

VOICES FOR A JUST SOCIETY

MINUTES OF JUNE 4, 2014

ST. JOHN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

PRESENT: Geegee Mills (Chair), Ann Barrett, Rosemary Pryde, Peter Wilkins, Jannie Mills, Marillene Allen, Heather Turner, John Ryerson, Heather McPherson, Kathy Salisbury, Heidi Fiebig, Dave Clemens, Richard Carrier-Bragg, Beth Baskin, Marian Baskin (Beth's Mother), Audrey Gilpin, Scott McDougall, Linda Gilpin (Minute taker).

WELCOME: Geegee Mills

Following an opening exercise, Geegee welcomed new members, Peter Wilkins and Heather Turner and guest Marian Baskin, Beth's mother. Attendees then introduced themselves with their church affiliation.

HISTORY OF VOICES: Rosemary Pryde

Rosemary presented a history beginning with our first meeting at Jannie and Paul Mill's home on December 3, 2009. Rosemary began with a quote from Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has."

In our first steps, we shared our challenges and hopes for social justice, explored the potential for common ground, agreed on the need for a vision and focus for our work, that it is important to have a few people in the congregation who are committed, that we be partners and realize the need for persistence and patience!

Our hopes for Voices are to bring a larger voice by educating each other, sharing the work we are doing, becoming more vocal, developing the capacities of our own churches to have a larger voice and also getting our congregations involved to work towards a 'transformation of the heart' (Rev. Barb White's suggestion) and to help others realize we need both charity and social justice to truly live out our faith.

Our broad priorities are poverty reduction, housing and income support. Our vision is a growing community of faith-based groups in north Toronto working together for a just society by: strengthening and supporting relationships within our community, learning and sharing to increase our knowledge of issues, speaking with one voice and acting together to address injustice. This vision statement was approved in December 2012.

Some of our accomplishments include having prepared information sheets on poverty, housing and income issues for the 2011 and 2014 provincial elections, being asked to help organize Mike Colle's Town Hall, making multi-denominational team visits to MPPs, developing position briefs on Drummond, SAR and Bill 32, sending letters signed by many Voices members to municipal and provincial leaders on these issues and speaking as individuals but with one voice.

A few challenges are encouraging Voices members to actively participate in the ongoing work of the group, keeping our morale up and our frustration down during the very long and hard slog that is systemic change and encouraging more congregations to join with us. Rosemary concluded by articulating the value of Voices; we are a unique collection of individuals

passionate about righting the wrongs of society, we share the load and speak as one voice on issues that concern us, we are of value to our congregations, bringing them perspectives and well-researched information on issues and many of us have developed friendships with other like-minded people, an added joy that this work brings. In Rosemary's opinion, it is all good and worth keeping.

Her excellent presentation was followed by a round of applause.

SURVEY: Jannie Mills

Jannie presented the results of the survey with Beth making notes on a flip chart. Thirty surveys were emailed and seventeen responses were received. For those who did not respond, we need to let people know that they were missed and their input is desired.

1a. Should we continue to focus on poverty reduction in the GTA and Ontario? Yes

1c. Please explain any changes you would like to see to our Vision. None

2. Awareness and involvement of our activities over the past three years. Most both aware and participated.

3. For activities you did not participate in, what could Voices have done to encourage participation? Nothing (time and the individual's issue).

4. What social justice issue would you like to see Voices tackle next? The top four were increase taxes to fund more social justice programs to provide services for all, increase the minimum wage, increase affordable housing and secure the \$100 food supplement as social assistance rates are not high enough and the \$100 increase is one way to address this.

5. How can Voices have the greatest impact on social justice issues? The top three were educating Voices members so they in turn can influence their congregations, lobbying/meeting with MPPs on specific issues and joining with other groups such as ISARC to increase their impact. Writing advocacy letters to government officials ranked fourth.

6a. How important is working together to you personally? Ten answered extremely important and four rated this as very important.

6b. How important is it to your congregation to work together as a congregation on social justice issues? This was not rated as high with five responding extremely important and four as very important.

7. The schedule of three meetings each year was agreed to.

8a. Which of the following activities are you willing to contribute to? Jannie has the responses.

9. Is there anything that could be done to make it easier for you to be involved in Voices? Schedule meetings for the year.

10. Please list at least two people in your congregation that you would like Voices to contact as potential future members. It was decided to leave this to individual current members to contact people in their own congregations.

Other suggestions that arose included: a website, a stronger connection to our home churches (some have gone back to get official home church support), bringing our clergy on board, online petition tools as being effective, the need to improve attendance by personal invitations to attend and engaging youth, increasing the number of core members by signing in, keeping records, keeping in touch and following up on absences, reviewing categories of membership including who gets what emails-full members, supporters and allies, who is on the list and what policy do we have about the amount and criteria for forwarding information along with an unsubscribe option and a facebook page.

DISCUSSION AND BRAINSTORMING: Beth Baskin

Beth led a discussion about what has worked well/what has not worked so well/where do we go from here.

What has worked well?

excellent speakers

shared responsibilities

MPP meetings particularly with Mike Colle resulting in two Town Halls and a personal connection with him and his staff

email sharing

utilization of denominational resources

staying connected to elected officials and all party candidates

What can be improved?

increase advertising of speaker events to recruit new members

tie speaker presentation to action

increase the number of institutions represented and bring new people to MPP visits

visit other candidates as well as the incumbent MPP

encourage Voices members to work actively

archive information -legacy notes e.g. history of Voices, position papers, planning all candidates meetings

try to have resources available sooner e.g. bulletin inserts

Tasks

maintain list of members and share information - **Heidi**

archive information specific to Voices for a Just Society

create a website pointing people to great links - **Heather Turner** (who is studying web design) & **Steering Committee**

create an information sheet for Voices - **Rosemary**

articles/community announcements in SNAPD and NOW

follow-up with survey non-responders -**Jannie**

Where do we go from here?

small groups with a focused task

strengthening the structure -**Steering committee of Geegee, Marillene & Dave**

affordable housing action will include a wide application of engagement tools and how to be involved in advocacy

minimum wage

election resources including a TTC subsidy (a social justice project) **Kathy Salisbury, John Ryerson and Beth Baskin**

openness to emerging ideas

possibly hosting a skills event

post election meetings with Kathleen Wynne (minority government or not) and elected officials such as Minister of Social Services

Beth also spoke about the bulletin insert and other information that she had previously emailed related to the provincial election.

John Ryerson spoke, saying that poverty is multi-faceted with an inclusive agenda with many components requiring an integrated strategy. While we cannot be everything to everybody, we will focus on affordable housing, minimum wage and election resources and John suggested a skills event on how to do advocacy work and how to engage, that is, what has worked for you.

Dave Clemens recommended Vote Compass, an online democratic engagement tool on CBC.ca which portrays issues and the complexity of government issues.

Branding: Marillene Allen

Marillene showed us the logo that Neelan Rach had prepared for us. It incorporates the name "VOICES FOR A JUST SOCIETY and the tagline of 'People of Faith Working for Change' and is done in six colours, each of which has special significance, for example, purple for spirituality. The design illustrates openness, speaking out and interconnectedness. Everyone present was very impressed and adoption of the new logo was unanimously approved.

New Business: Geegee Mills

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday, October 1st and will focus on municipal election issues prior to the October 27th election. The other two meetings are scheduled for February 4th and June 3rd, 2015.

Closing: Geegee Mills

Geegee summarizes the meeting as very positive and spoke of the enthusiasm and momentum Voices has for the future.

In closing, Geegee recognized the death of Rick Parton and his many contributions to Voices. He will be much missed especially as we move forward.

The meeting ended at 9:10 pm. with a reading.