

UU's Thaw in Chicago Over Inequality Flames

by Laura Dely

One hundred thirty nine UUs from 14 states gathered at the UU Church of Evanston, Il the weekend of Feb. 20th for workshops, key note speakers, and networking on the theme of Escalating Inequality, the new CSAI adopted by the 2014 GA. The event was organized by the UUs for a Just Economic Community (UUJEC).

Attendees heard Rev. Dr. David Breeden, Senior Minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis and UUA Commission on Social Witness Board Member, speak about his childhood poverty and his opportunity as a white male to make it to a comfortable middle class life, grabbing his membership in the "White Club" along the way. He also lamented the fact that none of his children will ever be as financially secure as he is, due to the shrinking middle class, and growing inequality.

Chuck Collins of the Institute of Policy Studies and the Oscar Meyer fortune, shared his ideas for ways to reduce inequality. In essence, Collins said, "There's taxation or revolution" ahead because the current societal set-up is undemocratic, and anti-American. For the conference, he extracted a double sided page of "[Eight Tax Policies that Unitarian Universalists Should Back](#)," from a longer paper he wrote, which ranged from restoring progressive income tax to creating a carbon tax. In between was one tax that caught on with many: create a progressive estate tax. At conference wrap-up session, when discussion groups were asked to share their major conference follow-up idea, almost half of the groups reported they would like to work for an estate tax.

Some said they would like to use another Collins suggestion: to open wealth creation conversations, or ask rich people how they got rich, as a way to find support for ideas like a progressive estate tax. The idea is to create recognition that no one became wealthy by their own effort - there has been lots of help for them that may help them to see why taxing very large fortunes has merit. Others said they would like to provide model legislation from states such as Washington that have progressive estate taxes to their state legislators. It was generally recognized that federal action is unlikely, although Collins encouraged attendees to try. At the very least, it keeps the inequality issue on the table was Collins' idea.

Others presenting workshops included Michael Greenman and UUJEC board member Karla Chew on the Move to Amend movement to end corporate personhood and money as free speech, Jeff Wright from the Urban Partnership Bank which provides loans and banking services to underserved, minority communities in the Chicago area; Rudy Lopez from Interfaith Worker Justice who conducted a workshop on "Wage Theft and Raising Worker Standards." UUJEC Co-Chair Dick Burkhart distributed a one-page summary of Thomas Piketty's "Capitalism" book while Michael Teasdale presented a workshop that explained the basic notions of the book. The complete line up of speakers, workshops, and their workshop materials will soon be available on the UUJEC web site.

The UUJEC board plans to follow up the Chicago event with regional one-day mini-conferences throughout the year. The idea is to engage as many UU congregations and members in reading, talking, acting, and thinking about inequality and its corrosive effects. There are many resources to get you started right away - check the UUJEC web site for study guides, and Inequality films and Ted Talks now available there.

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