

# **A Proposal for Small Group Social Change Ministries in UU Congregations**

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### **I. Enacting Justice: Questioning the Paradigm**

Whatever the issue area, be it Occupy Wall Street, immigrant integration, or how we are together in religious community, whether we're conscious of it or not, a paradigm is operative. A paradigm is a mindset or set of assumptions, often unexamined, about how things happen. It's the way we shape and understand information; it reflects our perceptions and approach to problem-solving.

For example, our Unitarian Universalist justice ministries operate within a paradigm – a set of assumptions that inform our approach to social change as a gathered religious community. Precisely because paradigms and their accompanying symbols are so influential, it's important that we pause and reflect on what we mean when professing to be a justice-seeking people. In an age as divided and prone to violence as our own, what kind of “justice” do we seek? What models or paradigms are most appropriate and in alignment with our covenantal faith tradition Beloved Community religious vision?

Many, if not most of us, were taught and then socialized into a retributive justice paradigm. This justice model, symbolized by revenge and punishment, informs our criminal justice system and historically, has shaped the strategy and tactics of most secular social change organizations. We're all relatively familiar with its characteristics and methods: define the problem and find fault by targeting individuals or institutions; mobilize anger and resentment by crafting fear-based messages, adopt a language of demand and control often in the form of public shaming and apply the use of, or threat of, emotional, psychological, and physical violence. The unintended, often tragic consequence of such a de-humanizing model is change agents can become mirror images of the very attitudes and behaviors we're hoping to change. Admittedly over-simplified here, it's still the case a retributive justice paradigm pits people against one another, often preventing the common good from emerging, and, I believe, is a model that has outlived its usefulness most especially in the context of religious community.

Alternatively, a faith-based restorative justice paradigm exemplified by participants in the southern freedom struggle a generation ago, is focused on “justice” as restoring right relationship. The characteristics of restorative justice reflect an empathetic and disciplined spirituality of resistance through the practice of reconciliation and non-violence in thought, word, and deed. Its source and power comes from nurturing a joyful and deeply compassionate love for self, other, and the world despite the pain and heartbreak of our brokenness: “... the theological foundation of social justice is protecting souls, ...[healing the] repeated blows to the emotional integrity of the human heart.” (Thandeka, *A People So Bold*).

Concerned with healing *all* wounds caused by living in a de-humanized world, this rapidly developing alternative to traditional community organizing tactics is based on the interdependent web of life - all things are connected to each other in a web of relationships. Instead of revenge and punishment,

restorative justice is symbolized by the vision of Beloved Community. The problem of wrong-doing then is that it results in a communal wound, a tear in the relational web, or covenant. Therefore, restoring right relationship is the responsibility of an entire community, not merely targeted groups and individuals. There is no “us” and “them;” we’re all in it together. This more holistic, prophetic model of justice making requires that we embody and practice our Universalist notion of God: “ a universal, impartial, immanent spirit whose nature is love. It is the largest thought the world has ever known; it is the most revolutionary doctrine ever proclaimed; it is the most expansive hope ever dreamed.” (Clarence Skinner, *Worship and a Well Ordered Life*). Restorative justice realizes that liberation from a retributive mindset is often the work of a lifetime and happens in an intentional learning community where people are willing to risk experimenting with new ways of effecting personal and institutional change. Before sharing with you a concrete, congregation-based example of this life-enriching paradigm, I invite you reflect on the following:

- What paradigm is operating in your religious community?
- “If the church is to impart to the world a message of hope and love, of faith, justice, and peace, something of this should become visible, audible, and tangible in the church itself.” (David Bosch, *Transforming Mission*).
- What might a faith development plan for activist-oriented Unitarian Universalists look like in practice?

## **II. Shifting the Paradigm: Small Group Justice Ministries**

Standing on the Side of Love offers us a new energy field for enacting justice. If we’re standing on the side of love, what then, does love require of us? What unmet human needs require attention? What cultural blockers thwart our effectiveness as change agents? Can we identify energizing, generative strategies for addressing identified needs and are they in alignment with our religious vision of Beloved Community? By asking these questions of ourselves, it may be that those in search of a religiously liberal spiritual home - a transformational community designed to help us become the kinds of human beings we really want to be - will no longer leave congregations that inadvertently allowed polarized political agendas to supplant religious identity formation and spiritual depth.

Institutionally, redeeming our tradition may require nothing less than re-examination of the function and purpose of the church. According to Larry Graham, the function of the church is to individually and corporately reverse the consequences of lovelessness, injustice, and disarray in the psyches and behaviors of its members. And the purpose of the church is to increase our capacity for the love of self, God, and neighbor ...to increase our ability to work together for a just social and economic order. (Graham, *Care of Persons, Care of Worlds*). An increasing number of Unitarian Universalists of all ages yearn for the means to bridge the gap between social change and spiritual integrity. While public protest and mass demonstrations of solidarity can serve to build morale, attract media attention, and educate the general public, without a base community of support back home in our congregations, sustained participation is difficult:

Without the joy and support that come from acknowledging the mutuality of responsibility, being loved as well as loving, the will for fundamental change cannot be sustained. People are empowered to work for justice by their love for others and by the love they receive from others.” (Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*)

Gaining increased clarity about the role organized religious communities play in social change movements is timely and we can benefit where there is a container for gathering insight into our collective action. Covenant-based, small group justice ministries are intentional learning communities grounded in the ethic of restorative justice. Though it is action-oriented, this is not the typical social justice task force found in many UU congregations; it applies interpersonally as well as to public witnessing. It also differs in content and process from the typical covenant group in that there is a clear division of labor, includes youth and young adults, shares a commitment to becoming equipped, non-defensive public representatives of Unitarian Universalism, and provides structured reflection and life-enriching mutual support for the journey to individual and societal transformation. In the process, members gradually become “ambassadors of reconciliation,” midwives of a realized vision of Beloved Community.

Here’s what it looks like in practice: (For details, see attachment: *Implementation at UU Church of Boulder, CO*)

*Formation includes:*

- A covenantal agreement stating what right relationship looks and feels like is read at the start of each meeting. These are agreed upon norms of how you will be together as a group and is related to the congregation’s mission.
- Early on in the groups’ formation, each person is given designated and un-interrupted time to share their story with the group. This process holds open a space for each person’s gifts and sense of life purpose to be known or emerge.
- Group focus is on active engagement with an issue that is presently alive in the surrounding community. For example, to get started one member assumes responsibility for researching and contacting immigrant-led coalitions already operating in your vicinity inclusive of religious communities. Remember: Thou Shall Not Recreate the Wheel.

*Becoming a Learning Community includes:*

- Group members engage in local social change coalition activities returning to the group for shared reflection on the experience of participating. (See attachment: *Guidelines for Accompaniment*). Upon personal and collective reflection, new learning is incorporated and strategies for continuing education are revealed.
- Practicing together the spiritual disciplines of keeping the covenant, deep listening, and non-violent communication.

*Division of Labor in keeping with Learning Community intentions include:*

- One person involved in researching the history of the issue and its impact on the local community.
- One responsible for maintaining relationship to allies in the interfaith community.
- One working on theological and restorative justice responses to the issue and how to reframe public policy talk into religious language.
- One becoming knowledgeable about denominational resources to support increased intercultural competencies ( *Building the World We Dream About, Building Beloved Community: How Do We Talk About Race, Class & Privilege, A Chorus of Faith, etc.*)
- Another creates and maintains an internal electronic communication network. Linked to other active UU congregations in geographic proximity, its purpose is building lateral relationships and extending the learning community.
- One responsible for maintaining a collaborative working relationship with church staff and seeking professional input and feedback when needed
- All are responsible for modeling Beloved Community. When we stumble on the path, forgive yourself and one another and begin again in love.

### **III. Potential Outcomes of Small Group Justice Ministries include:**

Intergenerational participation in a transformational learning community

Intentionally multicultural congregations where everyone is becoming increasingly inter-culturally competent while working together in service to the larger community.

Increased congregational capacity and stronger lateral relationship between UU congregations and local interfaith allies.

The increasing ability to live out a connection to our religious identity and heritage.

A deeper understanding and commitment to social change as a religious vocation through the practice of restorative justice paradigm.

The increasing ability to make commitments beyond one's own self.

A more holistic understanding of how our various justice-making programs and activities fit together and their relationship to UU faith development resources.

The increasing ability to enjoy one another and one's life.

The increasing ability to live with integrity in the face of frustration, failure, and loss.

## **Implementing Small Group Social Change Ministries At Unitarian Universalist Church of Boulder - 2011**

**A. Immigration Ministry Task Force meets twice per month for two hours**

**B. Labor is divided**

**C. Discussion Guidelines and Group Covenant - Example**

*These are based on Parker Palmer's guidelines for his Circles of Trust, some ideas from Building the World We Dream About - a UUA course on multiculturalism, and Ground Rules from Not in Our Town movie.*

Be as fully present as possible, with your doubts, fears and failings as well as your joys and successes. When we offer attentive presence, we nurture love and respect.

Assume positive intent on the part of fellow participants.

Listen with resilience, "hanging in there" when hearing something that is hard to hear.

Refrain from interrupting others.

Set your own boundaries for personal sharing; ask yourself, "what parts of my life story, if any, am I comfortable sharing?" "Pass" or "pass for now" if you are not ready or willing to respond to a question – no explanation required.

Speak personal truths in ways that respect other people's truth. Speak using "I" statements, assuming others can deduce the meaning as it applies to them.

Don't speak for entire groups of people (like all white women).

Trust and learn from the silence. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words.

No fixing, no saving, no advising, and no setting each other straight. Avoid telling others how they should be. Ask questions from the standpoint of curiosity, rather than arguing or debating.

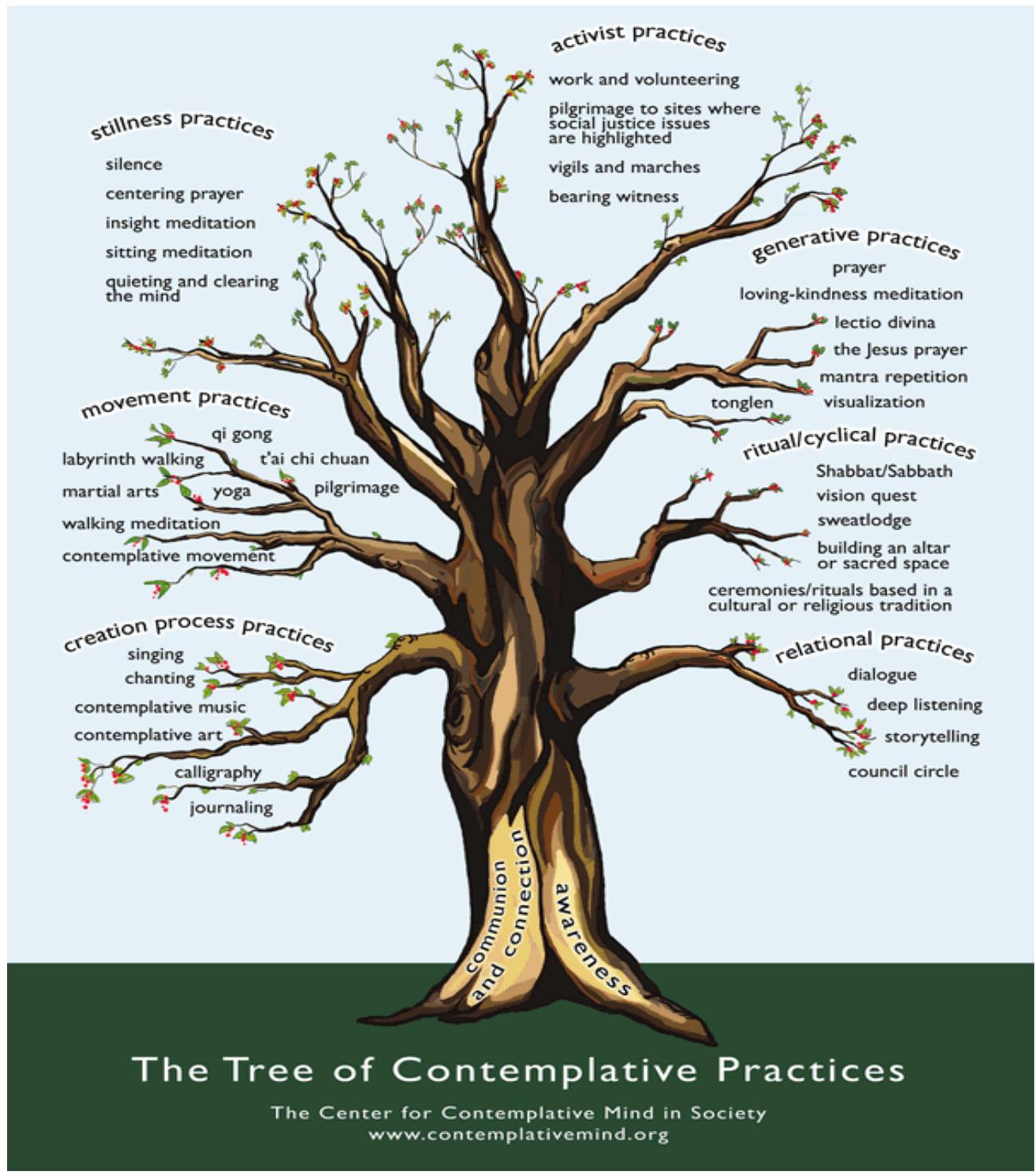
When the going gets rough, turn to wonder. If you feel judgmental, or defensive, ask yourself, "I wonder what brought her to this belief?" "I wonder what he's feeling right now?" "I wonder what my reaction teaches me about myself?" Set aside judgment so you can listen to others—and to yourself—more deeply.

Observe deep confidentiality. Nothing said in this circle will ever be repeated to other people.

Commit to regular attendance.

#### **D. Agenda for Meetings**

- First hour:
  - Spiritual Practice (15 minutes) Silent worship, guided worship using Quaker Testimonies, or See *Tree of Contemplative Practices*
  - One Shared Story (20 minutes) using the Template on page 8 as a guide
  - Group Reflection (25 minutes) using the Template on page 8 as a guide
- Second hour:
  - Planning and business: Using First Steps as a guide
  - Closing Words and Silence



# The Tree of Contemplative Practices

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society  
[www.contemplativemind.org](http://www.contemplativemind.org)

## E. Template for Shared Story

Name and Date:

<p><b>Observations, Self-awareness, Plan</b></p> <p><i>Briefly describe the situation in your community or the event you attended.</i></p>
<p><i>Briefly recount your own feelings about the situation: your state of mind, your fears/hopes for the encounter, how you felt upon entering the situation.</i></p>
<p><b>Story:</b> <i>Describe the events as they unfolded. Include your own feelings and observations as well as the impressions you had about the other people's feelings and behavior.</i></p>
<p><b>Dynamics/Identifications:</b> <i>Describe the dynamics of this story and any identification you may have had with a person, family, community or others. How does this encounter engage your personal history or previous life experience? Which of the participants in the event evoked strong reactions in you?</i></p>
<p><b>Self Reflection:</b> <i>How did you companion this person(s) and what could you have done differently? What took place, or did not take place that suggests that companionship occurred? (Refer to <u>Doing Social Change as Companionship</u>)</i></p>
<p><b>Spiritual/Philosophical/Theological Reflections:</b> <i>Reflect on how this situation engages broader spiritual, ethical or religious themes. Name any metaphors, parables or writings that express the meaning and significance of this event (consider finding something from one of our Sources). Is there one of our Testimonies that speaks to this specifically? How? Does the encounter challenge your own beliefs or resonate with deeply held truths? How did you engage the other person(s)' values and beliefs. How were you changed by the event?</i></p>
<p><b>Group Reflection:</b></p> <p><i>If you attended the event, name any lingering emotional responses or questions it raised for you.</i></p> <p><i>How were you changed by the event?</i></p> <p><i>What theological reflections did it prompt you to have?</i></p> <p><i>If you didn't attend the event, name any emotional responses or questions this story raises for you.</i></p> <p><i>How are you changed by the story?</i></p> <p><i>What theological reflections does the story prompt you to have?</i></p>

## Doing Social Change as Companionship

### *Tenet One*

Companionship is **being present** to the oppressed person's pain without trying to take away the pain.

### *Tenet Two*

Companionship is **going to the wilderness of the soul** with another human being without thinking you are responsible for finding the way out.

### *Tenet Three*

Companionship is **honoring the spirit** as well as the intellect.

### *Tenet Four*

Companionship is **listening with the heart** before analyzing with the head.

### *Tenet Five*

Companionship is **bearing witness** to the oppressed person's struggle **without judgment** while **trusting a solution to emerge** from the act of witnessing.

### *Tenet Six*

Companionship is **walking alongside**; it is not about leading with expertise and solutions.

### *Tenet Seven*

Companionship is **discovering the gifts of sacred silence** without filling up every moment with words.

### *Tenet Eight*

Companionship is about **being still** and not about frantic movement.

### *Tenet Nine*

Companionship is **respecting the creative movement** of disorder and confusion.

### *Tenet Ten*

Companionship is **learning from others** before teaching them.

### *Tenet Eleven*

Companionship is **cultivating curiosity** as well as expertise.

Adapted from: Wolfelt, Alan. *Handbook for Companionship the Bereaved, Eleven Essential Principles*, Companion Press, 2009.

## F. Sample Shared Story

**Name:** Kelly Dignan

### **Observations, Self-awareness, Plan**

*Briefly describe the situation in your community or the event you attended. If confidentiality is necessary, use pseudonyms for people in the story.*

A decade ago, Raul came to the United States from Mexico as a single man to work, but without any documentation. A couple of years later, he married Judy. But their marriage was not enough to grant him legal residence status or a work permit. Together, they had a little girl. Since their marriage, he has been taking care of their daughter and Judy's kids and aging father, coaching soccer, attending First Universalist church, and contributing to our society.

In 2009, eight years after he had worked without documentation, the Department of Homeland Security tracked Raul down and charged him with violating immigration laws. He was not a threat to national security or public safety, but his punishment was deportation. And his hearing was scheduled for Tuesday, April 12, 2011.

I was at my first minister's retreat that week. On Monday, the day before the hearing, one of the First Universalist ministers described what was happening with the Cardenas family - how they were prepared to say goodbye after the hearing. Raul's bag was packed because it was very likely that he would be taken to the Aurora detention center and then sent to Mexico. The minister cried as she described the situation. Unanimously, we decided to drive from the retreat center the next morning to the immigration court.

*Briefly recount your own feelings about the situation: your state of mind, your fears/hopes for the encounter, how you felt upon entering the situation.*

When the minister described the situation, I cried. I felt afraid that the result would be devastating, and that we might be there when Raul was taken away from his family. I pictured the scene unfolding like that, and I was sad thinking about Judy and the kids being left alone. I hoped our presence would make a difference. I was a little intimidated when I arrived at the immigration court. There was a large crowd, and it became evident that we might not all get to enter the courtroom. I felt like I should give up my spot for someone who was closer to the family.

**Story:** *Describe the events as they unfolded. Include your own feelings and observations as well as the impressions you had about the other people's feelings and behavior.*

Raul, Judy and their three children went into the court room. The First Universalist Immigration Task Force, who had been working for months on this effort, followed them. Twenty ministers/ students, all in stoles, filed in behind them. Judge Trujillo noted the crowd's presence for the

court record. She said that she noticed religious clergy in the crowd. The hearing itself lasted only eight minutes. The judge determined that two key documents had not made their way through the legal maze at the Department of Homeland Security yet. She continued the case.

After the hearing, I talked to one of Judy's sons. I asked him how he was feeling. He said that he was happy with the continuance, but now he would be worried for 7 more months about whether his step-father would be deported. I asked him if he was close to Raul. He said that Raul was a huge part of his life and he didn't know what he would do if Raul had to leave. I acknowledged that it would be awful and told him I would be sending them love.

The large crowd went outside and gathered with the family while holding a large yellow "Standing on the Side of Love" banner. We didn't hold signs that were full of anger. We didn't stand on the corner and shout. We stood on that corner at 17<sup>th</sup> and California, and we sang. We sang, "Love will guide us. Peace has tried us. Hope inside us will lead the way. On the road from greed to giving. Love will guide us through the hard night."

**Dynamics/Identifications:** *Describe the dynamics of this story and any identification you may have had with a person, family, community or others. How does this encounter engage your personal history or previous life experience? Which of the participants in the event evoked strong reactions in you?*

When I spoke with Judy's son, I identified with my own kids and their relationship with my husband, their step-dad. I know that if he left their lives for any reason, they would be devastated. And if he got hauled off, sent to a detention center, and then to a different country with no hope of being in their lives again, it would be traumatic for them, resulting in all kinds of psychological issues. Then I started to feel what Judy might feel. I had to stop thinking and feeling about it. It was too much for me. Too much loss.

The singing really touched me. Throughout my life, when I have struggled, singing religious songs has comforted me. I felt that comfort outside the court while we sang.

**Self Reflection:** *How did you companion this person(s) and what could you have done differently? What took place, or did not take place that suggests that companioning occurred? (Refer to Doing Social Change as Companioning)*

In the moment, I wanted to fix it all for Judy's son. But I remembered that the best thing to do is to be present and still. We even stood in silence for awhile which is usually very awkward for me. I think he felt companioned because when I told him that I would be sending them all love, he thanked me and smiled. My questions to him were fairly close-ended. I could have asked better questions like, "What is like for you?" instead of, "How do you feel?" Reflective listening could have been used, too. For example, I could have said, "It sounds like you are afraid." That could have affirmed his feelings.

**Spiritual/Philosophical/Theological Reflections:** *Reflect on how this situation engages broader spiritual, ethical or religious themes. Name any metaphors, parables or writings that express the meaning and significance of this event (consider finding something from one of our Sources). Is there one of our 7 Principles that speaks to this specifically? How? Does the encounter challenge your own beliefs or resonate with deeply held truths? How did you engage the other person(s)' values and beliefs. How were you changed by the event?*

Unitarian Universalism teaches us that salvation is available in this life through the transforming power of love. That transforming love is generated by the Beloved Community; by all of us who choose to be in covenant with one another. That love overcomes separation and results in connection.

Before the deportation hearing, I think we could all recognize love, intellectually. Nearly 4000 people had loved this family by signing petitions for Raul, directed to the Department of Homeland Security, through our Standing on the Side of Love website and Change.org. Over 4300 people had visited the YouTube video about Raul. But in the physical, tangible, outpouring of love - in the unexpected turnout of the Beloved Community at that hearing - we could **feel** the love and know it would endure.

Love is the doctrine of our church. Love and loyalty are what hold us in covenant with each other. It is likely that the love shown by the Beloved Community made a difference in the lives of the Cardenas family that day. It may have even influenced the court decision. Love connects us, and connection gives me hope. I was changed by seeing and feeling hope and love that day.

**Group Reflection:**

*If you attended the event, name any lingering emotional responses or questions it raised for you.*

*How were you changed by the event?*

*What theological reflections did it prompt you to have?*

*If you didn't attend the event, name any emotional responses or questions this story raises for you.*

*How are you changed by the story?*

*What theological reflections does the story prompt you to have?*