

Some Key Questions to Consider When Organizing a Move to Amend Affiliate in a Really “Red” State

by Jim Price

The first week in December is special to the members of our Move to Amend–Tuscaloosa affiliate. It was just one year ago, on the night of December, 4, 2013, that two dozen of us from Tuscaloosa, Alabama gathered in a classroom at the University of Alabama and began our journey leading to establishment of the first Move to Amend affiliate in the state of Alabama. Our group has since grown in numbers and energy. We now have sixty-five members and around fifteen to twenty “regulars” at our meetings. Morale and commitment are high. We are learning a lot together and are feeling the empowerment that comes from identifying ways to confront the abuse of wealth and power by the wealthiest one percent through their use of the U.S. Supreme Court to expand the power of corporations in oppressing the rest of us.

With that said, I probably do not have to tell you that we are building our Move to Amend-Tuscaloosa affiliate within a dominant culture that can only be characterized as politically conservative, socially reactionary, and religiously fundamentalist Christian. Alabama is a really “red” state. For example, all but one member of the state’s congressional delegation are Republicans. The lone Democrat,

Congresswoman Terri Sewell from Tuscaloosa, just recently voted for the Keystone XL pipeline. Republicans

also control the governorship and both houses of the state legislature.

I am sure that our situation is not unique. Many communities in “red” states face similar challenges. Our circumstance has required us to examine just how we, as progressives, go about successfully organizing a democratic movement within this culture. Below are a few of the key questions that we have had to ask ourselves, in relation to our culture, and how we have chosen to answer them in order to become a fundamentally sound, united, motivated, and well organized Move to Amend affiliate.

1. How do we get started? We thought it was important to start with a powerful initial organizing event. This may appear obvious but omitting it can hinder early coalescing of a core group. We were fortunate that Move to Amend national spokesperson David Cobb kindly chose to stop over for a night in Tuscaloosa between two of his regularly scheduled “barnstorming” stops. His fiery and inspiring “barnstorming” speech was just the match that was needed to light a fire within all in attendance. His presentation provided our group with a strong introduction to the corporate abuse of power; the

importance of a constitutional amendment overthrowing the legal concepts of “corporate personhood” and “money equals speech”; and the need for us to lead in building a broad-based democracy movement in our locality, state, and nation.

2. Where will we find our initial core group of supporters? We were fortunate to have a core sponsoring organization that nurtured our group. The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tuscaloosa’s Social Justice Team has provided that leadership. Not only were many members of that group attendees at David’s presentation, they also took the Move to Amend message to their congregation and reached out to other UU churches in the state. Many UU congregations have been exposed to Move to Amend. The passage of an Action of Immediate Witness at the Unitarian Universalist Association’s General Assembly in Louisville, KY, on June 23, 2013, (www.uuworld.org/ga/tag/action-of-immediate-witness/) endorsing the work of Move to Amend, has been extremely helpful in organizing UU

congregations around the country.

3. Should we be a lighthouse or a chameleon? When organizing (especially in regions like the American South) we are faced with a communications choice. Do we present Move to Amend as a lighthouse, beaming our true values and mission, providing an alternative vision to that of the dominant culture, or do we emphasize different themes and language in communicating with various groups along the political spectrum? We believe it is crucial to present to all we meet that Move to Amend is about more than winning the passage of the “We the People” constitutional amendment. Failure to make clear that we seek to build a truly democratic movement with leadership that includes those who have long suffered oppression in this country would be disingenuous. It would give a false impression about who we are and what we are about.

Therefore, we required each new member to join a Study Circle using a curriculum assembled by the Move to Amend Leadership Team. What we found is that the more politically conservative among us grow more comfortable with democracy movement building when we are up-front in asserting our anti-racist, anti-classist core values. We discuss with new members why we emphasize outreach to oppressed groups including, women, racial and ethnic minorities, Native Americans, the LGBTQ community, and immigrants to name but a few. We have made it clear that a commitment to working with

oppressed communities is fundamental to our relationship with the broader culture. The result has been wide acceptance of this important goal. This commitment is all the more important in light of recent developments in Ferguson, New York and other communities – race, in fact, does matter and must become part of any discussion in creating an authentic democracy movement.

4. Should we immediately take a high profile role in the community or take the time to build a collective knowledge base about the history of the expansion of corporate power as enabled by the U.S. Supreme Court? We thought it was vital to become fully grounded in that history before reaching out beyond our original twenty-four members. We are now spending approximately one-third of each meeting educating ourselves in a Study Circle. We used the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF) Timeline of Personhood Rights and Powers with explanatory notes (www.wilpf.org/docs/ccp/corp/ACP/CP_article+timeline.pdf) as a framework and spent over six months discussing most of the U.S. Supreme Court cases highlighted within it. Using Thom Hartmann’s book Unequal Protection as a guide, we conducted a role play exercise in which various members took on the roles of the key players in the *Santa Clara County v Southern Pacific R.R.*, 118U.S.394 (1886) Supreme Court case. The *Santa Clara* case has been used as precedent to justify corporate personhood.

We also studied in depth the judicial activism of Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell as he led the court to adopt the legal concept that “money equals speech”. To better understand our history, we are now reading such articles as Ronnie Dugger’s classic “A Call to Citizens: Will Real Populists Please Stand Up”, published in the August 14/21, 1995 issue of *The Nation*, (www.alliancefordemocracy.org/call_to_citizens.html).

5. Before asserting our positions in the community, should we take time to learn about the root causes of income inequality in the United States and what we can do about it? We chose to educate ourselves about income inequality. We viewed and discussed such films as Robert Reich’s “Inequality for All”, Jamie Johnson’s “The One Percent”, and Charles Ferguson’s “Inside Job”. We subscribed to the weekly blog “Too Much”. We are considering using the recently published Unitarian Universalist Association study guide Escalating Inequality (<http://ack.ipsdc.org/site/R?i=ue2Vi1SjuawiXk60TokDQg>) to better understand the causes of economic inequality and how we can overcome it. It is important to understand how economic inequality is a consequence of the expansion of corporate wealth and power.
6. Should we take a “shotgun” approach to outreach or have a more strategic, targeted plan? Unlike some groups who wish to shout out their presence to all people in their community, we chose a more deliberate and targeted

approach. We initially reached out to faith communities active on issues of racial, gender, economic, environmental, social, sexual, and immigrant justice. We appealed to them from the standpoint that not only economic inequality but also legal concepts as “corporate personhood” and “money equals speech” have moral as well as economic and political consequences. We also reached out to feminist, LGBTQ, civil rights, human rights, worker rights, immigrant rights, environmental and student groups representing communities that have long suffered at the hands of the wealthy and corporate power elites in our area. We emphasize the building of a strong democracy movement as a major goal of Move to Amend-Tuscaloosa. While it may be initially difficult to get endorsements from certain elected bodies, we know that we are touching people’s lives and collectively empowering ourselves to build a powerful organization better able to attain our goals.

7. Should we confine our focus to educating ourselves and others about the history of “corporate personhood” and “money as speech” or also seek to learn about the current issues affecting the power relationship of the wealthiest one percent and the rest of us? In addition to reaching out to others regarding the “We the People” constitutional amendment and building a truly democratic movement in the United States, we have chosen to keep abreast of issues affecting the economic relationships between the

wealthiest and the rest of us. We monitor such issues as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and keep abreast of recent U.S. Supreme Court cases such as *McCutcheon v. FEC* and *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby*.

8. Should we reach out to workers and labor unions? Some have said that labor unions, claiming their non-profit corporate status, might resist joining with us. That has not been our experience. Our Move to Amend-Tuscaloosa members have consciously reached out to two other coalitions in our area over the past several months. One comprises university students, faculty, and interfaith groups coming together in response to the tragedy at Ferguson, MO. The second coalition, Work Together Alabama!, is composed of members of several different unions, faiths, and community groups throughout West Alabama. We have been highly successful in bonding with them. For example, a few weeks ago Move to Amend-Tuscaloosa members and United Automobile Workers union members jointly participated in a special Sunday morning service at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Tuscaloosa with the theme, “Celebrating Workers and the Labor Movement in the United States”. The president of the West Alabama AFL-CIO Labor Council signed our petition and attended our most recent meeting. We are encouraged about this relationship.

These are some of the key questions we posed to ourselves and the

responses that guided the growth and development of Move to Amend-Tuscaloosa. Each group’s situation will result in the need to ask such questions as those described above. If you live in a really “red” state, I hope that our answers offer some fruitful ideas on how to build your own healthy, strong, and effective Move to Amend affiliate.

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