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ABOUT THE REPORT

S3K Reports are periodic publications of the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute on topics in Jewish congregational studies. S3K Reports synthesize key findings from recent research, offer new analyses of contemporary issues, and give useful insight into synagogue life.

We encourage clergy, educators, researchers, and communal leaders to use S3K Reports as they implement their own creative strategies for building vital and compelling congregations for the future of the Jewish people.

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Nancy T. Ammerman, Mark Chaves & Richard L. Wood

Synagogues and Social Justice: Creating Sustainable Change Within and Beyond the Congregation

Introduction

Shawn Landres, Director of Research, Synagogue 3000/S3K Synagogue Studies Institute
Benjamin Ross, Director of Organizing, Jewish Funds for Justice

How do synagogues make change? Change in ourselves, our families, our congregations, our communities, our world?

In May 2007, the S3K Synagogue Studies Institute and Jewish Funds for Justice convened a consultation on synagogue engagement with social justice. Participants included fifty clergy, lay leaders, activists, and funders from around the United States who are interested and involved in doing justice work within and beyond synagogues. Among the participants were three widely recognized scholars of congregations and social engagement: Professors Nancy Ammerman (Boston University), Mark Chaves (Duke University), and Richard L. Wood (University of New Mexico).

Despite the recent and rapid growth of synagogue-based social justice initiatives around the country, we still know little about them. With few notable exceptions—among them the work of the authors of this S3K Report—scholars have yet to study these initiatives' implications for Jewish congregations, social justice organizing, and American Judaism. Furthermore, key actors in the field measure success very differently.

The S3K-JFSJ gathering sought to begin to address these issues. We asked, "How are synagogues engaging in justice work? How can we determine if this engagement is transforming not only the world, but also the synagogues and congregants themselves? And what does that transformation look like?"

Synagogues are home to at least two different types of justice work, "issue-based" activism and congregation-based community organizing (CBCO). While they share many of the same social change goals, the approaches use different methods and vocabularies. The consultation focused on CBCO, which emphasizes the process of

THE S3K SYNAGOGUE STUDIES INSTITUTE

The S3K Synagogue Studies Institute works with scholars, clergy, and communal leaders to promote greater understanding of Jewish congregational life and to increase the value and stature of Synagogue Studies as a key field for academic research and seminary education. The Institute identifies key trends, convenes conversations around topics of common concern, promotes collaborative research, and disseminates important new knowledge to leaders in congregations as well as academic, communal, and philanthropic institutions.

The Institute is supported by two important groups. The Synagogue Studies Academy is a network of distinguished thought leaders, researchers, and academics who are doing pioneering work in the field. Members of the Academy work with the S3K team to develop the research agenda, participate in Institute-sponsored panels at major academic conferences, and lead Institute-sponsored research projects. The Synagogue Studies Advisory Board, comprised of key academic and communal leaders, provides advocacy to support the field of synagogue studies.

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relationship building as much as the substantive issues themselves. Through one-on-one conversations among congregants, community building, and leadership development, congregations engaged in CBCO identify the issues of key importance to them and then join city- or region-wide multi-organization coalitions to advance their policy aims. CBCO has a track record of documented success in other faith communities but is relatively new in Jewish communities. It is spreading rapidly: five years ago, only thirty synagogues were engaged in CBCO; today the number is close to one hundred.

In the pages that follow, Professors Ammerman, Chaves, and Wood offer reflective commentaries that contextualize the S3K-JFSJ consultation and the CBCO model. They place the two days of intensive conversation within the broader study of congregations, social justice, and congregational transformation. We hope that their insights and perspectives will engage and inform readers concerned with synagogue life and with social justice organizing.

After you read these reflections, we invite you to join others for an online conversation about them at JSpot.org, JFSJ's forum for Jewish perspectives on contemporary issues of social and economic justice. Just go to www.jspot.org and click on the sidebar graphic with the S3K logo to bring you to the discussion page.

We hope that the reflective conversation that we began at this consultation will generate additional research to explore these issues further. We all can benefit from a better understanding of how doing justice can strengthen our synagogues, and how our synagogues can contribute to creating a more just America. ♦

What is Congregation-based Community Organizing?

In general, community organizing describes a wide variety of efforts to empower residents in a local area to participate in civic life or governmental affairs. Most efforts that claim this label operate in low-income or middle-income areas, and have adopted at least some of the tactics and organizing techniques pioneered by Saul Alinsky (1909-1972). They focus on building political power in the hands of an organization of local residents, and using that power to influence issues the organization defines as important. Congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) is a form of community organizing whose primary institutional sponsors are local synagogues, churches, mosques, and other grass-roots religious groups. Common characteristics include:

- **Faith-based:** They ground their organizing in the values and traditions that come from religious faith (to varying degrees, and sometimes quite powerfully)
- **Broad-based:** They are typically interfaith, and many include in their membership schools, unions and a variety of other community-based institutions like neighborhood associations
- **Locally constituted:** They organize in areas that range from large neighborhoods to entire cities. Although often linked together into national and regional networks (see author's note, page 8), they emphasize local organizing
- **Multi-issue:** Their purpose is to train local leaders in how to effectively address pressing issues facing their communities, as determined by their leaders
- **Professionally staffed:** CBCO groups hire professionals who recruit and train local leaders which then work with the organizations on a voluntary basis

Adapted from: Wood, Richard L. and Mark R. Warren. 2002. "A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics: Social Capital and Community Organizing in the Public Arena," *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 22:11/12, 6-54 (Fall 2002). Also available at <http://www.unm.edu/~rlwood/>

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General Editor: J. Shawn Landres
Production Editor & Layout: Joshua Avedon
Contributing Editors for this issue:
Rabbi Jill Jacobs, Benjamin Ross,
Shuli Passow, Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman
Original Design: Rick Lupert

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Activism, the Golden Rule, and Congregational Transformation

Nancy T. Ammerman

The sum total of the passion in the room was amazing! Synagogue 3000 and the Jewish Funds for Justice had gathered an impressive array of rabbis, lay leaders, community organizers, funders, and leaders of key advocacy organizations. These were people who care deeply about the wellbeing of the world and have put their passion into action in a host of ways. My role was to listen as a guest in this conversation, to look for the common threads and the points of divergence, and to offer back some observations from my years of observing America's religious communities in action.

There were, in fact, some predictable points of divergence. Of course, people with different roles had different priorities, and people with different experiences advocated for different strategies. Rather than untangling those differences, however, I want to focus on some of the recurring issues around which I think there was some agreement.

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Effect and Significance in Synagogue-based Social Justice Work

Mark Chaves

There never has been a time when people in synagogues have not been concerned about social justice, and there never has been a time when people in synagogues—both as individuals and collectivities—have not been involved in social justice struggles. Still, self-conscious reflection on the nature and significance of synagogue-based social justice work waxes and wanes. The May meeting in New York represented a moment of such reflection, and I am honored to have been present and to offer these thoughts about how to move forward.

As a sociologist who studies religion, my charge is to focus on how we might enhance our knowledge and understanding of the nature, effectiveness, and significance of synagogue-based social justice work. Congregation-based community organizing (CBCO) is not the only, or even the most common, form of social justice work in synagogues, but since there was particular interest at this meeting in CBCO, I focus my comments on the narrower question of how we might increase our knowledge and

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Synagogues and Social Justice: Challenges in Building on a Legacy

Richard L. Wood

I was most impressed by the potential embodied in the consultation for a long-term, systematic effort to strengthen (and heighten the public profile of) synagogue-based social justice work: a truly remarkable array of talent, perspective, and experience of about 50 organizers, rabbis and cantors, activists and lay leaders, funders, and researchers from across American Jewish life. The ability to convene such a rich mixture of talent is extraordinary; if sustained over some years and focused on shared problems and opportunities, it holds great promise for deepening synagogues' witness and work for social justice.

That potential strikes me as particularly important today. The legacy of Jewish dedication to social justice in the wider American community remains a remarkable chapter in United States history. The contemporary perception (accurate or not) by the American public that the political concerns of major synagogues, at least, are almost exclusively focused on solidarity with Israel calls into question the future of that legacy. If synagogues are even perceived as less committed to the common good

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

NANCY T. AMMERMAN, PhD

Nancy Ammerman is Professor of Sociology of Religion at Boston University. She has spent more than a decade studying American religious organizations and the people who participate in them. Her most recent book, *Pillars of Faith: American Congregations and their Partners* (University of California Press, 2005), describes the common organizational patterns that shape the work of America's diverse communities of faith. *Congregation and Community* (Rutgers University Press, 1997) tells the stories of 23 congregations that encountered various forms of neighborhood change in communities around the country. She also co-edited and contributed to *Studying Congregations: A New Handbook* (Abingdon, 1998).



MARK CHAVES, PhD

Mark Chaves is Professor of Sociology, Religion, and Divinity at Duke University. Among other projects, he directs the National Congregations Study (NCS), a wide-ranging survey of a nationally representative sample of religious congregations. Results from the 1998 NCS have helped us to better understand many aspects of congregational life in the United States. Data collection for Wave II of the NCS recently has been completed. He is author of *Congregations in America* (Harvard, 2004), *Ordaining Women: Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations* (Harvard, 1997), and many articles, mainly on the social organization of religion in the United States. He is Past Chair of the American Sociological Association's Sociology of Religion Section and President-elect of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion.



RICHARD L. WOOD, PhD

Richard L. Wood is Associate Professor of Sociology and Director of Religious Studies at the University of New Mexico. He is the author of *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Action in America* (University of Chicago Press 2002), recipient of the 2003 award for the outstanding book in the sociology of religion from the American Sociological Association. His work focuses on the cultural and institutional bases of democratic life, especially those linked to religious traditions. He has written extensively on congregation-based community organizing in low-income neighborhoods, on how civic engagement can strengthen congregations, and on religion and democracy. His current writing focuses on how civic engagement can strengthen congregations, and on national faith-based democratic organizing efforts in the U.S. and in Central America.



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Chair: Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman
Boston University

Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson
American Jewish University

Dr. Randall Balmer
Barnard College, Columbia University

Dr. Diana Butler Bass
Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice

Dr. Jackson Carroll
Duke University

Dr. Steven M. Cohen
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Rabbi Elliot Dorff
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Rabbi Dan Ehrenkrantz
Reconstructionist Rabbinical College

Dr. Arnold Eisen
Stanford University and The Jewish Theological
Seminary of America

Rabbi David Ellenson
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Rabbi Daniel Freeland
Union for Reform Judaism

Rabbi Arthur Green
Hebrew College

Dr. Felicia Herman
Natan

Rabbi Hayim Herring
STAR: Synagogue Transformation and Renewal

Dr. Joel Hoffman
Temple Shaaray Tefila & HUC-JIR

Richard Joel
Yeshiva University

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First, I think we recognized that success has to be both short-term assistance and fundamental transformation. Justice means that situations are immediately addressed in all their acuteness (mercy) and altered in ways that make such assistance no longer necessary. We want to provide for people in need and work for changes that empower people to provide for themselves. What I think we acknowledged only tacitly, however, is that the former is considerably easier than the latter. In research on American Christians, I have found that the “activist” orientation is dominant in less than ten percent of churchgoers and less than five percent of congregations. Much more common is a “Golden Rule” orientation that seeks to enact faith through deeds of kindness and mercy. If one is appealing to people of faith to “serve others,” the appeal is very likely to be heard. If the appeal is to “change society,” only a minority will immediately respond.

What kinds of assistance from synagogues best help justice agencies do their work? And what kinds of partnership with justice agencies best help synagogues do their work?

In an activist gathering like this, that was probably not heard as good news. But I would suggest that perhaps the two orientations need each other. Short of a perfect world, some works of service are likely to be needed. But I would also suggest that success in motivating the “golden rule” folks to deeper engagement does not come by denigrating their impulses toward service. One of the challenges for leaders, it seems to me, is to develop synagogue practices that engage service-oriented people where they are, but provide them with opportunities for their own transformation – more on that in a moment.

One underlying question that simmered under the surface of our conversation had to do with the kinds of organizational partners best suited for helping synagogues do successful social justice work. Most any work a synagogue seeks to do is likely to require some sort of pooling of resources. Many congregations can manage some small-scale charitable work on their own, but even something as direct as food aid is likely to be organized through local nonprofits. Likewise, addressing fundamental issues through community organizing is, by definition, a collective endeavor. And attempts to address something as big as the tragedy in Darfur call for sophisticated educational, communication, lobbying, and fund-raising skills that can be created when many congregations work together. No one form of organizational partnership would seem to be best suited for every goal.

Here is where some evaluation research may be helpful. What kinds of assistance from synagogues best help justice agencies do their work? And what kinds of partnership with justice agencies best help synagogues do their work?

The second major thing I think we concluded was that success is both internal and external. That is, the things we seek involve external changes in policy and the delivery of services – real effects in the lives of people and communities beyond ourselves. We want to engage in practices that maximize the social transformation and healing that happen in the world. But we also recognize that working for justice will happen neither effectively nor for the long haul if it has no foundation in a sustaining community of learning and prayer. While there may be other ways to nurture engagement, thriving synagogues are certainly among the best.

That implies that the intersection between work for social justice and practices

of thriving congregational life is one that deserves sustained attention. There was considerable conversation in this gathering about the way each is essential for the other. Ineffective or anemic synagogues simply have little to offer in the pursuit of social justice. At best, a few activist members or an outspoken rabbi may be involved in organized efforts in the Jewish community and beyond. Too often those efforts are cut off from the rest of the synagogue, receiving no real support and never informing the rest of the life of the community. The pursuit of justice may net a few person-hours, but no more.

One aspect of that disconnection is the perception that Torah study and prayer and Jewish continuity are one thing, while community organizing or social service are something else. This perception is often exacerbated by the notion that when we do work in partnership with people who do not share our faith, we are obliged to find neutral – secular – ground. Happily, there are increasing opportunities for people of faith to work together across differences without neutralizing the source of our conviction. But just as essential, synagogues themselves need to provide opportunities where study and service are brought together, where prayer and longing for justice are one and the same, where Jewish identity is strengthened by collaborative work with others.

A study of “best practices” might be very helpful here. Synagogues that do seem to keep spiritual life and justice work together might be identified, looking for a variety of kinds of synagogues doing a variety of kinds of justice work. Through interviews and observations by a research team, S3K might produce something like “Synagogues That Get It” with a focus on this intentional link between study and action, prayer and service.

The intersection between thriving synagogue life and effective social justice action involves, we agreed, effects that run both ways. Learning and prayer sustain action in the world, but practices of engagement can also lead to revitalized synagogue life.

Whether or not CBCO is the form of justice organization a congregation chooses, inviting deep conversations about what matters is likely to strengthen both the synagogue itself and its passion for justice.

This claim was made most strongly by those who have engaged in Congregation-Based Community Organizing. Several of the practices they describe seem important for the process of revitalization and may or may not be unique to work for social justice. First and foremost, CBCO is a process that emphasizes deep conversation that allows real relationships to emerge. People are encouraged to

talk to each other about the things they care (and worry) most about. Such conversations can build community – something both essential to vital synagogues and not to be taken for granted. Out of such conversations come the stories that embody and illustrate a community’s identity and passion. Out of such relationships emerge spaces where conflict can be addressed. Whether or not CBCO is the form of justice organization a congregation chooses, inviting deep conversations about what matters is likely to strengthen both the synagogue itself and its passion for justice.

The CBCO form of organizing also privileges grassroots decision-making, and the power of “mobilized masses” can often break the hold of entrenched leaders, in synagogues no less than in the mayor’s office. Again, the lesson is that it is important to provide leadership opportunities to an ever-widening circle of participants. Such practices are good for synagogues, whatever the shape of their social justice agenda.

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Combined Jewish Philanthropies of Greater Boston

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Institute for Jewish & Community Research

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Experiment in Congregational Education, HUC-JIR

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Yeshivat Chovevei Torah

Dr. Alan Wolfe
Boston College

Dr. Ron Wolfson
American Jewish University

Dr. Jonathan Woocher
JESNA

Dr. Cynthia Woolever
Hartford Seminary

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CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Larry Akman
Lois and Richard England Family Foundation;
Synagogue 3000 Board of Directors

Dr. Nancy T. Ammerman
Boston University

Jeannie Appleman
Jewish Funds for Justice

Guy Austrian
Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York, NY

Joshua Avedon
Synagogue 3000

Rabbi Aryeh Azriel
Temple Israel, Omaha, NE

Roberta Blumberg
Congregation Beth Meyer, Raleigh, NC

Shifra Bronznick
Bronznick & Co., LLC

Rabbi Sharon Brous
IKAR, Los Angeles, CA

Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin
B-JEN, Baltimore, MD

Dr. Mark Chaves
Duke University

Dr. Steven M. Cohen
Synagogue 3000 / S3K Synagogue Studies Institute;
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion

Marjorie Fine
Center for Community Change;
Kolot Chayeinu, Brooklyn, NY

Lila Foldes
Just Congregations, Union for Reform Judaism

Miriam Foss
Chizuk Amuno Congregation, Baltimore, MD

Fran Godine
Temple Israel, Boston, MA

Arnold Graf
Industrial Areas Foundation

Simon Greer
Jewish Funds for Justice

Alec Harris
Chicago Sinai Congregation, Chicago, IL

Rabbi Larry Hoffman
Synagogue 3000; Hebrew Union College-
Jewish Institute of Religion

Rabbi Lauren Holtzblatt
Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York, NY

Rabbi David Ingber
Kehilat Romemu, New York, NY;
The Jewish Grassroots Initiative of the
Roaring Fork Valley, Aspen, CO

Rabbi Jill Jacobs
Jewish Funds for Justice

Janice Kamenir-Reznik
Jewish World Watch; Valley Beth Shalom, Encino, CA
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So the research question is to disentangle the effects. Is it the pursuit of justice that revitalizes synagogue life, or is it the practices of community building? Exactly which practices are critical? This will require a comparative study across congregations that have used various organizing strategies and networks. Exactly what changed and why?

The stories of change told among the group gathered in New York were remarkable, and I think we can take some final bits of wisdom from the changes they described. The most profound personal transformations came at moments of vulnerability, when crisis or transition had left a person open to something new. They also came when people were outside their normal “zone of comfort,” encountering new people and places. In the midst of those moments of openness, a new vision emerged, a new sense of purpose and power, a new commitment to justice. What, then, in the practices of synagogues that aspire toward justice, might invite ordinary “golden rule” members toward such transformation? How might congregations enhance the experiences such members already have as they serve the needy? How might prayer and study call them out into deeper engagement? ♦

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understanding of this particular model’s effectiveness.

A central issue, of course, is how to define “effectiveness.” Is synagogue-based social justice work effective only when it achieves a concrete political goal, such as enacting a piece of legislation or causing a public official to take a desired action? Or should it be considered effective if it energizes a congregation, even if the political goal is not attained? Other definitions of effectiveness also are possible: educating the synagogue’s members or the broader community about an important issue, raising money that can be used to further a specific cause, leading a congregation’s members to stronger connections with each other and with the synagogue, and so on.

Defining “effectiveness” is a normative issue, not an empirical issue. By this I mean that social science expertise cannot help us choose which of many possible goals ought to be valued and pursued. Choosing the goals to value and pursue is a decision for a community’s people and leaders. Once we identify a particular goal (or goals), social scientific research can then help us to learn more about which kinds of situations, structures, and practices will give a synagogue its best chance to reach that goal (or goals). The basic kind of question that social science can address is: However effectiveness is defined, why is the CBCO model effective here but not there, now but not then?

Because there are several possible goals that one might value, there are many interesting and important questions one might pursue in an effort to increase knowledge about CBCO effectiveness. I offer four sets of questions that seem to me to be worth pursuing given the current state of knowledge and understanding about CBCO work in synagogues.

First, whether effectiveness is defined in terms of political achievement or internal change in a synagogue, there is a set of questions involving leadership structure that could be pursued. Are paid staff who focus on social justice work essential for effec-

Are paid staff who focus on social justice work essential for effectiveness? What are the limits of volunteers? Does the rabbi’s level of involvement in social justice work matter?

tiveness? What are the most effective ways to use volunteers? What are the limits of volunteers? Does the rabbi's level of involvement in social justice work matter? Does it matter if the lead staff person in this work is himself or herself a rabbi?

How is a congregation's religious life affected by this work? Do rituals change? Do prayers or sermons change? Are members' religious lives, involvement with the synagogue, or sense of Jewish identity deepened?

both within and beyond the Jewish community, altered? Are members' religious lives, involvement with the synagogue, or sense of Jewish identity deepened?

A third set of questions concerns scale. Within a congregation, does it enhance CBCO effectiveness when many members participate in social justice work, or is the more typical pattern—social justice work is pursued actively only by a small group within the congregation—just as effective? Across congregations, can the success achieved by some of the congregations who have pioneered CBCO in synagogues be replicated among a much larger group of synagogues? If CBCO effectiveness is dependent on the efforts of unusually talented individuals who have fully internalized the CBCO philosophy, strategy, and techniques, then it may be difficult to replicate this model broadly. It is possible to teach people concrete skills and techniques, but it is difficult to teach people political savvy and judgment, and it is even more difficult to transmit the true believer's zeal to others. If CBCO effectiveness depends on leaders who are extraordinarily adept politically and also zealous in their pursuit of social justice work, then it may be difficult to replicate that effectiveness as widely as may be desired.

Fourth, and most broadly, it may be valuable to try to assess the extent to which CBCO presence in a coalition or movement makes that coalition or movement more likely to succeed. Political success, after all, almost always requires coalitions among various groups and individuals, and success sometimes occurs as a result of fortuitous events that activists do not control. Because of this causal complexity, even when a political goal is achieved through the efforts of a coalition that includes congregations, it may be difficult to discern how important the congregations were to that success. Are campaigns to pass living-wage laws, for example, more likely to be successful if congregations are active in the effort? Beyond whatever political clout is represented by the presence of mobilized Christian churches in a coalition, does the presence in a coalition of synagogues in particular increase the likelihood of success? Are there issues for which congregation-based activism in general or synagogue-based activism in particular might be particularly efficacious? Especially for people whose primary concern is advancing social justice, and who may see CBCO as a worthwhile investment only if congregational activism strengthens a cause more than investment in other kinds of political activism, assessing the extent to which congregation-based activism strengthens a larger coalition or movement might be an important agenda.

These are not the only kinds of questions that might profitably be pursued on this subject, but they seem to me to be among those on which progress could be made. ♦

CONSULTATION PARTICIPANTS

Rabbi Yosef Kanefsky
B'nai David-Judea, Los Angeles, CA

Erika Katske
San Francisco Organizing Project

Nancy Kaufman
Jewish Community Relations Council
of Greater Boston

Karen Kronick
Congregation Beth Am, Los Altos Hills, CA

Meir Lakein
Greater Boston Synagogue Organizing Project

Shawn Landres
Synagogue 3000 / S3K Synagogue Studies Institute

Michael Laufer
UJA-Federation of New York

Rabbi Mordechai Liebling
Jewish Funds for Justice

Shuli Passow
Jewish Funds for Justice

Rabbi Jonah Pesner
Just Congregations, Union for Reform Judaism

Hazzan Ari Priven
Congregation B'nai Jeshurun, New York, NY

Rabbi Mark Raphael
Kehilat Shalom, Gaithersburg, MD

Regina Rogoff
Congregation Kol Halev, Austin, TX

Rabbi Jennie Rosenn
Nathan Cummings Foundation

Benjamin Ross
Jewish Funds for Justice

Tzivia Schwartz-Getzug
Jewish World Watch

Rabbi Sid Schwarz
Panim

Riva Silverman
American Jewish World Service

Daniel Sokatch
Progressive Jewish Alliance

Rabbi Aaron Spiegel
Indianapolis Center for Congregations;
Synagogue 3000 Board of Directors

Rabbi Elliott Tepperman
B'nai Keshet, Montclair, NJ

Dr. Ron Wolfson
Synagogue 3000; American Jewish University

Dr. Richard L. Wood
University of New Mexico

Rabbi Shawn Zevit
Jewish Reconstructionist Federation

Rabbi Jessica Zimmerman
Synagogue 3000

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and a broad social justice agenda, this may well undermine their deep institutional credibility in the public arena; if that commitment were indeed eroded, it would be a major loss for justice in American and global society. Thus, the theme of the recent

If synagogues are even perceived as less committed to the common good and a broad social justice agenda, this may well undermine their deep institutional credibility in the public arena... .

Consultation strikes me as timely and important, both within the Jewish community and in American society as a whole.

I therefore would like to reflect here on the research agenda that might flow from the meeting, and on some tensions that were at work at the Consultation and will need to be addressed for the work to go forward. The tensions within the recent Consultation are also sometimes present wherever different models of social engagement rub up against one another. Of course, multiple areas of concern and approaches to social justice work are covered by the term “issue-focused organizing.” There was a divide between those clearly dedicated to congregation-based community organizing and those dedicated to various forms of issue-focused organizing. In the view of the latter, the former implicitly claimed a privileged place for CBCO work. Further tension arose from the tendency of some CBCO-focused speakers to insist on claiming a privileged position for their own particular CBCO network. Both tensions can be sectarian and corrosive of effective work for social justice in America and the world. But in going forward after the Consultation, I would suggest handling both kinds of sectarian tensions forthrightly but very differently.

Like most sectarian tensions, the view that privileges CBCO work is based upon a truth claim: Many CBCO advocates say that their experience has taught them that the CBCO model is more sustainable over the long term and has proven more capable of making a systematic contribution to building strong synagogues (in comparison to competing

...When done well, congregation-based organizing can be sustained for many years and can significantly strengthen congregations (probably more so than competing models in their existing forms).

models in their existing forms). However, that success comes at a significant price: congregation-based organizing has consistently addressed quality-of-life issues for poor- and low-income American families, but is unlikely ever to address a broad range of other issues and concerns (gay rights, the war in Iraq, etc.) – some of which are crucial for an ethical response to our world today. In this light, congregation-based

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Issue-focused Organizing vs. Congregation-based Community Organizing

For the sake of shorthand, I use the term "issue-focused organizing" to distinguish social justice efforts focused on particular issues (racism, gay rights, Sudan, etc.) from efforts based in "congregation-based community organizing" (CBCO), with its focus on addressing various issues for the sake of building broad societal reform organizations. Several national networks engage in CBCO work: the Industrial Areas Foundation, the PICO National Network, the Gamaliel Foundation, and Direct Action Research Training Center (DART). Smaller regional networks exist, as well, including the InterValley Project (New England) and RCNO (primarily Los Angeles).

- RLW

and issue-focused organizing are complementary approaches, and both have a role to play in synagogue-based social justice work (though particular organizations might still do well to prioritize one or the other for their work).

Underlying the implicit effort to privilege one CBCO network over the others is a different sectarian claim: that one network systematically does better work than the others. This claim is nearly always based on narrow exposure to one network or to one region of the country (wrongly generalized to everywhere). As I see it, the truth is that strong local organizations look quite similar across the networks; weak local organizations often reflect the idiosyncrasies of their sponsoring network. Claiming specific areas of excellence, when true, can challenge other organizations to better work: Thus, if one organization is especially good at building links to faith traditions, recruiting organizers, linking very local and higher-level organizing, fostering religious or racial diversity, training organizers, developing the advanced public abilities of clergy and lay leaders, or other tasks, claiming that expertise can advance the field. But broad claims to across-the-board superiority simply serve to advance turf battles, weaken the work of congregation-based community organizing, and ultimately undermine the struggle for justice and the repair of the world.

So I suggest, on one hand, a great deal of frankness regarding the complementarities of congregation-based and issue-focused organizing models (including what each of them does really well); openness from advocates of each to recognizing the strengths and lessons of the other; and transparency about why any particular institution chooses to prioritize one model. I think there are good reasons for prioritization, but transparency can help ease resulting tensions enormously. On the other hand, when an institution chooses to pursue congregation-based community organizing, I would suggest a firm stance of openness to the different networks (at least initially, with decisions made depending upon their strengths in particular regions and organizer availability; and with initial affiliations revisable in light of subsequent experience of the quality of their work).

Regarding the potential areas for research that emerged from the Consultation, it seems to me that participants' interests fell toward the more applied areas. That strikes me as quite normal and positive, given this group's direct interest in fostering thriving synagogues. But I would encourage you to avoid reinventing the wheel: we already know a significant amount about the "best practices" of congregation-based organizing, and much of this is directly applicable to synagogues (for brief reports on best practices, see the publications at <http://www.interfaithfunders.org/publications.html>). We need to know more about how those lessons can best be fully inculturated in the language, worship, and practices of synagogues, and how doing so affects the interior life and external profile of synagogues. So, while preserving an applied research emphasis, I would encourage a focus on several areas of social justice work (applicable to both congregation-based and issue-focused organizing:

How is social justice work best carried within the culture of synagogues of various kinds? What about such inculturation makes the social justice work truly thrive?

- How is social justice work best carried within the culture of synagogues of various kinds (immigrant vs. long-standing, moderate-income vs. high income, etc.)? What about such inculturation makes the social justice work truly thrive? How is it different in Orthodox vs. Reform vs. Conservative vs. Reconstructionist vs. Renewal synagogues? Given what we already know about the lay-organizer-clergy

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Join the Conversation

We invite you to participate in the online discussion about this report at the Jewish Funds for Justice blog. Go to:

jspot.org

and look for the graphic with the S3K logo linking to the discussion on synagogues and social justice.

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relationship generally, what is particularly true or different for the lay-organizer-rabbi relationship in particular Jewish traditions?

- Where synagogue-based social justice work has thrived, how has it been systematically promoted as a core element of synagogue life? What are the obstacles to this? In one synagogue lay leader's perfectly posed question: "Whose interests are served by keeping social justice work marginalized in the synagogue?"
- Given the extraordinary historical legacy of American Jewish commitment to a broad social justice agenda, and the more recent perception that most synagogues are more narrowly focused on questions pertaining to Israel and Zionism: How are synagogues perceived in American public life today? Where it has thrived, how has synagogue-based social justice work (of either the congregation-based or issue-focused variety) changed that perception?
- Does social justice work (of either variety) hold significant promise as a strategy for reengaging young people in synagogue life? Do young Jews follow the typical American youth trajectory, dropping institutional religious affiliation after high school, then re-connecting with synagogues upon child-rearing? Or do they disproportionately remain disengaged? Does social justice work engagement by synagogues tend to decrease the young departures, increase the subsequent returnees, or increase the intensity of engagement?

These are obviously reflections and suggestions from an outsider; more valuable will be the insights of those engaged in synagogue life. In whatever direction the sponsors and participants choose to lead the outflow from this consultation, the most crucial outcome will come if you have laid a foundation for the long-term, systematic accumulation of shared, evidence-based analysis and interpretation of synagogues' experience of social justice work. That will be a profound service to the Jewish community, and to American society. ♦

Download the Spring 2007 S3K Report:

"Synagogues That Get It: How Jewish Congregations are Engaging Young Adults"

by Tobin Belzer and Donald E. Miller



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Organizing versus Service Provision

...Congregation-based community organizations are primarily involved in what might be called political or social action, rather than in providing social services or running economic development initiatives. They aim to bring people together into an organization that can exert power. Typically they do not, except as a sideline or through a spin-off, build housing, operate food pantries, or open credit unions or recreation centers. Instead they typically pressure governments and corporations to bring more resources into communities that need them. This focus reflects and expresses one of the basic concepts of community organizing, "power"—a concept that is understood in this movement to have religious as well as political dimensions.

People involved in community organizing also contrast their work with "advocacy." In advocacy, groups put forward public policy positions in a disinterested voice, presenting themselves as speaking on behalf of others or for the general good. For instance, church groups with largely middle-class constituencies sometimes fight cuts in welfare that will hurt the poor. By contrast, organizing is intended to create vehicles for people to speak for themselves, advocating their own needs, agendas, and concerns through organizations they control.

Hart, Stephen, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement Among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 30.

Questions for Discussion

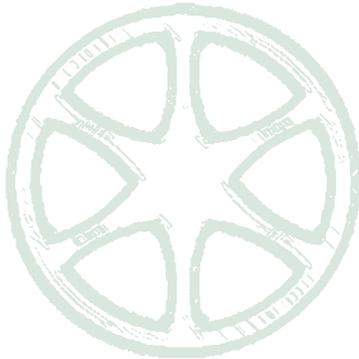
- 1. What are the stories of your congregation's service, advocacy, and/or organizing work?**
 - a. What changes has this work made in your synagogue or in the world?
 - b. In what ways has this work been successful? Describe a story of success.
 - c. How has this work not been successful? Describe an experience you would not describe as successful?
 - d. Who tends to be involved in this work?
 - e. What effect has this work had on the congregation as a whole? Is this work felt in other areas of congregational life?
 - f. What changes would you want to see in the ways in which your congregation pursues such work?
- 2. What is a Jewish congregation's obligation to social justice? Why?**
 - a. What are the goals of social justice? What is the difference between activism and service?
 - b. What does it mean to be a Jewish sacred community with an obligation to the world around you? What does it mean to be a community of people who work together to fulfill that obligation?
 - c. How does the meaning of "social justice" change in a Jewish context, an interreligious context, or a non-religious/secular context?
 - d. In the Avinu Malkeinu prayer recited during the High Holy Days, we ask God to treat us with "tzedakah v'chesed," justice and compassion. How do you see these concepts reflected in synagogue social service/social justice work? How do you think social service (chesed) and social justice (tzedek) should be balanced in your synagogue's approach to this work?
- 3. Nancy Ammerman observes, "Learning and prayer sustain action in the world, but practices of engagement can also lead to revitalized synagogue life." How else can "thriving synagogue life and effective social justice action" complement each other?**
 - a. Where have you seen these practices complement each other well?
 - b. Where have you seen these practices not work well together?
 - c. How do you think that these practices might best work together?
 - d. How might you create partnerships between congregants with an "activist" orientation, who seek fundamental change, and those with a "Golden Rule" orientation, who seek to "enact faith through deeds of kindness and mercy"?
- 4. Mark Chaves asks what makes synagogue-based social justice work effective. How do you define success?**
 - a. Is effectiveness determined by the achievement of a concrete political goal? By energizing the congregation? By creating community within the congregation? By advancing an educational goal?
 - b. How would you define effectiveness within the context of your own congregation?
 - c. How would you define success in your congregation?
- 5. Richard Wood asks, "Where synagogue-based social justice work has thrived, how has it been systematically promoted as a core element of synagogue life?"**
 - a. How does social justice work in a congregation change that congregation?
 - b. Have you experienced thriving synagogue-based social justice work? Did this work become a core part of the synagogue life? How?
 - c. Have you experienced social justice work marginalized within a synagogue context? To what would you attribute this marginalization?
- 6. Can you imagine your own synagogue taking on CBCO work?**
 - a. Why or why not?
 - b. What questions would you need answered in order to pursue this type of work?
 - c. What effect would you hope this work to have on your synagogue or your community?

Further Reading

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S3K is a catalyst for excellence, empowering congregations to create sacred communities that are dynamic and vital centers of Jewish life.

S3K believes that building sacred community is the best way to enrich and sustain the Jewish people. Our work is focused on providing the leadership, knowledge and expertise to help Jewish congregations succeed in their missions to be spiritual centers that inspire, uplift and transform each individual who passes through their doors.

S3K has two main vehicles to accomplish its mission: a Leadership Network consisting of visionary clergy, artists, lay leaders and educators and a Synagogue Studies Institute consisting of the leading thinkers in congregational studies, from the Jewish world and beyond.

The S3K process - innovation, conversation, collaboration, and transformation - is a simple but effective framework for furthering the work of our brain trust to catalyze change in Jewish spiritual communities. We connect practitioners and scholars in order to close the feedback loop between research and progress. And, most importantly, we seek long-term systemic change – to transform the face of Jewish congregational life in the 21st century.

SYNAGOGUE 3000

Los Angeles

New York

10350 Santa Monica Blvd. Ste. 205

One West 4th Street

Los Angeles, CA 90025

New York, NY 10012

tel 310.553.7930 • fax 310.553.5995

tel 212.824.2277 • fax 212.253.0230

WWW.SYNAGOGUE3000.ORG • INFO411@SYNAGOGUE3000.ORG

S3K SYNAGOGUE STUDIES INSTITUTE

Synagogue 3000
10350 Santa Monica Blvd., Suite 205
Los Angeles, CA 90025-5074