

REPORT

OF THE

TASK FORCE on SOCIAL JUSTICE

TO THE

DIACONATE

OF THE

ASYLUM HILL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Hartford, Connecticut

July 6, 2009

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INTRODUCTION

Asylum Hill Congregational Church has a clear and comprehensive Mission Statement:

“The purpose of the Asylum Hill Congregational Church is to work for the increase in the love of God and neighbor in Jesus Christ through sharing, caring, outreach, and worship. We invite all who would be disciples of Jesus to share this privileged task.”

A second statement, more recently adopted, is our Statement on Diversity and Inclusiveness, the concluding sentence of which says:

“Our faith in Christ Jesus calls us not only to respect our differences but also to work for inclusiveness of all humanity, and to challenge ourselves individually and as a congregation to overcome prejudice, injustice and exclusion.”

The Task Force on Social Justice affirms the power of these two statements as guiding principles for all of us at Asylum Hill Congregational Church as we continue our individual faith journeys. We acknowledge that social injustice exists in our society, yes, even in our midst. As a church body, we have already recognized the significance of helping the underserved. We aspire to strengthen and broaden our existing ministry of service by seeking and finding additional ways to put our faith into action. In fact, our quest to achieve greater social justice may well be called “Faith in Action.”

As a Christian community – *a community of faith* – Asylum Hill Congregational Church has a long tradition of standing solidly against social injustice of various forms. Such a stance dates back to slavery and its aftermath in this country, and continues to the present day as we seek to confront the problems of poverty, hunger, education, health care, and housing.

Through the years, our Church’s style, its *modus operandi*, has been to work quietly, patiently, persistently, without fanfare, to bring about change. We have had considerable success in promoting *social justice* by working thoughtfully and diligently to meet *social needs*. This approach is still appropriate for us today, even as we also seek to enhance and broaden our efforts to achieve greater social justice in our immediate community and in the world beyond.

RECOMMENDATION

Therefore, consistent with this history and with the principles of sharing, caring, outreach and worship, the Task Force on Social Justice recommends that Asylum Hill Congregational Church continue to provide opportunities for church members to help achieve the Christian ideals of fairness, equity, impartiality and compassion through service to meet the needs of others while also moving forward with new and enabling initiatives. We recognize there is no single path to the achievement of social justice. The Task Force seeks not only to affirm what our church has already achieved; but is striving to inspire strategies and actions that go beyond service to sustainability.

In setting forth the aforementioned process, and in providing the recommendations in this report to the Diaconate, the Task Force recognizes a certain tension. In our Christian tradition, it is natural for us to want to help the needy. We want to feed the hungry; we want to heal the sick; we want to give money to the poor. All of these actions are commendable. At other times, however, the best course of action may be for us to provide opportunities for those in need to develop the skills and resources necessary to help themselves. We believe, and emphasize, that our priority should be the latter! We feel that by following this strategy, with God's help, Asylum Hill Congregational Church and its individual members can move forward toward the ideal of ridding our society of bigotry, ignorance, poverty, racism and injustice in our time.

The Task Force anticipates the following blessings for those who participate:

- We will provide the means for open, honest, safe, and uninhibited discussions of the most fundamental and challenging social issues of today.
- We will become better educated about the issues of social injustice, discrimination and prejudice.
- We will find further opportunities to enhance our faith as more members recognize the joy of affirming God's grace through participation in this process.

The Task Force offers the following specific recommendations as a plan of action:

I. Opportunities to Engage Our Congregation in a Social Justice Ministry

The intention of this recommendation of the Task Force on Social Justice is to provide a variety of opportunities that will meet the varied needs and interests of those in the congregation who wish to participate. We recognize that some people want to learn more about the topic; some people like to discuss ideas; some people want to jump right in and "do" something; some people like to start with a small idea and help it grow; and, some people like to do something on their own, while others prefer to work in groups.

In an effort to answer the members' expressed interest in learning more about Social Justice Opportunities, we offer several avenues of engagement:

- The Task Force recommends the continuation of the use of lessons from the Bible. The scriptures are full of stories told by Jesus or about Jesus and his message of affirming our belief in God by sharing his love of us with others. Periodic meditations could be developed by the ministry for Saturday and Sunday worship services. Guest ministers could be invited to preach at AHCC.

- The Christian Activities Council (CAC) is a non-profit organization that is dedicated to promoting human equality and social justice in the metropolitan Hartford area. The Council was founded over a century ago by Congregationalists as the City Missionary Society. Programs span the vital areas of human life - including housing, youth education, and health care - and are informed by the faith of the Christian community. AHCC's coordination with CAC should be developed in an effort to get people thinking, talking, and doing.
- Immersion trips in the AHCC neighborhood are recommended. Through the CAC, these trips enable participants to visit community leaders and key service organizations such as hospitals, schools, and churches to meet individuals who have dedicated their careers to public service and through them better understand the needs, desires, and aspirations of our AHCC neighbors. What better endorsement of the value of this experience than the feedback from our own Diaconate whose members spent a full weekend this past spring, gaining a better appreciation of what can be done to make our immediate neighborhood a better place!
- The Hartford Seminary is a rich source of religious education and research. Through forums, discussion groups, classes, and workshops, the Seminary provides a wonderful opportunity for the exchange of ideas and the initiation of projects. Speakers from around the world offer context and information on ways in which religion plays a significant role in individual and collective faith initiatives. The proximity of the Hartford Seminary to our location offers easy coordination of forums or special presentations at AHCC.
- The listing of these more formal avenues of engagement should not preclude any grass roots efforts, such as the Malta House of Care van, which may evolve from serendipitous beginnings.

In preparing this listing of possible opportunities to engage the congregation in a Social Justice ministry, the Task Force has been guided by an admonition attributed to the Reverend Edwin Ayala from the CAC:

“Remember...people do not come to church to do social justice. But once people are there, they can learn or reaffirm that Christianity has social dimensions and implications for how we relate, connect, and support others as they become whole. “

II. Governance

The Task Force on Social Justice recommends a committee structure for the initiation and perpetuation of a Social Justice ministry.

Unlike existing AHCC Committees, where membership is usually by appointment and is limited, the Task Force envisions that membership on a Social Justice Committee would be open to all AHCC members, including young family members who are preparing for Church membership. It is expected that meetings would take place on a regular basis throughout the year.

To assist with the organization of this new Committee, we recommend asking volunteers from our Task Force to act as conveners. These volunteers would serve as a bridge to the resources, discussions, and decisions that the Task Force experienced and made during our two months of deliberations and would also provide a sounding board for this new Committee's own selection of elected leaders by the end of 2009.

The mission of this Committee would be to identify social justice opportunities, to develop an understanding of specific needs and goals, and to explore and recommend potential solutions. A significant part of the Committee's function would be to create opportunities for educating AHCC members and staff through forums, speakers, and dialogue with local community organizations and community leaders about the ways to change the course of social interaction. Through effective development of initiatives with, and execution through, the Diaconate, existing AHCC committees, and other AHCC related organizations, our collective Faith in Action ministries can become broader based and farther reaching, both in Hartford and in the region.

If the ordained ministers, staff, and the lay leadership of Asylum Hill Congregational Church accept this Governance recommendation, we suggest the following process for review of existing and new programs:

- Analyze carefully all programs and efforts that are supported in some way by Asylum Hill Congregational Church that have the objective of meeting social needs.
- Make decisions on which programs merit continued church endorsement and support, and which programs are best left to the support of individual congregants.
- For those programs that receive church endorsement, define each program and describe how it intends to fulfill its mission.
- Further, for each such program, clarify what support Asylum Hill Congregational Church as an institution will provide. Describe how that support can best be provided.
- We recommend that a methodology be developed whereby any new programs that seek Asylum Hill Congregational Church's endorsement and support go through a rigorous review against pre-determined standards. Establish a policy that only those programs that pass this review will be given institutional support. Administer this policy diligently.

III. Communication

Communication about a social justice ministry should include the following:

- Regular communication of the work, activities and new initiatives of the Social Justice Committee should be an integral part of AHCC's communications program. Working through the Board of Communications, we recommend the use of the Church's web-site, the *Hill Church News*, and special e-mails to update periodically these new as well as the existing social justice ministries of our church.
- Updates in the Sunday Bulletin, including notices of scheduled events, speakers, forums, study groups, etc. should become a normal practice.
- A summary of actions and accomplishments of the proposed new Committee on Social Justice should be included in the AHCC Annual Report.

Other possibilities include:

- Creation of a Faith in Action newsletter for regular distribution.
- The presence of a Social Justice Committee booth on certain Sundays during the Fellowship hour in Drew Hall.

IV. Programming and Special Events

The Task Force on Social Justice recommends the following initial programs to invigorate conversations about, and to stimulate active participation in, the social implications of our faith. We offer these suggestions as a call for connecting our members' spirituality with the struggles for social justice and peace.

- Forums and discussion groups with:

Reverend Edwin Ayala, Director of the Metropolitan Training Institute, Christian Activities Council, and Co-Pastor of Iglesia Cristiana Nueva Esperanza.

Dr. Efrain Agosto of the Hartford Seminary (biblical perspective of social justice and faith).

Community leaders who could provide information about specific needs and ideas to help enable the underserved to move forward.

- Book readings and discussions, of which the following books are cited as examples:

The Giving Myth by Stephen B. McSwain. The author provides a great biblical foundation and invites readers to affirm the joy of giving, in our case social justice work, as a response to God's love.

Living Faith: How Faith Inspires Social Justice by Curtiss Paul Deyoung. The author provides a road map for those interested in connecting their spirituality with the struggles for justice and peace.

- Guest speakers, for example the following:

The Reverend Dr. Peter Gomes – to present a sermon on the topic of social justice.

The Reverend Dr. Jerry Streets, who was Chaplain at Yale for many years, and who is active in social justice matters.

Jim Wallis, of *Sojourners*.

The Reverend Dr. James Forbes, retired pastor of Riverside Church in New York City, renowned for speaking out and acting for social justice.

V. Recommendation for an Introduction during the Fall of 2009: A Continuum

The Task Force recommends that the ordained ministers, staff, and the Diaconate select a date during the fall of 2009, at which time we would:

- Celebrate the diverse spectrum of AHCC social justice and social service activities.

- Trace the history of AHCC's involvement:

"I Have a Dream"
Boys & Girls Club
Asylum Hill Learning Zone.

- Have Reverend Edwin Ayala at AHCC to give an introductory sermon on social justice.
- Unveil the new social justice statement, along with selected new possibilities for learning more about social justice.
- Distribute a schedule of dates and times for forums and workshops on the subject of social justice.

The life of the Task Force for Social Justice ends with the submission of this report to the Diaconate. It is our hope that our Church's leadership will adopt our recommendations, so that the cause of social justice in our time can be advanced. We feel privileged to have been able to work for the increase in the love of God and neighbor in Jesus Christ.

We are grateful to both the ordained and lay leadership of Asylum Hill Congregational Church for giving us this opportunity to be of service, and thus allowing us to put our "Faith into Action."

Respectfully submitted,

The Task Force on Social Justice

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