

The Amherst Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Spotlight
September 2009

*The Social Justice Spotlight is a piece written monthly by Individual Social Justice Committee members. This month's Spotlight comes to us from **Mary Beth Seminario**.*

Every Sunday as the plate is passed, single dollars and other amounts are put in the basket. Presently it is our Society's policy that 10% goes to organizations which help those in need. But who are these organizations? Who decides where this money goes? At the Board of Trustees' delegation, the Social Justice Committee (Committee) selects which groups receive money. While there are potentially hundreds of "worthwhile" organizations, during previous years and the present one the Committee chose some organizations familiar to many of us, as well as others which our Society's members have brought to our attention. This column will briefly describe their important work.

Arise for Social Justice Begun in Springfield in the mid '80s by four people on public assistance, this organization is a Western Mass. low-income rights organization which believes that "we have the right to speak for ourselves." Members are poor, homeless, unemployed and at-risk working people who have been "pushed to the side by society." While Arise is primarily an organization which organizes around housing, health care, homelessness, family rights and criminal injustice, it also does individual and/or group advocacy. Issues it has organized around include homeless shelters where guests were at risk for their safety because of criminal behavior as well as deplorable conditions. The closure of a different homeless shelter was publicized by Arise and its supporters erecting their own Tent City. Presently they are organizing a city-wide tenant union. We've given Arise a small amount from the plate for several years.

Amherst Survival Center This North Amherst center helps over 3000 families and individuals meet their basic needs every year. It provides hot lunches, groceries, clothing and household goods on most weekdays. In recent years, free medical care has become available on Monday and Thursday nights; advocacy for the homeless and mentally ill is available on Thursday. A new program, Family Nights, is available for families with children on Thursday night. As people's income has decreased and jobs have been lost, the demand for services has greatly increased. The number of lunches served every month has increased from 700 to 1000.

Our Society has provided this Center with monetary donations for many years. Additionally, our members and friends have contributed dry food and other items through the Just One Thing basket on the second Sunday of the month. We also collect food and cash donations at Stop & Shop once a year for the Survival Center.

Friends of Hampshire County Homeless (Cot shelter included in this) The emergency winter shelter, originally begun by several churches in Northampton with churches rotating opening their doors to homeless people on different

nights, now operates at fixed locations in Northampton and in Easthampton. Service Net partners with the City of Northampton and the Interfaith Emergency Shelter and the Friends to run a variety of programs for the homeless in the Northampton and Easthampton area. Service Net's Grove Street Inn with paid staff provides beds for 20 homeless people. The "cot shelter," as it's known to our Society, has beds for an additional 20 people, and a recent annex in Easthampton has six more beds. Dinner at night and a breakfast the following morning are provided from November to April 30. Meals are provided by volunteers from various churches.

Our Society's members and friends regularly volunteer to make main dishes, desserts and/or salads, bring food and serve it to the guests. Two members also stay overnight periodically. It is a regular recipient of plate donations.

Not Bread Alone This is another long-time recipient of our financial support. Based at the Congregational Church in the center of Amherst, NBA provides lunches and companionship to people on Saturday, Sunday, and Wednesday (a day the Survival Center is closed). In addition, counseling is also available. Food is donated by area grocery stores and restaurants. Forty-50 people often gather for meals prepared by volunteers under a staff person's direction. At meal's end, fresh produce and bread is available for people to bring home.

Our Society also helps support NBA by helping prepare meals and clean-up on any month with a fifth Saturday.

Bread for the World Begun many years ago by one person writing letters for people in need of food, BW now reaches across the world. It organizes letter writing by churches on issues concerning food such as funding for our country's food stamp program, subsidies for farmers, debt forgiveness for poor countries and money for food in drought-stricken regions. It provides information and sample letters that can easily be used to contact legislators. These communications facilitate congregational letter writing on important food issues.

We join this organization in its letter writing campaigns and have supported them for many years with a small donation.

Hampshire County Interfaith Help Fund This emergency assistance program provides one-time emergency financial assistance from September to May to residents of Hampshire County who have exhausted their own resources. Money is available for such things as security deposit, fuel bill, diapers, etc. It helps meet the needs of many clients who are referred by the Salvation Army, First Call for Help, fuel assistance programs and other faith communities' help funds. Staffed by members of affiliated religious organizations, including the UU Society of Northampton & Florence, First Churches of Northampton and Congregation B'nai Israel, this program is supported by congregations of participating religious groups and by individual donations. It welcomes additional members to help staff and fund the program.

We learned of this program this past year.

Family Outreach of Amherst With only a staff of three and a director, FOA provides extensive family outreach and case management to over 300 low-income, at-risk Amherst families every year. It is often the first agency contacted when a family is in crises. Seeking to help entire families, this organization addresses the family unit when one member “presents” him/herself. Services provided include crises intervention, information & referral, crises management and home visitation. FOA not only helps families meet basic needs, it also helps that family identify and achieve ways to make their life better. Referrals are made by schools and courts as well as other state agencies. We learned of and began small donations to FOA last year.

UU Service Committee (for Darfur /Chad relief) Many of us know of the Service Committee but may not know the breadth of its mission. Its present focus areas are rights in humanitarian crises, economic justice, civil liberties and environmental justice. In Darfur, protection of women and girls is essential as they risk their lives if they leave the camps. The Committee works with others to build a safety net. It also partners to improve women’s livelihoods within camps as well as develop leadership skills. One present project is selling baskets made by these women on the Internet and elsewhere. Baskets were sold at this summer’s UU General Assembly and may become available to UUs throughout the world. In recent years a small amount has been donated to various organizations for Darfur relief.

Connecticut River Watershed Council “The Rivers are the lifeblood of our communities and the litmus test of our ecological balance,” quoting the director. From its headwaters in Vermont to its mouth in Connecticut, the CRWC is involved in numerous issues concerning the quality of the water itself, the dams, the pollution, the riverbanks. It continuously looks after life in the river as well as use by people relying on volunteers to help with this mission. Examples include having high school students install “trap boxes” to hold young fish until they are old enough to safely release and organizing manual clean-up. Involved in politics to ensure that the river gets a voice in decisions affecting it, the Watershed Council submits comments, is present at hearings and works with appropriate organizations. Our Society supports the River by helping with clean-up of its banks once a year and has made small donations for many years.

Open Pantry Community Services A Springfield-based organization that has provided a breadth of services to poor, low-income people and homeless people through meals, counseling, food and clothing for many years. A recent loss of funding for its shelter services resulted in the city and other non-profit assuming this responsibility. Open Pantry continues its provision of daily meals, brown bags of dry goods & fresh produce, as well as meals on major holidays for thousands. A member of our Society who recently resigned as the Executive Director expanded its services under his 20-year leadership. Donations from the plate have been made to this group for a number of years.