

# Looking at Social Action

*Social Action Community Board Report and Proposal  
Following a Year of Inquiry into the Model, Staffing and Funding  
of Social Action at First Parish in Concord  
May 2016*

## Outline

- Recent history of social action at First Parish
- Why we undertook the project
- What our process entailed
- What other churches do
- What we learned about ourselves
- Proposed pilot for the next two years

## Recent History of Social Action at First Parish

(Based largely on a report written by Dave Dawson and John Lowe.)

First Parish and its congregants have a long history of being social activists and funders. In recent years, some of the milestones have been:

1960s:

- Congregation raised \$9,000 to support the work of UUSC
- First line item for social responsibility (\$150) appeared in budget

1970s:

- Rev. Greeley recommended allocating 5-7% of pledged income for social action grants; the congregation voted to allocate \$5,000 (7.1% of budget)
- Due to the economic recession of the mid-seventies, allocation for social action grants dipped to 2-3%

1980s:

- Social action grants allocation stabilized at 3.3% of pledged income
- Open Table was founded, and First Parish started hosting the weekly dinners

1990s:

- Congregation voted to raise allocation to 5%, then 7.5%

2000s:

- First Social Action Director was hired, part-time, with salary funded from the social action allocation. (The intention was to gradually move salary expenses to the operating budget, but due to subsequent budget constraints this was only partially implemented for one or two years.)
- Jericho Road Project was founded with initial leadership and financial support from First Parish
- A report commissioned by Standing Committee studied the impact of special fundraising for social action versus allocating a percentage of pledged income. While the report recommended that special fundraising replace the allocation model, no action was taken as the priority had shifted to the development and implementation of a capital campaign.
- Motion to lower social action allocation to 5% was defeated at annual meeting

2010s:

- 20+ social action programs or organizations are sponsored by First Parishioners
- Hours for Social Action Director were increased from 20 to 30 per week, funded by approximately 50% of the social action allocation and therefore reducing the amount available for grants by about \$30,000
- Annual grants given to FP-sponsored programs and external applicants have ranged recently from \$32,000-\$42,000 per year
- Grants Committee and SAC Council were combined into one SAC Board

## Why We Undertook the Project

The Social Action Community Board (SAC Board) and Standing Committee are proud of the robust lineup of social action programs at First Parish, the grants we give to help sustain organizations doing social justice work, and the integration of social consciousness within the parish. The Social Action Director has been seen as a valuable addition to further the parish's commitment to social action. Some concerns remain:

Participation and prioritization

- Can we engage more parishioners in social action work?
- Should we better integrate social action with other programming at the parish?
- Do we have too many programs to keep track of and/or does it dilute our impact?
- Would the congregation prefer to focus on fewer and/or bigger initiatives?

Communication

- Some people report they feel uninformed about social action at FP; is this a widespread concern?

Staffing

- What is the most effective role for the Social Action Director?
- What are the reporting responsibilities of the Social Action Director?
- Should the Social Action Director position be funded the same as the Director of Religious Education, Director of Music, Minister of Pastoral Care?
- What is the most effective role of the SAC Board?

Funding

- Is the congregation unclear about where the 7.5% social action allocation goes?
- Is the 7.5% allocation the best way to fund grants and the Social Action Director's salary?
- Is the amount of money we send "out into the world" consistent with original intent of the percentage allocation and/or our intent and abilities today?
- Where does other social action fundraising fit? (e.g. Funderburg dinner and other social action event proceeds)

## What Our Process Entailed

### External research (May 2015 and ongoing)

- Roselyn Romberg interviewed 64+ congregations to understand other models of funding, giving and measuring social action

### Internal research and results (April 2015 through May 2016)

- Standing Committee and SAC Board identified desire to have congregational conversations about social action
- Members of the SAC Board, Director of Social Action and some interested parishioners
  - Created and published plan and timeline for SAC Conversations.
  - Held 1:1 interviews of 35+ parishioners who have experience with, or had expressed interest in the future of, social action at FP. This helped inform further research and conversations.
  - Conducted open-ended congregational Listening Sessions: 40 parishioners participated.
  - Carried out online congregational survey: 83 parishioners responded, 78% of whom had not participated in the Listening Sessions.
  - Collected, organized and shared results with Standing Committee and congregation.
  - Conducted feedback Listening Sessions: 15 parishioners participated.

### Proposal development

- SAC Board drafted proposal
- Gathered team to finalize proposal
- Proposal shared with Standing Committee
- Proposal revised

## What Other Churches Do

(Based on interviews of 64+ congregations, many of which were very small.)

### None interviewed retained a social action employee

- We know some larger UU churches do (e.g. First Unitarian Church in Portland, OR)

### How other churches fund social action

- Funds for social action initiatives are raised in a variety of ways: Pledges, plate collections, individual bequests, special events, sales, rentals, etc.
  - 90% hold events to fundraise
  - 50% have some form of ongoing fundraising activity (e.g. Fair Trade coffee sales)
  - 80% use dedicated plate collections or a share-the-plate model, some scheduled and others in response to natural disasters or crises
- None interviewed report having a fixed percentage of their operating budget allocated for social action, although almost 20% state their funding of social action activities in terms of “percentage of operating budget.”

### Few churches have a grant giving process

- Those who do give small amounts, typically from an endowment funded by a congregant’s bequest or from some other source of funds separate from the operating budget

## What other churches count to evaluate success of social action

- Funds raised
- Value of non-monetary donations
  - Items donated (e.g. coats for a coat drive, gift cards, Toys for Tots, food for pantries)
  - Discounted rental or free use of church facilities
  - Labor provided through volunteering (i.e. multiplying minimum wage rate by hours spent painting a day care center, etc.)
  - Professional services donated to social action organizations or events
- Other metrics used to evaluate the success of social action initiatives
  - Hours spent (e.g. community service projects, social action events, use of church facility by outside groups)
  - Participation rates (e.g. for events, trips, marches)
  - Number of items donated (e.g. shelter supplies, cans of food, meals served)
- Churches that adopted a single social action focus or project saw an initial spike in funding and participation but subsequently experienced a drop off of engagement and financing

## What We Learned About Ourselves

### Participation and prioritization

- Many parishioners would like to be **more involved** in social action
- **Integration** with other church programming is desired
- The teaching of **social ethics** through religious education is valued
- More **intergenerational** social action events and activities are requested
- **Relationship building** through regular social activity is valued
- **Variety** of activities promoting social action is important
- Deepening of **connections** with other area organizations and houses of worship is desired
- The ability to address **multiple issues** and needs is supported
- There is yearning to be known in the wider community for another **big project** such as Jericho Road or Open Table
- There is **no consensus** on what changes should or should not happen with the social action program at First Parish!

### Communication

- Although social action communication is thought to be thorough, there is the desire to have ways that people can find volunteer opportunities more easily
  - Currently our Social Action Newsletter has 232 subscribers

### Staffing

- There is widespread support for a social action staff member

### Funding

- Parishioners support grant giving and the funding of First Parish's social action program
- There is some confusion about where the 7.5% allocation goes
  - Many would like more transparency
  - Some desire to have more input over where the funds go
  - There is no consensus on how the 7.5% should be spent
- Nevertheless, there is not a strong call to change the 7.5% model
  - A few feel that the grant giving process needs to be overhauled

- Most parishioners underestimate the total amount of money given away via FP grants, plate offerings and fundraising events

## Proposed Pilot for the Next Two Years

### Participation and Prioritization

- Conduct a pilot to prioritize social action initiatives as a way to involve more people in, and focus attention on, social action
  - Poll congregation on social action priority areas on a cyclical basis (i.e. every 18 months or two years)
  - Ensure that chosen priority area(s) are integrated across programming
- Meet with Religious Education, Women's Parish Association and First Tuesday 65+ groups to explore intergenerational social action activities

### Communication

- Consider ways to better communicate social action initiatives and opportunities to parishioners
- Improve communication/coordination/integration with other FP programming
- Continue to integrate social action within worship (e.g. social action candle, children's messages, guest sermons, etc.)

### Staffing

- Hire social action staff to report to senior minister
  - Establish hiring committee to include members of the SAC Board, Standing Committee, Religious Education and others
  - SAC Board requests that social action staff priorities be:
    - Building relationships with external organizations, including denominational groups, especially in priority areas
    - Fostering synergies within First Parish
- Ensure coverage of social action communication and worship input
- Determine the best use of the SAC Board members
- Find more parishioners willing to serve on SAC Board
  - Create an ongoing recruitment process

### Funding

- Continue to pay social action staff from the 7.5% allocation while examining implications and logistics of moving salary to annual operating budget
- Track monies that are raised from all FP sources and donated to external organizations
  - Consider whether it makes sense to track "in kind" donations
- Pilot and track a "Share the Plate" funding model in winter/spring
- Consider aligning grant giving more closely to congregational priorities

## Proposed Schedule for First Year of Piloting Period

### June - September

- Hire social action staff
- Gather incoming SAC Board for fall planning

#### September - October

- Continue to educate congregation about multi-pronged social justice work of UUSC
- Determine one or two congregational social action priority area(s) for winter/spring
  - Can conduct new survey
  - Can use one or two of the first six priority areas identified in fall 2015 SAC survey: Gun Violence, Hunger and Poverty, Environmentalism, Racial Justice, Economic Inequality and Human Rights

#### November - December

- Plan integration of winter/spring priority area(s) with program leaders and worship staff

#### January - June

- Implement activities based on priorities
- Pilot a “Share the Plate” model for social action giving once a month or bimonthly (TBD)

#### Ongoing throughout year

- Track all monies taken in and distributed to social action programs/organizations
- Determine whether grant process and cycle should change
- Evaluate and refine social action prioritizing (e.g. move SAC survey to springtime?)

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*Janine Olson and Roselyn Romberg, Co-chairs, 2015-2016*

*Leslie Fisher*

*Tricia Haut*

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