

Social Action Service – Sunday November 13, 2011
Living Our UU Principles in Maine

This morning's worship service, titled "LIVING OUR UU PRINCIPLES IN MAINE" is presented by the Social Action Committee. Lay-led worship is a tradition at this and many other Unitarian Universalist Societies. At Allen Avenue, the Social Action Committee either sponsors or presents one service each year.

We here at Allen Avenue are all involved in Social Action in whatever way we can be, as it is part of our Mission Statement. The Social Action Committee not only provides information for the congregation, but offers opportunities for involvement. This year we have chosen as our theme ways we can collectively make life better here in Maine.

This morning you will hear from several of our members of the concerns that motivate them to action through involvement.

Same day Voter Registration – Susanne Willard:

One of the issues on which you voted recently asked if you wanted to allow people to be able to register to vote on the same day as the election. It was Issue One.

Issue One was on the ballot because citizens objected to a law voted by the legislature, which rescinded the practice of allowing such same day voter registration. These citizens circulated petitions to get the issue on the ballot for the people to decide directly. The Maine People's Alliance and other groups were instrumental in this effort – formulating the issue language and distributing the petitions.

I personally collected signatures at church, in my neighborhood and among my friends. . It was easy enough to do. When I asked people, they said "of course, where do I sign?"

Voting is the foundation of our democracy. It is important that we encourage as many eligible people as possible to vote. Besides, in comparison to other countries we have a very low turnout.

For 38 years Maine provided the opportunity to register to vote on Election Day. The person must be a citizen and have proof of identity and residence. A sworn deputy registrar can assist in filling out the necessary paperwork. Delene and I have been just such registrars. There are others in the congregation who also volunteer as registrars .

I believe that everyone has the right and obligation to vote. Our Unitarian Universalist Principles speak to this issue.

The 5th Principle is “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large”.

Environment in Maine – Harold McWilliams:

Good morning! My name is Harold McWilliams, and I am chair of the Green Earth interest group.

The mission of this church, posted on the side wall of the sanctuary, reads “we celebrate diversity, encourage spiritual growth and promote social responsibility as we walk with care on this Earth.” My own work with the Green Earth interest group nurtures my own spiritual growth and provides a channel for responsible action as I walk, hopefully, with care on this Earth.

This morning I would like to provide you a brief overview of some of the key environmental issues we faced last year at the state government level and a preview of environmental issues that are likely to come before the Maine state legislature when it reconvenes in January 2012.

As you know, Maine has a new governor and a new legislature. Both have agendas to weaken many environmental regulations in the state. During 2011, the governor proposed 63 environmental rollbacks as part of his LD 1 regulatory reform package, and legislators added 50 more proposals. These included proposals to reduce shoreland zoning protection, weaken the returnable bottle bill, remove the ban on billboards, weaken the Kid Safe Products Act, weaken the protections for vernal pools, withdraw the state of Maine from the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, and suspend the state’s renewable energy portfolio. Fortunately, most of these initiatives were not enacted because Maine people spoke out in defense of Maine’s environment.

However, many of the defeated proposals are coming back in 2012. The most significant environmental issues we expect to come before the legislature next year are:

1. A proposal to abolish the Land Use Regulation Commission (LURC), which acts on behalf of the entire population of the state to oversee planning, permitting, and zoning in the unorganized territories that make up almost half of Maine’s land area. Those urging the abolition of LURC contend that it is a drag on economic development in northern Maine. They believe that control of this vast area should be exercised by the

small number of people who live in the territories and by large landowners rather than by the people of the entire state.

2. A second major issue with far-reaching consequences involves an effort known as a “Regulatory Takings” law that would allow landowners anywhere in the state to demand compensation from the state if they believe that a law about land use or an environmental regulation reduces the value of their property. If passed, this could result in hundreds of lawsuits demanding billions of dollars in compensation from the state, which would not have the money to pay. And the law would provide that if the state does not have the money to compensate the landowner, it would have to waive the environmental regulation on the property.
3. A third major proposal would abolish the State Planning Office in order to save money, thus eliminating an important source of independent planning advice for the administration and the legislature.
4. Finally, there is a small but vocal minority that wishes to increase the restrictions on wind energy development, thus slowing our best chance for getting off petroleum and natural gas electricity production.

When the legislature takes up these and other issues starting in January, there will be a time when it will be important for legislators to hear from you about your views on these matters. We will keep you informed and let you know how you can make your voice heard.

Thank you.

Soup Kitchen – Tirrell Kimball:

In downtown Portland there is a wonderful and informative microcosm of our contemporary financial and social world. It’s the Soup Kitchen, run by the Preble Street Resource Center. Inside, at three meals a day, every day, there is a remarkable mix of low or no-income people needing food, paid soup kitchen staff and social workers, and a core of volunteers. In the course of the year, thousands of volunteers serve thousands and thousands of meals – volunteers who have enough to share it with others. Absent – completely as far as we know – are the billionaires who could fund or even eliminate the need for the whole operation.

The world is unfair, as Occupy Wall Street protesters in Manhattan and on Monument Square are reminding us. The world is unfair, but is also subject to improvement and change, as those protestors are insisting.

Our church became committed to serving the hungry in 1990 first with the Wayside Soup Kitchen and then with the Resource Center Soup Kitchen, volunteering once a month, on the fourth Tuesday – for 21 years. It is an easy commitment, actually -- a couple of hours a month. Volunteers help prepare the main dish, make a salad, cut up bread and slice desserts, organize the drink table, serve the plates, wash dishes and pots, and help clean up. We serve nearly 300 people. There is a communal spirit among the volunteers. In the moments before the clients arrive, we join in a circle to review our jobs and then to share a moment of quiet, guided reflection.

There in the soup kitchen are those most in need of great change and those most committed to doing something about it, in any small way they can – one glass of milk, one serving of meatloaf, one friendly smile at a time.

The late Steve Jobs had a different take. “Make a dent in the universe,” he said.

There at the corner of Preble and Oxford, every life has meaning, and being alive matters. There at the corner of Preble and Oxford, people are denting the universe.

Hunger – Delene Perley:

Hi, my name is Delene Perley.

As a congregation we work to make life just a little easier for the many in our community who are dealing with hunger on a daily basis. One way is in support of the Preble Street Soup Kitchen once a month, as just described by Tirrell. As well our congregation supports Project FEED a food pantry housed at Woodfords Congregational Church. Many of the volunteers are from Allen Avenue, as more fully described in your bulletin. I am the volunteer pantry manager.

Last spring I was asked by the Maine Hunger Initiative, with whom we also cooperate, what the pantry’s needs are. One of them was finding resources to provide fresh produce to our clients. At the same time the folks at Woodfords Church had a course on hunger and invited me to participate in a panel at one of the classes. I mentioned how nice it would be to have shares in one of the local farms so we could provide fresh local farm

produce. The Social Justice Committee at Woodfords paid for three such shares and the Maine Hunger Initiative obtained a \$500 grant for a local farm, so we got weekly deliveries of lettuce, beans, beets, carrots, tomatoes, corn, kale, Swiss chard, and much more.

What a wonderfully rich and fresh summer it was! But what happened this summer is not a long term “fix.” Thankfully there is now a bill that is in the legislature (LD 1164), which would provide a tax break to small farmers who donate fresh produce to a food pantry or to a soup kitchen. This sounds like a win-win-win situation. The farmers win by getting the tax break, the pantry and/or soup kitchen wins by getting fresh farm produce to offer its clients without additional cost, and ultimately the clients themselves win with better and fresher food for them and their families to eat.

I have been in contact with the legislators who are sponsoring this bill and the committee members who are considering it. If you would like to encourage them in their work, there are letters for you to sign and mail after the service. This is another way we can become involved in the State’s legislative actions. That is LD 1164.

Allies of the Wabanaki – Cush Anthony:

My name is Cush Anthony. I am the contact person for the Allies of the Wabanaki interest group of the Social Action Committee. I moved to Maine in 1967. I first became interested in the status of the Wabanaki tribes in the early seventies when a lawsuit was filed in Federal District Court in which the tribes claimed they owned over half the land within the state of Maine. In a preliminary hearing, well respected Judge Edward Gignoux found their claim credible, and ordered the case to proceed forward. Suddenly title insurance companies began to refuse coverage to purchasers of homes within the land in question, and bond counsel started questioning the ability of municipalities to assess and collect taxes. The upshot of all this was passage of the federal Maine Indian Claims Settlement Act in 1980. Under that law, the land ownership claims of the tribes were extinguished, in exchange for which the tribes were given just eighty-one million dollars in land and cash, and state law was also changed to grant certain limited sovereignty rights to the tribes on their reservations.

I became still more interested in and concerned about tribal issues during my six years in the legislature from ‘86 to ‘92. Shortly after, I was named to be the chair of the Maine Indian Tribal-State Commission, a body created under the Settlement Act to monitor the effectiveness of the settlement act, monitor the social economic and legal relationship

between the tribes and the State, and make recommendations as appropriate. It consists of an equal number of representatives of the tribes and of the state, as well as a chair selected by them. I stepped down as the chair of the Commission after seven years, and then about a year ago I was appointed as one of the state representatives to that same group. I continue doing that work to this day.

The four tribes in Maine, the Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Micmac and Maliseet, comprise less than one percent of the population of the state, and as a result they have very little clout in getting their voices heard. I have also learned that all Maine Indians have experienced significant racial prejudice from their white neighbors.

It is not surprising to find that unemployment rates are way higher among tribal members, their problems with drug addiction are much worse, and poverty on the reservations is way more severe than among the mainstream population.

I have also come to appreciate the rich tribal history and traditions of the Wabanaki. Our tribal neighbors can teach us many lessons that they have learned in their long, long history. It is ironic to me that despite that, they are not treated fairly and do not benefit as fully from our society as the rest of us.

In other words, I take seriously our mission statement that we are to share our gifts to build a world of compassion, equality and freedom. I have been extremely blessed in my life, and it is my clear responsibility to do whatever I can to make the lives of others better. Martin Luther King Junior once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." Fair treatment of our neighbors matters. Treating all people with respect and dignity is at the heart of my religious beliefs. This work of mine with tribal members is one of the most important means I have found to live out my beliefs in action. I get as much out of doing so as the tribal members do, I am sure.

If any of you want to stay informed about Wabanaki issues, let me know after the service and I will add your name to the Allies of the Wabanaki email list.

Equality in Marriage – Ellen Ward:

I'd like to tell you about my friend, Lucie. She reminds me so much of my aunt. Lucie and my aunt are in their seventies. They have white hair and warm smiles, they've raised kids, they're quick to lend a helping hand to others. They've become very wise over the years.

But – sadly -- the comparison stops there. My aunt recently celebrated her fiftieth wedding anniversary with her husband. But Lucie, who's been with her partner, Annie, for thirty-three years, can still only call Annie her girlfriend.

Why is that? That's a question I've been asking myself and others for several years. I have to admit, I didn't always agree with marriage for gay and lesbian couples. It's been a journey for me, too. I grew up in a conservative family. As I became older, my friendships grew more diverse. And I came to the realization that I am gay – I came out five years ago. But still I was in favor of civil union. Gay and lesbian people should have all the rights, I thought, but under the name of civil union. Why rock the boat by calling it marriage?

In 2009, I learned the Maine state legislature was holding hearings on this issue. I decided to attend.

I know some of you were there also. Of those who testified in favor of marriage – I most remember an elderly Maine veteran who limped to the podium. He declared that he had fought on the beaches of Normandy for liberty and justice for ALL – and yet one of his sons, who is gay, cannot marry.

I listened very hard to both sides. I was very aware of my conservative past but also of my desire for fairness. Those who opposed marriage did not say one thing that spoke to my heart.

As you know, the legislature passed the law legalizing marriage equality and the governor signed it, but a citizen's initiative put it on the ballot that fall. I volunteered in Lincoln County. It lost – by a heartbreaking THREE percent – and so I continued volunteering. This year I was fortunate to begin working for EqualityMaine in Portland. And a while back, when I began coming to Allen Avenue, I was excited to learn that this church supports and is actively involved in this kind of work. I am very grateful for this opportunity.

As a canvasser for EQME, I've now knocked on hundreds of doors from Kittery to Bath. I ask strangers how they feel about this issue and, for those who are not supportive, I offer new information that may help them see things in a new light. I've heard so many stories that tear at my heart. A lesbian couple in Boothbay Harbor said they never get into their car without taking a thick packet of wills, power of attorney, etc. With this, in an emergency they hope to be allowed to make medical and legal decisions for each other. But they know other gay and lesbian couples in Maine for whom even this has not been enough to ensure this.

You know, I don't know of any heterosexual family who feel it necessary to take a briefcase of legal documents when they make a quick trip to the grocery store.

Then there's the young Mainer who recently told me that he had thought long and hard, and had decided to donate his life savings to this cause. "What am I going to do with this money?" he asked. "Buy more furniture? What good will it do me if I can't marry the person I love?"

Marriage in our society is the highest promise, the most solemn vow that two people can give to each other. We all grow up knowing that marriage is a very big thing. And we all know that if we are in any kind of trouble, we want the person we most love to be right by our side.

Marriage is the only guarantee of that. Civil union falls far short.

These days, every time I raise my hand to knock on yet another door to talk to yet another stranger, I think about my friend, Lucie. She's lived her life with integrity. She's been with her partner for thirty-three years. She wants to be a part of this wonderful, important tradition. And with your help, we can make that happen.

Please remain standing and join hands for the closing words as I extinguish the chalice:

Shirley Chisholm wrote, "Service is the rent we pay for living on this earth. It is the very purpose of life, and not something you do in your spare time".

Blessed be.