

Economic Justice Spotlight

Escalating Inequality Task Force of Metropolitan Detroit

Five UU congregations in the Detroit, Michigan metro area joined forces in early 2015 to form the Escalating Inequality Task Force: Beacon UU Congregation in Troy; First UU Church of Detroit; Northwest UU Church in Southfield; UU Church of Farmington, and Birmingham Unitarian Church in Bloomfield Hills.

Recognizing that while many of their fellow congregants have some understanding of economic inequality, a broader and deeper understanding of the history, complexities, and intersecting causes needed to be identified to effect meaningful change.

They started by conducting a full-day, facilitated Class Conversations Workshop, followed by book readings and discussions focused on class barriers. Economic inequality-themed Sunday services and sermons were facilitated by the task force and pastoral leadership. Sermons on economic justice and worship service activities, such as class background surveys which point to diversity within congregations, have brought the issue of escalating inequality and its social and economic determinants to the entire congregation, broadening understanding and generating discussion.

The last winter, they presented a speaker series featuring three topics from the broad spectrum of economic inequality: (1) historic and current class-based drivers of inequality, (2) how the justice system disfavors people of low or no income, and (3) the effects of structural racism on economic status and opportunity.

The Task Force publicized the public forums and facilitated engagement in legislative petition drives, while spotlighting other opportunities for congregants to voice their opinions and take action on policy initiatives to address economic inequality. Their strategy recognized that there was no silver bullet for something this complex, but as understanding of multiple facets of the issue increased, the easier it became to recognize steps to support efforts to close the economic gap and oppose actions that would make it worse.



Q&A with Chuck Collins at the Winter Speaker Series, 2016 Photo provided by Pat Hammer

The Task Force itself is composed of social justice leaders in their individual congregations. Among the leadership are congregational board members and chairs of social justice programs, as well as the activists who bring their experience to the discussion and organize the outreach and advocacy activities within each congregation.

This collaboration of shared talent and resources has facilitated their ability to reach a broader audience and has helped them break out of the tunnel vision and group think of a single congregation.

Economic justice topics are now a regular feature in congregational newsletters, social media posts and action alerts. The Task Force has created a Google Drive storage link to host Escalating Inequality Task Force information to be shared among the coalition congregations.

In addition to the Detroit area coalition, Task Force congregations are members of the Michigan UU Social Justice Network ([MUUSJN](#)). MUUSJN is coalition of 27 UU churches and fellowships statewide who work together to advocate for social justice. MUUSJN provides its members and allies with information, talking points and calls to action on statewide issues, including those related to economic justice.



*Task Force Escalating Inequality Event 2016
Photo provided by Pat Hammer.*

Individual congregations have, for many years, engaged in a variety of community service projects that treat the effects of economic injustice such as homelessness, hunger, lack of affordable housing, and disparities in K-12 education. Volunteer leaders and teams coordinate this work in UU congregations, which one could say makes for a sustainable activity as the economic gap continues to widen.

They are in the early stages of planning a project to organize members of coalition congregations by legislative districts and to provide a process and support for UUs to bring a concerted voice to legislators on critical local, state, and national issues related to economic inequality. The intent is to build relationships and rapport with legislators to influence public policy and ultimately have a positive effect on economic inequality.

The workshops and forums have enabled the Task Force to identify and welcome new leadership, which strengthens and enlivens the planning process. They've noticed, too, a gradual increase in the number of people who are "tuning in" to the reality that economic inequality is a factor in so many issues in Michigan communities.

People are asking what they can do to change the situation. This has led to actions such as:

- (1) Hosting community conversations about inclusiveness in the Cass Corridor of Detroit where people with money are moving in, bringing revenue for renewal and rebuilding, but low-income people are being excluded in the vision of "new Detroit."
- (2) Hosting a community session with the Regional Transit Authority CEO to discuss needs and plans for significant public transit improvements throughout the region to open up economic opportunity for many who are constrained by transportation access and cost.

(3) Initiating dialog with law enforcement and elected officials about the treatment of people of color, recognizing that racist actions and attitudes lead to disadvantages including a debilitating imbalance in economic opportunity.

(4) Joining with other advocacy groups demanding attention to the Flint water crisis long before it hit the national news, and also to the water shutoffs in Detroit.

(5) Collecting signatures on a petition proposing mandated earned sick time for Michigan workers.

(6) Engaging in local voter registration drives and promoting use of the absentee ballot to increase voter turnout in the current election, which, in addition to elective office at every level, has important local issues on the ballot, such as approval of a regional transportation plan for southeast Michigan.

Some congregants have commented that they like the approach of working together across five congregations because of its potential to strengthen their impact and foster connections with other UUs. Information is more readily shared about all social justice events which encourages participation in each other's activities.

They see this coalition work as both dealing with inequality issues, but also as a way to build a stronger UU community...

This article was developed in collaboration between UUJEC Co-Chair Terry Lowman and Task Force Chair Pat Hammer. Contact Pat Hammer, Escalating Inequality Task Force / Metropolitan Detroit Region patriciajhammer@gmail.com 248.644.6568 for more information on Task Force events and materials.

Additional Resources

Escalating Inequality Series Audio Recordings from Winter 2016 <http://www.uufarmington.org/inequality/>

Escalating Inequality Series Informational Flyer from Winter 2016

<http://uujec.com/Portals/0/PDFs/2016%20Winter%20Speaker%20Series%20Flyer%20final.pdf>

Flint water crisis compelled Unitarian Universalists to action

<http://www.uuworld.org/articles/flint-crisis-compelled-uu-response>

Beacon UU Congregation website: <http://www.beaconcongregation.org/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/BeaconUUC/>

First UU Church of Detroit website: <http://www.1stuu.org/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/1stUUDetroit/>

Northwest UU Church website: http://www.northwestuu.org/static_archive/index.htm

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/Northwest-Unitarian-Universalist-Church-164926493532952/>

UU Church of Farmington website: <http://www.uufarmington.org/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/UU-Farmington-Official-Unitarian-Universalist-398459356853278/>

Birmingham Unitarian Church website: <http://www.bucmi.org/>

Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/BirminghamUnitarianChurch/>

Michigan UU Social Justice Network Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/MUUSJN/>