

# Rights Now

The newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

SUMMER 2020



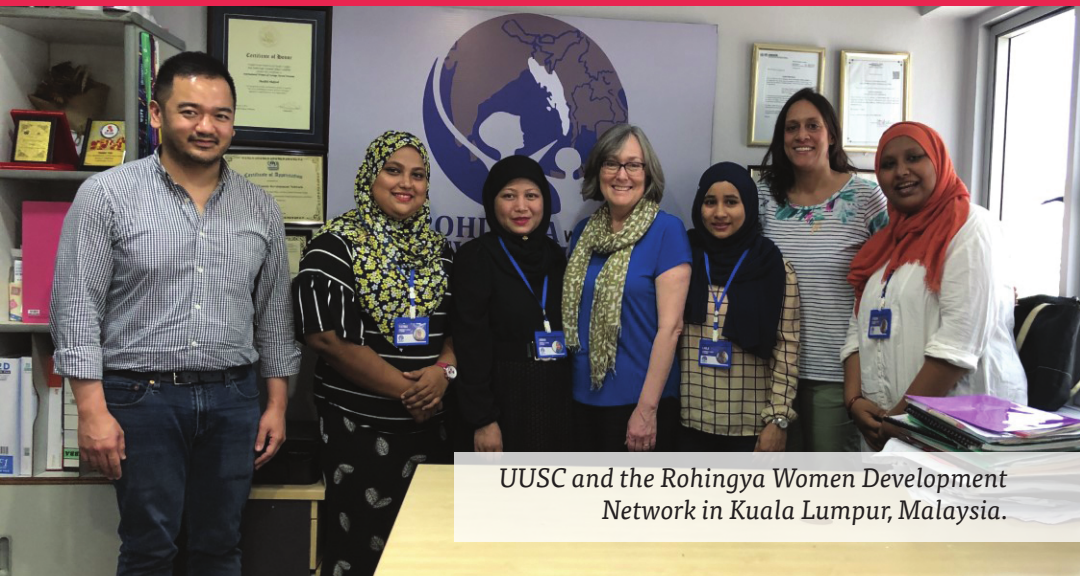
ROOTED IN  
PARTNERSHIP  
READY TO  
RESPOND

**RESPONDING IN TIMES OF CRISIS**  
A LETTER FROM REV. MARY KATHERINE MORN

**25 YEARS IN BURMA**

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# RESPONDING IN TIMES OF CRISIS



*UUSC and the Rohingya Women Development Network in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.*

The pandemic we are facing is presenting us all with new challenges. Our old routines are gone, and we are forced to keep our distance from those we care about. As we've committed to staying home to protect ourselves and others, I'm keeping in mind the communities around the world and here in our own country who have been displaced from their homes or for whom home is not safe. Across the globe, refugees, asylum-seekers, and Indigenous Peoples forced from their lands due to climate change are experiencing this global health crisis most acutely. From Honduran families fleeing violence and seeking safety in the U.S., to Rohingya refugees forced into camps in neighboring Bangladesh after a brutal campaign of genocide, to Pacific Islanders bearing the worst effects of climate change, UUSC is striving to respond in a way that upholds the dignity of all people.

We know that for so many, the threat of COVID-19 is not the only threat to their safety or basic human rights. This pandemic is only compounding the systemic inequities and human rights issues that have existed long before the outbreak. That is why UUSC is committed to working in solidarity with our grassroots partners to continue to confront the injustices they have

*We are committed to working in solidarity with grassroots organizations to continue to confront the injustices they have been fighting for years, while pivoting some of our support to address the immediate needs brought on by COVID-19.*

been fighting for years, while pivoting some of our support to address the immediate needs brought on by COVID-19.

During this time of crisis, UUSC's commitment to working in eye-to-eye partnership with those directly impacted by injustice is what allows us to respond both thoughtfully and quickly. Our work at its heart is relational—it is our connection over time and the trust that is built that helps us develop authentic, grounded relationships with our partners. When a crisis hits, we lean into that trust and support our partners in addressing the needs they identify. I hope the examples that follow of how we are centering grassroots solutions and pivoting our work in light of COVID-19 bring you hope that even in the most challenging times, our values hold firm.



With gratitude,

*MaryKath Mon*



# 25 YEARS OF ADVANCING HUMAN RIGHTS IN BURMA

For 25 years, UUSC has partnered with grassroots organizations in Burma to promote human rights for communities facing systematic oppression. Over the years, the human rights landscape in Burma has changed, and UUSC has been committed to listening to those on the ground and responding with flexible support to address the most pressing needs. Our focus over the past few years has been to promote justice and accountability for genocide at the international level, and to support Rohingya genocide survivors in refugee camps in Burma and Bangladesh who have suffered brutal violence at the hands of the Burmese military.

As COVID-19 continues to have a disproportionate impact on

communities that were vulnerable before the virus began to spread, our work to mobilize grassroots leaders and to restore the rights of the Rohingya is more important than ever. The refugee camp in Bangladesh, just over the Burma border, is the largest in the world. Nearly 1 million people living in overcrowded conditions make social distancing impossible, and families in the camps lack access to basic sanitation supplies. In the face of this deadly pandemic, UUSC remains committed to the long-term work of fighting for the restoration of rights that have been stripped from the Rohingya people while transitioning some of our support to provide immediate aid.

*Our partner Elom Empowerment conducting education classes for Rohingya children.*





## SOME OF THE WAYS WE ARE RESPONDING

### **Distributing emergency supplies:**

UUSC is working with a new partner to support volunteers delivering COVID-19 kits with soap, masks, and medicine to refugees living in the camps in Bangladesh.

### **Demanding access to life-saving information:**

Access to public health guidance is critical in slowing the spread of COVID-19. In Bangladesh refugee camps, UUSC is advocating for the restoration of mobile data, which has been blocked for months. Without access to information to keep their families safe, the Rohingya are even more susceptible to a wide-spread outbreak.

### **Providing safe spaces for women and children:**

We are committed to promoting dignity through relief as we work to address the new challenges brought on by the coronavirus. When we heard that women's centers in the Bangladesh camps, designed for and run by Rohingya women, were at risk of shutting down due to lack of resources, UUSC stepped up to provide critical funding. These centers provide privacy for nursing mothers, mental health services, and other necessary support for Rohingya women.

*The Rohingya genocide is one of the greatest human rights catastrophes of our time, and there is only a limited window of opportunity to act now that the case of the Rohingya is being considered at the International Court of Justice. Most of the world is looking away, but we invite you to join us in taking a closer look. Visit [uusc.org/burma25](https://uusc.org/burma25) to learn more about our ongoing work in the region.*

# MEMBER SURVEY

As a supporter of UUSC, your thoughts help shape our strategies and outreach. That is why we hope you will take a few minutes to complete this survey and share with us what is on your mind. Please answer the questions below and mail the survey back with the envelope provided. **To complete the survey online, please visit: [www.uusc.org/membersurvey](http://www.uusc.org/membersurvey).** Thank you!

## What inspires you to support UUSC?

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## What human rights issue(s) are most important to you?

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## Which communication(s) do you use to stay updated on UUSC's work? (Choose up to 3)

- ☐ Rights Now newsletter
- ☐ Postal mail updates and solicitations
- ☐ Toward Justice e-newsletter
- ☐ Email action alerts
- ☐ UUSC blog posts
- ☐ UUSC social media content
- ☐ UUSC congregational events

## In these challenging times, what brings you hope?

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## **PARTNER SPOTLIGHT: AL OTRO LADO**

For the past two years, UUSC has partnered with Al Otro Lado (AOL), a bi-national organization that fights for families torn apart by unjust immigration laws, to recruit and support volunteers at the U.S.-Mexico border. Working in both Southern California and Tijuana, Mexico, AOL provides free legal representation to migrants and advocates for changes to harmful immigration policies.

This vital work often requires in-person legal consultations, application workshops, and face-to-face translation services. Once COVID-19 reached the U.S. in early 2020, however, not only was this type of support impossible to provide safely, it was also becoming increasingly apparent that the Trump administration was using this public health crisis to further its anti-immigrant policy objectives. The Southern border became effectively closed to those fleeing urgent threats, asylum claims were stalled, and migrants, including children, were expelled from the country without any due process. In such an uncertain time, AOL's work was needed more than ever.

With in-person support no longer an option, AOL had to quickly transition to an entirely remote, digital service. Rooted in an understanding of the need for flexibility in times of crisis, UUSC was ready to respond. An emergency grant was immediately dispatched to help shift their work to a remote platform and remain nimble in the face of the ever-changing policies of the Trump administration. With asylum applications and know-your-rights workshops now moved to online platforms, AOL was even able to expand its reach beyond the immediate U.S.-Mexico border.

As COVID-19 continues to leave its mark around the world, it is also uncovering and exacerbating inequities our partners on the frontlines confront daily. By remaining flexible in our support, we are enabling partners to pivot to these changing circumstances, offering vital, consistent services at a time of real uncertainty. With remote volunteer placements still active and ongoing, UUSC continues to shape our support around these immediate needs, while remaining committed to the long term goals of AOL.



# COMPOUNDING EFFECTS IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS

When Category 5 Cyclone Harold made landfall in the Pacific Islands region in early April, causing devastating damage and displacement, our partners were already dealing with two other very present threats: the outbreak of COVID-19 and the destructive forces of climate change. For the Marshall Islands in particular, a recent outbreak of dengue fever was placing extra strain on a healthcare system that was overburdened before the global pandemic. This was compounded by the fact that these communities

were already struggling with the daily realities of the climate crisis.

While Indigenous Peoples in the Pacific have long been facing the uncertainties of rising sea levels and land erosion, the virus presents a new threat to their way of life. The halting tourism industry alone brings economic uncertainty and hardship, and public health guidelines around social distancing and consistent hand washing prove challenging at best, impossible at worst. Communal living in the Pacific – such as sharing food and

*UUSC staff member Salote Soqo with Maina from Tuvalu Climate Action Network and Robin from Alaska Institute for Justice.*





*Josevata shows UUSC staff the effects of climate change in Namatakula, Fiji.*

gathering as a tribe — are integral parts of maintaining cultural practices and identity. Regular handwashing also proves difficult in many communities that are without reliable access to clean, safe drinking water.

UUSC's support to our partners in the Pacific during this crisis is born out of long-standing relationships built on trust — constantly listening and responding to their needs as they evolve. In response to conversations with our partners, we quickly decided to support them in repurposing our funding to cover urgent needs. The changes varied by partner and community, but in each case, UUSC's resources filled critical gaps needed to protect families during the COVID-19 pandemic. For some partners, this meant shifting our funds towards basic food and hygiene items for those without access to clean water. For others, it was the simple yet incredibly important need to translate public health recommendations into the local language and educate their communities about the measures needed to be taken to ensure their safety.

This ability to rapidly support such crucial services highlights the effectiveness of UUSC's partnership model. Working eye-to-eye with partners, guided by their knowledge and expertise, we were able to quickly recognize the importance of adaptability: our funding needed to pivot in order to best support the needs of the community during this burgeoning crisis. Climate effects aren't easing for these communities during this time, so while we work to provide immediate support, we continue our commitment to centering Indigenous voices and supporting community-based solutions to the climate crisis.

***In times of crisis, UUSC remains committed to our partners and ready to respond to their changing needs.***

While a crisis like COVID-19 spares no one, it also magnifies inequity for families who are already confronting existing systems of oppression. As always, UUSC is focusing on those who are likely to be overlooked by traditional relief efforts and joining hands with them through the uncertain days ahead.

**Rights Now**

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**ROOTED IN PARTNERSHIP  
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**TO JOIN IN SUPPORTING THIS WORK, VISIT:**

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