

Bennett Award for Congregational Action on Human Justice and Social Action
Unitarian Universalist Association
Office for Congregational Advocacy & Witness
25 Beacon Street
Boston MA 02108

March 15, 2012

Dear Friends – We are pleased to submit to you this nomination for People’s Church of Kalamazoo Michigan, for the Bennett Award. Our attached narrative will give you the information you need, about our congregation which has become a leader in justice work in our community and in the international UU movement. Please let us know if you have questions.

Sincerely –

Dr. Tim Bartik, President, People’s Church
Senior Economist W.E. Upjohn Institute for Employment Research
269-385-0433 (voice)
269-343-3308 (fax)
bartik@upjohn.org

Rev. Jill McAllister, Minister, People’s Church
269-381-1783
minister@peopleschurch.net

People’s Church
1758 N. 10th Street
Kalamazoo MI 49008

PEOPLE'S CHURCH – WORKING FOR SOCIAL, ECONOMIC and ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

If you want to find out about justice work at People's Church, you can start with our web site. Typing Social Justice into the search space, you'll be offered a list of links to the following activities:

- Adopt A Highway
- ARAOMC Task Force
- Green Sanctuary Committee
- Habitat for Humanity
- ISAAC
- Martha's Table
- Prisoner Release Program
- SJCC
- Standing on the Side of Love
- Talking Pots
- Volunteer Mentoring at Lincoln School

Just this week, nearly fifty People's people – adults, children and youth – helped prepare and serve a meal and a worship service at Martha's Table, a weekly program for homeless people which we share with 11 other congregations. We've just raised \$1000 for an ad in the ISAAC banquet book, and more than 30 people are signed up to attend. Our 'Standing on the Side of Love' banner is hanging in the Sanctuary as we revisit our long-time welcoming congregation work and help prepare congregants for Border Crossing activities, both here and at the upcoming General Assembly. Interestingly, 10 years ago, when after a Sunday Service a newcomer asked about our social action, a long-time member answered "Oh, we don't do that." What has changed?

OUR HISTORY OF SOCIAL ACTION 1855 - 1995

People's Church is no newcomer to active work in the areas of human justice and social action – in fact we have a long and proud history in these areas. The congregation was first gathered in 1855 and progressed slowly for several years. The church was at a low ebb when they decided in 1889 to hire a young woman minister, Caroline Bartlett, who was then serving a congregation in Sioux Falls, Dakota Territory. Soon after arriving in Kalamazoo she said ".. this church cannot be a place where we are merely to come together once a week and enjoy our doctrine and congratulate ourselves that we have a faith free from superstition. We must do something for others, as well as for ourselves. And the more we have done for others, the more in the end, we shall find we have done for ourselves." She promoted a seven-day church with social programs for all people, regardless of race, color or creed. In 1892, having constructed a new building, a free public kindergarten was opened to the community; a women's gymnasium was instituted; a school of household science taught cooking, housekeeping, home nursing, and sewing using as teachers vocational school graduates from Chicago. There was a manual training class for men and a literary club named The Frederick Douglass Club for blacks.

After the Crane ministry, the church thrived for a dozen years, though it was served by four ministers during that time. It continued to offer services to the community, notably starting a nursery school on the north side of the city to serve working mothers; but it never attracted a very large clientele. Four people left bequests to the church as a result of the services that were being provided there, constituting the "Hubbard -Henika Fund" which contributed to a number of community projects; including furnishing a surgical ward at the new Bronson Hospital, contributing to the support of a visiting nurse, and helping maintain a "free-bed" at Bronson Hospital.

The church also ran Evening Rest from 1905 to about 1912, serving working women. The Evening Rest opened the church from late afternoon, with the parlors available for socializing. Also the women could use the gymnasium equipment and the church library. A hot meal was served every

night except Sunday for ten cents, though it cost an extra two cents to have dessert. By 1909 it was announced that 25,400 meals had been served. A Saturday nursery and kindergarten were also offered to serve country women who came into Kalamazoo to shop.

In June 1934, Edwin Palmer was called as minister. In accord with his idea that the church should be active in the Kalamazoo community, he served as president of the Kalamazoo Council of Social Agencies and on the Central Trades Labor Council as well as on the recreation council. A long list of organizations held meetings in the building. No rent was charged, and if offered it was returned, suggesting that the gift be given to some organization such as the Girl Scouts that also used the building.

In 1956, after the death of Mr. Palmer, Roger Greeley was called to be the minister. During his long and successful ministry, 1956 –1985, People's people were active in many of the most important issues of the times, including supporting and working for school integration, Planned Parenthood, and gay/lesbian rights. The first work on becoming a welcoming congregation started in 1974, before the UUA's Welcoming Congregation program was written. In general, during this time, members and friends of the congregation were encouraged to work on justice issues as individuals, since the prevailing philosophy of the minister and congregation included priority given to the humanistic ideals of freedom of conscience (the church should never take a stand.)

NEW APPROACHES TO JUSTICE WORK from 1998

By 1995, after a period of church conflict, the congregation was ready for a new approach to church life and outreach. Jill McAllister was called to be the minister of the church in 1998, bringing her experience on the UUA Board of Trustees, and dedication to the collective strength of the UU movement as a whole. In December 2000 she suggested to the Board the creation of a Social Concerns Committee. In September 2001 two Board members attended a Heartland District Social Justice Workshop and brought back materials and enthusiasm, which led to the planning of an All Church Planning Retreat with social justice work as one of the three main topics. The discussion was spirited, as new ways of engaging in social justice were being considered, but out of the conversation a committee was formed. At their first meeting they adopted the title of *Social Justice Coordinating Committee*, as a more inclusive and shared approach to facilitating the work undertaken by the congregation. One of the first projects of the SJCC was to plan an Empowerment Workshop in April 2002, with the Rev. Bill Gardener of the UUA. Rev. Gardener was instrumental in helping us understand the relationship between freedom of conscience and collective social action, and we began to move forward.

That same spring, two major community organizing movements arrived in Kalamazoo, from the Gamaliel Foundation and DART. People's people attended meetings of both, to learn about their structures and aims, and to explore possibilities for collaborative social action. We decided to join the Gamaliel organization, and became an official member congregation of I.S.A.A.C. (Interfaith Strategy for Action and Advocacy in the Community) at the opening public meeting in October 2002.

Being part of ISAAC offered fabulous opportunities for training in community organizing. During the first 2-3 years, nearly 20 People's people were trained, and a congregational core team of 8 people was formed. We participated in the all-congregation listening campaign, involving more than 200 people, to help decide the focus issues for the organization. People's people took leadership roles in all of the task forces that emerged, including Early Childhood & Education, Housing, and County Transportation. Members of People's engaged in this work went on to become city commissioners and organizers of major community coalitions. In 2007 a coalition chaired by a member of people's helped secure state and local funding to bring a multi-million dollar grant for the Nurse Family Partnership to Kalamazoo, and when changes in the state budget threatened to cut that program, People's people led the way in advocating with state

legislators and the governors office, eventually securing continued funding. . In 2008, leaders from People's helped form a broad community coalition, including school districts, business leaders and social service agencies. This coalition, which included People's, initiated the formation of a new organization, KCReady4s, which has secured pilot funding for preschool for over 70 children, and is raising funds for a 3 to 5 year transition to universal access to preschool for all 4-year-olds in Kalamazoo County. For these actions and more, People's Church was awarded the Leadership Award by ISAAC in 2010.

As we were becoming involved in ISAAC, we also worked out an official process for allowing the congregation to take a stand on justice issues in the community. It took several years to move to a new perspective. We lost when votes were taken early in the process (Iraq War, then Transit) and won later on (Gay Rights ordinance). Along the way we gradually developed a much more nuanced way to organize our congregation in social justice work.

In October and November 2009 we joined with other community organizations as part of One Kalamazoo, to advocate for the continuance of a local non-discrimination ordinance passed by the City Commission, but challenged by religious conservatives. It was our first action for Standing on the Side of Love, and we helped the repeal be defeated by more than 85% of the voters, an amazing success for our city.

Through a Kalamazoo Racial and Economic Justice initiative, funded by the ARCUS Foundation, in which our minister participated, we became engaged in local anti-racism work, and in May 2009 invited a local anti-racism organization, ERAC/CE, to present an introduction to the Crossroads anti-racism training at People's. More than 25 attended that workshop. Of those 25, ten attended the full 2.5 day ERAC/CE training over the next year. We obtained grant support from the Kalamazoo County Foundation to support ERAC/CE training for our entire staff, and several more church members. We also obtained grant funding to bring the Rev. Dr. Mark Morrison Reed to People's and to Kalamazoo, to present a weekend workshop on congregational anti-racism work, in addition to being a speaker in the Western Michigan University symposium "Race Matters." Out of that work, several of our trained members have formed the People's ARAOMC committee, which has sponsored an adult ed class using the "Examining Our Whiteness" curriculum, and is now engaged in a planning and design process for long-term congregational transformation. This process will include training for all members of the Board of Trustees.

These are only the major programs in our Social Justice portfolio! In it's most recent annual report to the congregation, (2010) the SJCC listed the following activities:

- The People's Church Partnership with the Lincoln School project continued its volunteer involvement in mentoring and reading programs. Ten members of Peoples have been involved in a variety of helping roles. In addition, the congregation contributed \$1,007 at a Sunday special collection allowing 20 teachers to receive \$50 each to use for classroom supplies.
- Forty persons from People's and about 400 people in all attended the annual ISAAC banquet. Two members represent Peoples Church on the Leadership Council and Jill continued on the Executive Committee.
- The Green Sanctuary task force has been integrated into the SJCC. It has sought to include a green focus in our current building expansion plans. Also, it has organized People's sponsored road clean-up activities and weekly fair trade coffee and candy sales.
- SJCC continues to participate with the weekly Community re-entry support group for ex-offenders and has developed special helping relationships with some participants.

- This year the SJCC proposed and the Board agreed to having five special Sunday collections for selected social programs being impacted by increased community need and funding cuts. The following amounts were contributed by the congregation: Lincoln School--\$1,007; Ministry with Community--\$1,131; Keystone Inc.--\$921; Open Door/Next Door Homeless Shelter--\$1,444; Boys and Girls Club--\$825. SJCC will expand this effort next year.
- The SJCC sponsored 2 food collections for Loaves and Fishes as well as continuing collections set up in the church lobby for L & F and Ministry with Community. In response to a petition signing request from a community group, the SJCC researched and clarified church policy concerning outside groups seeking to lobby at Peoples.
- The Prisoner Release project worked with the Center of Transformation's weekly support group meetings for returned prisoners who are on parole in the Kalamazoo area. We have also banded together with 2 other individuals from other congregations to form a closely knit support group for six specific parolees. We share lunch and breakfast with some of them every week.
- Many other community service activities are carried out at Peoples, such as Martha's Table – a collaborative program which provides a weekly meal and worship for homeless people, the monthly food contributions of Talking Pots to a local shelter, the film and discussion programs of the ARAOMC anti- racism task force, social-justice focused RE programs. Lastly, the SJCC is a supporting member of the Michigan UU Social Justice Network.

There is more! We have been an active partner in the UU Partner Church program for more than 10 years, working with a Transylvanian congregation on issues of shared concern, helping them raise funds for a church building, contributing to scholarship funds, and sharing visits and conferences in both countries. In 2007 we entered a new partnership with an emerging congregation in Bujumbura, Burundi. In this partnership, we have supported a micro-lending program in Burundi, advocated for rights for indigenous people in Burundi, helped our partner connect with international funding agencies, and coordinated and supported their project to buy land and build the first Unitarian Church in French-speaking East Africa. (We raised more than half of the \$45,000 ourselves, and recruited other UUA congregations to contribute the rest.) This year, we are partners in a UUFP-funded project to address domestic violence in Bujumbura by training men, while at the same time we are discussing ways to have an impact on domestic violence in Kalamazoo. Though our international connections, we have also supported the work of the Unitarian Universalist Association of Uganda in their difficult fight against criminalization of homosexuality in that country.

When Jill introduced a Charge for a social concerns committee in 2000, we were not truly acting as a congregation on the outreach mission statement we had adopted. Now, we are a recognized community leader in social justice and social action. All ages in our church participate in this work. This brings people to our church. We have gone from writing (righteous) individual letters to the editor to engaging deeply as a congregation together with others across religious, economic and race divides in our community to work powerfully with our local and state elected officials to accomplish social justice actions that impact much closer to the core of the issues addressed. We also engage with others in our district, in the UUA, and in the international UU movement to make our values be seen, heard, and effective in building more just communities and a more just world.