

Standing on the Side of Love

Summary: With a progressive legacy that includes the first American Christian ordination of women as ministers, Unitarian Universalism is continually committed to social justice. The tradition's Seven Principles, which include recognizing "the inherent worth and dignity of every person," motivate many Unitarian Universalist congregations to organize in support of liberty, justice, and peace.

In June 2012, thousands of Unitarian Universalists gathered at Tent City in Phoenix, Arizona. Holding signs and candles, they formed a sea of bright yellow t-shirts, each emblazoned with the words "Standing on the Side of Love." As the crowd sang hymns in English and Spanish, a handful of ministers were allowed access to walk through the immigrant detention center to see the poor living conditions. The ministers reported that the people inside could hear the singing and those detained told them they were strengthened to know they were not alone. These Unitarian Universalists came from across the country to protest the racial profiling and human rights abuses documented in Arizona since the state passed the controversial S.B. 1070, considered the strictest anti-illegal immigration policy in the country.

Unitarian Universalists are committed to social justice and are proud of their progressive heritage. Unitarians and Universalists were at the forefront of both the abolitionist and women's suffrage movements. Many participated in the Underground Railroad and openly demonstrated against the practice of slavery. The ordinations of Lydia Jenkins (in 1860) and Olympia Brown (in 1863) made Universalists the first denomination in the United States to extend full ministerial authority to women. The gathering in Phoenix is one chapter in a long history of faith-based public witness.

When the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said "[t]he arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice," he was paraphrasing the 19th century abolitionist and Unitarian minister Theodore Parker. Unitarian Universalists and Dr. King had long had an affinity for one another: he frequently attended services at a Unitarian church while he was in seminary, and even delivered the keynote address at the Unitarian Universalist Association's General Assembly in 1967. Unitarian Universalists, in return, see Dr. King as a paragon of faith in action and seek to bring into being his vision of "Beloved Community."

From “the inherent worth and dignity of every person” to “respect for the interdependent web of all existence,” the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism each relate to social justice, highlighting liberty, equity, compassion, sustainability, and peace. Worship services build awareness about social justice issues and call Unitarian Universalists into faithful response. Marriage equality, protection for LGBT people from discrimination, reproductive justice, healthcare, and income inequality are just a few of the issues of the day taken up by Unitarian Universalists. Additionally, the Green Sanctuary program grew out of concern for the environment. Most Unitarian Universalist churches have social justice programs and the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) annually bestows an award to a congregation that has done exemplary work in this area. At the policy level, Unitarian Universalist Legislative Ministries operate in several states.

The slogan—“Standing on the Side of Love”—became a rallying call for Unitarian Universalists in the struggle to win marriage equality in Massachusetts, and a song of the same name was written to capture the spirit of the Unitarian Universalist movement as a whole. After the 2008 shooting spree at Tennessee Valley Unitarian Universalist Church, which was targeted for welcoming LGBT people and for having liberal views on many issues, the Unitarian Universalist Association launched the Standing on the Side of Love campaign with the mission of harnessing the power of love to overcome discrimination and violence based on sexual orientation, gender expression, race, immigration status, religion, or any other identity. As a slogan, song, and campaign, “Standing on the Side of Love” captures the essence of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. It also acts as the rallying call for Unitarian Universalists who seek to foster world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all.