

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website
Small Group Session
The Right of Conscience and Use of Democratic Process
By William Hulbert

Opening Words

“My counsel tells me that if I answer questions about myself, I will have waived my rights under the fifth amendment and could be forced legally to answer questions about others. This is very difficult for a layman to understand. But there is one principle that I do understand: I am not willing, now or in the future, to bring bad trouble to people who, in my past association with them, were completely innocent of any talk or any action that was disloyal or subversive. I do not like subversion or disloyalty in any form and if I had ever seen any I would have considered it my duty to have reported it to the proper authorities. But to hurt innocent people whom I knew many years ago in order to save myself is, to me, inhuman and indecent and dishonorable. I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions, even though I long ago came to the conclusion that I was not a political person and could have no comfortable place in any political group.”

Lillian Hellman, Letter to House Un-American Activities Committee, May 19, 1952

Check in

Topic/Activity

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.

Some possible questions:

1. Do you find it difficult to live this principle? Why/Why not?
2. How can we work things out when what is in our conscience differs from what is in the conscience of others?
3. Where did your conscience come from? How has it grown over the years? Has it changed in any significant way?
4. How can we go about promoting this principle?
5. How much are you willing to give up for a principle, to live up to what your conscience tells you?
6. Lillian Hellman risked her reputation and her career for her conscience. Could you do that? For what principle of conscience?
7. When we advocate the use of democratic process, what exactly do we mean? Is voting always the best way to arrive at a democratic decision? When is voting the right thing to do? When is it not?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words

“The harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly; it is dearness only that gives everything its value. I love the man that can smile in trouble, that can gather strength from distress and grow brave by reflection. 'Tis the business of little minds to shrink; but he whose heart is firm, and whose conscience approves his conduct, will pursue his principles unto death.” Thomas Paine (1737 - 1809)