

SUMMER 2019

# SOUNDINGS



Unitarian Universalist  
Church of Charlotte

DISCOVER DEEPER SPIRITUAL MEANING

Depth through reflection

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"All Oppression is Connected," mural by Jim Chuchu

*Creating a wide variety of opportunities to listen to and learn from those who are marginalized by injustice, inequity and discrimination as a means of deepening our understanding of systemic injustice and inequity.*

—FROM THE UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH OF CHARLOTTE "CALL TO ACTION"  
ADOPTED BY THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES, FEBRUARY 2017



**The Mission of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte:** *Challenged by our liberating faith, we discover deeper spiritual meaning, nurture loving community, cultivate courageous connections, and partner in the work of justice.*

## HOW DO YOU OPERATIONALIZE A LONGING FOR JUSTICE?

by Eve Stevens



I attended a progressive Christian seminary where the curriculum was rooted in a commitment to examine oppression and the struggle for justice. Each course wove together the spiritual and the societal, applying Jesus' teachings as criticism of capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy and transphobia.

We explored the perspectives of Native American and immigrant Latinx scholars and were asked to write papers imagining the earth as God's body. I was taught that congregational life should offer the opportunities and provide the collective experiences that change the lives of people who then commit themselves to the struggle for a more just existence for all.

When I left seminary, I felt a great longing for this more just existence and simultaneously no sense of how to make it real. The dream of liberation is a beautiful thing in a classroom discussion. It's worthwhile to write papers about the intricacy and insidiousness of intersecting oppressions. It's inspiring to imagine faith communities committing long-term to an impossible hope with grit and determination.

But how, exactly, do you make a dream real? How do you take concrete steps toward what often seems impossible? How do you operationalize a longing for justice?

I didn't understand fully what I was reading the first time I read the "UUCU Vision and Framework" to prepare for interviewing here. I knew it meant that the leaders of this congregation had thought deeply and thoroughly about who our faith called them to be and what our faith called them to do within and beyond the congregation's walls.

Since joining in our work a year ago, I've continued to become more familiar with our congregational Vision and our board's Call to Action. On paper, it's a bold vision, ambitiously committing to staying the course of individual and collective transformation for twenty-five years. It's also a clear vision. The accompanying framework articulates in descriptive and practical terms what spiritual, societal, and environmental transformation look like.

But it has been in the past few months, while simultaneously teaching and learning with our Cultural Justice (CJ) Core Group, and watching interest in our community partners grow, that I have begun to feel the stirring of that vision becoming real.

In the CJ Core Group, since September we have meticulously unlearned and relearned the history of the United States by exploring the experience of women, immigrants, LGBTQ+ people, and those deemed religious outsiders. I have watched our group members mirror the experience I am having, of finding my view of the world and the role I want to play in it changed and still changing.

As the Cultural Justice and the Economic Justice Core Groups draw to a close, core group members are using what they've learned to reexamine and then fortify a set of guiding principles. These principles will then be used to guide the decision-making of the soon to be formed Cultural Justice and Economic Justice Engagement Groups in their search for community partners who are making justice real in Charlotte. The gears are beginning to turn and our collective energy as a congregation is slowly being channeled into meaningful work that will make our vision of transformation real.

Leaving seminary, I could not have imagined that I would find a congregation committed to examining the intricacy and insidiousness of intersecting oppressions. A congregation dreaming of collective liberation and committed long-term to an impossible hope with grit and determination.

On the following pages you will find reflections exploring the ways our congregation's children, youth, and adults have been invited to take concrete steps as we continue to operationalize our longing for justice.

Gratefully, Eve

*But how, exactly, do you make a dream real? How do you take concrete steps toward what often seems impossible? How do you operationalize a longing for justice?*

## HOW CAN I NOT BE CHANGED?

by Martha Kniseley, staff liaison for the Adult Religious Education/Spiritual Development Team (ARESD)

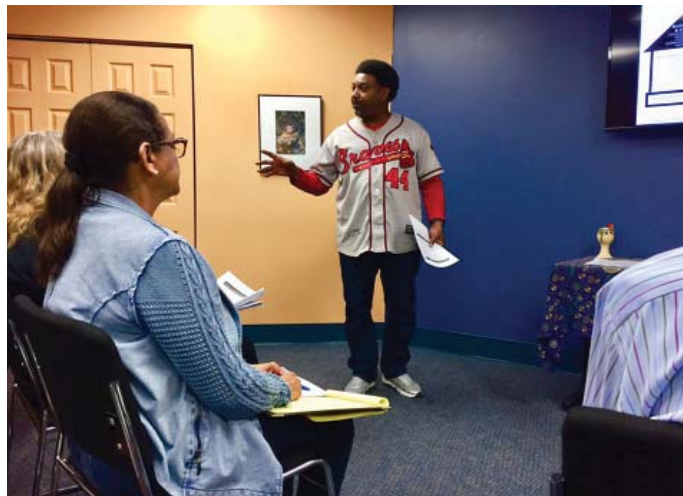


When we first embarked on our new Vision, which in turn came with a directive that required a new kind of learning, I'm sure I saw the task as daunting. What was being asked of me? What was being asked of all of us? What kind of learning opportunities would make

a difference in our personal lives and as a congregation?

During that first year we delved deep into the history of racial injustice and a better understanding of environmental justice. This year it became apparent that we needed to hear more from those who are directly impacted by systemic injustice and/or those who are directly engaged with marginalized communities.

We invited speakers from several community agencies and from our congregation to share their first-hand experiences with immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers. We became aware of the resilience that is required of people entering the U.S. through a legal process, sometimes spending years in refugee camps before gaining entry. Once here, they have less than a year to become self-sufficient. Asylum seekers, who have also left their countries to escape violence and poverty, enter into a complicated, confusing legal system. We learned about a wonderful after-school program for immigrant children in elementary and middle school offering academic and emotional support; we learned about the reality of their nightmares and real fear that their family members may go missing while they're in school.



Robert Dawkins of our partner organization, the Housing Justice Coalition, discusses how we can help advocate for affordable housing in Charlotte.

The wider congregation was also exposed to issues of economic injustice through films and a four-session workshop—*Class Conscious: Class and Classism in UU Life*—that examined the causes and effects of economic inequality. We learned from the facilitators that “many of our social ills (homicide, imprisonment, drug abuse, infant mortality, obesity, low social mobility) are correlated not with a nation’s per capita income, but with its degree of economic inequality.” And that the “working poor” are in fact subsidizing affordable goods for the rest of us.

We have continued to dig deeper with sessions exploring the question “What do we mean by White Supremacy?” and the book study discussion of *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. Reflecting back to the beginning of this journey, many of us were struggling with these terms and how they related to us. We recognize that our members are entering these learning opportunities at different levels of understanding. As one member admitted, she is now aware that “she is complicit in upholding the system that is benefiting her.” It seems to me that we have begun to internalize new meanings and embrace a common language.

After we offered sessions on daily spiritual practices that could support us, we witnessed the integration of the language of spirituality with the transformative work we are doing. This was evidenced by the responses to the ARESD feedback form sent to the White Fragility participants with the question: How did this course feed your spiritual life? One member reported that “it made her challenge herself to be in line with

living her values.” Another said that “it helped her take a deeper look and inventory where she has been wrong. . . and the actions she can take to try to make it right.” These reflections demonstrate that we are beginning to see the “whole” of our lives integrated with activism as we take what we have learned and apply it to our work with partners in our community. After two years of intensive, intentional study, how can we not be changed?

## CULTIVATE COURAGEOUS CONNECTIONS

by Kathleen Carpenter, Director of Religious Education for Children and Youth (CYRE)



I was standing in the front office area one Sunday recently, chatting with one of our nursery staff, 20-year-old Will. After serving for three years as a Teen Nursery Caregiver, Will moved away two years ago to live and work in Europe for nine months. Upon return, I immediately hired him as one of our Adult

Caregivers. We were discussing his decision to leave his nursery position once again, this time in order to work more hours in his other job. With college beginning in the fall, he needs the money.

As we chatted, five-year-old Dillon walked up and launched into a story extolling his skills on the soccer field. As he wound down, I told him that it was Will's last Sunday with us. Dillon, a regular in the nursery as an infant and toddler, turned to me and said, "I don't want him to leave. I love him." I agreed that we all love Will.

Earlier that morning, I had the pleasure of hearing 17-year-old Amelia Hagen deliver her credo presentation as part of our Sunday morning series. Among the things she named as critical to her faith development was her initial interaction with one of her CYRE teachers, Rich Greene. "I wasn't sure if I'd like this new church when I first arrived but in my very first class, Rich shared a song with us that touched me deeply, *Come, Come, Whoever You Are*. I have found my place, I thought. I can be me." Rich is a fixture in our CYRE program, having served in numerous roles, including CYRE teacher, Coming of Age mentor, and Mountain Con advisor. But what makes him so valuable to our program is his ongoing devotion to the children even after those roles have ended. Amelia didn't just remember a song, she remembered the man who told her there was a place for her here.

How can we incorporate a hunger for justice into our children's spiritual formation? How do we help the youngest members of our congregation understand our call to "cultivate courageous connections, and partner in the work of justice" as our mission statement directs? The answer can be found in another part of that statement reminding us to "nurture loving community." Our programming for our children and youth is critical and it is the relationship-building that creates the opportunities for that programming to stick. In order to promote justice in our world, we must create an environment in which all voices, opinions and ideas are respected, including those of our children. If our children and youth feel safe and encouraged, they are more likely to feel comfortable asking questions and responding to the questions of others.

Who can attend one of our youth services and not see the result of this atmosphere of support? To hear a 12-year-old stand in front of the congregation and discuss their depression or a 16-year-old share their gender fluidity (both of which occurred in youth services this year) knowing they will receive loving support for their words and bravery, confirms that we are doing something vitally important here.

This year, we have asked our children to consider their own power to effect change. We have asked them to listen to the voices of those on the margins. We have asked them to ask difficult and challenging questions of themselves. This has not been easy. But doing it in community allows them to struggle together and to feel part of something bigger than themselves.



Erika Sliger, Rich Greene and children participating in our 11:15 a.m. Children and Youth Religious Education (CYRE) class."

## REFLECTIONS ON CULTURAL JUSTICE

by Cate Stroud



My experience this year with the Cultural Justice Core Group has been both intriguing and eye-opening. Since I had been a member of last year's Racial Justice Core Group, I thought I would have some idea of what to expect going into the class.

However, looking at the histories of four different marginalized groups has made it a very different experience that has kept me engaged even with the vast amount of material we cover.

While covering the histories of women's rights, immigration, religion and LGBTQ+ issues I definitely have had moments that have stayed with me and I've loved learning about.

The women's suffrage movement was far reaching and crossed different economic and racial divides, more than I had previously realized. The amazing African American activist Ida B. Wells was one of the founders of the first African American women's suffrage groups, The Alpha Suffrage Club. Wells and her club went on to get the first African American alderman elected in Chicago in 1914. Learning about Wells and many others and their mobilization was inspiring.

As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, hearing about the very beginning history of a movement I've been a part of has not only been meaningful but also very humbling. I didn't know that the first gay rights organization in America, the Society for Human Rights, was founded in the 1920s by a man named Henry Gerber. Or that Harry Hay and the Mattachine Society established the connective groundwork for the LGBTQ+ rights movement. Knowing more about my own community has been very moving.

Seeing the history of naturalization for immigrants in this country as well as the movement of minority religions has driven home one of the overarching themes of the history we

learned: deciding who belongs and who doesn't.

I could go on about everything I've learned but instead I'll just mention two things I have taken away from the class. The first is the systemic and long history of injustice in this country. While it was something I knew, seeing the same rhetoric and hate appear again and again throughout our history was mind blowing. We live in a world where the hate we hear and the injustice we see seems so new, when in reality it's happened again and again in our history just in slightly different packaging.



Our members listening intently as Kristie Puckett Williams explains how our participation in court watching and data gathering can support her work with the ACLU and "All of Us or None."

Secondly, on the opposite end, it has been driven home for me what transformation can look like and how we can achieve it, not through politics, but by people on the ground coming together to fight for change.

What I am most grateful to the class for, is not just what I have learned but how it moves me to keep wanting to learn more.

## DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

by Sandy Wade



After taking part in the Racial Justice Core Group and learning so much during last year's dive "down the rabbit hole," I decided to take part in this year's Cultural Justice Core Group. My main goal was to learn more about the intricacies of our country's immigration laws. I have never felt comfortable in conversation around this topic, simply because I knew there were many things I

didn't know. Jay and Eve started the year focusing on our own social groups, asking us: What groups do we belong to? Which ones are by choice and which ones are put upon us by societal norms, of which we have no control? We looked at definitions of oppression and learned what oppression looks like.

We progressed through history looking at immigration laws, views of gender and sexuality, the treatment/role of women in society and religious exclusivity.

I should not have been surprised to find the ways laws in our country have been put in place to deny access to members of a group, simply at the whim of the country's leaders. There was the Naturalization Act of 1790, which allowed any white man of "good character" who has been living in the United States for two years or longer to apply for citizenship. Irish refugees coming to the U.S. prompted prejudice toward the "dirty Irish," not to mention the fact that they were Catholic. Next, the laws forced the Chinese out of our country. Then it was polygamists and then the Japanese. Through all this time, our approach favored those from Western European countries. The laws regarding immigration of Mexicans have been like a ping-pong match, seemingly changing

with the wind. Today, of course, we continue to question which immigrants belong here.

We also looked at the role of women and the LGBTQ+ community in each time period. It's harder for me to grasp, all the ins and outs of the ways both have been slighted. When it comes to sexuality and gender topics, what angers me most is the influence of the medical profession. To be something other than cisgender and heterosexual has been deemed a sickness throughout much of history.

Overall, I've begun to realize how so many people in our society are muted if they don't fit the white, male, cisgender profile. There is a feeling in the pit of my stomach that is increasingly unsettled. It's necessary to feel uncomfortable. I feel like I have just scratched the surface of these topics and it will still take time before I can speak knowledgeably about so many things.

Listening to the history of our "land of the free" over the past two years has been hard. As a white, cisgender, straight person, so much of it could easily be overlooked, ignored. As a woman, I'm shocked that I haven't been more outraged. A friend asked if I ever wished I could go back to my naïve little bubble and forget all the harsh realities of the world. I was about to agree, nod my head, and laughingly say yes. But I caught myself and really thought about it. My reply was no. I'd rather know the harsh realities of the world and be in it with eyes open than to be blissfully ignorant, harming others in the process. Because of this, I will continue to seek out the voices of the marginalized. I will continue to learn, and I will help rebuild society's systems. My liberation is tied to yours, and yours to mine. It has been and always will be.

Thank you, Eve and Jay, for your guidance in this journey.



Kristie Puckett Williams talks about her work with the ACLU and "All of Us or None" and how our partnership can help expand that work. Her presentation was followed by a training session for those who signed up to be court watchers.

## CONCENTRATION OF WEALTH AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

by George Ladner



Over the last eight months, the Economic Justice Core Group has studied how the tragic injustices of slavery and enduring racism, the dismantling of labor unions, the oppression of women, and constraints on access to healthcare and quality education have produced vast gulfs between the

rich and poor in the U.S. Time and again we have learned that the system has been rigged to favor one group above all others—that from our earliest days power has vested in the hands of wealthy white men and they (we) have chosen to favor themselves (ourselves) at the expense of all others. Their (our) choices have led to economic injustice being enshrined in Federal, state and local laws.

One of my contributions to the core group was to investigate an opposing—but in some ways complementary—idea: the thesis that there is an underlying law of economics that favors ever increasing concentrations of wealth. This thesis was advanced by Thomas Piketty in his groundbreaking *Capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, first published in 2014. Piketty spent fifteen years researching inheritance and income tax data over two-plus centuries for which good records exist. Piketty set a new standard for in-depth, evidence-based economic research, and although his thesis is not without its detractors, he has reshaped the debate about inequality. To be fluent in the subject, as was our charge, one should have some understanding of Piketty.

Piketty's thesis is fairly straightforward: the return on invested capital (wealth) tends to be greater over time than the growth in income through productive labor. His thesis says nothing about how someone obtained their wealth in the first place, whether fairly or not, but it helps to explain why, once they have it, they've tended to get more of it—the result being that wealth has tended to become highly concentrated in a very small percentage of individuals and families.

Along the way to developing his thesis, Piketty turned his investigative eye on the U.S. where he saw (in his mountains

of data) this unmistakable trend: wealth inequality has followed a U-shaped pattern since 1913. It was high at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began falling around 1929 due to the Great Depression, World Wars I and II that destroyed capital and brought on much higher taxes and wealth redistribution, and then began to steadily increase again in the 1980s.

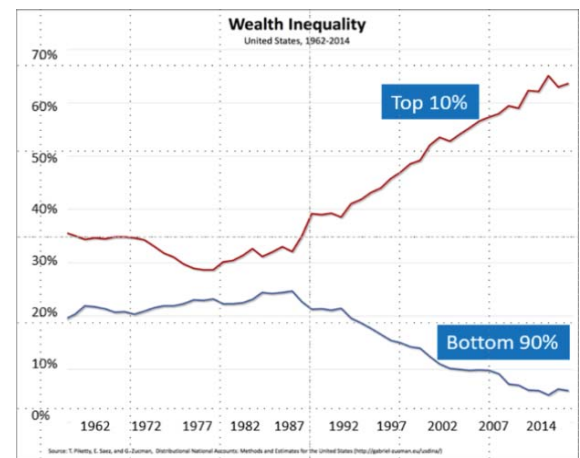
When not constrained by laws or disrupted by upheaval or wars, Piketty's newly discovered economic law favors wealth over workers. We've been living in an historically unconstrained time for capital since Reagan's "neo-liberal" economic policies took hold in the 1980s; hence, the escalation of inequality since then.

Piketty sees the danger in the current situation and proposes, as a corrective, a global tax on capital that would: force the wealthy to disclose their assets (an estimated \$7.6 trillion now hidden in tax shelters), making global inequalities

transparent and comprehensible; and in doing so, provide a better opportunity for governments to tax the wealth to provide services for the poor and middle classes.

Several of the current presidential candidates have advanced similar proposals. One can debate whether such a tax would be "transformative"; without a doubt, it would be momentous.

By measures of less hunger, longer lives, less poverty, better healthcare, better and more universal education, we are living in a golden age. However, runaway inequality could well be our eventual undoing. Quoting Plutarch, in the Athens of 594 BCE, "the disparity of fortune between the rich and the poor had reached its height, so that the city seemed to be in a dangerous condition, and no other means for freeing it from disturbances . . . seemed possible but despotic power."



Wealth inequality in the U.S. has skyrocketed since Reagan's "neoliberal" economic policies took hold in the 1980s. (Graph source: T. Piketty, E. Saez, and G. Zucman, *Distribution National Accounts: Methods and Estimates for the United States*.)

## EXAMINE THE SYSTEM, NOT JUST THE SYMPTOMS

by Beth Mussay



The subject of economics is so expansive that one could spend ten sessions on just one subtopic. For that reason, deciding what topics to cover within the Economic Justice Core Group led to some hard choices.

We all entered this group with different levels of economic knowledge. There were also different levels of awareness of

our personal biases based on race, gender, class and age (among other things). While this made for lively discussions, it also made for challenging situations where it was hard to see others' points of view. Since we were also a room full of mostly middle and upper middle-class white people, that perspective dominated the discourse. Participants were invited to present particular topics decided by the group. However, some were too busy to take on in-depth research. Those who did have my deep admiration.

Everyone in the group agreed that inequality is a huge problem. I joined this group to learn about how racism and capitalism work together to perpetuate systemic racism. To me, transformation starts with an interrogation of capitalism. How well is it working for all of us, not just the people in the Bernstein Room? So many proponents of capitalism have a vested interest in defending a system that benefits them. I think there is a strong case to be made that capitalism needs an exploited underclass in order to work properly. Historical examples abound, including slavery, women, child labor (past and present) and immigrants. Racism (and patriarchy) is used to justify the creation of this underclass. The only time inequality is lessened under capitalism is when people rise up, apply pressure and demand it. That is not baked into the economic system, and frequently these movements are violently crushed. People are forced to put their bodies on the line and literally risk death to gain basic rights. To me, that is a systemic problem.

I heard the opinion voiced that we need capitalism for the competition it brings or else people will become lazy. First, under democratic socialism and the economist Richard Wolff's program of Democracy at Work (democratically-run businesses—i.e. worker co-ops), there is still a competitive marketplace—but there's also a safety net. Second, the notion that people become complacent if they have a roof over their heads, nutritious food and healthcare is insulting to all human beings. This taps into the classist and frequently racist trope that people are naturally lazy and have to be forced to be productive with the threat of poverty. People like to work; they just don't like to feel powerless, disrespected and stressed out because they can't make ends meet. Providing everyone with basic necessities is the morally right thing to do, and will allow people to be happier, productive workers. How many retirees do you know who, upon retirement, start volunteering—i.e., working for free—and soon become as busy in retirement as they were when they worked full time?

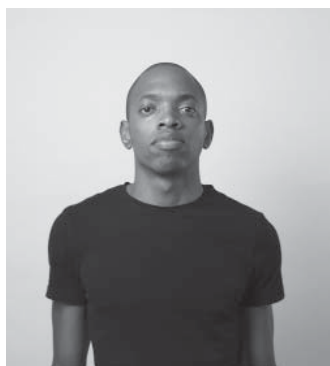


Madeline McClenney, founder and head of the Exodus Foundation, talking about her visionary work on incarceration and its aftermath. We've committed to support that work by participating in interview readiness, cultural competency training and fundraising.

I find a lot of hope in Democratic Socialist policies. As a broad, transformative economic philosophy that can give us a direction for a better future, I look to Manfred Max-Neef and his economic philosophy of Barefoot Economics. Our economic system is a subsystem of a larger, finite system—the biosphere. In a finite biosphere, infinite growth is impossible. Our economic system needs to work for people, not vice versa, and needs to be in harmony with the biosphere not at odds with it.



## THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS:



### Jim Chuchu

Jim Chuchu is a filmmaker, visual artist and musician based in Nairobi, Kenya. He is co-founder and member of the Nest Collective—a multidisciplinary arts collective based in Nairobi, as well as co-founder of HEVA—an

East African fund that invests in creative businesses. The collection of words and small texts, which may at first appear to be random, conveys the endless, interlocking nature of oppressive ideas and actions, which people fall victim to in all parts of the world. Chuchu was inspired by the poetry of Jamaican artist and activist Staceyann Chin. In their work, both focus on the fight for the recognition of the rights of minorities, particularly sexual minorities. Chuchu's markedly political support for these rights puts him in danger, given the conservative attitude of African societies towards sexual minorities.

### George Ladner

George is the Managing Partner of Altum, Inc., Co-Founder of FFL Communications, a former director of a Wall Street hedge fund and an adjunct professor at UNCC Graduate School. He did his undergraduate work at the University of Michigan and received his MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. George's journey has taken him from economic conservative to progressive, as the threat of concentration of wealth and power and its injustice has become clear.



### Beth Mussay

Beth is a painter whose work ranges from tiny, detailed ink washes to large murals. Her subject matter emphasizes people and is colored by Unitarian Universalist principles. She moved to the Charlotte area from San Francisco in 2012 with her family and continues to meet people who challenge her assumptions about the South, religion, and politics.



### Cate Stroud

Cate has been a member of the UUCC since moving to Charlotte in 2012. She is a very active member of the UUCC, from singing in the choir, teaching Middle School CYRE, OWL and co-leading the (dis)ABLED Support and Advocacy

Group at the church. She is grateful for all that she has been able to learn and experience at the UUCC. She lives with her fur baby Bandit and enjoys reading, drumming and time with friends.

### Sandy Wade

Sandy and her family have been in the Charlotte area for 14 years, joining the UUCC in 2015. Her passions include teaching, nature, and community. Sandy enjoys being at the UUCC because the people here challenge her to be a better person and to look outward to the community, while offering an internal network of support and love that sustains her. For that, she is grateful.



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