

Sunday March 4/12

A few weeks ago, when we were talking in groups about the long history of this congregation, Fran asked about memorial services for family and friends that could be added to the time line. I thought immediately of Charlotte, Lucy, Maud, Heidi, Dora, Carmen, Anita and Vern – a generation of women whose intellectual curiosity, social consciousness, inventiveness and determination greatly influenced (and instructed) me – and, no doubt, others - over the years. With all due respect to the men of this congregation, we've had some spectacularly wonderful women here. I miss them all, and I think of them often.

I suspect that most congregations have women like these in their history. When we go further back in Halifax we find all the dedicated Universalist women who accepted the truth as it was given to them and who lived their exemplary lives by it – even though Halifax was not ready for their message. Although the modern denomination prides itself on the early ordination of women like Olympia Brown, in fact female ministers were few and far between until the 1980s. The most memorable of the early Canadian Universalist ordained women, the Reverend Edna Bruner, was ordained in her home church in Olinda Ontario in 1930 and was active in Universalist

education and ministry until her retirement in 1972. This church had one female minister in the early twentieth century and has had four since the 1980s.

Although Unitarians are reputed to be primarily interested in discussion, we are also doers. Some of us were active in the peace movement through the Voice of Women, some of us were central to the Halifax version of the Raging Grannies. When I moved to Halifax in 1977 this church was a collection and shipping centre for the Unitarian Service Committee staffed and run by women in the congregation. Just yesterday, Margaret and Marilyn staged a successful benefit lunch, here in the church, in aid of the Stephen Lewis Foundation. Most of us are active in the life of our wider community and we bring to all our outside contacts our lives grounded in our UU principles.

For women, it's an ongoing and sometimes never-ending process. Thus, a determined group of women – from different backgrounds, different regions, often following different agendas – came together last May to form the Canadian Unitarian and Universalist Women's Association.

Its stated mission is:

- To support women-centred projects that raise awareness about women's history, rituals, and perspectives;
  
- To develop and distribute educational materials that highlight a women-centred lifespan curriculum;
  
- To grant awards to women based on merit, and to acknowledge the creative work of women;
  
- To maintain a monitoring group with two functions: 1) internal within our denomination to ensure that language is inclusive, that there is equitable representation on denominational committees, task forces, etc; and 2) external: to determine priority for issues such as economic equality, reproductive rights, and educational access; and
  
- To influence, educate or inform policy on issues relevant to women at all levels, local, national and international.

The Objectives are:

- To provide supportive programming consonant with Unitarian and Universalist principles;
  
- To assess the ongoing roles and responsibilities of women members

within the congregations, fellowships and other organizations affiliated with the Unitarian and Universalist denomination in Canada;

·To encourage outreach on individual and collective levels to all women;  
and, .....of course

·To support an annual meeting of Unitarian and Universalist women, either in a Host City if a Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) Annual Conference and Meeting (ACM) is held in that year, or otherwise.

There is a National Council of six located, literally from coast to coast, from Halifax to Vancouver Island, with stops in Ontario and Alberta. We hold our Council meetings electronically. The vision statements I have just read are all pretty words, but we are concerned with action.

Today, in our everyday lives we take a great many rights for granted and have forgotten the major struggles that produced those rights. New generations need to hear the stories of those struggles. Without that knowledge we are not sensitive to the fact that many of the rights fought for in the past are not materializing or are being subtly eroded. Funding has been cut for many women's groups across Canada, leaving them struggling to provide basic support and with no time for advocacy. Our government

withdrew funding from Planned Parenthood in Africa and abortion is still not available in PEI. Women still do not have pay equity (particularly in Nova Scotia) and Canada ranks 40<sup>th</sup> in the world with respect to the participation of women in government. And then there's all that really ugly antediluvian patriarchal stuff going on in the current Republican primaries that – as such things do - is bound to turn up soon on this side of the border.

What plans does the Association have? We have initiated a move within the CUC to highlight the PEI situation. But it takes time, and lots of discussion, to formulate plans and priorities in a new organization with such a diverse constituency. The intention is to come up with a range of possibilities through broad consultation. For example, a woman who has been active in following the OWL programme with teenagers has suggested that young women, even UU young women, need a great deal of support as they come to maturity in our present society. It has also been suggested that some older women (even among all those independent UU women) need more practical help and support than we are giving them. Some one else has suggested that we put together a Sunday service honouring our foremothers and the legacy they have left to us, which would be part of our annual congregational life in the same manner as the Flower Communion. We are looking for ways to

encourage women artists, writers and poets. Those suggestions are all focused on things happening **inside** the denomination where we have the possibility of bringing about change.

**Outside**, the Nova Scotia Women's Action Alliance for Change has identified poverty, lack of affordable housing and violence against women as the three most urgent issues that Nova Scotians need to address. These problems are not unique to Nova Scotia. How should we, as social activists, be working on these issues?

What do you think the Canadian Unitarian and Universalist Women's Association's priorities should be? I leave you to consider my question while we pause. Then I hope there will be questions and suggestions.