

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Rock Tavern: A Unique and Dedicated Peace Advocacy Congregation In New York's Hudson Valley

A recent history of the congregation's peace advocacy activities, compiled June, 2015



The Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Rock Tavern (UUCRT), established in 1868, has a long history of peace advocacy. In recent years, we have been building on that legacy with growing momentum. This document captures our work for peace since the fall of 2011, when we hired the Rev. Chris J. Antal as our consulting minister while he was also serving as a military chaplain. The UUCRT has partnered with Rev. Antal in our shared quest for peace-making and peace-building, including, significantly, during his absence for a deployment to Afghanistan from 2012-2013. Our commitment to this partnership has deepened recently when we called Rev. Antal in 2014 to be our settled minister and he accepted the call.

This support has been accompanied by serious thought about what it means for spiritually-motivated peacemakers to be engaged citizens in a military superpower nation. Some members come from a long-standing peace orientation with affinity to conscientious objector status: a tendency to stay distanced from all things military, and a distaste for military campaigns, regardless of the rationale. At the same time, the congregation has a number of members who have served in the military, and so bring a closer understanding and appreciation of it. Rev. Antal's service as a commissioned officer and military chaplain has challenged us to reconsider our received notions and unexamined assumptions about peace-work and adopt a view that is more nuanced and complex.

There are several ways we have grown in our understanding of peace and military service. It involves:

- Building a solid bridge to the people in our community who serve or have served in the military,
- Distinguishing between support for military *people* vs. military *policy*, and
- Distinguishing between *pastoral* support for people who choose the military way and *prophetic* resistance to militarism.

Our Vision for Peace Advocacy

As a peace advocate congregation we are committed to the complex task of creating peace at all levels, from the cultivation of inner peace to the work of peacebuilding in the world. Our commitment includes both the pastoral task of support for military personnel and the prophetic task of speaking truth to power. It is not only possible to engage in both; we believe the discernment this dual track entails will lead to more credible, change-making results. As a congregation, we believe that this combination of support and resistance is especially necessary concerning America's armed drones and nuclear arsenal, both of which function at some remove from the traditional combat work of military personnel. Each technology runs the risk of enabling moral disengagement and perpetuating a "war machine" that operates on its own twisted logic, at the expense of the imagination and collaboration needed to create true, durable peace.

In offering pastoral support for service members and veterans, we strive to avoid two traps: *projected demonization* (by which all people who serve/served are seen as baby-killers, etc.) and *projected valorization* (portraying all people who serve/served as heroes).

We believe it is possible to serve in the military without being a passive servant of the state. We believe a person or organization can and should critically engage with the military without offering religious legitimization for state violence. In our congregation, we often remember the example of our former neighbor Pete Seeger, a friend to some of our members and a not infrequent visitor to our sanctuary, who volunteered to serve in the U.S. Army during World War II as a singer and entertainer for fellow soldiers. Yet he lived his life as a dedicated pacifist.

Promotion of international peace

Nuclear proliferation, and the United States' failure to lead the world away from a reliance on the nuclear-armed posture, is perhaps a leading emblem of our world's great distance from a heartfelt aspiration for peace. In the spring of 2015, our congregation challenged itself to act boldly and publicly in a time of general complacency about the nuclear peril. We took a risk to charter a 56-passenger bus to attend the Peace and Planet interfaith service, march, and Rally held on April 26 in New York City, a gathering to demand



UUCRT member and U.S. Navy veteran Bryon Abrams (left) and Rev. Antal carry the UUA banner through the streets of New York during the 2015 Peace and Planet March. More than 40 members of the UUCRT participated in the march.

a nuclear-free, peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Could we fill the bus? The event coincided with the United Nations Nuclear Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference. Our minister worked with the UUA International Office and the UU-UNO office and was selected to represent the UUA in the Interfaith Service at Tillman Chapel of the United Nations Church Center, and lead the UU contingent of the march.

We did in fact fill the bus – and so brought more members to the march than any other UUA congregation! Children from our congregation were among the readers in the service at Tillman Chapel. Members from ages 3 to 91 marched the 30-plus blocks. It was an especially inspiring experience to march in solidarity with and meet concerned citizens from other nations, most prominently Japan. Only by showing up in person at such events can people not only show the world a way forward, but have encounters across cultures, forming memories of togetherness and making the world a little smaller.

We have acted in support of the UUA United Nations Office and the UU Service Committee and the UUCRT has received awards from both organizations over the years.

Here are some peacemaking forums and events we have recently supported:

- From December 7, 2014 to January 21, 2015, we hosted the Drone Quilt Project, and participated in the creation of a quilt to honor the civilian victims of U.S. drone strikes.
- On January 1, 2015 members joined the Interfaith Prayer Service for World Peace at Chuan Yen Monastery in Carmel, New York, also home of the Buddhist Association of the United States.
- In January 18, 2015, we sponsored and hosted the forum “Reconciling War and Peace: A Conversation about Targeted Killing with Armed Drones,” featuring activist from Voices for Creative Non-Violence Kathy Kelly and Rabbi Larry Freedman.
- For the past three years member Verne Bell and our Social Action Committee has hosted annual forums on peace:

“Pacifist vs. Just War,” with Mark Johnson, of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (2013);

“Nuclear Disarmament,” with Guy Quinlan of All Souls NYC and Lawrence Wittner of Peace Action (2014);

“Resisting Militarism through Boycott and Divestment,” with Nick Mottern of Know Drones (2015).



Rev. Antal brought a replica drone into the sanctuary for his sermon “Droning On” delivered at the UUCRT on December 7, 2014. A Drone Quilt with the names of innocent victims of U.S. drone strikes hangs in the background.

Lobbying and activism on behalf of peace

The UUCRT has connected our peace advocacy with the district and denomination. The Board participated in the UUA Common Read Program, *Reclaiming Prophetic Witness* by Paul Rasor and met for a day workshop to reflect on the book and on our prophetic responsibility to resist militarism. At the congregational meeting in May, 2015, we voted to endorse the UUA Creating Peace Statement of Conscience. In an effort to coordinate peace activities between churches in clusters and districts, at the UU District Metro Meeting in May, 2015, our minister offered a workshop “Drone Warfare: What Is our Prophetic Witness?” that was attended by dozens of district ministers and leaders. Rev. Antal is a frequent pulpit guest at UU congregations throughout the North East, and challenges audiences to fulfill our pastoral and prophetic imperative for peace advocacy.

Our minister was the only actively serving UU minister to attend the Interfaith Conference on Drone Warfare at Princeton Theological Seminary in January 2015, and his input at that conference led to the inclusion of UUA principles and purposes in the final statement produced by the conference. Following that event, Rev. Antal was named by the UU Office of Public Witness as liaison to the Interfaith Working Group on Drone Warfare, where he is leading a campaign for corporate responsibility directed at the military contractor Honeywell International. In 2015, our congregation took up a collection and raised enough to purchase a share of Honeywell stock so our minister could have a seat at the table at the annual shareholder meeting and raise our concerns about drone warfare to the CEO David Cote.

We wrote letters to elected officials concerning the Targeted Lethal Force Transparency Act. Members signed a petition to take nuclear weapons off high alert status.

Supporting domestic and congregational peace

The congregation carries the legacy of a recent dedicated period of study and training in Non-Violent Communications (NVC). Between 2009 and 2012 member Diane Diachishin trained the congregation on how to interact peacefully. This included weekly meetings and community forums to discuss and practice the principles of NVC, based on Marshall Rosenberg’s writings and study materials. As a result of this foundation, NVC remains instituted as an ongoing point of guidance. Our congregation has integrated NVC into a Congregational Covenant and the work of the Committee on Shared Ministry.

Our members teach spiritual disciplines that promote individual and congregational peace. For example, in the past three years, Alison Fornes, member of the Committee on Shared Ministry (CoSM) and a constellation practitioner, has provided workshops for members and the larger community; CoSM member Terri Pahucki, a spiritual director, has led the year-long Spirit in Practice journey group, which dove deep into several spiritual disciplines; Board member and U.S. Navy veteran Bryon Abrams leads weekly Chi Gong sessions conducted before the Sunday service that bring participants an ongoing experience of renewal and power peacefully applied; and CoSM member Keith Jordan leads a monthly Covenant Group.

The Children's Religious Exploration classes from 2011-12 were dedicated to peacemaking and put together an intergenerational peacemaking service. We used the NVC Heart Talk curriculum. Member Margaret Potemski created a children/youth art show around the theme of peace. Lessons on peace are still regularly a part of the children's RE classes: children and youth reflected on war and peace, while participating in intergenerational projects like making drone quilt squares and marching for Peace and Planet.

The challenging work of supporting military personnel

The UUCRT demonstrates genuine support for military personnel. Members acted in support of service member Drew Smith, the husband of member Twila Smith, when he was serving overseas, writing him letters and sending baked goods which he gave out to other soldiers. We hired as a consulting minister and then called as our settled minister Rev. Antal, who is one of only a handful of Unitarian Universalist ministers endorsed by the UUA to serve as a military chaplain. After serving the UUCRT for only one year, Rev. Antal was mobilized and deployed to Afghanistan with the U.S. Army. We grew in empathy for military families while we supported him and the soldiers in his care through the deployment cycle, and the UUCRT became the only congregation in the UUA to experience the loss of a minister to deployment in the recent Iraq and Afghanistan wars. We supported Rev. Antal by offering him a departure ceremony and a welcome-home ceremony. Moreover, when Rev. Antal received a General Officer Memorandum of Reprimand for what was called "politically inflammatory" remarks made in the context of a religious sermon to a gathering of UUs in Kandahar, Afghanistan, we advocated on behalf of Rev. Antal's right to represent our prophetic voice authentically within the military and protested against unlawful government interference in religion. The Board wrote a letter of support and concern to the UUA and one friend of the congregation, Dirck Westervelt, initiated the process of a Congressional Inquiry. These efforts ultimately contributed to Rev. Antal's vindication.

We also supported soldiers in Rev. Antal's care with gifts of inspirational pocket stones. In the fall of 2012, our congregation raised the funds to purchase more than 500 pocket stones (inscribed with words like "courage," "strength," and "hope") and sent them to Rev. Antal, who distributed them to troops in Afghanistan. The soldiers kept the stones in their pockets, making a connection to the home that cared for them.



A soldier in Fort Bliss Texas on the way to Afghanistan holds the pocket stones she received as a gift from members of the UUCRT.



Rev. Antal with members of the Kandahar Crossroads Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, at Kandahar Airfield, Afghanistan, in January 2013.

In November, 2014, with the full knowledge that our minister was still serving in the Army Reserve and therefore could be mobilized and deployed again, the UUCRT called Rev. Antal as our settled minister. He was installed on March 22, 2015. Among those attending were clergy from the Department of Veterans Affairs and the United States Military Academy at West Point (USMA). Veterans from the congregation and the larger community spoke at the service. The Rev. Sarah K. Lammert, Ecclesiastical Endorser for UUA military chaplains, gave the sermon and the charge to the congregation.



Rev. Antal talks with Sue Fulton (USMA '84), a member of the Unitarian Church of Summit NJ, and a recent West Point graduate before delivering the Invocation at the 2015 Knights Out Dinner in Eisenhower Hall.

The USMA is a short distance from us, and Rev. Antal provides pastoral support to Unitarian cadets, service members, civilian employees, and alumni, as a community ministry supported by the UUCRT. We are proud to have supported Knights Out (The Association of Gay and Lesbian West Point cadets and alumni) at West Point since they began. In 2012, when 12 other military chaplains refused to give the invocation for Knights Out's first annual banquet at the officer's club, Rev. Antal stepped in to do it, and the congregation donated \$1,000. Members Athena Drewes and Twila Smith also attended.



Rev. Antal with U.S. Army veteran and UUCRT member Twila Smith (left) and Athena Drewes (right), also a UUCRT member, at the first annual Knights Out Dinner, West Point Officers Club, March 2012.

The UUCRT once again supported the Knights Out Banquet on March 28, 2015, when Rev. Antal provided the invocation, the UUCRT President Mike McGinn and a Board member Twila Smith also attended, and members made a donation.



Rev. Antal holds the remains of Robert G. Valpey, a Unitarian and graduate of the United States Military Academy, before his interment at the West Point Cemetery in October 2014. Behind him Ray Valpey, Robert's son, holds the flag that was presented to him by the honor guard.

Rev. Antal officiates significant rites of passage for members of the West Point community. In October 2014, Rev. Antal provided the graveside funeral for the family of Robert G. Valpey (USMA '45), who was a Unitarian. On June 20, 2015 Rev. Antal officiated a same-sex marriage of two men in the Cadet Chapel.

Most recently we established the "Sylvanus Thayer Society of Unitarian Universalists" for UUs and seekers from the USMA community. Through this ministry we provide a shuttle service to bring USMA cadets to services and offer a home-stay for cadets on long weekends and holidays.



COL Sylvanus Thayer, an early superintendent of USMA (1817-1833) is known as "Father of West Point" and was a Unitarian. He is remembered with a statue, Thayer Hall and Thayer Hotel -- all on the Academy grounds. Additionally, the Thayer Award is presented to an outstanding citizen whose service and accomplishments in the national interest exemplify the Military Academy motto, "Duty, Honor, Country." The Association of Graduates has presented the award annually since 1958.

The UUCRT also partners with local faith communities from other traditions in order to advance our peace advocacy. In May 2014 and again in May 2015, Rev. Antal and members of the UUCRT, together with area clergy, organized and led an "Interfaith Service of Remembrance, Lamentation, and Hope" on Memorial Day Sunday. We joined with people of all faiths to begin the 2015 New Year with an interfaith prayer for peace at a nearby Buddhist temple.

Rev. Antal with Rev. Mary Lou Baumgartner (Lutheran) and Rev. Deke Spierling (Presbyterian) light candles of remembrance during the Interfaith Service of Remembrance, Lamentation and Hope on May 24, 2015, at the Temple of Virtue on the New Windsor Cantonment, which is the site of the first Army chapel (est. 1786) and home to the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor.



Continuing the legacy of peacemaking



Terri Pahucki, UUCRT member, and her daughter Camille attended with several UUCRT families the Interfaith Prayer Service for World Peace at Chuan Yen Monastery on January 1, 2015.



In July 2014 our congregation sponsored two teens to travel with our minister on a service project in Nicaragua. The team helped build a house, while learning first-hand about the work of sustainable economic development in war-ravaged countries.

We conclude with a brief look further back in time, to see that the flowering of peace work in recent years has grown from a well-tended garden of consistent dedication over the past couple of decades.

Looking back over the 1990s and 2000s, our membership includes those who served in World War II, Vietnam, and the Gulf War, and our minister and relatives of our members served in either Iraq or Afghanistan. We have had members who belonged to Orange County Peace and Justice, which met monthly at the UUCRT for about 10 years. Member Judy Garrett was involved with Women in Black, a network of women worldwide committed to peace and actively opposed to war and other forms of violence. Member Howard Garrett formed Amnesty International of Orange County. Member and Vietnam Veteran Mike Landrum has done extensive work with the Wounded Warriors Project. Member Diane Diachishin sowed the seeds of NVC. Our members have marched in protest of the American invasion of Iraq, published letters of dissent in local papers, reached out to cadets at West Point, sent gifts to service members far from home, and established a local chapter of Veterans for Peace.

We find the involvement of individuals in community, and the institutions they build and own, particularly religious organizations, is essential to progress on the path to peace. To make the world authentically more secure and safe from the violence of war, leaders must clearly hear a yearning and a demand. We remember how Pete Seeger would often spend his Saturday mornings, standing for peace at a roadside demonstration in our area. We do our best to model our commitment visibly in our many circles of influence, from UU convenings to encounters with other faith groups, in our surroundings and from corporate meetings to the United Nations, from the mid-Hudson Valley to West Point, to New York City, to Nicaragua, to Iraq, to Afghanistan... and beyond.