

THE HISTORY OF THE CANADIAN UNITARIANS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

(revised 2021-22) Written by two of the original members Norman A. McLeod (of South Peel Congregation, Mississauga) and Christine Johnston (of First Toronto Church and First Victoria) and Rev. Frances Deverell who joined CUSJ in about 2002, currently living in Nanaimo.

Background Context

In the 1990's, many older Unitarians looked back with nostalgia to the 1950's, '60's, and '70's when social action was strong in our denomination. In both Toronto and Vancouver Unitarian sermons were often quoted in the newspaper for their relevant commentary on current events. We saw ourselves as on the cutting edge of social issues -- leaders in social justice -- compared to other denominations.

In 1961, when the fledgling Canadian Unitarian Council (CUC) was formed, one of the stated purposes was to give a Unitarian voice to public issues of concern in Canada which were often not the same as American social justice issues.

But by 1996, some Unitarian social activists felt that we had lost our edge. We didn't see the Canadian Unitarian voice we had hoped to see in the Canadian Unitarian and in published statements. Congregations seemed to be more and more careful about taking public stands on social issues. Conflicts would arise between more small "c" conservative members and passionate social activists. Some felt the level of our denominational involvement had become quite weak. Members who had been around a long time noticed that enthusiasm for social issues had a certain ebb and flow with changing times. Others noticed that other denominations were taking the lead on important issues and Unitarians were absent.

Toronto Unitarians attempted to rectify this by birthing the "Social Action Network News," and sending it out across Canada. Regrettably, this endeavour, though promising, couldn't be sustained. Social action seemed to languish in Unitarian congregations from an activist perspective.

At the political level, we should also note that in the Regan era in the United States, we had the beginning of trickle-down economics and social cutbacks. Many public services in both the United States and Canada were either cut or privatized. This began the transition to a capitalism that elevated the already rich and squeezed the poor and the middle classes.

In 1990, Mike Harris was elected leader of the Ontario PC party. He won back-to-back majority governments in 1995 and 1999 and immediately began to implement the "Common Sense Revolution" (an Ontario version of the neo-liberal agenda.) Bill Bennett was the Conservative Premier in BC from 1975 to 1986 followed by Bill Vander Zalm, both also committed to the same cutback approach. Brian Mulroney was Prime Minister at the Federal level from 1984 to 1993 with similar values and approach. The Faith Communities, including Unitarians in Ontario, and BC began to rise up in protest, and to defend the poor. It was more important than ever for Unitarians to have a national voice.

The announcements of cutbacks to health and education and to the services to the poor in Ontario caused great consternation in the faith communities. The Catholic Bishops published an open letter criticizing the policies of the government and pointing out how damaging they were to the fabric of

society. Other denominations and social justice groups were on the public record opposing policies like the 22% welfare cut. Key church leaders spoke out in strong opposition and got a lot of press.

Many other faith organizations such as Citizens For Public Justice, Metro Network for Social Justice, the National Anti-poverty Organization, and Kairos were getting active.

ISARC (Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition) was the umbrella group to lead the charge on the cutbacks. It was a highly effective group of experienced religious and lay professionals, committed to social justice and drawn from many faiths, and denominations, and social justice groups. But no Unitarian group was listed.

The Birth of CUSJ

Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice (CUSJ) was a response to the need for a clear and strong national social action voice. It emerged from three principal sources: South Peel, Toronto area churches and Victoria. It took a couple of years for the planning phase to pull Unitarians across the country together.

Mississauga/Toronto area

So South Peel got together in March 1996 with some activists from Don Heights and First Church of Toronto to discuss their frustrations both with the political situation and the Unitarian lack of response. The people at First Unitarian agreed to arrange a meeting for the Greater Toronto Area Unitarians. The meeting was called for Sunday, the 24th of March, 1996.

To the astonishment and delight of the organizers, there was standing room only at the meeting. The initial tenor of the room can be summed up in one word: FRUSTRATION! All the GTA congregations were well represented at the meeting as well as some of those within driving distance.

The discussions centered around their concern with the Provincial Government cuts to social services. The attack on people living in poverty was very upsetting people who cared. These founding Ontario groups felt that more must be done by Unitarians, within their churches and in the greater community, to protect the social programs that define Canada as a civilized and compassionate nation.

In no time there was a consensus. Within two hours the idea new Social Justice organization was born and a steering committee formed. Seventy people signed up to join the new organization, called Unitarians for Social Justice (USJ). The new steering committee elected Doug Rutherford of Toronto First as its chair and set to work with great energy.

Vancouver/Victoria Area

That same year (1996) Victoria and Vancouver Unitarians met to express their frustration with the inability of the CUC to act on social issues. This was a completely separate expression of the frustration of the times, and not coordinated with Eastern efforts. By the 1996 AGM in Halifax, it came out at the national level. A number of the delegates reacted to what they interpreted as the CUC's lack of concern about the major changes right-wing forces were imposing on Canadian society. The sparse coverage of social action issues in the *Canadian Unitarian* had been an indicator of this diminishing concern.

Development (Toronto)

There is no question that the policies of both the Ontario and Federal governments played a significant role in bringing out that large crowd and giving us momentum to help us find our voice again. But regressive politics was not the only dissatisfaction in the room. According to Norm McLeod, "people were concerned that the Unitarians had lost their traditional dedication to social action. We seemed to be losing our voice and becoming less relevant, even within the Faith community. There was one question raised repeatedly: Where are the Unitarians?"

The discussion began about what kind of voice we wanted to have and what kind of Social Action organization we wanted to create.

People at the meeting hoped to follow in the footsteps of their Unitarian forebears who were broadly recognized for their proud history as leaders in the struggle for social change and justice. They hoped to discover if Unitarians had lost their commitment to social justice or if it was still a central part of the Unitarian Identity. They wanted to stimulate individual Unitarians to express themselves as individuals by writing to their MP's and MPP's. They wanted to foster that strong voice and keep the Unitarian tradition of social activism alive.

One of the first things they did was to join ISARC as the Unitarians For Social Justice, with Rev. Jeff Brown, minister of the South Peel congregation in Mississauga as their official representative.

From the beginning Toronto activists like Maurie Smith, (Don Heights), Norm McLeod (Mississauga), Wey Robinson (Hamilton) and John Rutherford (Toronto First) got straight to work, writing letters and organizing events to get the message out that the social cutbacks were unacceptable. They wrote on such issues as taxation, the tension between reduction of the deficit and the maintenance of social programs. Many of these letters were written by, and spoke only for, individuals, but a few went out under the organization's name. And they started work on a newsletter.

They lobbied assiduously, locally and at senior government levels, on behalf of the poor and underprivileged.

The Chair, Doug Rutherford presented a brief to a legislative committee against the Toronto amalgamation bill. This was covered on the Ontario Legislative channel with the Unitarian name clearly displayed on the screen.

Wey Robinson, now of Hamilton, spoke out against the *Tenants Protection Act*, which contributed to homelessness.

Between newsletters, the group distributed fact sheets on current items of social justice concern. These sheets provided members with the facts they needed to lobby MP's and MPP's with letters, e-mail, visits and so on.

They delayed administrative and organizational development until they could put together a national network.

Development (Victoria)

At the same time as the ferment in Ontario there was ferment in Victoria and Vancouver over right wing trends amongst Canadians, including UUs . This came to a head when several members were part of the explosion at the 1996 CUC AGM in Halifax when the CUC ED proposed the CUC join a Federal project, "The Canada We Want". Victoria's Bob Van Alstyne had researched it and spoke out at the annual meeting. He found it right-wing and recommended that we not participate. The CUC board refused to withdraw the motion despite many protests. (Interestingly months later the CUC Board quietly let the project drop, and Kim tried to make amends but no one would talk to her, the anger level being so high.) Tempers were already hot for reasons already discussed.

Perhaps this conflict reflected a deeper issue that so far had been left unaddressed as the vision for a new organization was being birthed. So far, we had not tackled the creation of an incorporated entity with vision and purpose, bylaws, and governance practices. It was unclear what our relationship was to be with the CUC. Who would speak for Unitarians on social issues? Who would represent Unitarianism in Canada and on the World Stage? Nobody wanted CUSJ to be born in an atmosphere of bitterness and conflict. It needed to be born in a spirit of purpose for Justice.

According to Christine Johnston, (originally of Toronto and later of Victoria), "a few key people in Ontario and Kim Turner of Halifax were working hard to create a truly national social activist movement. Kim was then Vice-president of the CUC Board and a sympathetic voice. The CUC Board was aware of the growing foment among activists and thought that a new organization focused on activism, a Canadian Unitarians for Social Justice, was a good idea.

Christine Johnston reported that "Kim approached me, (Christine) at the 1997 CUC AGM in Thunder Bay. She begged Mel and me to mediate because I was a friend of her mother. Kim used their move and the presence of a large and active Social Responsibility group in Victoria, to discuss the administrative work necessary to found a truly constitutional and national CUSJ." Mel and Christine were bridges between the Toronto team and the Victoria team; and most wanted a resolution. Kim outlined the actions required to make CUSJ a legal national organisation.

Fortunately the next CUC AGM was in Victoria . Kim Turner and Keith Jobson (chair of the Victoria SRC) stayed up half the night before to draft a proposal to present to the CUC AGM. At the annual meeting, it passed. The President of the CUC Board (John Hopewell) and the Vice President (Kim Turner) were the first to sign on as new members, right on the podium in front of the meeting, as soon as the vote was declared. The ground was laid for a collaborative relationship between the CUC and the CUSJ.

At the CUC AGM in Victoria in 1998,
CUSJ was born, a national organization extending from coast to coast. It had a legal constitution and a relationship as an affiliate organization with the Canadian Unitarian Council.



Photo: Courtesy of Art Kligour, The Canadian Unitarian

Some of the CUSJ Steering Committee and Board Members at the AGM held last May in Mississauga, Ontario. From left to right: (back row) John Taylor, Vancouver; Bob Stevenson, Ottawa; Joop Schuyff, Victoria; Bert MacBain, Victoria; Bob VanAlstyne, Victoria; (front row) Elenor Smith, Edmonton; Christine Johnston, Victoria; Linda Schofield, Toronto, Mel Johnston, Victoria.

CUSJ Now Country-Wide

Out of last May's annual general meeting of the CUSJ, held in conjunction with the CUC's annual meeting, a refurbished, nation-wide organization has emerged.

Sixty-five delegates adopted a new constitution and established an "associate" status with the Canadian Unitarian Council.

The gathering heard the views of British Columbia author Richard Bocking on the issues of Canadian water exports and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

A resolution on NATO's action in Kosovo was passed which, in its amended version, was adopted by the CUC AGM.

By the year 2000, CUSJ's membership was approximately 350 (in 306 households) representing 44 Congregations and Fellowships.

Learning To Work in a National Organization

During 1997, activists from both sides of the country were learning how to work together across the country. Bob Van Alstyne and Joop Schuff did most of the legwork.

Bob van Alstyne taught the members of the CUSJ how to do "daisy-chain" teleconferencing for free, so they could have a monthly meeting on the phone.

Norm reported: "The use of inexpensive, do-it-yourself teleconferencing was one of our achievements. CUSJ Board meetings regularly hook up 10 people coast to coast for a two-hour conference call. This technique has the fortuitous and welcome result of inhibiting the normal Unitarian verbosity. Participants apparently shrank from grabbing more than their fair share of airtime, as they're inclined to do at a face-to-face meeting. The Toronto GTA group also started to use the technique with good success with the benefits of cutting down night driving time, saving gas and reducing pollution, etc. This is a system to be highly recommended."

In our board meetings, we talked about the social issues of the day and what we thought about them. We wrote letters and submitted briefs. Norm McLeod reported:

"Federal Concerns included the total obsession with the deficit and the massive cuts to the Canada Assistance Plan and social programs, including a national housing strategy. Balancing the budget seemed the federal Government motto, --and I need not elaborate on the consequences of that. (Thinking back on this time, I recall Jean-Chretien's minister of Finance, Paul Martin, saying that he would balance the budget come Hell or High Water. Well, true to his word, Mr. Martin has balanced the budget and Hell has come to untold numbers of our poorest and most vulnerable fellow citizens."

Moving the Executive Team

The original CUSJ board had made the decision that the most efficient approach for this national organization was to keep the executive all in the same city. This would allow for more efficient banking with two co-signatures always available. It would also allow the executive to meet face to face every month, get to know each other better, and create better cooperation.

According to Norm McLeod, When the original Toronto steering committee was running out of steam they decided to ask Victoria to take over the steering committee role. Revitalization was at hand. The takeover was gradual with a new CUSJ Board which was approved at the 1999 CUSJ AGM. Board Members were found across Canada.

Bob Van Alstyne, of Victoria, a dedicated activist and good organizer, was confirmed as president. Associate membership with the CUC was approved. The CUSJ AGM was to be held the day before the CUC AGM. An email list serve was established that could broadcast messages over the internet, providing instant communications with all members who signed on to the list. This proved valuable in coordinating a national effort and in providing information on numerous CUSJ topics.

The Victoria team included Bob Van Alstyne, Mel and Christine Johnston (after they moved from Toronto), Keith Jobson, Joop Schuff, John Taylor, (Vancouver) and Alastaire Mont.

JUSTnews

Norm McLeod reports from Toronto that,
“From the early days from the First Unitarian Church of Toronto and later from the First Unitarian Church of Victoria, we were very fortunate in our first newsletter editor, Mel Johnston. He had a dedicated and talented core team and he himself had abundant newspaper skills. From the beginning, the newsletter reflected thoughts from across the country. The first issue was distributed to many UU congregations and to each member.

Mel worked with his editorial team to develop a name, logo, and vision for what became JUSTnews. Members of the first editorial team included Diane McLaren (North Shore, Ottawa), Bert McBain, (Victoria) and Marya Nyland (Victoria).

The first issue on record had the theme *Demonstrate Response - ability*. It covered topics such as the MAI, (Multilateral Agreement on Investment), the threats to global ecosystems, a challenge to corporate rule, and the responsibilities for engaged Unitarians and what individual Unitarians could do to improve things.

In Volume 4, Number 3, we commit ourselves to solidarity with First Nations people, affirming their aboriginal title, their rights to self-government, and in particular that the government should reverse its course of action in the Mi'kmaq fishing dispute.

Mel Johnston and his editorial board continuing to put out a professional publication for several more years.

JUSTnews, as it came to be known, was a significant new presence in Canadian Unitarian congregations that helped to raise the profile of social justice in our movement and connect

Unitarians to the new organization. It put CUSJ on the map and contributed significantly to its effectiveness.

We had a succession of editors including among others, Nichola Martin until finally Phillip Symons took over the job and did it for many years.

Relations With the CUC

In the meantime, strong connections were maintained between the CUC and the new CUSJ. Keith Jobson represented social justice on the CUC Board in 2000. Christine Johnston served in that same role from 2002-2006. Christine worked on a great team with Rev. Steven Epperson on the CUC Social Justice task force that looked at the SR resolution process. Jan Greenwood followed in 2006-7 but didn't stay in that role long. From June 2010, Leslie Kemp, another prominent social activist also served on the CUC board in that role, and then joined the board of CUSJ when her term was over.

The Victoria Executive

For six years, the organization was run very effectively from Victoria. By the time they were done and ready to pass the baton, membership numbers were 235 (in 210 households), from 36 out of 53 congregations. The annual budget was \$4300. The newsletter required \$1000 per issue to print 1600 copies and distribute. Directors came from nine cities from Nova Scotia to BC. including at least one representative from every region.

In 2006 they passed the baton to Ottawa under the leadership of Bob Stevenson.

His Ottawa team: Debra Mair, Bob Staveley, Don McDiarmid (from the Fellowship), and Pauline Heinonen with Julia Varga, Christine Johnston, John Taylor, Bob Van Alstyne all staying on to help out from BC. There was a good spread of members at large from across the country and 3 people stood for the nominating committee.

Watch for the next stage of the history coming soon.