



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MINISTRY FOR EARTH

ENVIRONMENT & JUSTICE GREEN PAPER 2

HOW SHALL WE NAME OUR WORK?

We have seen Earth from space, and everything has changed. We now know, as never before, that there is no "away" nor, in terms of our relationships with all of life, is there any "them". There is only "us".

Blatant racism in public decision-making birthed the environmental justice movement at a time when environmental activism was more directed toward conservation and preservation, and less toward the impact of environmental degradation on those living in an impacted environment. Today, activism aimed at preventing or mitigating climate change, habitat destruction, pollution prevention air and water quality protection, and many other issues is taken up *for the sake of the whole community*, as well as the particularly disadvantaged segment of it. Today we have a growing understanding that all environmental issues are ultimately shared and interrelated. For example, the pollution that is spewed from a coal-fired power plant sited in a disadvantaged urban area wreaks havoc in the immediate vicinity, but it also is carried by the wind to taint every stream and lake in the U.S. and across the globe as additional greenhouse gases.

Acknowledging our 21st century understanding of the global impact of our local actions, how shall Unitarian Universalists work to build both a just and a sustainable world? What language and tools will we use to describe our common purposes and to build relationships with others in our communities?

As we saw in Green Paper 1, the term "environmental justice" arose out of a specific movement shaped by people of color, and this movement then gave rise to other pathways connecting environmental concerns and justice work. Each of the movements and academic disciplines which have organized out of this first notion of environmental justice have redefined it for themselves. Groups emphasize different notions of justice for different issues in different contexts. There is a "flexible, heterogeneous and plural discourse of justice" within the environmental justice movement. ¹

"Flexible, heterogeneous, plural." It is not surprising that Unitarian Universalists, including those attempting to fulfill the Green Sanctuary accreditation requirement regarding "environmental justice", have multiple and sometimes confusing notions of exactly what is meant by that phrase. The truth is that differing definitions and understandings have been offered public agencies, secular environmental and justice advocacy groups, and religious organizations. The particular definition to which a given group adheres usually reflects the perspective, goals, and purpose of a group's or institution's membership or constituents. Thus the aim of this Green Paper is to pose the question:

HOW SHALL UNITARIAN UNIVERSALISTS DEFINE AND NAME OUR WORK?

Shall we choose to honor our historic connections with the civil rights movement and our work on anti-racism by continuing to use the name *environmental justice* while broadening its meaning? Shall we

¹ Schlosburg, *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*, 2007

embrace the term *eco-justice* with its broader definition and religious, though predominately Christian, context? Or shall we, as UU Ministry for Earth proposes below, claim new language?

Because there is no single definition of environmental justice that encompasses all aspects of the work, and because each movement has found a need for its own common group language, UUMFE offers the following perspective as a starting point for further discussion among Unitarian Universalists. Our aim is to provide language that lay and ministerial Unitarian Universalists might use to deepen our environmental and justice work in ways that reflects our Unitarian Universalist principles and values while honoring the various paths that have informed our growing understanding. We have sought language that describes well our work and our vision for environment and justice in a way that respects the history of earlier and contemporary movements but also enlarges the connection between environment and justice to speak to our commitment to the UU Seventh Principle and to the complexities of global planetary crises.

We call our perspective on environment and justice *Earth Justice*:

A UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST PERSPECTIVE ON EARTH JUSTICE

Earth Justice is the human affirmation of our place within the interdependent web of all existence. Earth Justice pursues simultaneously the protection of natural systems and the ecological health of human communities, specifically disadvantaged, marginalized, oppressed, and indigenous communities; and

- Promotes basic human rights for all Earth's people,
- Distributes the benefits of Earth's resources fairly and sustainably,
- Avoids inequity in bearing the burdens of humanity's impact on the Earth,
- Recognizes that people have common but differentiated responsibilities according to abilities and resources available to them,
- Ensures the moral and political rights of all to participate in decisions affecting their environment and wellbeing,
- Provides equal participation in decision-making processes regardless of race, class, gender or sexual orientation, age, language, education, or economic barriers,
- Applies and enforces environmental rules, regulations, and laws equitably and impartially,
- Recognizes the inherent value of all species,
- Acknowledges our human responsibility to seek a sustainable balance between the rights of nature and human rights, and
- Works in respectful, collaborative relationships to create the largest impact.

We offer this perspective in the hope that it will:

- 1) stimulate a sustained conversation within Unitarian Universalism
- 2) help UUs to more easily identify those places in their community where issues of religious principles, and social and environmental concerns intersect
- 3) create new, collaborative bridges between environmental action and social activism
- 4) and call us to action.

However, language that speaks to our UU principles is not enough. In addition, concerned UUs and their congregations also need tools and skills for identifying Earth justice issues in their communities and for engaging in respectful collaborations to address recognized injustices. Green Paper 3 will present some tools to help us recognize the the places where environment and justice intersect in the issues that confront and engage our UU congregations.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION:

- 1.** How should Unitarian Universalists name our work for environment and justice? Should we call it environmental justice, eco-justice, or Earth Justice? Do the history-laden terms environmental justice, environmental racism, eco-justice, and environmental ethics lead to confusion and hamper building bridges or does using existing language together with our enlarged understanding enable us to more easily build coalitions and relationships outside our faith community?
- 2.** Which UU Principles do you see reflected in the Unitarian Universalist Perspective on Earth Justice? Are you surprised by the number of interconnections?
- 3.** What about the inclusion of “the inherent value of all species?” Do you agree? What are the relative values of human and non-human species? How does this affect your thoughts about justice?

REFERENCES

Schlosberg, David. 2007. *Defining Environmental Justice: Theories, Movements, and Nature*, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.

NOTE: The UUMFE perspective is the product of collaboration between Patricia Jones of the UU Service Committee, Kat Liu of the UUA Washington Office of Advocacy and Witness, Rev. Katherine Jesch and Claudia Kern of UU Ministry for Earth, and Robin Nelson of the UUA Green Sanctuary Program. It was first presented at a UUA General Assembly Program in Salt Lake City, UT in June, 2009.

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