

Shared Ministry - Listening Circle Results

The Listening Circles held in January on the topic “Do You Have to be an Activist to be a Unitarian-Universalist?” were productive and thought-provoking. A selection of comments from all three sessions is included here so that we may all reflect on our future as public witnesses to our faith and principles.

Q1: What would it mean to be an activist church?

Many of us struggled with the term “activism” because:

- Activism is not clear – I would rather be active than activist.
- It’s easy to adopt a less emotionally-clad term, such as “public witness”
- Activism has certain connotations. It means something different for each individual
- “Activist” is a loaded word.
- I don’t like being called an activist, but it’s something that I’m interested in exploring.

Nevertheless, most people seem to feel a call to become more active and involved in working for social justice. For example:

- We think we know the answers, but are not doing much about it.
- We need to be deliberate about what matters to us; articulate what we want to say and do, and plan how to make it happen.
- The church is supposed to be a leader in the community. We need official opinions from the church and get that out to the public.
- The church is composed of activists. Lots of members are activists on their own
- It’s not what you say, it’s what you do.
- We are a progressive voice. We need to implement those things we discuss. We need to practice helpful dialogue.
- There’s quite a difference between being passive vs. active. Key is to connect people with who they are and what is important to them as individuals

Despite the call to more action, there are still some concerns about becoming known as an activist church because activism may not be for everyone and may make people who don’t know us feel uncomfortable here.

Q2: How far into the public square are we willing to live our shared principles?

This question brought out a diversity of opinions about our willingness to put ourselves “out there” and what unforeseen consequences that may bring. For example:

- We don’t believe anything we should be ashamed of – why worry
- We should go as far as we need to go, taking risks so people will associate this with our church
- We need to focus on standing for what is right, not what’s going to make us look good.

- Believing in 7 principles is to help rebuild the world in the image of the 7 principles. Activism is part of our calling.
- We run risks to our reputation, no physical property risks.
- We are already taking reputational risks by NOT being an activist church.
- How do we help the world – we stick our necks out far enough to do them justice. What people think about us is secondary
- We don't need to be too concerned about external risks. There is a great risk to internal cohesiveness of the church.
- Consensus is important. We should go where it takes us. We should still respect each other, even if we don't have 100 percent agreement.
- We can't just jump in all of a sudden. We need to take small steps.
- We don't want to be our own Antifa, but what they did in Charlottesville to support marchers, we should do.
- We need to support non-violent responses. We should look for and take opportunities to step into the public square in support of our values and principles.
- As far as I need to, with sincerest intention and without anger. Emotion can cancel out reason and responsiveness.
- Speak directly. Activism will be effective if we keep it clean and clear.
- Georgia O'Keefe said she was terrified every day of her life, but didn't let it hold her back

Some people voiced concerns about opening ourselves to vulnerability:

- There are hills worth dying on, and not. We can be activists, without requiring that every congregant share in it. We should be first a church. If people feel uncomfortable and leave, we'll need to evaluate
- There might be some differences in our community about comfort level.
- There will be some backlash. You are going to have some cost.
- People would rather hear positive stuff rather than negative stuff
- I am willing to but not sure if others will.

Q3: Where do our passions and our principles lead us?

In the end, that seems to be the question we are all grappling with. Here are some of the participant responses:

- Being prominent in the community, vocal with local government officials
- We need to protect our democracy and our constitution
- Express our principles on climate change, immigration rights, Black Lives Matter, things that are important to the world.
- We need to work where our values lie, we need to be self-reflective, not smug and self-satisfied. Don't get to a place of complacency
- We shouldn't just do things that are safe and feel good or political. We need to do what is most impactful and responsible

- Do what is just. Follow your principles, lift others up, bring others in. What we do makes a difference, not just lip service
- Social equity is the key issue of our principles.
- We need to get (combine) contemplation and intellectual aspects with activity and witness-bearing.
- We need to do the spiritual groundwork. We need study groups and listening circles
- Make posters, one per principle, and put them outside so people walking and driving by and the kids from the school will see them.
- As a congregation, we need to let the passion we share connect us to sharing our abundance with the community, rather than investing it to give ourselves to make ourselves safer and more comfortable here. .
- We need to take a stand on issues that face humanity, such as income inequality, climate change, nuclear war
- We need a conference to support LGBT teens
- We need to be anti-racism, anti-war and anti-economic exploitation
- Plan some concrete steps, e.g., support local business, demonstrate for causes.
- Speak my piece and encourage others to speak theirs with intent, civility and healthy respect for others to find commonality.
- Don't reinvent the wheel; be inspired by what others are doing. How is our unique way to reach out to those in need?

Some reservations expressed in this round included:

- This might lead us to spreading ourselves too thin. There are too few of us.
- There's a lot of resistance to social change. How do you get past that to educate people?
- Our activism feels disjointed - not tied to an overarching value statement (vision/mission needs defining).

The SMC thanks everyone who participated in these Listening Circles for sharing their opinions openly and respectfully. We hope the conversation continues as UUCR seeks to fulfill its destiny and discover our own vision of activism.