

"See That Justice Is Done"

Amos, 5:15

People of Faith Advocating in the Public Square: Long Island Challenges, Hopes and Opportunities



"Few are guilty, but all are responsible."

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Summary of the Long Island Jobs with Justice Faith Leaders' Focus Groups

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By Richard Koubek, PhD, Community Outreach Coordinator

Long Island Jobs with justice

&

Anita Halasz, Executive Director

Long Island Jobs with Justice



www.longislandjwj.org

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FOCUS GROUP SNAPSHOTS

In May, 2015, Long Island Jobs with Justice (JwJ) conducted four, two-hour focus groups with 42 Long Island faith leaders about the challenges, hopes and opportunities for faith-based advocacy on behalf of economic justice. Here are some of the major points made by the participants:

- **Challenges** discouraging clergy from confronting economic injustice on Long Island:
 - ✓ The religious vision of economic justice with its emphasis on care for the vulnerable is countercultural to America's market values based on individual competition and success. Suburbanites generally accept the American vision of economic success and deny the existence of its failures on Long Island, such as poverty and racial segregation, viewing such problems as belonging to the inner city, caused by outsiders and as threats to their property values.
 - ✓ Middle-class suburbanites also deny their own economic insecurities, fearing the shame of personal failure, and tend to blame poor people for being poor.
 - ✓ Long Island's more than 900 government jurisdictions foster parochialism and discourage faith leaders from seeking regional solutions to problems.
 - ✓ People of faith on Long Island see religion as a private and very personal matter and mistakenly believe that faith-based political advocacy is illegal and impolite.
 - ✓ With declining congregational memberships, clergy avoid controversial political topics and are consumed by pastoral care for their congregants' personal needs.
- **Hopes** for engaging faith leaders in justice advocacy:
 - ✓ The major religious denominations have rich and powerful Scriptural, doctrinal and historical traditions calling believers to help people in need (charity) while addressing the systemic causes of their needs (justice).
 - ✓ Religious congregations can have a significant impact on justice advocacy because they have moral standing, have experience serving people in need, and are positioned to both educate and organize large numbers of citizens.
 - ✓ Despite their commitment to America's economic system, people of faith on Long Island recognize the narcissism, selfishness and excessive individualism it fosters in their families and communities and can be open to religious principles of justice.
 - ✓ Personal stories linked to Scripture resonate with Long Islanders and can move suburbanites toward the religious vision of economic justice.
 - ✓ Using their charitable work with people in need – especially by telling their clients' stories – faith leaders are positioned to be effective advocates for economic justice.
 - ✓ Faith leaders can frame economic justice issues around both the self-interests of their congregants and the moral principles of their justice traditions.
- **Opportunities** to engage people of faith in the public square:
 - ✓ Congregations should make a greater effort to connect their charitable volunteers with the pain and life experiences of the clients they serve.

- ✓ Faith leaders need to do more to educate themselves and their congregations about current events and link these news stories to their justice teachings and traditions.
- ✓ Faith leaders – both ordained and lay – need to have the courage to speak up about their countercultural economic vision and values with their congregations, government officials, friends, neighbors and relatives.

What follows is a detailed report on the focus groups along with success stories and next steps for justice advocacy.

PART I

The Focus Group Process: A Journey toward Faith Organizing



"The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice"

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Dr. King was right: the arc of the moral universe is long, but it does bend – albeit slowly – toward justice. This is why Long Island Jobs with Justice (JwJ) created the AMOS Project (AMOS - A Movement of Solidarity) bringing together faith, union and community-service leaders as a “coalition of conscience” to educate, organize and advocate for economic justice and workers’ rights on Long Island. The AMOS Project is named for the Hebrew Prophet Amos who, 2300 years ago, instructed us to “see that justice is done.” The AMOS Steering Committee meets regularly to plan activities around JwJ’s core agenda: immigrant rights and immigration reform; bus riders’ equity; family-sustaining wages and supports for the working poor; and collective bargaining rights.

The AMOS Committee coordinates the annual JwJ “Working but Still Poor” conference that always has a faith component, with about 40% of the 200 conference attendees each year representing people of faith. The March 13th, 2015 conference featured Sojourners’ President Rev. Jim Wallis as the keynote speaker as well as Sojourners’ Lisa Sharon Harper who presented a two-part workshop for faith leaders titled, “How to Preach About Social Justice ... And Hold on to Your Congregation.” As a follow-up, JwJ hosted four, two-hour focus groups in May of 2015 attended by 42 faith leaders. Invitations to the focus groups were sent to faith leaders of many denominations. Those who chose to participate were: 22 Catholic; 16 Protestant; 3 Unitarian; 1 Ethical Humanist representing 32 congregations or organizations. Of the participants, 23 were ordained clergy or religious sisters and 19 were lay social-justice leaders. Another focus group will be scheduled in the Fall of 2015 for Jewish and Islamic faith leaders as well as others who could not attend the May focus groups.

The focus groups, titled “Preach Good News to the Poor,” provided clergy and lay leaders with an opportunity to discuss the economic injustices they see in their congregations and the difficulties they

face engaging their congregations in public-policy advocacy on these problems. Each focus group had these core questions:

- (1) What is the demographic profile of your congregation?
- (2) What justice problems and issues do you see in your congregation?
- (3) What challenges do you face confronting these injustices in your congregation?
- (4) What does your congregation need to do to be a prophetic voice in the public square addressing these problems?

JwJ understands that there are multiple barriers to engaging Long Island faith leaders in the politics of justice. This is a slow, incremental process. The religious vision of a just economy is countercultural to the American vision of a free-market economy based on profit and productivity, competition and personal gain, acquisitiveness and wealth. Pope Francis has described this global economy, *at its worst*, as an “economy of exclusion and inequality.”

The countercultural religious vision of economic justice was captured by the U.S. Catholic bishops in their 1986 pastoral letter, “Economic Justice for All,” in which they wrote that a just economy is based on these principles:

- The economy exists to serve people, not the other way around.
- Economic life should be shaped by moral principles and ethical norms.
- Economic choices should be measured by whether they enhance or threaten human life, human dignity, and human rights.
- A fundamental concern of a just economy must be support for the family and the well-being of children.
- The moral measure of any economy is how the weakest are faring [what the Bible repeatedly identifies as the widow, the orphan, the immigrant and the poor.]

Rev. Jim Wallis defines economic justice “most simply” as “putting things right again ... repairing and restoring broken relationships ... everything that makes for people’s well-being, security...” especially “making things right for those who are poor and oppressed.” In his keynote address at the 2015 JwJ conference, Rev. Wallis described a just economy as “God’s economy ... where there is enough for all, if we would just share what we have.”

Recognizing the difficulties involved in preaching and advocating for this countercultural economic vision, JwJ provided focus group participants with a toolkit containing resources to help them pray, study and act for “God’s economy.” The major goal of the JwJ AMOS Project is to encourage and support faith leaders to be prophetic voices and witnesses for justice, moving themselves and their congregations from works of charity to works of charity *and* justice. With this voice and presence, JwJ urges faith leaders – both clergy and lay – to “speak truth to power” about justice as did the great prophets of the Hebrew tradition like Amos, Isaiah, Micah or Jeremiah, as well as Jesus Christ and his disciples. Living this prophetic witness is surely challenging, as Dom Helder Camara, Archbishop of Recife Brazil observed when he said, “When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist.”

What follows are the major themes that emerged from the May 2015 JwJ focus groups.

PART II

What We Heard: Challenges Being Prophetic in the Public Square



"The church ... is the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state."

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Suburban Injustice: Fear and Denial

Each focus group touched on the pervasive denial of social and economic injustice on Long Island. Several focus group participants stated that part of this denial is a distorted sense of American history, that: God has blessed the United States above all nations; the U.S. is a land of enormous economic opportunity for all; past injustices such as worker exploitation, slavery and Jim Crow segregation have been resolved; America's prosperity has allowed for a seemingly endless expansion of wealth, lifting millions of people willing to work out of poverty. This distorted historical perspective profoundly affects suburban attitudes about justice. Living in one of America's ten wealthiest suburbs and the suburb with the highest cost-of-living in the nation, focus group participants felt that Long Islanders are often stereotyped as wealthy and tend to think of themselves and their region as affluent. With about 85 percent of Long Islanders living in single-family homes that they own and with much of their personal wealth based on the market value of their home, numerous focus group participants stated that Long Islanders are reluctant – even fearful – to acknowledge deep-rooted problems in their communities such as poverty or homelessness or racism because such problems might undermine their property values and their very economic security.

This denial flies in the face of two inconvenient and troubling realities. One is that about 20 percent of Long Islanders earn under \$48,500 a year, which is the "true" poverty level for our high-cost region (twice the federal government's definition of poverty which is \$24,250 for a family of four in 2015, or 6 percent of Long Islanders.) The second difficult reality is that Long Island is one of the ten most racially segregated suburbs in the United States. Focus group participants acknowledged that clergy understand the economic fears and insecurities of their congregants and are therefore reluctant to call attention to these problems in sermons and other congregational activities. Thus, Long Islanders' fear and denial of injustice are major impediments to the faith community fulfilling Dr. King's call to be "the conscience of the state."

Race and Class: The Great Long Island Divides

Faith leaders in each focus group expressed frustration at the unwillingness of Long Islanders to address racism and classism. Participants spoke openly about the tendency in America's culture of self-reliance and individualism to blame poor people for their own poverty or people of color for their own segregation. The shame of being poor affects much of their charitable work helping poor people. Several focus group participants who are parish outreach directors noted that middle and working class parishioners experiencing serious economic insecurities, such as unemployment, wage freezes or wage cuts, reductions in hours or benefits or the threat of foreclosure, tend to hide these problems from their neighbors. Worse, they observed, some congregants direct anger about their economic insecurities at what they believe are "lazy" poor people or racial minorities who they blame for raising taxes with expensive government entitlements like Food Stamps. In solidly middle-class communities, outreach directors in the focus groups described the residents they serve as largely unknown and invisible to their neighbors and fearful of being "discovered" using the food pantry. Similarly, Long Island's racial segregation, dramatically exhibited each weekend in segregated worship services that reflect the congregations' housing patterns, goes without much notice or comment from most pulpits. This divide came to the fore in one focus group when a white faith leader suggested that African-American clergy make more of an effort to attend meetings of the community's ecumenical clergy group, to which an African American pastor politely replied that more effort should be made to welcome and include them in these meetings.

The Myth of Suburban Exceptionalism: Injustice is a "City" Problem

Since Levittown's creation in the late 1940s, Long Island is often called the "mother" of America's suburbs. While many if not most Long Islanders today were born in Nassau or Suffolk County, focus group members spoke of the widespread belief in their congregations that Long Island is fundamentally different from "the City." This belief in Long Island's suburban exceptionalism tends to define as "urban" such injustices as poverty and racism. Similarly, problems like crime or low-performing schools are viewed as suburban aberrations, often blamed on newcomers such as immigrants or people of color who have migrated from the inner city to the suburbs. Suburban exceptionalism, according to a number of focus group participants, encourages Long Islanders to blame their troubles on "the others" who have entered into and disturbed their suburban tranquility. This phenomenon was poignantly described by the Pastor of Holy Cross Lutheran Church in Commack who in 2014 was defeated by local community opposition, fueled by a well-coordinated neighborhood social media campaign, in his efforts to use the church to temporarily shelter about 40 unaccompanied Central American refugee children.

Suburban Injustice: Isolation and Division

A number of focus group participants expressed frustration at the multiplicity of government jurisdictions on Long Island that prevent coordinated efforts to address the injustices which crisscross Nassau and Suffolk Counties' more than 900 entities, including 124 school districts, hundreds of fire and library districts, over 90 incorporated villages, two cities and 13 townships. One focus group participant related that when the head of Catholic Charities approached Ed Chambers in the 1990s, then head of the Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), about bringing his faith-based community organizing model to Long Island, Chambers said, "Why would I do that?" Apparently, Chambers understood the difficulties involved in organizing justice campaigns in a wealthy suburban region with so many government jurisdictions. Another focus group participant said that Long Island's many government units cause people to wall themselves off from other communities, to think parochially and

possessively about their immediate surroundings and the needs of only their own communities, and to isolate themselves from seeking regional solutions to systemic problems such as racial segregation. Such a mindset becomes yet another barrier to faith leaders being a prophetic voice for justice on Long Island.

The Myth of Church State Separation: We Must Never Mix Religion and Politics

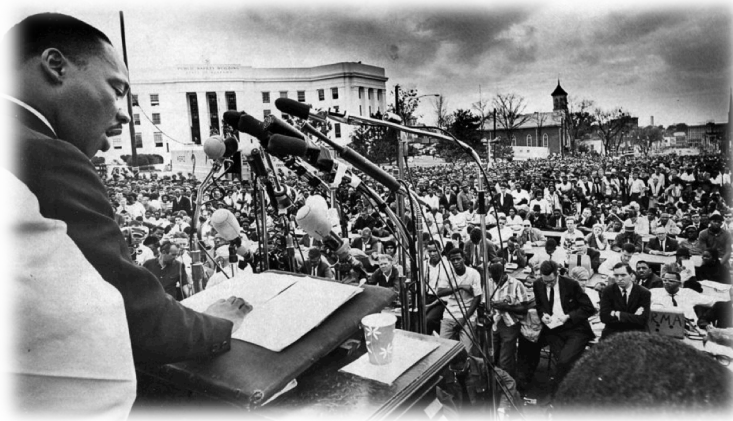
Another theme that came up in the focus groups was the belief that America's "separation of church and state" causes people of faith to think that any political advocacy by a religious institution is prohibited by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. One participant, an attorney, complained that many people mistakenly think Jefferson's metaphor about a "wall" of separation is actually language in the Constitution. One of the resources in the JwJ toolkit distributed to each focus group participant is a summary of which political activities are prohibited by the Constitution (partisan political actions and election campaign endorsements) and which are allowed (organizing and advocating for public policies using the values and language of faith). This perceived legal prohibition against *any* political activities by faith organizations has been exacerbated by the American cultural norm that it is simply impolite in public company to talk about religion and politics. Such a narrow view of religion is at odds with the vision of Mahatma Gandhi who said, "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics."

The Suburban Religious Perspective: A Private and Personal Journey

One focus group participant described how his brother reacted when told that he would be using Catholic social teaching to advocate for public policies that serve the poor. "You mean you are mixing religion and politics?" his brother complained. "I don't go to Mass for politics; I go to Mass for peace." Participants at each focus group spoke about the American tradition of treating religion, faith and spirituality as intensely private matters. Within this tradition, faith and religion focus almost exclusively on one's personal search for peace and salvation. Works of charity for the poor are an important part of this very private journey, but political advocacy that addresses the systemic causes of poverty is frowned upon and viewed as a purely secular activity that ought to be unconnected to one's religious beliefs. A related theme that arose at each focus group is the harsh reality that America and Long Island are rapidly secularizing; attendance at religious services is declining and the number of so-called "Nones" – people who claim no religious belief – is increasing. This decline in both religious identification and worship-service attendance causes many – perhaps most – clergy to treat religion as a private matter and to avoid including the controversial politics of justice – that is, prophetic witness – in the life of their congregations. At each focus group, participants noted that clergy are also overwhelmed by the pastoral concerns congregants bring to them, including personal and family problems such as divorce, difficulties raising children, emotional and physical illnesses, family deaths and many more.

PART III

What We Heard: Hopes for Faith Involvement in the Politics of Justice



Politics... is one of the highest forms of charity."

Pope Francis

Charity and Justice: The Two Feet of Faith-Based Service

Is politics one of the “highest forms of charity?” This statement by Pope Francis may not sit well with many Americans and certainly not with many Long Islanders. On May 17th, just two days before the first focus group convened, *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat wrote a piece titled, “Do Churches Fail the Poor?” In it, he described as “ridiculous” a recent comment by President Barack Obama that American churches have “obsessed” on culture-war issues such as abortion at the expense of economic justice issues such as poverty. Douthat offered as a counterpoint to the President the enormous personal and institutional resources churches devote to works of charity helping poor people. Douthat also acknowledged that religious leaders have written many denominational statements about the need to address the causes of poverty.

Douthat’s column was discussed at several of the focus groups. There was wide agreement among participants that Long Islanders have been extremely generous with their charitable service and monetary contributions to poor and vulnerable people. Each year, for example, over 300,000 Long Islanders seek help at local food pantries, many of them run by religious congregations. Charity was seen by most of the focus group participants as very important to their congregational life. However, several clergy in the focus groups acknowledged that their denomination’s leaders have emphasized teachings on abortion, contraception or same-sex marriage at the expense of their teachings about economic justice, with the justice teachings generally not reaching down to the local congregations or into their pulpits. At several focus groups, Pope Francis was mentioned for criticizing the Catholic Church as having obsessed on these sexual teachings while downplaying the Church’s justice teachings.

There was a broad consensus at each focus group that the teachings of most religious denominations call believers to serve people in need (charity) while also addressing the systemic causes of their needs (justice). However, several clergy stated that their seminary training was deficient on justice teachings

and there was wide agreement among focus group participants that in most congregations there is a disconnect between what has been called the *two feet* of faith-based service: charity and justice. Some participants expressed serious disappointment at this disconnect because they view the Protestant Social Gospel and Catholic social teaching as rich resources for shaping the prophetic mission of the Church. Others acknowledged that justice activities such as voter registration drives after services are useful, but that faith leaders need to do much more to educate their congregants about issues and to mobilize them to write letters, make legislative visits, testify and even demonstrate for public policies that support economic justice, such as raising the minimum wage in New York State to \$15 an hour or passing the New York State DREAM Act. A number of participants felt strongly that lay members need to urge, if not lobby, clergy to preach about justice and become involved in the politics of justice. But in each focus group, as noted above, participants acknowledged that on Long Island, with the exception of certain congregations and denominations such as the Unitarians, faith-based politics are generally rejected and hardly viewed as “forms of charity,” which contradicts St. Augustine’s 1600 year-old maxim that “charity is no substitute for justice withheld.”

When Faith Acts for Justice: The Power of Scripture and Historical Witness

A Baptist pastor at one focus group pointed out that Pope Francis has emerged as a powerful global voice, calling people of faith to address systemic injustice. He expressed the hope that Francis might energize people of all faiths to use their rich Scriptural, doctrinal and traditional resources to enter the public square as prophetic voices and witnesses for public policies that get at the root causes of injustice. At several focus groups, the witness of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was discussed. With 2015 being the 50th anniversary of Dr. King’s march for voting rights in Selma, Alabama, that led to the adoption that year of the historic Voting Rights Act, and with a number of focus group members having seen the 2015 motion picture, “Selma,” Dr. King was discussed as an example of how faith-based advocacy can change systems and promote justice. In addition, focus group members spoke with pride about the poetry and the power of Scripture as a framework for faith-based justice advocacy, able to address both private sins such as bigotry and social sins such as racial segregation in housing and schools. The fact that the Bible has over 2,000 references to the poor – overshadowing Biblical references to personal sexual behavior – was noted by several focus group participants. “We have excellent material in Scripture” one participant stated, “which we need to use more often and more deliberately.” Several participants cited theologian Karl Barth’s dictum to preach with “the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other.” One participant spoke of a JwJ prayer breakfast at which a secular leader with little religious training was asked to read an excerpt from Isaiah 61, which is his call to “preach good news to the poor.” Having done so, this leader remarked privately, “That was good stuff. Where did you get it?” Yet another participant spoke about the transformative nature of Scripture and faith, capable of changing private lives and public systems. Several participants said that the communal values in Scripture and social-justice teachings can be a counterpoint to the excessive individualism, selfishness and narcissism of contemporary suburban culture, arguing that many congregants are, in fact, open to hearing for themselves and their children the religious message to care for others as we care for ourselves. Part I of the JwJ toolkit distributed to focus group participants contains Scriptural calls to justice, as well as prayers for economic justice, from the Hebrew, Christian and Muslim traditions.

Personal Stories, Self-Interests and a Higher Morality

Lisa Sharon Harper, Sojourners’ Director of Mobilizing, framed her JwJ March 13th conference workshop on justice preaching around the power of the personal story: “the story of me; the story of us; the story of now.” Many of the focus group participants attended this workshop and there was wide

agreement that stories, more than political ideology or even theology, can significantly move people to act against injustice. The Bible is filled with colorful, moving stories. Jesus taught with stories or parables, some so influential that they have been absorbed into today's secular culture as witnessed by the many states that adopted "Good Samaritan" laws to legally protect people who help others in an emergency. A number of clergy in the focus groups spoke of how they weave Bible stories into current issues when they preach. One lay participant told his own story, of experiencing a life conversion toward helping poor people after visiting the Diocese of Rockville Centre's mission in the Dominican Republic.

The outreach directors in the focus groups described how connecting their volunteers to the actual life experiences of the clients they serve transforms their perceptions about poverty and poor people. At several focus groups, participants discussed how client stories, told by the clients themselves or by outreach and food pantry workers when testifying before local legislatures or visiting elected officials, moved these officials to vote for an anti-poverty bill, as happened when the Suffolk Legislature adopted its Living Wage Law.

Another approach to storytelling related to the importance of self-interest. At each focus group, participants discussed how congregants could be moved toward justice if they see it in terms of their own interests. One participant said that preaching about economic justice can be messaged to show "a rising economic tide lifting all boats;" that raising the minimum wage, for example, to \$15 an hour can pump millions of dollars into the local economy, helping local businesses to increase their profits. Affordable housing being one of the public-policy issues raised at all four focus groups, several participants described how this very contentious issue can be messaged to show homeowners that their opposition to affordable housing is undermining their own self-interests: young people and businesses are leaving Long Island because of the housing shortage; "Who will be left to purchase my home?" Yet, other participants pointed out that self-interest, a corner stone of community organizing, cannot and must not overshadow higher moral principles. "How much is the opposition to affordable housing rooted in plain racial bias and prejudice?" one asked. And, she added, "How can and should faith leaders confront such bigotry from the pulpit?"

PART IV

What We Have Done: The Faith Community as a Prophetic Voice Long Island Success Stories



"If not me, who; if not now, when?"

Rabbi Hillel the Elder

Participants agreed that these focus groups provided an excellent beginning to a dialogue that needs to continue so that Long Island faith leaders can answer Rabbi Hillel's question: "It is I who seek justice, now." Part III of the JwJ toolkit distributed at the focus groups contains a resource that outlines the unique power faith leaders have in the public square: moral standing; direct experience serving the poor; a platform for education; and sheer numbers. Part III of the toolkit also contains a resource with tips on how to converse or preach non-confrontationally about justice issues – written by Rev. Tom Goodhue, Executive Director of the LI Council of Churches – as well as other resources on how to speak with and write to elected officials. Among the high points of the focus groups were examples of successes that participants have had moving their congregations to be a prophetic voice and witness for justice. Here are some Long Island success stories of faith leaders in the public square.

- **Marching to Support Immigrants:** In Wyandanch on October 27th, 2013, JwJ sponsored an interfaith "Pilgrimage for Just Immigration Reform" (pictured above). At that time, there was some movement in Congress toward adopting comprehensive immigration reform. Over 200 people of faith participated in the pilgrimage, marching up Straight Path. Participants sang and carried signs and banners while they processed in the middle of the street. At the end of the procession, they prayed and heard Jewish, Christian and Muslim Scripture readings and appeals for immigrants be treated justly. The pilgrimage, covered on *News 12* and in *Newsday*, was a powerful public demonstration of support for immigration reform. The pilgrimage was preceded that summer by a JwJ delegation of faith leaders who visited influential Republican Congressman Peter King. He told them he will vote for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants as well as other reform principles supported by advocates. Congressman King also told the faith leaders to "keep the pressure on" his colleagues in the House of Representatives.

- **Preaching for Immigration Reform:** At St. Frances de Chantal RC parish in Wantagh, one of the immigrant priests had trouble returning to the U.S. from his homeland as a result of what many consider America's "broken" immigration laws. The priest is very popular with congregants. This prompted another priest in the parish to preach at Sunday Mass about the need to support the U.S. Catholic bishops' call for comprehensive federal immigration reform. The sermon was very well received by congregants.
- **Respecting Cultural Diversity:** Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal RC Church in Wyandanch has, in addition to its original white European and African American congregants, a growing Latino population as well as Haitians, Caribbean and African immigrants. The pastor spoke of how this ethnic mix has enabled parishioners to appreciate the "cultural pluralism" rather than "assimilationist" model of America, thereby allowing people to retain their own cultures rather than feeling that they must "melt" into a homogenous American culture. He noted that non-Latino parishioners are learning that Latinos do not like to be called "Latino" but rather want to be identified as Dominican or Salvadoran or Columbian – their national heritages. To foster such understanding, the parish hosts several multi-cultural food festivals each year in which parishioners sample ethnic foods from the more than 20 countries represented in the congregation. The congregation has also used JwJ's "We Are All Immigrants" resources to show how the experiences of today's immigrants replicate the experiences of earlier Irish, German, Italian and East European immigrants, thereby rallying parishioners to support comprehensive federal immigration reform and the New York State DREAM Act with letter writing, legislative visits and participation in public demonstrations, like the October 2013 pilgrimage.
- **Sheltering Refugee Children:** When Holy Cross Lutheran Church was defeated by Not in MY Backyard (NIMBY) opposition to sheltering unaccompanied Central American refugee children, JwJ and Long Island Wins hosted a press conference on September 19th, 2014 at which the largest Long Island gathering of faith leaders ever assembled on the immigration issue (14 clergy and lay Catholic, Protestant, Muslim and Unitarian speakers) called for acceptance of these children on Long Island. Event planners anticipated 30 people in the audience; 140 people attended. The press conference was covered over two days with major stories in *Newsday*. The energy around this issue encouraged Long Island Wins to form a Rapid Response Team of pro-immigrant activists, including JwJ, who are ready to step in when there are anti-immigrant situations as occurred in Commack. Some weeks later, on word that anti-immigrants would denounce the refugee children at the Suffolk Legislature, the Rapid Response Team turned out over 30 mostly-faith people in support of the children. Only one anti-immigrant spokesperson was present. Several pro-immigrant speakers addressed the Legislature, prompting the legislators to discuss what Suffolk County should do for the immigrant children.
- **Demanding \$15 an Hour:** On June 18, 2015, as part of its low-wage workers campaign, JwJ arranged for seven directors or volunteers from faith-based outreach centers or food pantries to provide testimony to the New York State Fast Food Workers' Wage Board, calling for a \$15 an hour minimum wage for fast food workers. One volunteer from Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal Church in Wyandanch relayed stories of adult students in her ESL class who are fast food workers, yet still need to get food and clothing from the parish outreach center for themselves and their children because of their low salaries. Another, a nun who directs the St. Raphael's parish outreach center in East Meadow, described the plight of a white, single mother whose fast

food take-home pay is less than \$200 a week, which is well below the Federal Poverty Level. Another nun who directs the outreach center at Our Lady of Fatima Church in Port Washington described how the work schedules of her clients who are fast food workers vary so much that a teacher at the local public school told her not one of these parents had the time to attend their children's parent/teacher conference. And the director of the Long Island Council of Churches Food Pantry in Freeport movingly spoke of the almost 7,000 Nassau families they served last year, some of them adult fast food workers, who don't earn enough to support their families.

- **Opposing Nassau Bus Cuts:** In 2011, JwJ formed a coalition to stop the MTA from cutting 25 of 48 bus routes during a funding dispute with Nassau County. Faith-based outreach centers and food pantries played a critical role in this coalition because they serve working-poor people, many of whom rely on the public buses as their only form of transportation. Congregations in Nassau published in their bulletins information opposing the cuts, collected letters and asked congregants to call County Executive Ed Mangano to demand that the County put more funds into its bus system. So many letters and calls were initiated that the County Executive expressed anger at the involvement of so many congregations in this campaign. Nevertheless, the bus cuts were cancelled.
- **Supporting Suffolk Sunday Bus Service:** The eventual privatization of Nassau's bus system prompted JwJ to form the Long Island Bus Riders' Union to monitor the new bus company and advocate for bus equity in both Nassau and Suffolk. In 2011, working with Suffolk County Legislator Jay Schneiderman, JwJ supported a 50 cent bus-fare increase to provide, for the first time, limited Sunday bus service in Suffolk. Legislator Rick Montano, who represented working-poor communities in Brentwood and Central Islip, was unsure about supporting this proposal because he thought his constituents might oppose the fare increase. Several outreach centers in his district, including St. Anne's RC Church in Brentwood, St. John of God RC Church in Central Islip, and Pronto in Bay Shore collected almost 1,000 client surveys – printed in English, Spanish and Creole – with over 90% percent supporting the fare increase to provide Sunday service. Faith leaders visited Legislator Montano to deliver the surveys and urge his support. The outreach director at St. Anne's told him about one of her clients who, due to the lack of bus service, had to walk five miles each Sunday to the Bay Shore ferry to reach her job on Fire Island. Eventually, the Suffolk Legislature adopted some Sunday bus service with a 25 cent fare increase.
- **Building Affordable Housing:** First Baptist Church in Riverhead is engaged in a long political battle to secure Town Board approval for a Community Life Center which will contain a community center as well as affordable housing. While the Town Board has thus far withheld the needed vote, this campaign has mobilized community support, raised the specter of racism and is garnering support from outside the community.
- **Addressing Police-Community Relations:** Teenagers participating in the 2015 Garden City Community Church's annual Lenten "30 Hour Famine" program met with congregants at the mostly-African American South Hempstead Congregational Church, the community that abuts almost all-white Garden City. There, they heard Hempstead residents speak about their experiences with police harassment, how they avoid driving through Garden City because the

village police often stop them, and how degrading these experiences are. The teenagers were profoundly shocked and moved and are still talking about what they heard.

- **Reforming Prolonged Solitary Confinement:** The use of prolonged solitary confinement in New York prisons and jails exacts a terrible cost on those who are subjected to its torture and on their families and loved ones. Those who have experienced solitary are left with emotional and psychological scars that may never heal. Once released, these broken individuals have a difficult time reinserting themselves into the fabric of their communities as productive, healthy members. The practice also adds thousands of dollars annually to the cost of care for individuals who are incarcerated. For the past two years members of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock have been participating in a coalition to pass legislation that will bring about systemic change in New York's prisons and jails. When passed, the Humane Alternatives to Long Term (HALT) Solitary Confinement Act (A4401/S2659) will require criteria for the use of solitary confinement, limit it to no more than 15 days, exempt vulnerable populations from ever being placed in solitary, and mandate rigorous training and oversight for corrections officers. In May 2014, and again in April 2015, members of the Congregation made the trip to Albany to join over 100 advocates from across the state to meet with lawmakers and promote the legislation. With each advocacy day more legislators have signed on as co-sponsors.

PART V

What We Need to Do: Next Steps



"As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead."

Epistle of James, 2:26

What We Need to Do

Focus group participants understand that their desire and passion for justice needs to translate into "deeds." The focus groups yielded a number of broad suggestions to help congregations become more involved in the politics of justice. "Feeling the pain" of poor and vulnerable people came up in each focus group. Participants spoke movingly of how acts of charity can sensitize congregants to the experiences of people suffering injustice as well as helping congregants meet and empathize with marginalized people they often consider "different" from themselves. Education was another theme stressed in all four focus groups. Participants strongly suggested that clergy and lay leaders become aware of their denomination's social justice teachings and pass these teachings on to the wider congregation. St. Frances de Chantal's religious education program, for example, incorporates Catholic social teachings and principles into each grade level curriculum, with adjunct justice resources and activities to engage parents.

In the spirit of theologian Karl Barth, a number of participants urged clergy and lay people to a closer reading and awareness of current events and political news, always using Scripture and their denomination's social teachings as a lens to assess "breaking news." The JwJ toolkit distributed to each focus group participant contains study materials with historical, statistical and policy information about immigration, poverty on Long Island, the New York State DREAM Act and the minimum wage. JwJ frequently distributes policy updates to its supporters and posts study resources on its website (www.longislandjwj.org). Several participants called upon their church hierarchy to be more active in proclaiming and prioritizing the denomination's social-justice teachings.

At each focus group, participants spoke about the importance of clergy and lay people having the courage to speak the truth about justice, even if it discomforts their congregation, friends and relatives or, as one pastor said, “even if it costs me my job.” As noted above, the power of personal stories linked to Scripture as a vehicle for justice preaching and conversation came up at each focus group. Finally, clergy were encouraged to work more closely with each other, in community ecumenical associations, for example, to counter the isolation many experience and to bolster their willingness to preach justice from the pulpit and engage in the politics of justice.

Next Steps: Fall 2015-Spring 2016

On June 3rd, 2015, at the annual Long Island ERASE Racism benefit, keynote speaker Peter Edelman cited Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a confidante of Dr. Martin Luther King: “Few are guilty, but all are responsible.” Professor Edelman was talking about our collective responsibilities to end poverty and racism. Edelman himself has taken responsibility, resigning from his post as Counsel to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services during the Clinton Administration because he believed that the newly-enacted “welfare reform” policies were unjust. His words challenged all to action.

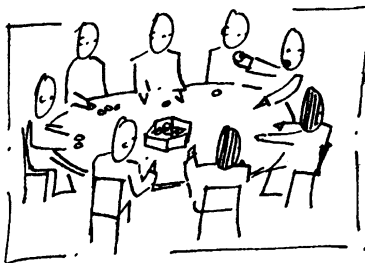
In keeping with these calls for responsible action, JwJ plans the following **faith-based justice activities in the coming months:**

- **Labor Day** – JwJ “Prayers for Worker Justice” distributed to AMOS congregations
- **September** – Repeat of the JwJ faith leaders’ focus group, “Preach Good News to the Poor,” for Jewish, Islamic and others who could not attend the May sessions
- **September 24th** – “Pope Francis Address to Congress: Live Viewing and Panel Discussion” (LI Federation of Labor, Hauppauge and First Baptist Church of Riverhead)
- **October 3** – Long Island Presbytery justice conference at which JwJ presents the closing plenary address using this focus group report to encourage Presbyterian action for justice
- **Mid-October** – Second round of JwJ faith leaders’ focus groups
- **November 7** – Progressive Network Conference: an all day Saturday conference focusing on the Long Island progressive agenda and strategies for creating a coordinated, effective network of progressive advocates
- **December 10** - JwJ Human Rights Prayer Breakfast possibly honoring agencies that serve immigrants
- **January** – “Messaging a Public Policy Issue Using the Lens of Faith”: JwJ faith leaders’ focus groups on how to message, preach about and advocate for one specific public policy issue, either at the New York State or federal level of government. This may be offered as a webinar. (Issue to be determined based on legislative activity in 2016)
- **March/April** – JwJ “Working But Still Poor” conference with a two-part workshop, “How to Make Your Congregation a Prophetic Witness for Justice,” featuring a presentation on justice preaching, profiles of faith-based justice successes and strategies for incorporating justice education and advocacy into the life of a congregation

- **Ongoing –**
 - Moral Monday Movement on LI – an outgrowth of Rev. William Barber’s April 28th Moral Monday address and workshop, JwJ and the AMOS Project will participate as issues become focused. Anita Halasz serves on the Moral Monday Steering Committee; Richard Koubek serves on the Messaging Committee
 - Meet with community ecumenical groups to engage them in justice education and advocacy

PART VI

Focus Group Notes



"I will also speak of your testimonies before kings and shall not be put to shame."

Psalm 119:46

The four focus group sites were selected so as to accommodate the largest number of faith leaders who participated in the March 13th JwJ conference workshop on preaching conducted by Lisa Sharon Harper of Sojourners. The focus groups were facilitated by JwJ Staff Richard Koubek, Anita Halasz and Victoria Daza. Here is a summary of the issues, the challenges and the needed actions that were identified and discussed at each focus group, as well as the names of the participants and their congregations.

First Baptist Church of Riverhead

May 19th, 2015

Present: Rev. Charles Coverdale; Rev. Cynthia Liggon; Shirley Coverdale, First Baptist Church of Riverhead; Rev. Ron Richardson, St. Anthony RC (Rocky Point); Doreen Quaranto, Most Holy Trinity RC (East Hampton); Pat Spencer, Ethical Humanist Society of LI; Mary Donohue, Ss. Philip and James RC (St. James); Rev. Donald Butler, Community Baptist Church (Southampton); Rev. Marvin Dozier, Unity Baptist Church (Mattituck); Rev. H. G. McGee, First Baptist Church of Bridgehampton; Rev. Henry Faison, First Baptist Church of Southampton; Ron Schaeffer, St. Rosalie RC (Hampton Bays); Richard Koubek, Anita Halasz, LI Jobs with Justice

1. Topics identified as significant for the congregation:

- Acculturation of immigrants
- Problems of undocumented immigrants
- Homelessness and evictions
- Lack of affordable housing
- Racism
- Classism
- Need for youth programs
- Aging population/senior issues
- Fear about property values and economic insecurity

- High taxes
- Negativity toward poor people and welfare recipients
- Criminal justice issues
- Police community relations

2. Challenges facing clergy who want to be a prophetic voice:

- A false sense of American progress and distorted history cause congregation members to feel that the US (and especially suburbia) do not have serious social and economic injustices.
- Refusal of Americans and suburbanites to address systemic injustices like racism.
- Clergy are afraid to speak out for fear of losing their congregations or their jobs.
- Hierarchy (particularly RC under Bishop Murphy) has shut down advocacy.
- Some clergy see no point in mixing religion and politics: faith is a personal journey
- Laity need to press clergy to preach about justice.
- Suburbia is very dispersed – congregational leaders have little interaction.
- The justice language of the faith community may be at odds with the justice. Language of the secular community: e.g., is Isaiah's call to "Preach good news to the poor" condescending and elitist?
-

3. What needs to do to be done for the faith community to be a prophetic voice:

- Acknowledge that faith is not just a personal journey but also requires addressing systemic injustices like racism and classism, worker exploitation, income inequality
- Preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other (Karl Barth).
- Connect tough political issues to Scripture – draw parallels between current events and Biblical messages and stories.
- Preach Scriptural truth while acknowledging the fears/concerns of congregation (e.g., police brutality against people of color must be weighed against the "good cops" and their difficult work).
- Frame issues in terms of the congregation's self-interests (e.g. if we keep resisting affordable housing, there will be no young people left to purchase our homes.)
- Clearly distinguish the difference between charity and justice and the need to do both.
- Bravely preach Scriptural truths despite the risks.
- Have the courage to take on the delicate and tough issues (e.g. Biases against gays and lesbians within the church.)
- Encourage congregational education (e.g. the Just Faith movement) so that members see the Scriptural mandate to work for justice.
- Connect with one another through community ecumenical clergy groups or community organizing networks such as LION and Moral Monday movement.

St. Francis de Chantal, Wantagh

May 20, 2015

Present: Rev. Kate Jones Calone, Setauket Presbyterian Church; Ron Schaffer, St. Rosalie RC (Hampton Bays); Sr. Rosalie Carven, Sisters of St. Joseph (Brentwood); Sr. Cathy Artale, Sisters of the Infant Jesus; Rev. Ron Garner, Rev. Maureen O'Hagan, Memorial Congregational Church (Wantagh);

Sr. Lauren Hanley, St. Frances de Chantal RC (Wantagh); Rev. Larry Swenson, Prison Ministry, (Wantagh); Mary Donohue, SS. Phillip and James RC (St. James); Dr. Joseph Volker, Ruth Dumas, Jack Dumas, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal RC (Point Lookout); Maria Dayton, St. James RC (Seaford); Victoria Daza, Richard Koubek, Anita Halasz, LI Jobs with Justice

1. Topics identified as significant for the congregation:

- Moving members of the congregation from charity to justice
- Home foreclosures and the lack of affordable housing
- Hidden poverty; the shame of being poor in the suburbs; the tendency to blame the poor for their own poverty
- Unemployment; underemployment; low wages; part-time work; wage theft
- Economic insecurities for middle class families burdened by high taxes and a high cost-of-living
- The lack of affordable child care
- Human trafficking
- Prison reform
- Racism/segregation
- Senior issues

2. Challenges facing clergy who want to be a prophetic voice:

- Clergy lack the time for justice: they are overburdened by pastoral concerns, funerals, etc.
- Clergy lack of training in social justice theology.
- Clergy fear of being fired if they introduce controversial topics.
- The widespread belief that religion is private and personal (both by clergy and lay people.)
- Clergy and laity fear that mixing religion and politics violates the First Amendment/separation of church state.
- Concern by clergy that their congregations do not want to hear disturbing messages about the presence of poverty, racism and other injustices, partly because they deny the existence of these problems.
-

3. What needs to do to be done for the faith community to be a prophetic voice:

- Clergy and lay people need to deepen their knowledge about social-justice theology and current political issues.
- Infuse social justice into all levels of religious education for children and engage the parents in this social-justice education.
- Lay people need to urge clergy to preach about social justice.
- Use personal stories of injustice in sermons, preferably from the congregation, linked to Bible stories, which convey the need for systemic changes.
- White male clergy should empathize with the experiences of marginalized people such as women of African Americans.
- Clergy should engage in community activities (as many Catholic sisters do) that encourage each other to become voices for justice.
- Clergy should use Scripture to preach truth to power even if it costs them their jobs.

- Clergy should have the courage to attack income inequality and exploitation by the wealthy that should be contrasted with the popular tendency to blame the poor for their poverty and for “ripping off” society with “free programs.”
- Faith leaders should make radical suggestions (e.g., turn empty schools or church buildings into affordable housing) in order to provoke debate.
- Become engaged in the Moral Monday movement.

Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Shelter Rock, Manhasset May 21, 2015

Present: Rev. Paul Johnson, Claire Deroche, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock (Manhasset); Ron Schaeffer, St. Rosalie RC, (Hampton Bays); Rev. Dennis Walker, Holy Cross Lutheran (Commack); Mary Donohue, SS. Philip and James RC (St. James); Mary Dewar, Garden City Congregational Church (Garden City); Rev. Ken Graham, Social Justice Coordinator, LI Presbytery; Richard Koubek, Anita Halasz, LI Jobs with Justice

1. Topics identified as significant for the congregation:

- Police-community relations in communities of color and the difficulties faced by police officers.
- Middle-class economic insecurities: property values, taxes.
- Concerns about the suburbs urbanizing: crime, welfare, low-income housing.
- Absence of a coherent Long Island vision or identity to address problems: multiplicity of governmental jurisdictions that fosters parochialism and fear of the “other” including over 900 incorporated villages, school districts, towns and other governmental entities.
- Lack of adequate public bus service.

2. Challenges facing clergy who want to be a prophetic voice:

- White middle-class people have deep fears rooted in economic insecurity cause clergy to avoid issues related to these fears such as racial segregation.
- Congregants are uncomfortable mixing religion and politics (except for certain congregations and denominations such as the Unitarians).
- Fears based on racism and classism are risky for clergy to address at a time of declining church attendance.
- Churches are often isolated from one another and from their communities, making it difficult to bring faith-based moral values into a public debate (such as Commack community opposition to Holy Cross Lutheran sheltering refugee children in 2014).
- Social media use by opponents tends to inflame fears and overtakes or overwhelms a church’s efforts to seek a just solution to local problem such as the Commack refugee children.
- Local government decisions to act quickly and quietly on divisive issues such as affordable housing can backfire and cause public outrage as occurred in North Hempstead with the accessory apartments law or in Huntington with Avalon Bay at Huntington Station.

3. What needs to do to be done for the faith community to be a prophetic voice:

- Clergy need to preach against “American exceptionalism,” – God loves all – even those perceived as the “other” and that God does not shed special favors on the U.S. compared with other nations.
- Faith communities should help congregants connect the experiences of the “others” using their own family experiences, such as the JwJ “We Are All Immigrants” project.
- Research by sociologist Alan Wolfe and others has shown that suburbanites admire traditional values exhibited by immigrants such as strong families, hard work and religious faith. These values of the so-called “others” should be emphasized in sermons and other messaging that addresses the fears congregants have about the “others.”
- Difficult issues such as affordable housing should be framed in terms of congregants’ self-interests: e.g. our young people are leaving LI because they can’t find affordable housing; who will be left to buy your house?
- Clergy need to keep their eye on the moral issues that relate to self-interest messaging and be willing to confront immoral behaviors and attitudes: e.g., how much is the opposition to affordable housing is actually rooted in racism?
- Clergy should preach on divisive issues such as immigration or housing by acknowledging the fears of their congregants while moving them toward higher levels of moral reasoning. The preaching notes provided by Rev. Tom Goodhue in the JwJ tool kit are an excellent guide for doing this.
- Biblical Scripture provides powerful language and stories that resonate with congregants and should be used to frame sermons about injustice and calls for action to create a more just Long Island.
- When a local government is approaching a divisive public-policy decision such as affordable housing, faith communities should educate and organize their own members to reach out to other community members and to speak out at public hearings.
- Churches should provide personal interactions with different class and cultural communities such as the “30 Hour Famine” that brought Garden City youth into Hempstead to hear actual stories of negative police interactions with people of color.
- Difficult, even explosive events such as the racial rioting in Ferguson Missouri or Baltimore Maryland should be addressed head on by clergy to illustrate the America’s move toward right-wing extremism.

St. John Nepomucene, Bohemia May 26, 2015

Present: Rev. Tom Philipp, Old South Haven Presbyterian (Brookhaven); Helen Tucker, Jack Reilly, St. Joseph the Worker RC (East Patchogue); Rev. Jack Moore, St. Mary RC (East Islip) and St. John of God RC (Central Islip); Gil Hanson, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship at Stony Brook; Sr. Lisa Bergeron, St. John Nepomucene RC (Bohemia); Jeannine Rose, St. Lawrence Martyr RC (Sayville); Rev. John Rowan, St. Frances de Chantal RC (Wantagh) and St. John of God RC (Central Islip); Agnes Gary, Rev. Bill Brisotti, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal RC (Wyandanch); Rev. Andrew Connolly, Our Lady of Assumption RC (Copiague) and Our Lady of Miraculous Medal RC (Wyandanch); Ron Schaeffer, St. Rosalie RC (Hampton Bays); Mary Donahue, SS. Phillip and James RC (St. James); Richard Koubek, Victoria Daza, LI Jobs with Justice

1. Topics identified as significant for the congregation:

- Rising Hispanic populations and national/cultural diversity within the Hispanic community
- Assimilation vs. acculturation of new immigrants
- Immigration reform
- Racism and classism
- Income inequality
- Living wage, minimum wage and jobs that pay family-sustaining wages
- Services for poor seniors
- Affordable housing
- Mental health services
- Health care access for poor and middle class
- Funding for social services

2. Challenges facing clergy who want to be a prophetic voice:

- Clergy are not prepared/trained to address social systems or the theology of justice.
- Too many clergy are stuck in works of charity and cannot or will not address unjust systems.
- Clergy see faith as personal and private and their role as primarily liturgical and pastoral, not political.
- Misperceptions about the First Amendment and the so-called “wall of separation” between church and state cause many lay people and clergy to believe that they have no role in politics and advocacy.
- Conservative Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI appointed bishops around the world who avoided direct political action that addresses injustice.
- American culture of individualism tends to blame the poor for their poverty. This belief is widespread among congregants and clergy are therefore reluctant to challenge it.

3. What needs to be done for the faith community to be a prophetic voice:

- Use personal stories in sermons, bulletin inserts and other educational tools to illustrate injustices.
- Take the Bible seriously: the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures have many powerful calls to serve the poor, the marginalized, the vulnerable while attacking unjust systems. Clergy and lay people should see Sacred Scripture as transformative.
- Social teaching (Protestant Social Gospel and Catholic social teaching) should be incorporated into the life of the congregation. (Note: while Pope John Paul II was viewed as doctrinally conservative, he made major contributions to Catholic social teachings which have not yet found their way into local parish life.)
- The communal values of religion (to serve our “brothers and sisters” and think beyond our immediate individual and personal needs) are countercultural but need to be emphasized by clergy. Congregants want to hear this message.
- Faith leaders should “touch the pain” of those experiencing injustice (e.g. do home visits at the Holidays to deliver food baskets and toys, while meeting poor people where they live and learning first hand of their struggles).

- Appeal to the self-interest of congregants: that economic justice benefits all members of society or that injustices can affect middle class as well as the poor (e.g., affordable housing is needed by the middle class to keep young people on LI).
- Lay people, outreach and food pantry coordinators and other non-clergy should be encouraged and given opportunities to preach.
- Lay people need to urge the clergy to become involved in works of justice rather than just works of charity.
- Congregations should stress informed voting and encourage their members to vote (e.g. voter registration drives.)