



### **Small Congregations Live Social Justice Values**

*by Don Skinner, editor of Interconnections, the UUA newsletter for lay leaders*

The Bismarck-Mandan UU Fellowship in Bismarck, North Dakota has made a name for itself by taking on social justice challenges.

Several years ago it initiated and carried out a comprehensive interfaith antiracism program. Before that, it stood up for a proposed Job Corps center when others in the community didn't want black kids from the rural South in their midst. It successfully lobbied to make a Christian baccalaureat service voluntary rather than compulsory. It became a Welcoming Congregation, making it official that gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender persons are welcome.

The congregation also attracted attention in the wake of 9-11 when it successfully brought pressure on community leaders to make a 9-11 memorial service inclusive, rather than "Christian-only." With telephone calls, email, and participation on talk radio shows, it made that happen.

For its antiracism work, in which it worked with congregations including Catholic, Methodist, and Presbyterian, the congregation won the UUA's Bennett Award for Congregational Action on Human Justice and Social Action, several years ago at General Assembly.

That's not bad for a 48-member lay-led congregation which is 200 miles from the nearest UU community. So what makes this fellowship tick? Partly it's that many members are involved in social justice careers or are activists in other ways.

Former president Carol Jean Larsen has been the executive director of the North Dakota Democratic Party and a board member of Habitat for Humanity. Longtime member Betty Mills has worked as a newspaper columnist. Many others are active in progressive groups.

It's a congregation made up of activists, says UUA Prairie Star District Executive Nancy Heege: "They live their values." Mills says the congregation's small size helps it act quickly when issues arise. "We don't have mass," she says, "but we have velocity. And if not us, who? This is a conservative community and they don't kick over the traces very fast. But if we start something, others will usually climb on board. It's like putting English on a pool ball. You have to get it spinning the other way."

The congregation also takes advantage of opportunities. It received a \$5,000 UU Funding Panel grant for its antiracism work. Mills says, "That gave us stature in the eyes of the community, that our denomination would back us in that way."

Delegates who go to General Assembly bring back ideas, such as the antiracism program, and keep the fellowship connected to the larger movement. Larsen adds, "Knowing there's a bigger group that's supportive of what we are doing has emboldened us out here." The fellowship also regularly helps pay for members to attend the Prairie Star District annual conference.

Has the fellowship made a difference where it lives? "We've definitely raised the level of understanding about racism in our community," says Don Morrison, former vice president of the congregation. "We brought together people who continue to work together on racism and other community issues because we increased the trust, friendship, and shared understanding of each other. We broke down the brick wall of inaction that comes from feeling isolated. Many people in Bismarck-Mandan wanted to dismantle racism, but too often they didn't act because they were not aware of others who agreed with them. Our efforts to connect people—mostly lay people—helped give us the understanding that we do have the power to make change happen."

Here is another example of antiracism projects our congregations can engage in. For three years the UU Church of Cheyenne, Wyoming teamed with an African-American women's group to develop an antiracism education program. When they offered the program to public school teachers for Black History Month they expected a modest response.

Instead, requests flooded in. Each year about 1,200 third- through sixth-graders were bussed to the church for two hours of black history, music, and art.

The Cheyenne congregation's antiracism interest developed when First Unitarian Church of Denver sponsored an antiracism workshop for UU congregations. Cheyenne's antiracism team attended the

workshop and then, fired up to do something, joined with the black women's group, Love and Charity. Together, they organized a community celebration and the school program, which includes videos about prejudice and the Civil Rights era, Martin Luther King Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech, Buffalo Soldier reenactors, African-American inventors, African folk tales, spirituals as freedom songs, and quilts as "freedom maps."

Accompanying the week-long educational program was a Friday night gospel extravaganza and a Saturday music and history celebration, plus a soul food tasting. The program cost, excluding volunteer hours, has been \$1,000 – \$2,000, mostly for copying resources for teachers and students, feeding volunteers, food for the tasting, and hiring an African dance group. About half the money has come from the Wyoming Arts Council.

These projects helped the congregation better understand racism issues, said then-minister the Rev. Makaanah Morriss. "The congregation was very proud to be a part of this. It made us aware of a different level of prejudice and racism. Doing this work also made people more willing to speak out at work and in their neighborhoods about racism."

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