

ICCR MEMBER PROFILES

The Unitarian Universalists

In each issue of the Corporate Examiner, we profile an ICCR member organization and their work in corporate social responsibility. Below, we spoke with Tim Brennan, Patricia Jones, Jim Gunning, and Paul Johnson.

UNITARIAN
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CONGREGATIONS



Can you tell us about the origins of the UUA, and how the UUSC relates to the UUA?

Tim Brennan: The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) traces its roots in North America back to the early Massachusetts settlers. UUA congregations are democratic in polity and operation, meaning, they govern themselves. As Unitarians, we believe in the inherent worth and dignity of every person; in justice, equity and compassion in human relations; in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; and in acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations.

Patricia Jones: The UUSC is a member organization of the UUA dedicated to advancing human rights and social justice around the world; we envision a world free from oppression and injustice, where all can realize their full human rights.

How did the UUA first come to join ICCR?

Jim Gunning: I first started in SRI activities – socially responsible investing, that is – before anyone had even yet coined the term “SRI”. It was in response to Apartheid, and I was a young member of the First Unitarian Church in Brooklyn. I got a call from one of ICCR’s founders, Tim Smith, then



Tim Brennan, Treasurer & CFO, Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations



Jim Gunning has been involved in shareholder advocacy on behalf of the UUA, the UUSC, and his congregation for nearly 40 years



Patricia Jones, Environmental Justice Program Manager, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee



Paul Johnson, Senior Minister, the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Shelter Rock

a young staffer at the National Council of Churches, who invited me to attend an inaugural meeting of several national Protestant denominations concerning a boycott of the racist government of South Africa. I was invited to represent the Unitarian Universalists. This moment was the genesis of ICCR and also my, and the UU’s, initiation into SRI, so you could say we were there from the very beginning.

Can you tell us about the UUA’s mission and how it benefits from working with other ICCR members?

Jim Gunning: The UU’s work with ICCR on the crucial justice issue of Apartheid got the Unitarians started on the path of exercising their institutional ownership of

corporations’ securities, and joining with others to speak up on a variety of social and environmental issues.

Tim Brennan: To this day, our work is enabled and strengthened by being a part of ICCR. Our understanding of the issues is deepened through ICCR meetings, working group calls, and the tremendous resources available through the members’ area of the website. And even on those issues that are not ICCR priorities, the connections with other members lead to valuable collaborations.

But perhaps the greatest value of being part of ICCR is the inspiration that comes from other members, particularly those women and men of faith who have pursued



justice together for decades. As Martin Luther King said, “We are looking for a new earth in which dwells righteousness. It is our prayer that we may be children of light, the kind of people for whose coming and ministry the world is waiting.”

What are the UUSC’s core goals and how does it advance its mission?

Patricia Jones: The UUSC works through a combination of advocacy, education, and partnerships with grassroots organizations like ICCR to promote economic rights, advance environmental justice, defend civil liberties, and preserve the rights of people in times of humanitarian crisis. Our work is built on the conviction that all people are entitled to basic human rights, which transcend divisions of class, race, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, and gender.

What process does the UUA follow to set its social justice priorities?

Tim Brennan: The UUA has a deep and long commitment to socially responsible investing and shareholder advocacy. Today this manifests itself through the way we set our public witness priorities. For each issue we ask several questions, including: “Does the issue have grounding in our principles and in resolutions from our General Assembly?” “Does it fit with the skills and resources of our staff and our congregations?” And lastly, “Is there an opportunity for the UUA’s voice to make a real difference?”

This analysis leads us to focus our shareholder advocacy on four issues: climate change; the rights of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender people; the corrupting influence of corporate spending on politics and lobbying; and immigration justice.

What issues most concern the UUSC today?

Patricia Jones: That would be the environment, and more specifically – water. Access to safe, sufficient, affordable water for daily human needs – the human right to water – has become an urgent concern not only for communities who do not have the right, but also for corporations whose actions affect this right on a great scale.

Working with ICCR makes it possible for UUSC and its partners to move the water issue to the forefront in their dialogues with corporations and their affected communities. ICCR members are now active on the issue of water with 70 of the world’s leading corporations, applying ICCR principles based on the human right to water and giving voice to people across the world. The collaboration has been a mutual road with ICCR members and staff generously sharing their expertise, knowledge, and time to guide UUSC’s corporate engagements, and UUSC and partners contributing their experiences to help shape our collective water agenda.

ICCR has gone beyond corporate reform and has also helped to set human rights policy. ICCR joined the UUSC and others in advocating for the U.S. mission of the UN Special Rapporteur on the human right to water and sanitation in 2011. Many positive developments have emerged from the Special Rapporteur’s mission: the U.S. government has signaled it will work toward addressing rights like the human right to water, and, California became the first state to sign into law a human right to water bill at the state level.

How did the UU Shelter Rock congregation come to join ICCR?

Paul Johnson: One of the five aspects of our congregational mission is social justice. We have a number of social justice task forces that offer members of our congregation a chance to engage with a wide range of issues, such as peace, affordable housing, the environment, hunger, and long-term solitary confinement. Our Social Justice Committee provides support to these issue-specific task forces, and helps new ones form as needs change. The committee also keeps the congregation informed about social, ethical and economic issues, and takes public positions on selected issues.

We joined ICCR in 2006 after a period of long-range planning to find more effective and impactful ways of using our congregational resources. One way to do that, we found, would be to vote our corporate proxies in line with our values, and so we sought out other organizations in this line of work and came across ICCR. Another avenue we discovered was community investing, and so we decided to dedicate 1% of our portfolio to several community-focused projects.

This year, we decided we wanted to become more directly active, and we asked our socially responsible investment committee to recommend 8-10 companies to our Board of Trustees that we should invest in. Just this past November, the Board approved the purchase of stock in up to ten U.S. companies. We plan to hold onto those shares, which will allow us to file our first-ever shareholder resolutions. Based on what other ICCR members are doing with those same companies, the Congregation will choose which issues at those companies to become involved with. Filing shareholder resolutions will allow us to make an important public statement about our mission and our values. ■