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UUA Board listens, learns at Occupy Boston

Trustees visit protest site to witness grassroots movement aimed at economic justice.

By [Michelle Bates Deakin](#)

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Will Blumenthal (left), of the Follen Church Society in Lexington, Mass., delivered cookies to Occupy Boston, where he met the Rev. Jason Lydon, minister of the Community Church of Boston, and Gini Courter, moderator of the UUA. (Michelle Bates Deakin)

The trustees of the Unitarian Universalist Association paused from their board work on Saturday, Oct. 22, to visit Occupy Boston, part of a grassroots economic justice movement that is drawing the support of an increasing number of Unitarian Universalists.

In bright yellow “**Standing on the Side of Love**” T-shirts and sweatshirts, members of the board walked and taxied from the UUA headquarters to the Occupy site in Dewey Square Park in Boston’s Financial District. As they assembled, the Rev. Jake Morrill, trustee from the Southeast District and minister of the Oak Ridge, Tenn., UU Church said, “We are going to listen, learn, and love.”

Although the Occupy movement has not generated a single set of goals or demands, it has called attention to the widening class divide in America and highlighted a concern for economic justice—a goal that overlaps with Unitarian Universalists’ longstanding commitment to working for workers’ rights and economic justice.

“As a person of faith, I am committed to justice in all its forms, especially economic justice,” said the Rev. Erik David Carlson, trustee from the Central Midwest District and minister of the UU Church of Stockton, Ill.

Several of the board members had visited Occupy sites in other cities. The Rev. Michael Tino, trustee from the Metropolitan New York District, has visited Occupy Wall Street with members of his congregation, the UU Fellowship of Northern Westchester in Mount Kisco, N.Y. “This movement has been characterized as angry. But I didn’t experience as much anger as I was met by the healing power of community,” said Tino, adding that he had witnessed people who are interested in “being in community together and not privileging an elite few.”

Morrill, who has been to Occupy Knoxville and Occupy Wall Street, said the cooperative process and cooperative values he has witnessed there “embody the values of our faith.”

The board did not issue a statement regarding the Occupy movement. However, each board member entered Dewey Square with a copy of the [statement](#) UUA President Peter Morales issued earlier this month after his first visit to Occupy Boston. Morales said, in part, “Unitarian Universalism embodies a long tradition of working for economic justice and workers’ rights. Today is another opportunity for us to live our faith, and the Occupy protests are a first step on the road to repairing our country.”

“I reach out to Unitarian Universalists everywhere,” Morales’s statement continued, “to consider how you might be of service to any among us who are struggling to provide for their families, those who have been cheated and abused by financial institutions, and all those whose backs ache under a burden of debt, unemployment, and fading hope. Let the world see the power of our faith in action.”

More than 4,200 people have signed an [“Open Letter of Support for the Occupy Movement”](#) created by the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. That is by far the largest response the UUSC has ever had to an electronic action, according to Dick Campbell, UUSC spokesman. The letter states in part: “My recognition of the inherent worth of every person compels me to speak out against policies that privilege the demands of corporations over the human rights of people. I support the Occupy movement in its affirmation that protecting workers’ rights and ensuring that basic human needs are met must take precedence. All people have a fundamental right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of themselves and their families.”

Even before the board members arrived at Occupy Boston on Saturday afternoon, Unitarian Universalists were already there. Will Blumenthal, an eighth grader from Lexington, Mass., who attends the Follen Church Society, was at Occupy Boston with his friend, Isaac Case, and his parents. The boys were delivering chocolate chip cookies to the protestors. “It felt like it was a way to support the people trying to support our future,” Blumenthal said.

The Rev. Jason Lydon, minister of the [Community Church of Boston](#), has worked with the Occupy movement from its very beginning stages, meeting with organizers on the Boston Common as they tried to imagine what their local response to Occupy Wall Street might be. He has stood in solidarity with the protestors, and spends every other night sleeping in a tent there. Although he is typically in jeans and a sweatshirt, he has also donned his clerical collar to be more visible as a chaplain. Lydon said his ministerial skills were particularly in demand during two clashes between Boston police in riot gear and protestors.

“I reminded people that our strength is in our calm,” Lydon said. He counseled protestors facing arrest to breathe deeply and maintain their peacefulness.

The group processes used by many Occupy protestors look familiar to some UUs. Decisions are made through consensus at the group's General Assembly, which convenes several nights each week. Participants use silent hand signals to signify agreement, disagreement, and praise—the same gestures employed by decades of UU youth and young adults. “It comes out of an anarchist tradition of horizontal democracy,” Lydon said.

Lydon has seen a steady UU presence at the site. Several area ministers have been holding Sunday evening vespers services there, including the Rev. Parisa Parsa of First Parish in Milton, the Rev. Hank Peirce, minister of the UU Church of Medford, the Rev. Tom Schade of the First Unitarian Church of Worcester, and the Rev. Fred Small of First Parish Cambridge.

As of Oct. 26, 110 ministers in the Mass Bay and Clara Barton districts had signed on to a letter supporting the Occupy movement. The **letter**, written by the Rev. Gary Kowakski, the Rev. Elaine Peresluha, and the Rev. Dorothy Emerson, is also being used as a worship reading throughout the districts. It begins, “As clergy and people of faith, we applaud the Occupiers in Boston and elsewhere who are reigniting American democracy from the grassroots. We join them in the vision of a society where all people enjoy a fair shake, with equitable access to education, healthcare, housing, and other basics necessary to achieve a dignified life. We are appalled that the nation's poverty rate today is higher than when Martin Luther King Jr. organized the ‘Poor People's March’ back in 1968.” It concludes by asking people to support the Occupy movement nearest to them “logistically, politically, faithfully.”

On Saturday, some board members held signs along the edge of the Occupy site as a steady stream of traffic sped by, supporters honking encouragement. The Rev. Clyde Grubbs, trustee-at-large, held a sign that said, “Say ‘NO’ to Anti-Immigrant Racism.” Youth Observer Caleb Raible-Clark spoke with a protestor holding a sign reading, “Lost a Job, Found an Occupation.”

The energy impressed UUA Moderator Gini Courter, who was visiting Occupy Boston for the third time. “This is hopeful. This is how democracy starts,” she said. She said she was struck by “the notion that people care enough about this country and care deeply about their neighbors and want to make a difference.” She has also been heartened to see congregations getting involved. “The centerpiece of this is economic justice,” a subject the UUA General Assembly has been voting on for decades. “Our congregations know that economic injustice spreads,” Courter said.

She wandered through the tents, chatting with protestors and making her way to the Spirituality Tent. UU Andrew Coate was sitting in front of the tent, crocheting a black hat. “I’m here to provide a spiritual presence,” said Coate, a young adult member of First Parish Cambridge, who hopes to attend seminary next year. Coate said people come to the tent seeking a place for meditation, prayer, or quiet. “This is a space to come and be centered, and it has given people the ability to say, ‘I can speak from a place of religion.’” On a round cardboard sign, Coate had written a blessing he copied from the Rev. Sean Dennison in black marker: “Bless all who speak today and all who listen, whether in the pulpit, the pews, or the street.”

Tibetan prayer flags hung across the tent's entrance, and inside, a table held battery-operated tea lights, a framed photo of the Dalai Lama, a sculpture of the Buddha, a plate of corn with a sign



identifying it as “the seed of life,” and handwritten prayers. In one corner was a library of books from many faiths, including two UU hymnals donated by Coate. In another, a man was stretched out reading the Bible. In the center, a visitor read from the Psalms, while holding a stick of incense.

Trustee Natalia Averett, of the Joseph Priestley District, was pleased the trustees took the time to witness the protest. “It’s absolutely the right thing to do. It puts us all on the same page of our understanding of what is going on,” she said.

At Averett’s congregation, the UU Church of Arlington, Va., members were part of a network of congregations supporting protestors at Occupy DC-K Street in Washington, D.C., by providing meals for at least 100 people each Friday night.

Like many trustees, Averett sees connections between the Occupy movement and Unitarian Universalism. “It is people from different backgrounds who are committed to coming together to create something organized,” she said. “We want to be an association that serves the world. The history of our movement is to be at the forefront of civil rights.”

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