

**FINDING COMMON VOICE  
CONGREGATIONAL RESOURCE BOOK  
FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY  
IN CANADIAN  
UNITARIAN AND UNIVERSALIST  
CONGREGATIONS**

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## FINDING COMMON VOICE

This handbook was first published during the 1997-98 year. It has been developed to provide information and clarity to member congregations about the social responsibility of the Canadian Unitarian Council.

The handbook was originally prepared by Ellen Campbell and Frances Deverell

Frances Deverell wrote the Finding Common Voice Handbook for Congregations.

Ellen Campbell prepared the summary of resolutions which was originally published as "Part I of Finding Common Voice."

The parts relating to the CUC process for social responsibility have been enlarged and published as the CUC Social Responsibility Handbook.

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The 2nd edition has been edited to a 3rd edition multi-media format. The items cut from this version can be found by following the links to the CUC website.

This handbook was sent to all Canadian congregations when first produced. You may copy additional copies from the original, or purchase additional copies from the CUC..

Updates and other information on the CUC process and policies can be found at [www.cuc.ca](http://www.cuc.ca).

For other information contact [info@cuc.ca](mailto:info@cuc.ca).

NOTE: The web version of this handbook does not have all of the graphics and formatting in the hard copy original. We have posted it for convenience and hope to be able to add to it in the future.

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# FINDING COMMON VOICE

## **Bringing the message of our Purposes and Principles to the wider community**

### **INTRODUCTION**

When people begin to think about change, there are so many problems and so many issues, it is hard to know where to begin. In an inspiring speech at the Canadian Unitarian Council Annual Meeting (1991), Phillip Hewett pointed out that if you intellectually add up all the events of the world, it cannot help but lead to pessimism. Nevertheless, the human imperative leads us "to live and act in hope and purposefulness." "The pessimism of the intellect" is balanced by the "optimism of the heart and the will."

Today's lifestyle, with both members of a partnership (or single parents) working is always hectic. Time is at a premium. People don't want to commit themselves to anything if nothing is going to come of it. We need to learn to focus ourselves on actions which are going to produce some positive results. The following models are designed to channel our thinking so that when we choose the issue or the problem that we want to work on, we will also have the tools to think how we want to work on it and what impact we want to have.

### **The Challenge of Congregational Involvement**

Almost since the beginning of Unitarianism, one of the on-going challenges has been to simultaneously honour individual differences and create group voice and action. In some congregations, an individual or small group has become really excited about a particular social responsibility issue, only to discover that many people in the congregation either actively disagree with them or are unsure as to what they believe and are unprepared to support their initiatives. Social responsibility issues have often been a major source of divisive conflict among us. Congregations that have experienced pain and loss of members because of these conflicts have often responded by stopping social responsibility work at the congregational level and leaving it up to individuals.

This strategy may alleviate the distress and create harmony, but it also robs us of an effective group voice and leaves us unable to play the role that we are capable of playing, bringing justice issues to the fore in our communities. There are a number of solutions to this problem which you may wish to explore. One is the Sample Social Responsibility Policy. How this policy was developed is described in a case study. A second possibility is the Rankin Process, developed by Rev. David O. Rankin. Other materials which may help congregations work more effectively on social issues are the Congregational Discussion Guidelines and a Social Responsibility Survey.

Materials which may help congregational members develop a deeper understanding of their role in social responsibility are in the sections on Levels of Action and the Development of Networks.

### **Legal Considerations**

Another factor which congregations should consider is the amount of money which "flows through" its hands. Charitable organizations are not supposed to spend more than 10% on activities which could be considered "political" by Revenue Canada.

Legally, churches can make donations from their budgets to other organizations as long as they are registered charities. For causes which do not qualify as registered charities, the congregation should not "launder" the donations its people make by accepting the donations to the church, issuing a tax receipt, and then passing the money on to the target organization. Organizational memberships to organizations which do not qualify as registered charities are a legitimate expense.

### **A. Essentials for Congregational Social Responsibility**

In keeping with the principles of congregational polity, each congregation has the right and the responsibility to determine how it wants to incorporate social responsibility activities. With this handbook, leaders can benefit from the experience of other individuals and groups. Models are provided so that social responsibility becomes an opportunity for spiritual centering and community building rather than for conflict and divisiveness.

#### **This section is designed to:**

**1. Clarify roles and responsibilities**

of the minister, the congregation, the board, the social responsibility committee, and the individual member.

**2. Improve the quality of dialogue**

and discussion at all levels of meetings so that people improve their listening and speaking habits to create an atmosphere conducive to creative interchange rather than win-lose debate.

**3. Discover the priorities,**

interests, strengths, and level of commitment of the congregation on particular issues.

**4. Build consensus**

around how to approach social responsibility concerns and what issues the congregation wishes to address.

## 5. Network

Facilitate a networking strategy that connects us into the larger community and helps us either build or participate in coalitions for change.

### 1. Clarify Roles and Responsibilities

This sample social responsibility policy was developed for the Beacon Unitarian Church in Coquitlam, B.C. and has been in effect since 1993. It has been extremely effective in creating safe boundaries to facilitate group social responsibility. Some of the key points include:

- 1 Definition of roles of individuals, social responsibility committee, board, and congregation
- 2 A policy that the social responsibility committee will prepare the congregation well through adequate communication and education activities before it brings any issue to the congregation for a vote and that it will not bring forth any issues where there is not substantial consensus in the congregation. Issues where there is dissent cannot be issues for group voice.
- 3 A policy for congregation-level issues require a 66% approval rating - more than 50% but not total consensus.
- 4 A policy that when even one person dissents, the minority opinion will be acknowledged in any public communication.

The sample policy offers a clear picture of how issues can be raised in the congregation and who is responsible for what. It was developed for a small church of 110 members and may need modification for a larger church. It attempts to clarify roles and responsibilities of the minister, the congregation, the board, the social responsibility committee, and the individual member. It also provides sample decision-making guidelines.

### SAMPLE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY POLICY

## 2. Improve the Quality of Dialogue

Creativity theory teaches us that innovation and improvement cannot happen without an atmosphere of experimentation, risk-taking, and trust. The following discussion guidelines may seem obvious and simplistic to seasoned communicators. People will be familiar with most of them. Nevertheless, it is important to establish a culture where the *whole combination of skills and attitudes* become *the norm*. Having a group agree to these guidelines from the beginning prevents needless conflicts and misunderstandings. If you are in a group where these guidelines are being violated, speak up. Create safety and energize everyone in the group.

We are now coming to an understanding that popular debate-style discussions of the past lead more to divisiveness than to deeper understanding of the issues. Even the standard Roberts Rules of Order, cornerstone of our democratic process, tend to set up divisiveness. The process of having to formulate a motion (or position) before discussion can begin, forces people to take sides before they have thought the issue through. The sample discussion guidelines provide a frame for seeking out diverse opinions and hearing all the individual experiences related to a topic before any positions are firmly taken. They provide safety so that people can express differences. Deeper listening makes real creative interchange a possibility. As consensus evolves, a motion may then be formulated which most people can support.

### **Discussion Guidelines**

#### **Show each other Respect**

Honour the diversity of opinion in the group.

Honour the differing abilities and disabilities in the group.

Listen until the other person is finished. Give people the space to finish their own thoughts.

Avoid put-downs, name-calling, blaming or labelling.

If someone has a different perspective that does not make them wrong. Each perspective contributes to the understanding of the whole.

#### **Communicate for Understanding**

Use "I" statements. "I think...I feel.... I need." Own your own feelings and opinions. Speak your own thoughts. Let others speak for themselves.

Describe the behaviour you are reacting to.

Check out assumptions. Ask for clarification. Do this for both ideas and feelings.

Bring your good will. Hear the content through your heart.

#### **Participate with Trust and Commitment**

Ask for what you want or need

If you are a talker, limit your own contributions so that you can make space for others; invite others to speak

If you are a listener, remember, the group needs all the perspectives. If no one else puts your ideas forward it is important that you share them.

Hang in there when the going gets tough. With trust you will be able to hear each other and come to resolution.

Avoid negotiating with threats.

### **3. Discover Social Responsibility Priorities**

Too often individuals push particular social issues which have no depth of commitment in the congregation. If you want to have a congregation that is involved in your social responsibility program, you need to identify which issues will touch the interests, strengths, and areas of concern of a large number of members. This survey is a good way to do that.

A congregation's social responsibility policy allows for the possibility of church-level action if a sufficient consensus on topic and direction can be achieved. It is the goal of the social responsibility committee to choose a direction for social action and to lead the congregation to such a consensus. The online survey is intended to give the committee guidance as to where to begin. The survey results will help the congregation discover its interests, strengths, and levels of commitment on various issues. After the results are collated, the information will help the committee design the next phase of the discussion process - building consensus.

## LEVELS OF ACTION

After looking at the results of the congregational survey, it would be helpful to determine what level of action is required. Thomas Price suggests this model of four main types of social concern:

1. social service
2. social education
3. social witness (advocacy)
4. action for social change.

The following chart shows the kinds of activity that might take place under each level of action:

SOCIAL SERVICE	SOCIAL EDUCATION	ADVOCACY WITNESS	ACTION for SOCIAL CHANGE
Food Bank	Religious Education Curricula	Letter Writing	Clean up river
Refugee Haven	Public Speaking	Vigils	Boycott company
Fundraising for women's shelter	Newsletter	Raging Grannies	Put in bicycle paths
	Ads on TV	Present Brief	Plant trees
	Public Forums		Ride the bus
			Civil Disobedience

Some of these suggested activities might fit equally well under another category. Don't get bogged down in discussion of which goes where. The point is, there are a variety of levels of action and each has its advantages and disadvantages. It may not be possible to get your local government to the point of action on transportation issues without doing some education and some advocacy work first. If the public is not ready to support the ideas, politicians won't move. Politicians themselves may not understand the issues or have the right vision of the future. On the other hand, a pilot project increasing the number of bicycles in an area and putting in some bike stands may be the best way to get the idea across.

The level of action required for a specific project, will depend on:

- 1 The situation itself and which level of action is most needed;
- 2 The energy and resources required to achieve something;
- 3 The opportunities available and the resources your group has;
- 4 The political impact of your choice on allies such as your congregation;
- 5 The kinds of results you can expect for the kind of energy you can put in.

#### **4. Build Consensus**

In some congregations social responsibility may be difficult to achieve due to conflict between the committed social activists and the congregation as a whole. If this is true in your congregation, the Rankin Process (developed and tested by Unitarian minister Rev. David O. Rankin), is one method which many congregations have found successful in resolving or at least reducing these tensions and bringing your congregation around to a position of support for particular social action projects. Involvement of the whole congregation is not essential to the success of this program.

The Rankin Process could be used instead of a survey or as a follow up to the survey to propose projects and build commitment in the congregation. Congregations who do this have higher levels of ownership of their social responsibility activities.

#### **Premises:**

1. That no congregation can do justice to more than three major social action issues in any one year or season.
2. That individual Unitarians become alienated when "the Church" takes a stand on a justice issue without consulting them.
3. That consent must be *informed* consent.
4. That with the exception of membership fees or subscriptions to umbrella organizations, funds raised for the operation of the church or fellowship should *never* be donated to other causes no matter how worthy. The church may donate the use of its space, but money for causes must be raised specifically for those causes.

(The Sample Social Responsibility Policy is also built on these guidelines.)

The Rankin Process is one way of securing congregational backing- or at least consent for social action in the name of the church.

## 5. Network

As individuals, we can each do a small amount. How much more can we do if we work together!? Each of us is tied into a variety of networks which we could use to communicate our ideas and gain involvement. We are all involved in families, religious groups, workplaces and community groups. The networking model shows how individuals can be connected through a variety of groups to any problem, anywhere in the world - from the local level to the international level.

Many workplaces are now connected through multinational corporations to other businesses in other provinces, countries, and continents. Unions have local committees, national and international bodies. Every religion has members on every continent of the world. Many community groups, professional associations, and so on have chapters in local areas, and at national, and international levels. (Rotary, Lions, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, Physicians and Surgeons Against Nuclear War, etc.). Families themselves are spread out all over the world, and for many where the family culture is strong, they still keep strong connections with each other.

Government is the one structure that remains individualized and unconnected from one part of the world to another. A myriad of different local, regional, and national structures exist in a large number of nation states. The United Nations has some unifying opportunities, but requires a lot of development before it can act as the international arbiter and police force that we need. When government is needed to effect change, a group needs to be very clear which areas are affected and what governments are involved. It needs to be prepared for a very complex set of actions to bring all related government bodies around to the point of change together.

Every individual in your group has the potential to be connected to a network where you might be able to get more than the usual leverage for the solving of a problem. Understanding your connections and knowing how to make use of them is the first step to building a movement larger than just yourself towards positive action for change.

In some areas, the network is already built, in place, and functioning well due to other projects successfully accomplished. In some cases it needs building from scratch. Our own Canadian Unitarian network is in the process of development. If we want to function as one, we will first need to strengthen it. Some congregations are very active. Others are not. The former *Social Action Network News* (SAAN), now published as part of the Canadian Unitarian, received regular contributions from Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, and Vancouver/Victoria ~ but nothing from the Prairies or the Atlantic Provinces or South Western Ontario. We hope that by including it in The Canadian Unitarian more people will be able to see and use it. We need to build up our interest and involvement at the local level before we will truly have an effective national network for action.

*See also the case study examples of Networking in Action.*

## **B. Mini Curriculum**

The three sessions are the core sessions from a 10-session curriculum designed to give a group an in-depth opportunity to discuss key world issues of the day and decide how to focus the attention of their group – both which issues their group should address and how they should approach them. After field-testing the curriculum in Victoria, Toronto and Montreal, it was decided that it was too long and the content would be too quickly out of date. We decided instead to include the three core process sessions, which should be timeless, and encourage people to pick up the most up-to-date version of: *The State of the World, A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, New version every year since 1984, W.W. Norton & Company, New York and London.

The curriculum provides an excellent three-session process to help a group get to know each other, discuss social issues of concern to them, and begin to discover what their particular strengths and weaknesses are. From this information they can choose a social responsibility focus based on what issues are of greatest interest to the group and what processes are most suited to the talents and network connections of the group.

We recommend this mini-curriculum to a variety of groups: a social responsibility committee, an adult RE program, a youth program, a board or even a whole congregation (if we are talking about a fellowship of 50 or less).

### **Session #1: Hopes and Dreams**

This session is designed to help people explore the issues that are of central importance to them and to get to know each other as a team.

### **Leader's Notes**

People come into a group like this from many different spaces. Some will have particular issues that they feel strong concerns about and want the group to deal with. Others will have a general sense that they want to be more involved, but may not know much about the issues or where they should start. Some of the group will have a good knowledge of Unitarianism and some will not. Participating in session one will give each person a chance to name his or her concerns, hopes and dreams and share a bit about their background. This can provide an important basis later for finding common goals and developing an effective team.

As a result of this session, you may have identified several areas of interest that you may wish to do more in depth thinking about before you choose an issue or focus to work on. The first step in social responsibility is often education for the committee on an issue. An excellent resource for looking at the issues is: *State of the World 1999, A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, W.W. Norton & Company.

The Worldwatch Institute has put out a new and up-to-date edition of this book every year since 1984. It covers issues such as the state of International Agreements, Population and Food Distribution, Global Cropland, Healthcare, Ecology and Climate Change, Valuing Nature's Services, Transforming Security, Economic, Trade, and Subsidy Policies, and Learning from Successful or Unsuccessful World Change Efforts.

Another resource which you may wish to order for your group is the Citizens for Public Justice Toolbox for Justice and Stewardship. It contains an excellent action and communication guide for organizing meetings and interfacing with politicians.

Contact: Citizens for Public Justice, Suite 311, 229 College Street, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 1R4. Phone: (416) 979-2443; fax: (416) 979-2458.

When you are ready to try to pick a focus, you may decide to continue on in your small group with session two or go to the Toolkit section and conduct either a Congregational Survey or the Rankin Process.

### **Session #2: Choosing a Focus**

This session helps participants focus attention on one or a few manageable projects.

#### **Leader's Notes**

The purpose of this session is to focus attention on one or a few manageable projects. It is not essential that the group come to consensus. If one or more minority members have a very strong commitment to a different kind of project and the rest of the group is not ready to go with them, those people should be encouraged to follow through on their own commitment and beliefs. There is no reason why several groups can't finish the curriculum, each working on the project which they feel is most useful or important.

### **Session #3: Action Planning**

The purpose of this workshop is to plan specific action projects and implement them.

#### **Leader's Notes**

The purpose of this session is to plan specific action projects for either individuals, groups, or the congregation as a whole to implement. If several projects were selected in session two, then the people should each work on their project of choice. The case studies are included to show people how an issue is handled over time and the great variety of steps that may be needed to bring an issue to fruition. If the group wants the whole congregation to be involved in the project, you may wish to refer to the Rankin Process for congregational decision-making for assistance in planning the steps. If people are short of ideas on what kinds of action projects are possible, look to the Levels of Action section for suggestions or to the Social Action Toolkit. If a group selects a process they have never done before they may wish to bring in experienced community resources for training.

## **C. Case Studies**

### **Working Models for Social Responsibility**

These cases illustrate the process by which effective social action can be carried out. They report the actual experience of members of our congregations in making social change. They have the capacity to inspire action in others, and they also illustrate what is required for social responsibility to be effective.

Questions follow the case histories about Frank Lewis and Carol Lees. These can be used for discussion as part of the group process program.

#### **1. Lobbying Federal MPs - Frank Lewis**

An action to prevent the reinstatement of the death penalty.

#### **2. Work is Work is Work - Carol Lees**

An action to change Canada's economic yardsticks by persuading Statistics Canada to count and value unpaid work.

#### **3. Building Congregational Commitment - Beacon Unitarian Church**

A case to demonstrate how to move towards congregational social responsibility.

## **D. Group Process Toolkit**

A tool in this toolkit is a group process, a decision-making tool, or an exercise that will assist you to open up the dialogue in new and interesting ways to bring out individual differences and new perspective. The group can look through the toolkit for exercises or processes that may help open their eyes in each particular situation. You are not expected to go through them all or to use them in any particular order. Pick and choose as they seem helpful to you.

### **Overview**

#### **1. Including a Spiritual Component in Meetings**

This guide gives you ideas on how to make sure your social responsibility committee meeting or your adult education program touches the whole person and helps people leave with a feeling of worth and dignity.

#### **2. Envisioning – Hopes and Dreams**

This is a group exercise the use of which is described in Hopes and Dreams (Session one of the mini-curriculum). It is a great group builder and helps people get to know what really matters to each person in the group.

#### **3. Brainstorming**

If your group gets too bogged down in criticism, argument, and debate without good listening, you can loosen them up with a brainstorming session. This tool tells you how to set the rules to enhance creativity and fun.

#### **4. Empowerment through Networks**

This exercise stimulates the group to think of all the connections and networks they have available to the group. This then becomes one of the criteria affecting your action strategy.

#### **5. SWOT Analysis**

Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats. This model gives a discussion format for looking at the external community to see what the critical issues are and for looking at the church community to see what strengths it has to bring to the community's problems.

#### **6. Force Field Analysis**

This is a decision-making process. If you have a difficult choice to make between two options and you must pick either one or the other, this tool can really help. Study the forces pulling in each direction.

**7. Valuing Charts**

This is a decision-making process. If you are comparing several choices with a complex set of criteria, then this tool is terrific for structuring the discussion. It helps get people off of starting positions and into the underlying values represented by each option.

**8. Action Planning**

This is a group organizing tool to help you plan your group process. It is easy for a project to fail because responsibilities are not properly assigned and deadlines set. No one knows who is doing what. If you use this tool you'll prevent some of those problems.

**9. Meeting Critique Form**

This is an evaluation process to help your group improve its own effectiveness as a group. It provides a format for giving every person the opportunity to evaluate both their own contributions and the contributions of others. Use it for team building.

## **E. Social Action Toolkit**

### **Using Social Action to Raise the Profile of Unitarianism in Your Community**

Communication and project management skills are essential to effective social action in any community. The fundamental principle involved is that people need to hear a message in several different ways before they will have assimilated it. Some people take information in through reading. Others need to hear it spoken. Some need to hear it very close to the event. Others need to hear about it well in advance so they can put it in their calendar. A most common complaint is that the congregation is not involved and not supportive of social action events. The truth is probably that whoever was planning the social action event missed opportunities to do the communication required to get a good turnout.

Just as good communication brings out people in the congregation, so also good communication brings out people in the larger community. There is no greater opportunity to publicize our faith than through our social responsibility activities. By clearly proclaiming our social responsibility work people in the community will get a sense of who these Unitarians are and what they are about. We can really increase our impact and the awareness of our Purposes and Principles if we take the time to develop a good communication strategy for each project. In addition, social responsibility projects frequently give us excellent press. This gives us the best kind of free publicity and often much more newspaper space than we could ever afford to buy.

**Tools in this section include:**

1. **Developing a Communications Strategy**

Gives you general principles of communication and some guidelines as to how to take advantage of a variety of communication techniques to reach your audience as well as the timelines for key decisions and key communication.

2. **Writing and Distributing Press Releases**

Gives you the format of a press release and how to write it.

3. **How to plan and run a forum**

Gives detailed tips on the steps involved in organizing a forum.

4. **Letter Writing Campaigns**

This form of action is great to get some activity going when you don't have a congregational consensus.

5. **Brief Writing**

Gives tips on what to put in a brief and how to present it.

6. **Making Effective Use of Media**

Gives ideas on the kinds of events for which you should go all out for maximum media attention.

7. **Lobbying**

Gives ideas on how to find the best pressure point for change and how to find the decision-makers who will ultimately determine what happens on your issue.

8. **Other Resources**

## **Acknowledgments**

### **A note from Frances Deverell**

The contents of this handbook has been under development for quite a long period of time. At first, we were designing a curriculum and then changed gears in midstream to create a national and congregational handbook. Then the Social Responsibility Taskforce added the links and streamlined the contents. I would like to express my thanks to the following people, many of whom were involved at the curriculum design stage, and others who have helped to put it together:

Ellen Campbell, Executive Director of the CUC, who has been behind the development of the original curriculum and who conceived of the shift to a CUC handbook and wrote those portions relating to the National Policy picture.

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## The Social Responsibility Policies of the CUC

In recent years the CUC has looked for a way to make our social responsibility more focused and effective. We identified three ways in which the CUC carries out its mandate for social responsibility on a national level:

**First**, we support the activity of individuals and congregations by providing information on issues and activities and by providing opportunities for activities of individual congregations to be shared and supported by others. We do this through our newsletter, *The Canadian Unitarian*, our regular mailings to members, the activities at our Annual Meeting, and study programs like “Rainbowmaking: Intercultural and Interfaith Outreach for Canadian Unitarians and Universalists.”

**Secondly**, we decided to move away from the resolution process as we had practised it. This approach has taken some time to develop and is still in process. We are trying to work through congregations and the Social Responsibility Task Force to develop policies which

- a. reflect our religious purposes and principles
- b. reflect broad agreement across our congregations, and
- c. provide a framework within which we can respond to changed circumstances over time.

We have carried out two such processes, one on Choice in Dying and the other on Justice for First Nations Peoples. We have people monitoring these issues and advising us when to take appropriate action to make our views known in the larger community.

The **third** strategy is to work with coalitions and groups with whom we share common concerns. In 1998, we belong to the Aboriginal Rights Coalition, the Unitarian Universalist United Nations Office, the Canadian Abortion Rights Action League, and the International Association for Religious Freedom.

A more detailed discussion of how we came to this point and how our process works is included in the CUC’s Social Responsibility handbook. It’s available at [www.cuc.ca/social\\_responsibility](http://www.cuc.ca/social_responsibility).