

## **Congregational Organizing: A Model for the Jewish Community**

Jewish Community Action (St. Paul, MN) brings together Jewish people from diverse traditions and perspectives to promote understanding and take action on social and economic justice issues in Minnesota. In pursuing this mission, JCA has developed an organizing model that is unique within the Jewish community, brings a new approach to the broader faith-based organizing community, and is key to the difficult work of building broad-based alliances.

Most of Minnesota's 42,000 Jews live in the cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul and surrounding suburbs. Until the latter half of the twentieth century, Twin Cities Jews, like those in other metropolitan areas around the country, lived largely in the core cities; many now live in the suburbs, especially those west of Minneapolis. Of the 20 or so synagogues in Minnesota, all but three are in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. Minneapolis itself is home to three; St. Paul hosts five; the suburbs west of Minneapolis have eight; and the suburbs of St. Paul, one.

The Twin Cities Jewish community is also well organized outside of synagogue life. Two Jewish community centers serve east metro and west metro residents, and the St. Paul United Jewish Fund and Council and the Minneapolis Jewish Federation provide funding to member agencies and social services to individuals. While JCA is not a member agency, it has received grants from both the UJFC and Federation. The Jewish Community Relations Council chiefly works on matters of anti-Semitism and relations with Israel.

**JCA's congregational organizing.** JCA uses key congregational organizing strategies: the "one-to-one" visit, during which an organizer begins to build a relationship with a key constituent, volunteer, or community leader; "self-interest," in which the organizer discovers this individual's core values; and leadership and congregational development, through both formal and informal opportunities for education and action. All of these strategies, developed and used by the national networks of the Industrial Areas Foundation<sup>1</sup>, The Gamaliel Network<sup>2</sup>, the Pacific Institute for Community Organization<sup>3</sup>, and the Direct Action and Research Training Center<sup>4</sup>, form the base of JCA's organizing, but JCA builds on them in ways specific to the needs of the American Jewish community. What results is a ground-breaking approach to organizing that would be nationally replicable by other Jewish social justice groups nationwide, and that offers important lessons for congregational organizing efforts across the country.

**Organizing Jewish diversity.** JCA's organizing work encompasses the scope and diversity of the Jewish community. In the past four years, JCA has demonstrated that Jews from the four main branches of Judaism (Orthodox, Conservative, Reform, Reconstructionist), as well as Jews who are "unaffiliated<sup>5</sup>," can unite around social justice issues. These diverse segments of the Jewish community approach Judaism and Jewish life with often radically different attitudes and rarely

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<sup>1</sup> The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) was founded in the 1940s and remains the foremost national model and training institute for congregation-based organizing for social change.

<sup>2</sup> The Gamaliel Network and Foundation, founded in the 1960s, has its roots in a faith-based effort among African-Americans, who organized against discriminatory lending practices in Chicago. Today, Gamaliel has 45 affiliates in the U.S. and South Africa, including the Twin Cities' ISIAAH.

<sup>3</sup> The Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO) is based in Oakland, CA, and trains community leaders throughout California and the country to organize for neighborhood justice.

<sup>4</sup> Direct Action and Research Training Center (DART), based in Florida, builds congregation-based organizing through training and consulting in metropolitan areas in the eastern third of the U.S.

<sup>5</sup> By "unaffiliated," JCA means Jews who are not members of synagogues. Note that many of these individuals are affiliated with other Jewish institutions.

overlapping lifestyles. By speaking specifically to Jews about the Jewish religious obligation of action in the face of injustice; our history as an oppressed people; our history in working in social change movements such as the labor, Civil Rights, feminist, and lesbian/gay liberation movements; and our textual tradition of valuing social justice; Jewish Community Action has been able to bring together people who ordinarily do not pray together, do not share Sabbath meals, and may even define their Jewish identity in opposition to one another.

JCA is distinct from traditional congregation-based organizations because it involves Jews who are not affiliated with any synagogue. Since its inception, JCA has placed a high premium on working with unaffiliated Jews, some of whom are involved in other Jewish organizations, as well as with those involved in synagogues. JCA's Board of Directors, as well as its key working groups and campaigns, include leaders who are not members of synagogues, and who yet define their commitment to social justice as an essential component of their Jewish identity. JCA welcomes all Jews as individuals, and does not require them to be affiliated with a synagogue in order to be active. JCA has been able to identify and attract unaffiliated Jews through its network of personal contact with individuals involved in social justice work in the Twin Cities and through broadly advertising events and opportunities for involvement. Currently, three of JCA's 13 board members are not affiliated with a synagogue; yet, their commitment to social justice *as Jews* is profound.

JCA's membership also encompasses the rich diversity of the Jewish community in other ways: Our members and leaders range from high-school age to elderly; they were born around the country and around the world; their first languages are Hebrew, Russian, German, Spanish, and English; they are straight, gay, and lesbian; some are challenged by mental illness, disability, and the after-effects of injury or illness; some are high school graduates, while others have post-college degrees; they are blue-collar, white collar, union members, entrepreneurs, educators, Fortune 500 employees, health care workers, and artists; some are people of color. And JCA recognizes that such diversity is crucial to our strength.

JCA's ability to encompass the diversity of the Jewish community provides a useful model for other Jewish social justice groups. For affiliated and unaffiliated Jews alike, JCA provides a place to belong, to participate in social and economic justice work. It has been JCA's commitment to social justice, together with the use of community organizing principles and a focus on action that has brought affiliated and unaffiliated Jews together.

**From direct service to social justice.** JCA has been instrumental in bridging a key gap in the Jewish community. Throughout much of the history of the American Jewish community, synagogue-going Jews have primarily been involved in service projects—food shelves, homeless shelters—devoted to meeting the immediate needs of their own community. More recently, Jews have been involved in such service projects to meet the needs of other, non-Jewish communities affected by poverty or catastrophe. Historically, many Jews not affiliated with synagogues, but with a strong sense of Jewish cultural and historical identity, have taken action for social change.<sup>6</sup> By bringing together unaffiliated Jews who are committed to social justice work with synagogue members, committed to direct service, JCA bridges the gap between the unaffiliated and the affiliated, while transforming *tzedakah*<sup>7</sup> into *tikkun olam*<sup>8</sup>—direct service into social justice.

**Building a base in synagogues.** Even while recognizing the significance of organizing unaffiliated Jews, JCA knows that synagogues are still the most important locations for identifying leaders and

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Jewish individuals key to Civil Rights Movement organizing were typically *unaffiliated* Jews.

<sup>7</sup> *Tzedakah* means “righteousness,” usually referring to deeds of charity and philanthropy.

<sup>8</sup> *Tikkun olam* is usually translated as “the repair of the world.”

building power in the Jewish community. Not only can synagogues organize in coalition with churches and other community allies, but in the process they can transform their own understanding of *tzedakah* from a primary focus on direct service to an increasing emphasis on social justice organizing campaigns.

By organizing in synagogues, JCA works toward three goals:

1. Building JCA's base of support through increasing membership and identifying and developing leaders;
2. Creating change in the Jewish community by fundamentally shifting the whole notion of how synagogues do justice work; and
3. Organizing an institutional base from which to collaborate with other communities and organizations to build power and take action on social and economic justice issues.

To build its congregational base of power, JCA employs techniques common to faith-based organizations. More than four years ago, JCA began to implement "inreach" within nine congregations in the Twin Cities. Nearly 100 Jews were trained in the art of one-to-one conversations to build relationships with other congregants, while learning the self-interest—the core, driving values—of fellow congregants. JCA convened Tzedakah Institutes, training forums for JCA members and others, to learn about social justice, community organizing techniques, leadership development, and JCA's key issues.

What resulted from more than 400 one-to-one conversations with affiliated and unaffiliated Jews was an understanding of the self-interest of Jews committed to social and economic justice. Three issue areas emerged as priorities for JCA and members of the Jewish community interested in working with JCA: racial justice, community reinvestment, and affordable housing. JCA organized three working groups to develop Jewish leaders and involve them in alliances with other faith-based and community-based organizations in the Twin Cities.

Congregational and leadership development is an ongoing effort for JCA. In order to move Jews in synagogues from service work to organizing campaigns, JCA convened an advanced Tzedakah Institute during spring 2002. Leaders from 11 Twin Cities synagogues participated in a training session to learn more about power, self-interest, and organizing, while strategizing on how to move synagogues from direct service to social change. JCA organizing staff continues to work with leaders of these eleven congregations to evaluate the current capacity of social action committees and leadership in these congregations, and to develop strategic plans for strengthening that work. All staff members have attended IAF national training to develop stronger skills and strategies for building leadership in synagogues. JCA intends to provide more intensive training for synagogue leaders in the months to come to increase each congregation's capacity to work on social justice issues.

As the skills of synagogue leadership develop, JCA anticipates a powerful impact on the life of congregations:

- Strong social action committees in synagogues will serve as a significant lure to congregants to increase their involvement in synagogue life.
- As congregations have moved from the core cities to the surrounding suburbs, JCA's congregational development will enable congregants to strengthen ties with one another and with the synagogue itself as a center of community. Working together as a congregation on social justice builds the collective culture often lacking in larger, suburban congregations.

- Integrating the work of synagogue social action committees into JCA's work will give congregants leadership opportunities in the broader community.

**A Jewish voice in interfaith alliances.** Several Christian-faith-based groups now organize in the Twin Cities. ISAIAH's 80 member churches work on a variety of social justice campaigns. The Metropolitan Interfaith Council for Affordable Housing (MICAHA) organizes churches on behalf of affordable housing. The Twin Cities Religion and Labor Network joins religious leadership and labor leadership to advocate for workers' rights. While each group engages in outreach to non-Christians, all are Christian based; by "interfaith," each group largely means joining various Protestant denominations and Catholics into coalition with one another. All three of these faith-based networks rely on JCA to ensure the Jewish presence. At the same time, JCA is transforming these organizations so that they are more inclusive of a Jewish presence—from discouraging them from holding meetings on Saturdays, to encouraging them to serve meals that Jews can eat, to altering some of their Christian-based language.

Because Minnesota's interfaith coalitions must include the Jewish community in order to be truly interfaith, JCA has taken a lead role in organizing coalitions related to immigrants' rights, affordable housing, community reinvestment, and gun violence prevention. These coalitions bring together Jews, Christians, Muslims, and nonprofit and civic groups. For instance, JCA, ISAIAH, and parishioners from Latino Catholic churches worked jointly to increase access to drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants. Jewish participation in such coalitions affirms the Jewish historical commitment to justice, while combating the misconception of Jewish insularity.

**The challenges ahead.** During 2003, JCA will continue its work to transform the Jewish community's commitment to social justice and to build strategic alliances within the broader community. In the next year, JCA plans to:

- Strengthen synagogue leadership. JCA organizing staff will continue to identify and train synagogue leaders capable of taking action on social justice initiatives. Ongoing training and capacity building to create leadership teams in each congregation will require many hours of JCA staff working with synagogue leaders to build relationships, provide training, and integrate the congregations into the broader community justice work of JCA. Training will include research techniques, power analysis, one-to-ones, and organizing tactics—all to develop sophisticated community leaders.
- Convene a leadership core of rabbis to serve as advisors. This rabbinic group will assist JCA with congregational development, strategic planning, and connecting JCA to synagogue leaders. Ultimately, rabbinic involvement with JCA will benefit congregations, because congregants will strengthen ties with each other and with the synagogue community and will develop valuable leadership skills. Rabbis also give credibility to JCA's work and a sense of the connection to historic Jewish values.
- Strengthening geographic clusters. JCA is working to bring together leaders of several synagogues to be part of community alliances based on proximity and common interests. For example, JCA has organized an alliance of churches and synagogues in a St. Paul neighborhood to work on housing development. This alliance, Gateway Interfaith Table for Affordable Housing (GIFT) is a model for bringing synagogues together with the broader interfaith community on social justice issues.

- Union of American Hebrew Congregations Biennial<sup>9</sup> (November 2003). Local members of the Reform community have asked JCA to play an important role in the next UAHC Biennial, which will be in Minnesota. JCA will take advantage of this rare opportunity to lead workshops and training on congregational organizing, leadership development, and social justice work.
- Increase involvement of synagogues in JCA campaign work. Once JCA has developed core leadership teams in each congregation and stronger ties between synagogues and JCA, we will begin to pursue congregational partnerships with JCA, which are fundamental to faith-based organizing. While it is yet unclear how these congregational partnerships will shape JCA, we do know that this, along with synagogue leadership teams, will increase JCA's capacity and influence, and will serve as a source of financial support.
- Strategize with ISAIAH and MICAH, both of whom already obtain congregation memberships, on how JCA's introduction of congregational partnerships will affect all organizations.

JCA believes that its growing success with congregational organizing will provide useful lessons and models for other Jewish social justice groups. This is especially timely given the study by Interfaith Funders on faith-based organizing,<sup>10</sup> which will provide information about the relationship between faith-based organizing and congregational development, an important focus for JCA. Over the next few months, JCA will focus on maintaining its current issue campaigns and alliances, while continuing to build its base in the Jewish community, increase its commitment to leadership development, and strengthen its multifaith and multicultural alliances.

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<sup>9</sup> The Union of American Hebrew Congregations is the national organization of Reform Judaism, representing more than 900 congregations and 1.5 million Jews.

<sup>10</sup> Results of this study will be available in 2003.