



# ***How to Preach A Justice Sermon***

## ***What Works and Doesn't Work for Clergy and Congregations on Long Island***

**Insights from the LI Jobs with Justice  
Faith Leaders' Focus Groups  
on Justice Preaching**

**January, 2016**

**By Richard Koubek, PhD  
Community Outreach Coordinator  
with Anita Halasz  
Executive Director  
Long Island Jobs with Justice  
[www.longislandjwj.org](http://www.longislandjwj.org)**

 **LONG ISLAND JOBS WITH JUSTICE**

## **Contents**

	<b>Page</b>
<b>Introduction: Building a Prophetic Base on Long Island</b>	3
<b>The Challenge: Preaching a Countercultural Economic Vision</b>	4
<b>Justice Content - WHAT is Preached</b>	6
1. Root Justice Sermons in Scripture	7
Reflect on Scripture	7
Challenge with Scripture	8
2. Preach Justice from a Positive Perspective	8
Hear the Voice of God	9
Stress Action and Success	9
Call Upon our Better Angels	9
3. Preach to the Concerns of Congregants	10
Expand Congregants' Circle of Concern	10
Appeal to "Enlightened Self Interest"	10
Challenge Congregants to Repair a Broken World	11
<b>Delivery – HOW Justice is Preached</b>	11
1. Don't Lecture the Congregation	12
Connect with the Congregation	12
Don't Overwhelm the Congregation	13
Preach with Stories	13
2. Build Trust and Connection	13
Preach with Humility and Empathy	13
Move Congregants from Self Concern to Social Concern	14
<b>Sermon Follow-Up - WHO Will Act for Justice?</b>	14
Launching Justice Actions from the Pulpit	14
Partnering with JwJ for Justice on Long Island	15
Transit Equity on Long Island	15
Immigrant Rights Organizing	15
Workers' Rights	16
<b>Conclusion: The Qualities of a Good Justice Sermon</b>	16
<b>Focus Groups Participants</b>	17
<b>Interfaith Resources for Preaching About Justice</b>	18

## ***Introduction: Building a Prophetic Base on Long Island***

During 2015, the Long Island Jobs with Justice (JwJ) AMOS Project - AMOS: A Movement of Solidarity - sought to deepen and widen participation of faith leaders in our mission to make religious congregations a prophetic voice for economic justice on Long Island. The Greek root of the word “prophet” is “advocate.” Prophets in Hebrew and Christian Scripture, such as Amos who still tells us to “see that justice is done,” spoke truth to power about the need for society to practice justice by caring for its most vulnerable people such as widows, orphans, immigrants and the poor. Jesus encapsulated the prophetic message in Mathew 25 where he tells us that ultimately nations will be judged on how they treated “the least of my brothers and sisters.” In our time, religious prophets like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. have brought this message into America’s public square, challenging racism, poverty and other injustices.

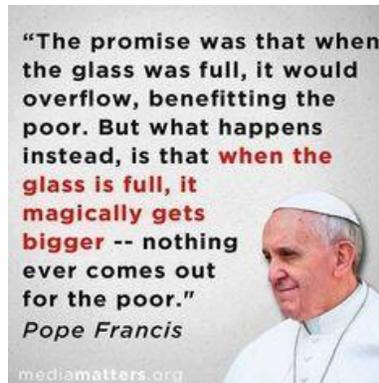
Our March 2015 “Working but Still Poor” conference featured Sojourners President, the Rev. Jim Wallis, as the keynote speaker and Sojourners Director of Mobilization, Lisa Sharon Harper, who presented a two-part workshop on how to use stories to preach about economic justice. Sojourners is a prominent, national Christian organization calling people of faith to advocate for economic justice. We followed the conference with four focus groups in May at which 42 faith leaders spoke about the challenges they confront and the opportunities for their congregations to be active in the politics of justice. Our report about these May focus groups, “See that Justice is Done,” can be accessed on our website at:

<https://lijwj.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/see-that-justice-is-done-report.pdf>.

We concluded 2015 with five focus groups in October and November in which 31 faith leaders representing 24 congregations and organizations discussed “Preaching Justice: What Works and Doesn’t Work for Clergy and Congregations.” Our focus groups addressed these core questions:

1. How do your faith’s Scriptures, traditions and justice teachings connect with current events (local, national, global)?
2. What are some examples of successful justice sermons you have preached or heard? Why were they successful?
3. What are some examples of unsuccessful/ineffective sermons you have preached or heard? What was ineffective about them?
4. What are some tips you can offer for engaging congregations in the works of justice?

A full listing of the fall focus group participants can be found on page 17. Resources on how to preach about justice can be found on page 18. What follows is a summary of what our participants told us about how to preach justice in an affluent suburb like Long Island.



### ***The Challenge: Preaching a Countercultural Economic Vision***

At the Bohemia focus group, a Catholic priest said we need to acknowledge that “most people in the pews are not going to agree with what we have to say about economic justice.” His stark reminder came just weeks after Pope Francis’ wildly successful visit to the United States.

Despite the public acclaim Francis received, his U.S. visit was not without challenges. For example, David Gibson reported in the *Religious News Service* that Francis is encountering “sharp, even personal criticisms directed at him from American conservatives upset with his thundering pronouncements against economic injustice and climate change, and ... his focus on the poor and marginalized.” Gibson reported that Francis himself addressed these concerns on his plane trip from Cuba to Washington in which he said that his criticisms of capitalism are “in keeping with church teaching” and laughed at repeated accusations that he is a communist or radical left-winger. “I am certain I have never said anything more than what is in the social doctrine of the church,” Francis said. “I follow the church and in this I do not think I am wrong. Maybe I have given an impression of being a little bit to the left,” the Pope conceded. “But if they want me to recite the Creed, I can!”<sup>1</sup>

Pope Francis has emerged as a global voice for a religious vision of economic justice that runs counter to America’s economic values, which stress individualism, competition and material gain. As we reported in our summary of the May focus groups, the U.S. Catholic bishops captured this countercultural religious vision of economic justice 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.

---

<sup>1</sup> Gibson, David. “Pope Francis reassures US: ‘I’m Catholic, not communist’.” *Religious News Service*, September 22, 2015

- 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.]<sup>2</sup>

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.”<sup>3</sup>

The religious vision of a just economy thus moves people of faith from works of charity that relieve the suffering of poor people to political activism that addresses the systemic causes of their suffering. While the participants in our 2015 faith leaders’ programs and focus groups share this vision of economic justice, they reported that many in their congregations do not. Here are some of the challenges they spoke of in the May focus groups, which discourage clergy from being a prophetic voice for economic justice 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.<sup>4</sup>

The religious vision of economic justice articulated by Pope Francis, by Rev. Jim Wallis and by the clergy, nuns and lay justice leaders who participated in our 2015 JwJ faith leaders’ activities is indeed countercultural. This vision calls for redistributive economic policies that move resources from the wealthiest Americans to the poor so that people in need can have the opportunities they require (education, housing, health care, jobs with family-sustaining wages, etc.) to fully develop their human potential.

---

<sup>2</sup> Koubek, Richard and Anita Halasz. “See that Justice is Done. People of Faith Advocating in the Public Square: Long Island Challenges Hopes and Opportunities.” Summary of the Long Island Jobs with Justice Faith Leaders’ Focus Groups. May, 2015., p. 6,

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 3

Such a vision runs up against the prevailing American ideal that our economic system is driven primarily by individual effort rewarded with material gain, and certainly not by government safety-net policies that redistribute resources. Alec MacGillis, a political reporter for ProPublica, captured this American ideal in a lead *New York Times* analysis published on November 22, 2015 titled, “Who Turned My Blue State Red?” In his essay, MacGillis asked why “parts of the country that depend on safety-net programs supported by Democrats are increasingly voting for Republicans who favor shredding that net.” He focused on working-poor people, many of whom once received safety-net supports such as food stamps or child-care subsidies. But now many working poor see safety-net programs as “bad for them and good for other people – specifically those *undeserving* benefit recipients who live nearby,” that is, people they perceive as “lazy” who have grown too dependent on government help while refusing to help themselves.<sup>5</sup>

This then is the core challenge facing people of faith – in particular preachers – who articulate an economic vision and support economic policies that make “things right for those who are poor and oppressed” in an affluent community that does not share this vision.



### ***Justice Content - WHAT is Preached***

“Why do Jewish congregations seem open to the religious vision of economic justice?” was a question raised at the Oakdale focus group. One rabbi responded that her congregation expects and demands sermons about economic justice. Another rabbi noted that:

“Preaching justice in the immigrant communities of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was easier than it is in affluent Long Island. People knew each other's sufferings then and knew each other personally. They set up organizations to help one other deal with poverty and injustice. It was ingrained in their communal lived experience.”

This rabbi, who hosted the Oakdale focus group, gave participants a tour of his sanctuary at the end of the session. There, he opened the Ark to reveal a number of Torah scrolls, two of which he identified as “Holocaust scrolls.” These scrolls, one from Poland, the other from Hungary, had been buried during the Shoah, and then recovered. While never carried in procession, the

---

<sup>5</sup> MacGillis, Alec. “Who Turned My Blue State Red? Why poor areas vote for politicians who want to slash the safety net.” *New York Times*, November 22, 2015.

congregation can see the Holocaust scrolls each time the Ark is opened. They are a constant and powerful reminder of the shared suffering that the Jewish community has experienced. And quite possibly, these Holocaust scrolls provide an opening for sermons about justice.

At the Riverhead focus group, a Baptist pastor stated that congregants who are experiencing persecution or rejection, such as Jews or African Americans, are more open to justice preaching. A Catholic priest added that during “The Troubles” between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, Irish Catholics were much more open to justice and that Irish Americans are much less receptive to justice sermons now that they have achieved success.

Long Island - one of America’s ten wealthiest suburbs, where the sufferings caused by economic injustice are generally believed to be irrelevant - is a region where sermons about redistributive economic justice are often not welcomed. While Long Islanders are generous in their support of charitable works and organizations that relieve the symptoms of injustice such as hunger, they are not open to addressing unjust systems such as racial segregation in housing and education that cause hunger and poverty. Nevertheless, participants in our focus groups provided concrete suggestions on the content of a good economic justice sermon that could resonate with Long Islanders.



## **1. Root Justice Sermons in Scripture**

There are over 300 verses about poverty and justice in the Bible, more than any other topic. In both our May and fall focus groups, faith leaders spoke of the richness and the power of Scripture as perhaps their most important resource in becoming a prophetic voice for economic justice on Long Island. In each of the fall focus groups, clergy and lay people spoke about the importance of rooting any sermon on justice in Scripture. Some of their specific points were:

### ***Reflect on Scripture***

- *Cycle C of the Christian Common Lectionary which will be used in 2016 is the Gospel of St. Luke which stresses the poor.* This should provide many preaching and action opportunities throughout 2016. For example, a sermon about poverty on Long Island can cite Luke 4:16 in which Jesus says, quoting the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach good news to the poor.”
- *Respect congregants’ willingness to hear sermons that address justice topics from a humanitarian or spiritual perspective based on Scripture rather than from a political or governmental perspective.* For example, the difficult topic of admitting Syrian refugees to the U.S. might be framed by Leviticus’ 19: 32-34 call to treat immigrants with respect rather than in terms of U.S. policies to contain or destroy ISIS: “If a stranger

lives with you in your land, do not molest him. You must count him as one of your own countrymen and love him as yourself—for you were once strangers yourselves in Egypt.”

- *When preaching justice, do not set out to preach a justice sermon.* Rather, reflect on the Scriptures for a full week before the sermon, placing them in context, assessing their meaning and their relation to current events, particularly news stories that week. The ultimate question before a sermon is: Do the Scripture readings have anything to say about these current events? Ask congregants to simply “think about the connection.”

### **Challenge with Scripture**

- *A good justice sermon is not an intellectual lecture that provides answers to problems.* Better to lay out the problem or issue in the context of Scripture, then ask questions for the congregants to ponder: What are we being asked to do about this problem?
- *Widespread acceptance of the American Dream as a reality for all but what are stereotypically believed to be “lazy” poor people who don’t want to work is a serious challenge for justice preachers.* This can be countered with facts about the working poor linked to Scripture, such as Isaiah 58, the Beatitudes or Mathew 25 which call us to care for others who are in need. For facts about Long Island’s working poor, see the JwJ toolkit, *Case to Cause: Strategies for Channeling Direct Services for Poor People to Advocacy for Economic Justice* which can be downloaded from our website: <https://lijwj.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/jwj-case-to-cause-toolkit-4.pdf>



## **2. Preach Justice from a Positive Perspective**

Our focus group participants acknowledged that justice issues can seem remote and overwhelming to congregants. A number said that good justice sermons should offer hope and stress the positive and the possible. One participant put it this way: “We are all part of something bigger than ourselves. Together we can make a difference.” Here are some of our focus group participants’ suggestions for preaching justice positively in order to engage the congregation:

### **Hear the Voice of God**

- *Emphasize the presence of God among us now.* Service to the poor is service to God. In Christian theology, this is “incarnational preaching”- Christ is present in each poor person; service to each of them is service to Christ.
- Sometimes, with difficult subjects like admitting Syrian refugees to America just after the ISIS attacks in Paris, *ask congregants to “be silent and listen” to what God is asking*

*of us in Scripture.* This type of justice sermon plants a seed without necessarily dictating answers.

### ***Stress Action and Success***

- *Utilize “intentional preaching” which is directing the sermon to action.* Admit that creating justice is a struggle, but offer specific actions that congregants can take to make a difference. Preach beyond Sunday to what can be done during the week. For example, “We have a homeless problem in our community. What are we going to do about it?”
- *Preach about an actual success in which faith-based community action addressed a specific injustice.* This could be a global example such as a South African who brought together feuding whites and blacks or locally such as the JWJ mobilization of congregations to fight bus cuts in Nassau.

### ***Call Upon Our Better Angels***

- *Preach with a message of mercy and forgiveness, inclusion and affirmation,* as Pope Francis did when addressing the U.S. Congress. (I am an immigrant. Despite past discrimination and prejudice, in the end America has always welcomed immigrants like me who built this country. Continue to do so.)
- *Frame justice issues in terms of broad principles of fairness and human decency* that will resonate with congregants. For example, education is a right that every child should access. Providing New York State Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) grants to DREAMer children is simply treating them fairly.
- *Stress the preacher’s failures and sins and then link these personal failings to forgiveness and forgiveness to larger justice issues.* For example, “I am often selfish, looking out for myself first. This is my very human failing for which I must constantly ask God’s forgiveness and for the strength to overcome my selfishness. So too must we recognize the many Long Island systems and policies that are grounded in selfishness. Long Island is among America’s most segregated suburbs. For this we need to ask God’s forgiveness and the strength to accept racial diversity in our neighborhoods.”



### **3. Preach to the Concerns of Congregants**

Our focus group participants, both in May and again in the fall, recognized that preaching about justice works against the American notion that religion is only about personal salvation. This idea cuts across all denominations and reinforces the view held by many lay people that religion is a private, personal matter. Our focus group participants acknowledged the need for justice preachers to understand that for many congregants, religion and worship services are escapes from the problems of the world and from their personal problems. Our participants

recognized that many middle-class congregants are loyal to “the system” that they believe gave them the opportunities to become “successful” and therefore resent sermons that challenge this system which they believe has rewarded them for their hard work. Good justice preaching connects congregants to the larger social issues and problems that transcend their own personal experiences. Participants told us that a successful justice sermon aims at the conversion of the congregation, moving them from their very private and personal concerns to sympathy and empathy for the suffering of others. Here are some tips they provided for connecting a justice sermon to the concerns of congregants:

### ***Expand Congregants’ Circle of Concern***

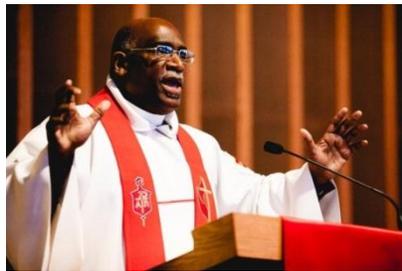
- *Many congregants come to services to find peace from the problems and insecurities that trouble them. Acknowledge their problems and insecurities, even in affluent congregations, such as materialism, greed, selfishness, narcissism, excessive competition, job uncertainties, monetary pressures such as mortgage payments or college tuition, etc. Gently connect their problems to those suffering even more than they do. A good justice homily will expand the circle of concern from individuals’ problems to similar but more serious problems faced by their less affluent neighbors and then to the unjust systems such as income inequality that cause these problems for both the poor and middle class.*
- *Reassure members of the congregation that their fears and anxieties can be relieved through service to people with greater needs than their own. Encourage them to think bigger than themselves; call them to “fix a broken world” (in Hebrew: *Tikkun Olam*)*

### ***Appeal to “Enlightened Self Interest”***

- *Be cognizant of the self-interests of the congregation. For example, black middle-class congregants who used to be farm workers on the East End and now are property owners will be politically more conservative than congregants who have been less successful. Both interests need to be balanced in sermons, which sometimes is difficult to do since self-interest is often based on selfishness. Nevertheless, some issues can be framed in terms of “enlightened self-interest” in which individual interests coincide with community interests, for example, raising the minimum wage will pump millions of new dollars into local businesses thereby benefitting working-poor people and the larger community*
- *Address income inequality which is becoming an issue that has penetrated the middle class. NPR’s Brian Lehrer recently profiled a study of metropolitan New Yorkers’ attitudes toward income inequality, which found that 70% of middle class people now feel that the government is not doing enough to protect them from the negative impacts of income inequality. These findings are an opening for preaching about economic injustices faced by both the poor and the middle class (flat wages; the shortage of affordable housing; job insecurities; uncertain retirement income; college tuitions and tuition debt, etc.)*
- *Appeal to broad concerns of the congregants, such as the pain caused by violence. Then challenge them to think about what they can and should do to relieve this pain, as Thomas Merton did with his book, *Conjecture of a Guilty Bystander*.*

### ***Challenge Congregants to Repair a Broken World***

- *Challenge congregants to let go of their material concerns.* Some justice preaching has to take on the tough challenge of asking congregants to “comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.”
- *Encourage congregants to help repair broken social systems, starting by voting.* Low voter turnout and the growing disillusionment with what people think is a broken, corrupt and unfair political system makes congregants even less open to justice sermons.
- *With difficult issues like admitting Syrian refugees to the U.S., acknowledge people’s fears, and then challenge them to think about the opposites of fear, which are faith and love.* God breaks into our time amid broken people and systems:
  - What is God saying to us?
  - What is God thinking?
  - What is God asking us to do?



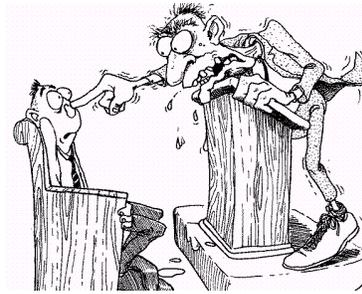
### ***Delivery - HOW Justice is Preached***

Our focus group participants were very sensitive to the style in which a justice sermon is preached. Our 2015 focus groups coincided with Fairfield University’s Center for the Study of Faith in Public Life finalizing their study, *Strangers and Neighbors: How Religion Can Help Re-Frame the Issue of Immigration*, which was itself drawn from focus groups conducted in two Long Island Catholic parishes. The Fairfield study offered several important cautionary notes about how a justice sermon should be preached that we shared with our focus group participants:

“When framed in terms of either religious/spiritual discourse or local/individual discourse the topic of immigration is discussed more emphatically and more positively than when it is discussed in terms of government, laws, or systems outside of the Church.” The Fairfield study also concluded that the focus group participants “remained divided as to whether or not the Church and local priests should engage the parish community in discussions related to politics. Many stressed the separation of church and state. Others felt that these discussions had a place within the church community,

but that the space should be outside the traditional Catholic Mass and that the message should not be delivered from the pulpit.”<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Rev. Tom Goodhue, Executive Director of the Long Island Council of Churches who participated in our Manhasset focus group, reminded us in his guide, *How to Talk About Hard Topics Without Alienating Others Needlessly*, that “people may forget what you say, but they will never forget how you made them feel.”<sup>7</sup> Some of our participants said that sermons work best when they affirm the congregants first and then move on to larger justice issues. Congregants should feel the preacher cares about them, is in relationship with them. In keeping with these caveats, our focus group participants had a number of suggestions on how to deliver a sermon on economic justice.



### **1. Don't Lecture the Congregation**

Our focus group participants were clear that *congregants do not want to be “lectured” from the pulpit about public policy issues or politics*. Such sermons can appear to be manipulative. Here are some of their ideas for engaging the congregation in what they might otherwise consider an uncomfortable sermon about politically-charged economic justice topics:

#### **Connect with the Congregation**

- *When preaching justice use “we” rather than the accusatorial “you”* and admit that we all have been unjust at times and in various circumstances.
- *Do not preach with this message: “I am burdened by this injustice and I want you to share my burden.”* Similarly, the preacher should not wear his/her “heart on the sleeve” in a justice sermon since this can be manipulative and puts pressure on the congregants to agree with the preacher. Appeal to the heart and connect Scripture to the life experiences of congregants.
- *Avoid preaching in a pedantic manner, telling the congregation what they should understand intellectually about Scripture.* Also, do not scold congregants about an injustice. Rather, share the injustice with the congregation in a way that empowers preacher and congregants to address it together.

---

<sup>6</sup> Boyczka, Jocelyn, David Gudelunas, Gisela Gil-Egui. “Strangers and Neighbors: How Religion Can Help Re-frame the Issue of Immigration,” Center for the Study of Faith in Public Life, Fairfield University, 2015, Pp. 3, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Koubek, Richard and Anita Halasz. “Preach Good News to the Poor: A LI Jobs with Justice Toolkit to Help Faith Leaders be a Prophetic Voice for Economic Justice,” Long Island Jobs with Justice, 2015. P. 24.

### ***Don't Overwhelm the Congregation***

- *Do not preach justice with a new “demand” of the week and do not preach at the congregation.* Don't obsess on one justice issue and don't hit the congregation with too many issues; each approach causes them to turn off to the justice message and agenda.
- *Preach justice incrementally,* beginning with simpler and less controversial topics like undocumented DREAMers brought to America as young children by their parents before tackling the tougher issues like sanctuary cities that adopt policies in which police departments are not mandated to cooperate with Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials in the deportation of noncriminal, undocumented immigrants.

### ***Preach with Stories***

- *Tell the stories of real people who have suffered injustice.* Tell the stories of clients served in the congregation's outreach center or food pantry. Encourage congregants to share their own stories from the pulpit. *Use stories to introduce and illustrate sermon points about justice – such as family immigrant histories of discrimination secured through an oral history project.* Stories are essential personal connections that link justice principles to real people. Such stories can be used in sermons to transition the congregation to think about the structural injustices causing the problems in the stories.
- *Use stories that dramatize the suffering of poor and vulnerable people,* invite guest speakers or even create dramatic vignettes to be acted out or read during or after a service.



## ***2. Build Trust and Connection***

Our focus group participants stressed that the preacher needs to connect with his or her congregants. Heady intellectual sermons directed at the listeners are far less effective than sermons which make the listeners feel that the preacher cares about them. Here are some of their tips for preaching caring sermons:

### ***Preach with Humility and Empathy***

- *Make each justice sermon a personal statement about where the preacher himself/herself has been unjust.* As the preacher shows his/her humanity and failings, he/she gives the congregants permission to reflect on their own failings as well as the injustices of the larger social systems. Build trust with the congregation; you are seeking justice together.

- *Acknowledge the fears and concerns of congregants.* For example, express empathy for middle-class families worrying about the cost of college tuition and tuition debt or saving for retirement or job insecurities or high mortgage payments and property taxes.

***Move Congregants from Self Concern to Social Concern***

- *Acknowledge that congregants are proud of their middle-class status, which they believe they earned through hard work.* Relate their values about hard work to recently arrived immigrants who are also known for their willingness to work hard (and at jobs often rejected by native-born Americans.)
- *Frame the issue in terms of the personal and family histories of congregants that connect with similar histories of other groups.* For example, what help (e.g. free land through the Homestead Act, government jobs building railroads; public school education) did your immigrant ancestors receive when they arrived in the U.S.? Why not therefore help recently-arrive immigrants with similar supports?



**Sermon Follow-Up - WHO Will Act for Justice?**

Our report on the May focus groups cited the Epistle of St. James, 2:26, “Faith without deeds is dead.” Perhaps this passage from St. James might be adapted to read, “Sermons without action are dead.” Our fall focus group participants felt strongly that any good justice sermon needs to lead to actions for justice. We shared with our participants this caveat from the Fairfield University study whose participants “expressed a clear opposition to their parish priests conveying explicitly political messages during Mass ... yet also expressed a deep desire for and interest in discussing the social issues confronting the U.S. outside the Mass, but within the parish community.”<sup>8</sup>

***Launching Justice Actions from the Pulpit***

Our fall focus group participants offered these ideas for following up a justice sermon with congregational actions:

1. *Use the pulpit to encourage congregants to participate in justice-oriented projects* such as oral histories of their shared immigrant backgrounds.
2. *Encourage lay participation in services in ways that illustrate justice themes.* For example, one congregation had lay people read portions of the Pentecost Sunday Gospel in their native languages to celebrate the diversity of their community.

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

3. *Follow justice sermons with an opportunity for fellowship and for congregants to discuss what they heard and what faith-based actions and advocacy they should take on the problem and policy issue addressed or alluded to in the sermon.* Post-sermon fellowship or meetings are critical to moving people from an emotional call to serve the poor delivered from the pulpit to rational analysis, such as examining a public policy and strategizing how to take action on this policy.
4. *The justice sermon should penetrate the congregation and the congregation should become part of the larger community.* The sermon and the liturgy should not be seen as a weekly opportunity to “fill up the gas tank, and then drive on.”
5. *Preach actions that directly engage the preacher and the congregants.* For example, a rabbi told us how he preached on the Jewish tradition and laws requiring respect for the dead. Then he and congregants cleaned up a nearby neglected cemetery.
6. *Empower parents to teach justice and act justly to and with their children*
7. *Encourage members of a local clergy association to preach justice sermons on the same weekend.* [Note: Long Island Jobs with Justice may facilitate clergy association justice weekends with the Wantagh Clergy Association and the Riverhead Clergy Association who have participated in the focus groups. JwJ AMOS volunteers might be present for these sermons to lead a discussion following the worship service on the sermons as well as about JwJ campaigns such as bus equity or the DREAM Act described in the next section.]

### ***Partnering with JwJ for Justice on Long Island***



Long Island Jobs with Justice has three on-going action campaigns to foster economic justice on Long Island. Justice-oriented congregations are a major part of our “coalition of conscience” for economic justice. Our education, organizing and advocacy have been recognized by elected officials and we have gotten results. Nevertheless, there still is much work to be done. Consider linking justice sermons to these JwJ campaigns that members of your congregation can participate in during 2016.

- ***Transit Equity on Long Island:*** The JwJ Long Island Bus Riders’ Union will continue to advocate for an affordable, reliable and accessible public bus system that serves working people in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties by:
  - Organizing bus riders in both counties to advocate for the public bus systems;
  - Monitoring the quality of bus service in the privatized NICE bus system in Nassau County;
  - Expanding evening and Sunday bus service in Suffolk County;
  - Advocating for additional State funding to improve bus service in both Nassau and Suffolk Counties
- ***Immigrant Rights Organizing:*** JwJ will continue serving as a leader in Long Island advocacy for comprehensive federal immigration reform and adoption of a New York State DREAM Act that would provide Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) college grants to undocumented students brought to the U.S. as young children by:
  - Organizing an advocacy campaign in the winter and spring of 2016 to persuade the New York State Senate to adopt the DREAM Act;

- Calling attention to the plight of Long Island noncriminal, undocumented immigrants who face deportation due to the failure of Congress to adopt comprehensive immigration reform;
- Providing undocumented students and their parents with critical information on their educational and employment rights through trainings and workshops in schools and congregations.
- **Workers' Rights:** JwJ will continue to support low-wage Long Island workers during 2016 in their efforts to secure family-sustaining wages and benefits and their right to form or join a union by:
  - Advocating with partner organizations for a \$15 an hour New York State Minimum Wage;
  - Hosting "Rights at Work" trainings for immigrant workers;
  - Supporting labor unions in specific struggles for economic justice such as the ongoing Communication Workers of America (CWA) contract struggle with Verizon or efforts to save the unionized jobs of supermarket workers threatened by store closings.

To learn more about these JwJ advocacy campaigns and our staff who are coordinating them, visit our website at: [www.longislandjwj.org](http://www.longislandjwj.org).



### ***Conclusion: The Qualities of a Good Justice Sermon***

At the end of our year-long JwJ AMOS series of faith-leaders' programs, we came away with a deep appreciation of the challenges faced by Long Island clergy who want to preach about and organize their congregations around a religious, countercultural vision of economic justice. Nevertheless, we concluded with a sense of hope and promise that, using their Scriptural, teaching and historical resources, religious congregations can be a prophetic voice for justice and clergy can preach about justice while holding on to, if not engaging, their congregations in the politics of justice. Participants in our fall focus groups identified these broad qualities that make up a good justice sermon:

1. Did the sermon *touch people* where they are and move hearts to compassion?
2. Did the preacher *convey care and concern* for the congregants?
3. Did the sermon *connect Scripture to the congregants'* fears and anxieties, and then move them to compassionate care for others' fears and anxieties?
4. Did the sermon *help congregants understand what spiritual gifts they are lacking*?

5. Did the sermon *connect the Bible with the newspaper* so that congregants came away from a sermon with an understanding how Scripture relates to current events in the larger world?
6. Did the sermon *help congregants understand the core nature of fairness?*
7. Did the sermon *help congregants understand the systemic causes of injustice and move them to follow the sermon with actions for justice?*

## **Focus Group Participants**

JWJ is grateful to the clergy, nuns and lay people who participated in the fall 2015 focus groups on justice preaching. These focus groups had 31 participants (16 clergy; 4 Catholic nuns; 11 lay justice leaders) from 24 congregations or organizations (12 Protestant or Unitarian Universalist; 9 Roman Catholic; 2 Jewish; 1 secular/mixed faith)

### **St. Frances de Chantal, Wantagh, October 13, 2015**

**Participants:** Rev. Jim Barnum, Belmore Presbyterian Church; Rev. Ron Garner, United Church of Christ, Wantagh; Sr. Cathy Artale, Congregation of the Infant Jesus; Nancy Dwyer, Pax Christi, LI; Sr. Lauren Hanley, Ele Ruth Melendez, St. Frances De Chantal, Wantagh; Mary Donohoe, Pax Christi LI; Rev. Ken Graham, LI Presbytery; Rev. Eric Rasmussen, Woodbury United Methodist Church; Anita Halasz, Richard Koubek, LI Jobs with Justice

### **Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock (UUCSR), October 14, 2015**

**Participants:** Rev. Paul Johnson, Claire Deroche, UUCSR; Rev. Tom Goodhue, Executive Director, LI Council of Churches; Rev. Cheri Kroon, Plainview Reformed Church; Mary Donohoe, Pax Christi LI; Richard Koubek, LI Jobs with Justice

### **B’Nai Israel Reform Temple, Oakdale, October 19, 2015**

**Participants:** Rabbi Steven Moss, B’Nai Israel Reform Temple, Oakdale; Rev. Kate Jones Colon, Setauket Presbyterian Church; Helen Tucker, St. Joseph the Worker RC Church, East Patchogue; Rabbi Kathy Novick, Good Shepherd Hospice, Patchogue; Mary Donohoe, Pax Christi LI; Richard Koubek, Anita Halasz; LI Jobs with Justice

### **St. John Nepomucene, Bohemia, October 20, 2015**

**Participants:** Jack Reilly, St. Joseph the Worker RC Church, East Patchogue; Rev. Tom Phillip, Old South Haven Presbyterian Church, Brookhaven; Sr. Rosalie Carven, Sisters of St. Joseph, Brentwood; Ron Schneider, St. Rosalie RC Church, Hampton Bays; Rev. Bill Brisotti, Rev. Andrew Connolly, Our Lady of the Miraculous Medal RC Church, Wyandanch; Rev. John Rowan, St. Frances de Chantal RC Church, Wantagh; Gilbert Hanson, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook; Sr. Lisa Bergeron, St. John Nepomucene RC Church, Bohemia; Mary Donohoe, Pax Christi, LI; Richard Koubek, LI Jobs with Justice

## First Baptist Church of Riverhead, November 19, 2015

**Participants:** Rev. Ronald Richardson, St. Anthony of Padua RC Church, Rocky Point; Rev. Charles Coverdale, First Baptist Church of Riverhead; Mary Donohoe, Pax Christi LI; Richard Koubek, Kimberly Saget, LI Jobs with Justice

### Interfaith Resources for Preaching About Justice

Long Island Jobs with Justice has created a toolkit, *See that Justice is Done: A Toolkit to Help Faith Leaders Be a Prophetic Voice for Justice on Long Island*, which can be downloaded at our website: <https://lijwj.files.wordpress.com/2015/07/preach-good-news-to-the-poor-clergy-toolkit.pdf>. In addition, here are some other interfaith resources to help prepare justice sermons and to follow these sermons with congregational actions for justice:

- Interfaith Worker Justice Resources: <http://www.iwj.org/resources>
- Stories for Preaching About Justice: <http://storiesforpreaching.com/category/sermonillustrations/justice/>
- Sermon Cloud: <http://www.sermoncloud.com/sermons-about-social-justice/>
- Sermon Outline Resources: <http://www.urbanministry.org/f/content-type/sermon-outline>
- Sojourners *Sermon and Worship Resources*: <http://d6.sojo.net/get-involved/sermon-and-worship-resources>
- Sojourners *On Line Sermon Preparation and Scripture Reflections*: <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word>
- Woman Preach *Sermon Resources*: <http://womanpreach.org/resources/sermon-resources/>
- CCAR *Social Justice Resources for the High Holy Days*: <http://ccarnet.org/lifelong-learning/other-learning-resources/social-justice-resources-high-holy-days/>
- Green Faith *Interfaith Resources for the Environment*: <http://www.greenfaith.org/resource-center/spirit/greenworship-resource/christian-resource-1/christian-web-based-resources/web-resource-full-listing>
- Unitarian Universalist Association *Social Justice Empowerment Program Handbook*: [http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/aw/sje\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/aw/sje_handbook.pdf)
- *Interfaith Resources for the Fair Share Campaign*: [http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/aw/sje\\_handbook.pdf](http://www.uua.org/sites/live-new.uua.org/files/documents/aw/sje_handbook.pdf)
- *Reformed Worship Resources*: <http://www.reformedworship.org/article/june-2003/let-justice-roll-worship-planning-resources-justice-theme>
- *Catholic Climate Covenant Resources*: [http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/catholic\\_teachings/resources](http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/catholic_teachings/resources)
- *Bread for the World Lectionary Resources*: [http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/catholic\\_teachings/resources](http://www.catholicclimatecovenant.org/catholic_teachings/resources)