly offers delegates the opportunity to participate in the high-energy Action of Immediate Witness (AIW) process. People come impassioned on a wide range of issues, engage one another in conversation, craft proposed statements, sign petitions, debate the issues, vote, and bring to life the values of Unitarian Universalism, all within the span of one General Assembly (GA). ... an AIW does not carry the full authority of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA); rather, it expresses the conscience and carries the authority of the delegates at the GA at which it is passed. ...[because it is] initiated by individual delegates or groups of delegates and move through their entire creation and adoption process during one GA. Nonetheless, AIWs are the product of considerable thought, collaboration, and commitment. The AIW process allows Unitarian Universalists to respond quickly to social issues deemed urgent. Adopted AIWs are used by congregations in local efforts and empower Multicultural Growth & Witness to take action and recommend action through other departments of the UUA and other Unitarian Universalist groups.

[End Quote]

The most important part of that description is that an AIW does not carry the authority of the UUA but carries the authority of the delegates to the General Assembly at which it passed. That means that you won't be getting any emails from the UUA or UUSC or the New England Region staff reminding you to do

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something. We must plan and do something on our own as a congregation or recruiting other congregations or organizations to help us.

Here are some examples of the word action, immediate and witness which I have seen or heard about at past General Assemblies. These are not all AIWs.

In Providence in 2014, my 1st time at GA and as a delegate, I was sitting at a table waiting for friends to have lunch when a man sat next to me. Being good UUs, we started to talk. When another man sat next to him it was clear that they were partners. The first asked the second if he had arranged for money to be sent from their congregation to the Quakers. We had just passed an AIW to support the Quakers who were running an underground railroad to get LGBYQ people out of Uganda where they were being killed. So their action was as immediate as it could be.

Continuing to talk to them I found out that they were married and from Arkansas. Now this was prior to Marriage Equality, so I asked where they had been married because Arkansas did not allow same sex marriage. Arkansas did indeed have a law outlawing same sex marriage. But there was an old law that was going to be struck down by the courts at one time. Knowing that they would not have much notice and that the legislature would immediately pass a new law, they prepared with many other couples, to get the paperwork done, have witnesses and a minister on hand and get the ceremony performed on the day the court ruled. And yes they made it on that one day that they had to do it. Immediate action oh yes.

Not every GA has AIWs. In advance of the New Orleans GA in 2017, the local planners wanted no AIWs. So in Columbus OH, at GA in 2016 a vote was taken to remove the AIW process from the next years' GA. In place of AIWs the New Orleans people wanted the participants at GA to visit the 9th Parish. A parish in New Orleans is like a county. The 9th Parish had been devastated by Katrina and they wanted people to see how it was still in shambles. So without knowing anything else, who can tell me something about the 9th Parish? Yes, that is the poor section where mainly people of color lived or still live.

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If you heard my talk on General Assembly last September during a service on the theme “Belonging”, you know that I was not happy to attend GA in Kansas City in 2018. However, one really interesting thing happened. A bunch of us who were working Accessibility were sitting around talking in our spot at the convention center which was near the windows to a main street. So we had a good view of traffic. As we were talking to a member of the safety team, a car crash happened right outside. She never hesitated and ran out immediately to offer help. A car had run a stop sign and broadsided an oncoming car. The driver who ran the stop sign got out of his car and started yelling at the driver of the other car. The police arrived and took the part of the white male driver of the stop sign runner. Meanwhile, the UU safety women deescalated by standing between the drivers, back to the white driver and police man. And she talked calmly to the black women driver of the other car. She made sure that her young children in the back seat who needed to go to the hospital were taken care of and that their mother would be able to go to get them. Action, immediate and urgent happened.

In Spokane at GA last year, this is what I witnessed one evening. A rally had been arranged for the attendees to support the local UU Church members and others to stop the local powers from building a new prison. The local powers had been trying to expand the prison system and been opposed by local groups for 10 years running. Action and witness in support of a member congregation happened.

These are examples of actions taken because we believe in our principles and are important for us all to know about. There is no accountability for AIWs or reports on successes or failures to make a difference in the world. Each congregation is responsible for deciding what to do.

How do AIWs come into being at General Assembly.

Each year at General Assembly up to 6 AIWs are allowed on the agenda and up to 3 are accepted by vote of the delegates to be recommended to all congregations for action. A rather interesting thing happened in 2018 which have not seen before. After debate and voting on 3 AIWs, a resolution from the delegates was

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passed suggesting that indeed all 6 of the proposed AIWs on the agenda were worthy of congregational action.

This was a difficult year for generating AIWs because of the lack of people standing around talking about actions that they thought were important to bring to the assembled delegates. Two AIWs were proposed and accepted. These are

Address 400 years of White Supremacist Colonialism

and

Amen to Uprising: A Commitment and Call to Action

Normally speaking, an AIW contains 3 parts: a statement about why we as UUs are interested in working on this issue; the issue and the actions we can take.

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Address 400 Years of White Supremacist Colonialism

Part 1 Why we are interested

2020 marks the 400th anniversary of the first Mayflower voyage, transporting Pilgrims from England to the North American Atlantic Coast.

Part 2 The Issue

Many Unitarian Universalist congregations uncritically trace their origins to the Pilgrims' "Free Church" tradition – a mythos that sanctifies white supremacy and depends upon erasure of Indigenous peoples. (also part of Why)

White settler-colonialism is extractive, expansive, and based in violent patriarchy – resulting in a preponderance of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and creating unsustainable conditions for all living beings.

The Plymouth Plantation (a for-profit corporation with stockholders in London) established the corporate pattern of using police to extract resources from Indigenous peoples, a pattern repeated at Standing Rock nation and other Indigenous nations that resist pipeline projects and other extractive industries.

The Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, whose ancestors' lands were invaded by the Pilgrims in 1620, and who have inhabited and stewarded parts of present-day Massachusetts for more than 12,000 years, came under attack from the Trump administration in March of this year and were notified that their reservation lands were being terminated.

The administration continues in this and other attacks on Indigenous peoples' lands, sacred sites, and sovereignty – even as a federal district judge has temporarily blocked the taking of the Mashpee Wampanoag's lands.

Part 3 Actions

Continue to gather in solidarity with the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe, Standing Rock nation, and all Indigenous peoples struggling to preserve their lands, waters, peoples, sacred sites, and sovereignty.

Continue to push for release of Indigenous Water Protectors from prisons, end public policies that criminalize resistance to extractive colonialism, and adopt a vision of prison abolition.

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Work nationally, statewide, and locally on public policy that is decolonizing – such as establishing Indigenous Peoples Day, including Indigenous peoples' histories in public education curricula, and eliminating racist monuments, flags, and mascots.

Work to stop and reverse ecological harm in genuine collaboration with and taking leadership from communities most consistently and harshly impacted by extractive exploitation of land, water, air, and all beings.

Research, identify, and acknowledge the Indigenous peoples historically and/or currently connected with the land occupied by congregations, and find ways to act in solidarity with or even partner with those Indigenous peoples.

Examine practices relative to Indigenous peoples, particularly the narratives regarding UU origins and US holidays including Thanksgiving.

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Amen to Uprising: A Commitment and Call to Action

Part 1 Why we are interested

Unitarian Universalist congregations covenant to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations, we proclaim loudly, Black Lives Matter!

Part 2 The Issue

Many of our faith communities have been complicit in creating the society and systems we currently live within (also part of Why)

Police departments and officers across the United States have taken the lives of Black people, including George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Nina Pop, Rayshard Brooks and so many others.

Modern policing in the United States is a continuation of what began as slave patrols and have been used to control and harm Black people for generations

Anti-racist protestors have been met by violence of an increasingly militarized police force

Our ancient and evolving Universalist theologies call us to bring an end to all hells that exist and calls for accountability and transformation, not punishment.

Part 3 Actions

as Unitarian Universalists we commit to shaping a world in which love and justice may thrive, where Black leadership, creativity, and resilience is celebrated while Black grief is honored and held with love. We will use our voices to amplify the demands of Black Lives Matter, Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (BLUU), Diverse and Revolutionary Unitarian Universalist Multicultural Ministries (DRUUMM), Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100), Undocublack, and other organizations by and for Black people

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We will create systemic change within our congregations by:

- Revising agreements, and policies to create alternatives to policing (including developing plans for safety and accountability);
- Choosing not to involve police departments, and deactivating security systems that mobilize police response when triggered;
- Engaging in creative transformative justice processes;
- Pursuing abolition of policing systems within the congregations and institutions in which we have power;
- Moving congregational and institutional resources and endowments towards Black liberation organizing and long-term redistribution; and
- Rooting ourselves in theologies of liberation and abolition.

We will support uprisings with spiritual and material resources, serving as places of respite during protests, funding movements through congregational budgets, and providing spiritual care for protestors and survivors of police and state terror.

We will advocate in the wider world by:

- Following the example of institutions like the Minneapolis Public School Board in ending contracts with police, and directly intervening alongside communities experiencing policing and ICE raids;
- Joining in widespread calls for immediate defunding of police departments, ending immigration detention, and abolishing ICE; and
- Advocating for reinvestment in communities that have been victimized by policing and other forms of white supremacy.

We commit to making our congregations and communities authentically multicultural, multiracial, anti-oppressive spaces that dismantle anti-Blackness; resisting a culture of perfectionism, and repairing our mistakes; and given that building the *Beloved Community* in an ongoing and ever evolving process, we commit to staying in this work for the long haul.

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Because there are no reports of success or failure or more likely a mix of both as a result of any of these methods of doing AIWs the only outcome is what each congregation chooses to do.

If you want to change the world, you need to be more organized and have a better plan for that. And so I move on to talk about Congregational Study/Action Issues called CSAIs.

This would have been a year to start a new CSAI. What follows is a statement from the Commission on Social Witness.

The Commission on Social Witness, in consultation with the UUA Administration, UUA legal counsel, UUA Board of Trustees and the General Assembly Planning Committee, has decided not to admit a new Congregational Study Action Issue (CSAI) for the 2020-2024 period.

The Commission's charge is to oversee the UUA process of social witness, particularly the adoption of Statements of Conscience that are developed through the Congregational Study/Action Process: "The purpose of the Congregational Study/Action Process is to provide the member congregations of the Association with an opportunity to mobilize energy, ideas, and resources around a common issue. The end result will be a deeper understanding of our religious position on the issue, a clear statement of Association policy as expressed in a Statement of Conscience, and a greater capacity for the congregations to take effective action." (See Section 4.12 UUA Statements of Conscience in the [UUA By-Laws](#).)¹

The Commissioners believe that the CSAI process will be best served at this time by concentrating our process on providing "an opportunity to mobilize energy, ideas, and resources around a common issue," and therefore delaying the addition of a new CSAI. It is within the Commission's charge to determine that, at this time, UU congregations and covenanting communities will best be served by a social witness process that allows focus and provides resources and support. Thus, in the spirit of "developing a greater capacity for congregations to take effective action," the Commission is asking member congregations and covenanting communities to focus on the current Statement of Conscience (SOC): "[Our Democracy](#)"

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Uncorrupted” and the current 2018-2021 Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI): “*Undoing Intersectional White Supremacy.*”

[End Quote]

Delegates at the 2018 General Assembly in Kansas City, MO, selected "Undoing Intersectional White Supremacy" to be the 2018-2021 Congregational Study/Action Issue (CSAI) of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) of Congregations.

The Congregational Study/Action Issue is an invitation for congregations to take a topic of concern and engage it, reflect on it, learn about it, respond to it, comment on it, and take action—each in their own way. A CSAI is NOT a statement—it is a question.

UNDOING INTERSECTIONAL WHITE SUPREMACY

Issue

Racism is fundamental to U.S. social systems. White supremacy culture operates economically, institutionally, politically, and culturally, shaping everyone's chances to live healthy, fulfilling lives. It is also the nation's most toxic export, shaping policies and practices that do profound harm to the Earth and all living things.

Grounding in Unitarian Universalism

White supremacy culture shaped everything we consider norms, which recent experience has pushed us to analyze. Sociologist Robert Bellah challenged us to make "the interdependent web of all existence the first of your principles and not the last." Decentering whiteness calls us to decenter individual dignity for our collective liberation.

Topics for Congregational Study

White supremacy operates intersectionally. Beyond black and white and interwoven with other forms of oppression, it is multiracial and intersects with issues of class and income, gender, age, ethnicity, immigration status, sexual orientation, religion, ability, and more.

- How are people socialized into various overlapping supremacy systems, creating a white dominated hetero patriarchy that serves the interests of US corporatism?
- How do different racial and economic strategies get applied to different racial groups, often disguised in coded language that pretends to be colorblind while having racialized impacts?
- How can we, as UUs, build transformative relationships of trust and accountability across race lines?

Through reflection and action, courageous conversations should foster our abilities to de-center whiteness and other "isms". At the core we must equip UUs

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to work inside and outside our congregations, building trust by following the leadership and direction of the most vulnerable in society.

Possible Congregational/Regional Actions

- provide ongoing training and education in antiracism and anti oppression on a multi- and intergenerational basis to all who wish to deepen their understanding of the impacts of intersectional white supremacy.
- build local relationships with people of color and other oppressed people, inside and outside our congregations, so that agendas and strategies for social justice efforts respond to the real vulnerabilities they face.
- mobilize UUs to participate in community organizing that is guided by accountable partnerships.

Actions can include street protest, advocacy work, resource sharing, local, regional, and national campaigns, letter-writing, community asset building, and more. The key is organizing with strategic accountability while building sustainable communities of resistance. This work should happen in the areas of environmental racism, mass incarceration and police brutality, reproductive freedom, immigration, access to quality health and education systems, and more.

Related Prior Social Witness Statements

There are few social witness statements from the last ten years that do not have implications regarding intersectional white supremacy. Here are some standouts: [Reaffirmation of Commitment to Racial Justice](#) (2016), [Support the Black Lives Matter movement](#) (2015), and [Reproductive Justice](#) (2015). Robert Bellah's 1998 Ware Lecture is another resource.

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How do CSAs come into being? It is a much different process than the one for AIWs.

Congregational Study / Action Issues, called CSAs, are brought to General Assembly after much work on the proposal. The purpose of a CSA is to produce a Statement of Conscience that will guide all of us in thinking and working on the issue.

A CSA goes thru a process that can last for 5 years. In the first church year, the CSA has to be submitted by October 1. Yes, that is about 8 months before the delegates convene for General Assembly. Why does this process take so long?

The Commission on Social Witness accepts up to 10 proposed CSAs and places them in a Congregational Poll. All of the congregations are notified, which means that I get an email telling me to vote before February 1. 25% of all congregations must vote for the poll to be valid. So that's roughly 250. If there are not enough votes then no CSAs can be put on the General Assembly agenda and the process starts again for the next year. If there are enough votes, the top 5 CSA proposals are placed on the agenda for General Assembly.

After all that, the delegates can select 1 CSA to be worked on for the next 4 years.

UUA staff produces a Resource Guide for congregations to use to participate in the Study or Actions that define the CSA. Congregations have until March 1 to submit comments on the Resource Guide and the work they did on the CSA. At that year's GA and the next year's GA, workshops are held on the CSA.

So now we get to the reason that all this work has been done. In the fourth year, a draft Statement of Conscience is written by the Commission on Social Witness. And then we the congregations have another poll. This poll asks us to comment on the draft Statement of Conscience and vote on whether to put it on the agenda for General Assembly. The same voting rules apply, 25% of the

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congregations must vote. If the poll is valid, then the CSW takes all the comments and writes a revised Statement and puts it on the agenda.

A 2/3 vote is needed to approve the Statement of Conscience or to refer it to another year of study. If it was approved a year of implementation follows ending in more workshops at the fifth and final GA.

And if you think you got all that, another CSAI cycle begins in year 2 of that process. And it may be merrily chugging along.

So how many CSAIs are currently in progress? Let's applaud those who are still following and said 1 and in normal times it would be 2.

What happens to a Statement of Conscience? In my imagination I see a dusty binder with each one carefully added. Also a link to it is put on the UUA website. The only possibility of human access to either form seems to be if a delegate returns to her congregation and tells them about it and then someone actually reads it.

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What I have been talking about is a group of issues in various stages of definition. AIWs are in rough form which requires the most definition to accomplish some goal. CSAIs have a solid amount of work behind them and require research and defined actions to formulate a set of beliefs and actions to address the underlying issues. Statements of Conscience have groups of actions geared toward individuals, congregations and groups of congregations that have been determined to work toward definite goals to alleviate whatever situations are deemed unacceptable to us as Unitarian Universalists because we believe in our 7 Principles.

Where do we fit as a congregation in this array of work to be done as agreed to by the congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association?