



***“See That Justice Is Done”*** (Amos 5:15) ***...In an Affluent Suburb***

## **How to Engage Long Island Congregations in Economic Justice Advocacy**





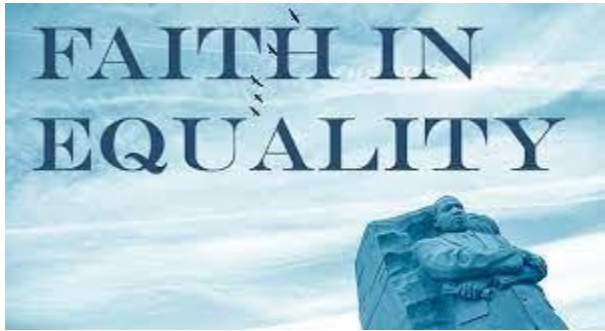
*How to Preach  
A Justice Sermon  
What Works and Doesn't Work  
for Clergy and Congregations  
on Long Island*

- In 2015 LI Jobs with Justice hosted a series of two-hour focus groups in which 72 faith leaders discussed the challenges they face advocating for economic justice in an affluent suburb.
- These focus groups yielded a JwJ resource, “*How to Preach a Justice Sermon: What Works and Doesn't Work for Clergy and Congregations on Long Island*”



## **What We Heard at the focus Groups - A Countercultural Vision of Justice:**

- **There are multiple barriers to engaging Long Islanders in the politics of economic justice and social equity.**
- **This is a slow, incremental process.**
- **The religious and secular progressive 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.**



**The countercultural 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.]**

## What We Heard: Fear and Denial

Each 2015 faith leaders' focus group touched on the pervasive denial of social inequity and economic injustice on Long Island. 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 have been resolved such as worker exploitation, slavery and Jim Crow segregation;
- American capitalism has allowed for a seemingly endless expansion of wealth, lifting millions of people willing to work out of poverty.
- Long Islanders are even fearful that acknowledging deep-rooted problems in their communities might undermine their property values and their very economic security.





## **What We Heard: Race and Class are the Great Long Island Divides**

**Faith leaders expressed frustration at the unwillingness of Long Islanders to address racism and classism.**

- **The tendency in America’s culture of self-reliance and individualism is to blame poor people for their own poverty or people of color for their own segregation.**
- **Middle- and working-class congregants tend to hide their own economic insecurities such as unemployment, wage freezes or wage cuts, reductions in hours or benefits or the threat of foreclosure or eviction.**
- **Some congregants direct anger about their own economic problems at what they believe are “lazy” poor people or racial minorities whom they blame for raising taxes with “expensive government entitlements” like Food Stamps**



## **What We Heard: 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.**

- The widespread belief in congregations is 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.**
- Crime or low-performing schools or even government corruption and other suburban problems are viewed as aberrations, often blamed on newcomers such as immigrants or people of color who have migrated from the inner city to the suburbs.**



## What We Heard: Suburban Isolation and Division

- Long Island's multiplicity of government jurisdictions prevent coordinated efforts to address the injustices which crisscross Nassau and Suffolk Counties' with more than 900 governmental entities, including:
  - 124 school districts,
  - hundreds of fire and library districts,
  - over 90 incorporated villages,
  - two cities,
  - 13 townships.
- Long Island's many government units cause people to:
  - wall themselves off from other communities;
  - think parochially and possessively about their immediate surroundings and only the needs of their own communities;
  - isolate themselves from seeking regional solutions to systemic problems such as racial segregation.





## What We Heard: The Suburban Religious Belief that Faith is A Private and Personal Journey



- The American tradition of separating church and state causes many congregants to mistakenly believe that they cannot legally become involved in government advocacy from a faith perspective.
- Within this tradition, faith and religion focus almost exclusively on one's personal search for peace and salvation.
- Clergy are thus overwhelmed by the personal concerns of their congregants including:
  - individual and family problems such as divorce,
  - difficulties raising children,
  - emotional and physical illnesses, family deaths and many more.
- Works of charity for the poor are an important part of this very private journey...
- But justice 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.

## What We Heard: HOPES For Engaging Congregations in Justice:



- ✓ 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).
  - ✓ There are 2,000 references to the poor in the Judeo-Christian Bible – more than any other topic related to worldly problems.
- ✓ Congregations' charitable activities such as food pantries can help members ask justice questions about the economic systems or structures causing people to need charitable help such as food assistance.
- ✓ People of faith on Long Island recognize that the American economy fosters in their families such dysfunctions as narcissism, selfishness and excessive individualism

# ***What We Heard: Tips on How to Discuss Justice in a Congregation***

- **Respect that some congregants are more willing to hear justice preached or discussed from a humanitarian or spiritual perspective than from a political or governmental perspective.**
- **Focus on successful faith-based community actions for justice such as the 2019 win securing NY State drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants.**
- **Discuss justice with a message of mercy and forgiveness, inclusion and affirmation.**
- **Frame justice issues in terms of broad principles of fairness and human decency which resonate with Americans such as siding with the weak against powerful oppressors.**
- **Incorporate personal stories of people struggling with poverty into your activities.**
- **Acknowledge middle-class problems and insecurities - some caused by pressures built into the US economic system - and gently connect their problems to those suffering even more than they do.**
- **Frame issues in terms of “enlightened self-interest” in which individual interests coincide with community interests such as advocating for an increase in the minimum wage that pumps money into the local economy.**



## Tips on How to Form a a Congregational Justice Committee

- Work with your clergy leaders and other staff to identify members of the congregation who might be willing to serve on a justice committee. Make personal-invitation calls to them.
- Use the “Still Struggling in Suburbia” PowerPoint or the Poor People’s Campaign discussion guide (see page 11 in in the “Preach Good News to the Poor” toolkit) to host a discussion on the structural injustices that cause poverty. Since many congregations have food pantries, the theme should be “Why are people hungry on Long Island?” This discussion could be used to recruit volunteers for the justice committee in these ways:
  - Schedule the discussion after a liturgy that incorporates “Preach Good News to the Poor to the Poor” toolkit prayers and scriptural citations (pages 4-10) about poor people and poverty into the service.
  - If your congregation has a food pantry or other charitable program that serves the poor, the discussion can engage the program’s staff along with other congregation members in analyzing the structural injustices that cause people to need your charitable help.
  - Hold a pot-luck supper around the poverty resources in the “Preach Good News to the Poor to the Poor” toolkit.

