

CALLED to SPEAK

Six Strategies That Encourage Women's Political Activism

Lessons from Interfaith Community Organizing



About this Report

This report is the second in an IWPR series on Politics, Religion, and Women's Public Vision. The first report, *The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society*, and this new work explore the values, experiences, and leadership development of women involved in religious, and particularly interfaith, social justice organizing. Future publications will explore how women's religious activism intersects with women's movement organizing. IWPR hopes its research will build awareness of the work and values of women volunteers and activists who strive for social justice, often based on their faith. We hope to contribute to a greater understanding of the values women share in support of social justice issues and causes, and to ensure that women's voices are central to politics and policymaking.

As part of our work in this area, IWPR has also convened a Working Group on Women's Public Vision of leaders in the women's movement, religious social justice organizing, and academia. The group is working to develop stronger collaboration among the communities they represent and to bring women's voices to the forefront of political debate.

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About the Institute for Women's Policy Research

The Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) conducts rigorous research and disseminates its findings to address the needs of women, promote public dialogue, and strengthen families, communities, and societies. IWPR focuses on issues of poverty and welfare, employment and earnings, work and family, health and safety, and women's civic and political participation.

The Institute works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and families and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. IWPR, an independent, nonprofit, research organization also works in affiliation with the graduate programs in public policy and women's studies at The George Washington University.

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introduction: Women's Political Activism in Interfaith Community Organizing

“ It would be very difficult to [work with our organization] and not have some transformation occur, because the work that we do and the people that we serve—a lot of the people we serve don't have a strong voice in the community, and so you are called to be that voice.... You may speak only in your community, you may speak only in your church, but I can't imagine not being called to speak.”

Across the country, women are answering a call to speak. Their activism is evident in community halls, congregations, and schools, in cities, towns, and rural areas. In all these settings, women are providing leadership, labor, and passion towards improving the lives and well-being of their communities.

In recent years, interfaith community organizing has been recognized as a place where women are frequently answering the call to speak, where they play relatively visible roles as political activists. This type of organizing brings together individuals across congregations and denominations to address social welfare issues. Within interfaith community groups, women have achieved impressive levels of leadership, not only by leading many local and national organizations, but also in their work as approximately half of all board members and organizers (Warren and Wood 2001). In this work, women's leadership is significant to communities across the country, as religious community organizing is “second in size only to the labor movement among drives for social justice among low-income Americans today,” involving 3,500 congregations and working together with approximately 500 local unions, public schools, and other institutions, to touch over two million people (Wood 2002; 6).

Women are claiming a specifically political role in interfaith community groups. Since 2003, the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR) has conducted interviews with 68 women and 7 men involved with religious organizing across the country. These women were selected for the study because of their activist roles in interfaith organizations devoted to issues of social justice. In our interviews, IWPR found that most—over three-quarters—consider their work political. They describe themselves as engaged in changing policies that shape the conditions of people's lives, often as a major focus of their activism. (For more on the interviews done to produce this report, please see Appendix 1.)

Women's work in interfaith community organizing is particularly important because in American life generally, women are less politically active than men. Although women report higher voter turnout than men, fewer women participate in informal political activities directed at solving community problems, are affiliated with organizations that take political stances, or contact their elected officials about issues or policies (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Interfaith community groups, then, seem to provide women opportunities for political activism that many other groups do not.

What is the secret of their success? Overall, successful programs provide women something both simple and profound: the resources and opportunities they need to answer a call to speak, not just as citizens but as women. For many women, and particularly religious women, this is no small contribution. Throughout women's lives, religious, economic, social, and cultural institutions impose on women expectations and limits that define their roles—usually to the exclusion of public voice. To break out of these roles, women must not only see themselves in a new light—able to take on the voice of authority—but must also step out of a place of safety and put themselves at risk of attack, of failure, and of facing their personal fears and frustrations.

This report describes successful strategies used by interfaith community groups to encourage this process and thus to encourage women's political activism and leadership. Groups do this in a variety of ways:

- ▶ By providing role models for women's political and religious leadership within their own work, from scripture and history, and in contemporary activist movements.
- ▶ By creating the space and tools that women need to address their fears of claiming public voice and their discomforts expressing anger and passion.
- ▶ By developing opportunities for women to interact and build alliances with women of different racial, ethnic, class, and religious backgrounds.
- ▶ By increasing women's confidence with public roles through opportunities to lead, mentoring for political activism, feedback that addresses women's hesitations, and political skills development.
- ▶ By considering the ways that women's lives differ from men's, and designing programs that recruit them where they are and make engagement as easy as possible.
- ▶ By engaging in issues and promoting policy positions that are relevant to women's lives and well-being.

These strategies, described in more detail within this report, seem particularly effective when used together in comprehensive and integrated efforts to increase women's leadership.

Two notes about the lessons and strategies described here. First, this report highlights strategies that benefit *women's* political activism and leadership. Many books and manuals have been written on community organizing, and they contain effective strategies for mobilizing and sustaining citizen involvement (e.g., Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001, Gecan 2002, Jacobsen 2001). They stress strategies such as encouraging participants to analyze power relationships in their communities, training them to interact with political leaders, and working to build coalitions across sectors of the community. This report, however, focuses on women's experiences. In that sense, it serves as a companion guide to existing recommendations and guidelines.

Second, the programs and strategies described here were developed specifically in religious and mostly interfaith settings—and that matters. On the one hand, like politics, religion is not traditionally a place of women's leadership. As a result, in these settings, women often face particular resistance to their claims of authority; they frequently must make an extra effort to be recognized as real and potential leaders; and they commonly require encouragement and support to take on leadership. On the other hand, these settings offer a place where religious values, traditions, and symbolism can be used to inspire concerns and passions for social justice, particularly among women, who are more religious than men. In other words, religiously based organizing has its own peculiarities, which are reflected in the recommendations in this report.

At the same time, many of the lessons described here can be used and adapted by both religious and “secular” groups trying to mobilize women politically. Each suggested strategy has been identified by women activists as successfully encouraging and supporting their political work. As a result, they have promise for doing so in non-religious settings.

To facilitate groups adopting the principles and strategies described in this report, and to illustrate the lessons learned in our research, programs that have successfully encouraged women's political activism are highlighted throughout the report. The elements of each program that were identified by interviewees as effective are described and used to extrapolate lessons. (Contact information for these programs is included in Appendix 2.)

We hope this report will be used by community activist groups and other political organizations to develop women's roles as political leaders, in both religious and “secular” settings. A previous report for this project, *The Ties That Bind: Women's Public Vision for Politics, Religion, and Civil Society* (Caiazza 2005), described the distinct and transformative values that women bring to religious community organizing. This report is a way, we hope, to increase the visibility and influence of their voices and involvement in activist work.

background: Religious Women's Motivations, Values, and Obstacles in Political Activism

Women describe a variety of motivations for their participation in religious community groups, and they bring a constellation of distinct values and perspectives to that work. They also describe specific obstacles for getting involved in political work within activist groups. Their motivations for involvement, activist values, and hesitations to act politically all provide important clues on how to encourage women into political activism.

Why Are Women Involved in Religious Community Groups?

One of the most common reasons for activism reported by the women we interviewed is simple recruitment. About half of our interviewees were recruited into activist work through their personal contacts, including their congregations, work colleagues, or friends. Women describe other forms of recruitment as well: a family tradition of activism, for example, or being encouraged by teachers or other students in college or high school.

A second group of motivations relates to life experiences with injustice. About a third of the women we interviewed were originally motivated into activism by personal experiences with racism, sexism, or classism, either as victims or by observing these experiences among their family, friends, or their communities. Others were motivated by their experiences living or working abroad, particularly in developing countries, and seeing injustice and poverty that they related to global inequalities.

Values are a third set of motivations. Most of the women we interviewed hope to address issues of social welfare and connect this desire explicitly to their religious values. In addition, the majority—three-quarters—were specifically attracted to an interfaith experience within their community activism by a desire to interact with people of different religious backgrounds. This most commonly came from a desire to reflect values seen as spanning religious differences—e.g., a devotion to service, compassion, and love.

Anger—often based on values—also compels many women to work for political change. Among religious women, anger is often tied closely to religious faith, values, and traditions—for many women, their sense of what the world should be. When these values are violated, women activists describe an anger, a sense of moral outrage, that politicizes them. As one woman says, “I found that if I was mad enough about something, I didn’t think about being shy. I just thought about articulating what it was that we needed to articulate. And that’s what change work is.”

These findings fit with those of other researchers interested in women’s community involvement. Recruitment is consistently one of the most important factors in both men’s and women’s civic engagement. It works in tandem with other factors, though, including the experiences and resources that people have (education, income, skills), their sense of responsibility for or interest in participating, and even their values. Religion plays a role at several stages in this process, serving as a place of recruitment, a place to learn civic skills, and, in some congregations, a place where values and traditions are explicitly applied to politics, community issues, and even social justice (e.g., Ayala 2000; Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Jones-Correa and Leal 2001; Leighley 1995; Williams 2002; Wilson and Janoski 1995).

Groups can incorporate strategies that respond to these motivations in order to encourage women to move from civic community involvement to directly political activism. Examples of successful ways to do so are included throughout this report.

What Values Do Women Bring to Religious Community Organizing?

In our interviews, women describe four basic sets of values behind their activism: stewardship; love, peace, and compassion; interconnectedness; and basic worth and dignity (Caiazza 2005). On stewardship, a white mainline Protestant:

The message of the gospels has to do with giving of what we have, taking care of people who don’t have, distributing our abundance...I can put all my energy and some of my money into things that make the world better.

On love, peace, and compassion, an Arab American Muslim and a Hispanic Christian:

Sufis harbor feelings of love, peace, and harmony inside, and spread it outside, without any distinctions. This is the basic concept of Islam.

The God that I subscribe to is a God of love and compassion, and of change and working for that greater good.... There’s a correlation with my activism in social justice.

On interconnectedness, an Asian American Hindu, a white Catholic, and a white Jewish woman:

There’s a connection between all human beings, and if you are going to act aggressively and minimize somebody’s rights, or just completely strip them of their rights and abuse them or what have you—what does that say for the morality that we are being taught?

I guess my worldview is that ultimately we're all connected, and that biologically and spiritually and environmentally we're all connected to each other. And even though some people are able to remove themselves from that connection based on wealth and privilege, ultimately we are all connected.... It's not spiritually healthy to be one of those people that removes yourself too much from all of that.... Ultimately we need to be accountable to the people that work for us and with us.

God is in the space between human beings, and all these ethical commandments and ritual commandments are all bound up together, and any relationship that you have with God, any relationship with human beings are tied together.

On worth and dignity, a white mainline Protestant and Latina Catholic:

It comes right out of my strong conviction that all of us are created in the image of God, which then means we are all created in goodness. And that image of God remains in every one of us, no matter who we are or what we've done, and all of us deserve the dignity and respect of being a person of God.

Part of what you do is that you build community. You recognize the sacredness of every person.

Together, these values suggest a moral vision for public life in which rights are both individual and shared, where recognizing our connectedness and mutual responsibility is integral to creating fully inclusive economic and political systems. The values of the women we interviewed suggest that if we can redefine the public sphere as a place of partnerships and relationships among citizens and communities, rather than of individuals simply protecting their rights, we can create the kind of social networks and ties that build more integrated and consciously interdependent communities, while respecting the dignity and rights of all (Caiazza 2005).

This moral vision for public life challenges all of us to create a society with the social, economic, and political conditions that allow all citizens real choice and agency in their lives. Groups concerned about social welfare should pay particular attention to fully integrating this voice and vision into their work and leadership.

Obstacles to Women's Political Activism

Once engaged in community organizations, not all women are involved in political work, and even some of the most dedicated political activists we interviewed were not originally interested in that role. Their reasons for avoiding politics reflect several obstacles to women's political engagement that groups can address.

Some women are simply disillusioned with politics. They argue that our political system is unresponsive, particularly to those who are not economically and racially privileged. For example,

Every time I started to become involved in politics it just seemed so vile <laughs> and jaded, and it was all about power, and one-upmanship, and I was never comfortable with that.

[I'm interested in politics] but I'm realistic about it...what I'd like things to be, politically, is not going to happen, because I don't have the money and you've got to have money...It's the money and it's the nepotism and you get people in positions who don't know what they're doing...See, we're poor. <laughter> We don't have any money. <laughter> ... I don't want to keep spinning my wheels about things.

These women reflect generally low levels of confidence that participation can affect politics in the United States, particularly among women. Less than one in five Americans feels confident in their ability to influence national politics. Only about half feel that way about local politics. Among women, just 46 percent believe that they can influence local politics, compared with 53 percent of men (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 1997). In polls, women are also consistently more likely than men to say that government and elected officials do not address the issues or policy concerns that are most important to them.

Other women describe an initial discomfort with their religious values motivating political activism: they harbor a concern that “religion and politics don't mix.” For example, as a now prominent community leader describes her first training,

[The trainer] was talking about power and self-interest, and I go, my God, this is repulsive, I am offended, oh my goodness. I said, this is not Christian. Christians are supposed to be self-sacrificing. I said, this is obnoxious, and I went back and I wrote a five-page dossier as to why Christians should not be involved in faith-based organizing.

This kind of resistance was relatively common in our interviews, and the leaders of community groups noticed it as well—and not just from women. A male pastor who is involved in a local interfaith social justice group describes the problem:

I get resistance from the parish around some of these things, just because you're constantly up against the model of, politics over here and church over here, but you just have to keep banging away at it.

The director of a national group echoes his concerns:

When we do work with faith communities and with faith-based leaders, we hear the same thing over and over again, which is that people want to do charity work. And they don't quite get, or they feel they're not real clear about, what advocacy or social justice change is about.... It seems to take the service work into politics, the religious into politics, and for many there's such a divide. One is religion and one is politics.

Neither the leaders nor participants of religious community organizing express a hope to legislate their religious traditions in law or policy. Rather, their goal is to validate that religious values can motivate and inform activism just as non-religious values can. Still, the rigid church-state distinction that Americans hold dear can cause many religious people discomfort with their own motivations and worldviews as applicable to public life. This keeps many from getting involved in political activism.

Among women, though, the most commonly described obstacle to political activism is a sense of discomfort with taking on political, and especially public, roles. As one woman says, "It goes against the nature of the way I was raised." Another says, "I was very uncomfortable with going into [an elected official's] office. I was intimidated." Another evokes her heritage as a Latina immigrant:

I remember my father saying to me, "You don't even look at someone eye to eye. It's disrespectful. You lower your sight, you don't stare at someone." So, the whole idea that I would be taught how to confront someone was terrifying.

Alarming, most of the women we interviewed describe some sense of discomfort with political engagement. And a fear of activism is most commonly expressed by women with the least power: women of color and women from the smaller U.S. religious traditions, particularly when they come from low-income or immigrant backgrounds. For these women, the fear of claiming public, political roles is acute. They argue that it has developed based not only on their experiences and roles as women, but also on their own experiences, and the experiences of their communities, with racial or religious discrimination, hatred, and lack of voice.

Women leaders in religious community groups also observe discomfort with political activism among the women they try to mobilize. As one notes,

A lot of women don't have the level of confidence or even the socialization that men have had around how to be in the world, and putting that energy out and being assertive and confrontive. . . . We're socialized to be nurturers, to be non-confrontive, and so it's operating outside of our realm of our comfort zone.

Of course, men can feel uncomfortable with politics, too, and some leaders note that moving people into political work is difficult generally speaking. One argued that it often has to do with a sense that our social and economic problems are too big—and not knowing, exactly, how to tackle them:

I just think [people] don't know what the options are and they don't know how to do it. ... We've got to get out and talk to people better. We've just got to do the work that's fundamentally core organizing work. We've got to do it bigger and better, you know? So it's not—I don't think it's an intellectual challenge. I don't think it's even a spiritual problem of being able to make the spiritual connects. It's really an organizing challenge.

But women, and particularly women from disadvantaged backgrounds, have a psychological barrier to political activism that many men do not: historical exclusion from politics and political leadership. Politics has been, and largely continues to be, a white man's game. Despite major changes in gender roles in recent decades, women still have lower levels of political involvement than white men. They also have dismally low political representation. In part, women are less engaged because they are simply less interested in politics than men—not surprisingly, because they do not see politics as their world. Research suggests that if women had proportional elected representation, women's psychological interest in politics would increase substantially. In fact, research suggests that if women held half of all elected offices in the United States, women would be *more* interested in politics than men are (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). For women from disadvantaged communities, the sense of political irrelevance is exacerbated by racial, ethnic, and class-based discrimination and exclusion.

Many of the women activists we interviewed recognize or reflect women's psychological barriers to participating in politics. Women often described a hesitation to claim authority, particularly in politics, because it feels uncomfortable or inappropriate for them to do so. For many, their hesitations are wrapped up in more general hesitations to take on leadership—a discomfort with a public role of authority. But for many others, there was or is resistance to thinking of political activism as appropriate to their lives as women.

For many women, discomfort with expressing anger or outrage can compound their uneasiness with political roles. Many women have a hard time embracing their anger as appropriate to their roles as women. Acting on anger can be seen as violating an ethic of care, collaboration, or peace that they think is more appropriate to themselves as women, and often particularly as religious women. Anger, in contrast, feels violent or egoistic: again, “this is not Christian. Christians are supposed to be self-sacrificing.” Such concerns

are not unusual, among women from both Christian and non-Christian traditions, and in fact are justified by religious histories of decrying women's anger as inappropriate to their roles—in some religious traditions, even sinful. By publicly expressing anger, women do indeed put themselves at risk of being attacked as acting inappropriately.

Women of color, immigrant women, and those from smaller U.S. religions describe another layer of difficulty that contributes to their hesitations in joining political life: fear of physical or political retribution for speaking out. Among African American women, a history of political violence against their communities—often observed or experienced by the women interviewed—shapes their willingness to act. Among immigrant women, or the daughters of immigrants, fears of confrontation or even visibility are also based on a history of abuse. Asian American women point to the internment camps of World War II where their parents or grandparents were held. Latinas learned from their parents to keep their heads down to avoid being fired, physically harmed, or threatened with deportation. Among Muslim and South Asian women, targeted violence and increased scrutiny by government security officials since 9/11 led many to fear activism. One Muslim activist described the threatened imprisonment of her eight-year-old son, who was with her at a rally for peace in the Middle East. These experiences keep many women from taking on more public roles.

Compounding women's psychological barriers are, of course, the considerable limitations women can face once they *want* to play a public political role. Almost every woman we interviewed described some kind of experience with resistance from men, a denigrating of their public authority. These experiences range from being ignored, to being asked to help with the food rather than speak publicly, to being publicly slapped. Often, they are related to obvious discomfort with having a woman lead. As one, a Latina leader, says,

There can be some intimidation at having a young woman be the lead of a project, especially a power-related project—I mean, advocacy is about power. There is either intimidation or a doubt about the relevancy of the project, or the potential for success of the project, when it's being led by a woman... When [a male colleague] first brought our [task force] together, there was a lot of male participation. And then I took it over, and they drifted away. And it's not as if they weren't in the loop or they weren't being informed or what have you.... I'm coming to find consistency in that people appreciate having a leader, and at first they're drawn to the fact that you're young, you're a woman, and you're Latina... [but when the work is] not just about service, but it's about change, I'm finding that there's some reluctance, call it intimidation, call it doubt, because you're not the traditional leader.

Many of the women we interviewed speak in these terms about the ongoing difficulties women have in claiming political authority.

Importantly, within religious organizations, resistance to women's public roles can be particularly acute. Historically, most religious institutions have been aggressive and dogmatic about excluding women from positions of leadership and other public roles. At a basic level, men's dominance of leadership in almost all religions—in conjunction with official limitations on women's religious authority in many—sends a message that only men can rightfully claim it. At a deeper level, most religious denominations are rooted in a history of patriarchal values and traditions. These traditions, which assign women specific roles centered around family, children, and private life, can also exclude them from public forms of leadership. Often, such traditions are presented as inherently and fundamentally moral—making them even more difficult to challenge (Buchanan 1996; Chopp and Davaney 1997; Pateman 1988; Schneider and Schneider 1997). For women working as activists in religious settings, patriarchal traditions are an additional barrier to taking on any kind of public role. And because these religious structures have historically justified women's exclusion from politics, they present a barrier specific to women's political involvement.

Most of the women we interviewed recognize their religions' patriarchal histories and traditions. Within their congregations, most have noticed or personally experienced the ramifications of this history, and they express frustration with what it means for their roles within their congregations. In fact, some interviewees had sought out interfaith settings as a place of more freedom to take on a form of religious leadership. Despite their frustrations, though, many women remain within their congregations because of their commitment to most of the values those congregations represent. Women do not want to abandon a place that is so central to the values they believe in, even though they are also frustrated and disappointed with it.

This is not an uncommon position for women generally, of course. Not just religious institutions but the economic, social, and cultural systems that structure our lives all shape women's expectations and roles. For example, women are still largely expected to be primary caregivers in their families. As a result, the basic responsibilities and patterns of their lives differ on average from men's, with more of a focus on children, education, and related responsibilities. Perhaps not surprisingly, when women participate politically, issues related to education and child well-being are often the focus of their activism.

Surveys suggest that women bring different perspectives to the roles and expectations facing them, but in general, even when women are frustrated with

those expectations, most conform to them at least to some extent. The risks of not conforming are too high. In political work, facing and potentially defying expectations about women require them both to confront their hesitations about claiming a public voice—a voice historically denied them—and to step out of a place of safety. This requires taking on profound responsibility for one’s life and the life of the community.

Asking women to undertake the process of embracing a public voice, then, is no small task. It is by no means impossible, however, as women’s political leadership and activism in interfaith community organizing shows. A variety of community-based groups have devoted time and energy to mobilizing women’s participation, often quite effectively. The key to their success lies in recognizing the obstacles to women’s public voice. Strategies for doing so are outlined in the rest of this report.

doing miraculous things:

Six Strategies for Encouraging Women's Political Activism

“ I went to a week-long training...And I got clarity that the power did not come from [my organization], but [my organization] taught me how to use it. So I came back from the training, and I just began to do quite miraculous things.”

How can groups help women overcome their difficulty taking on political roles? What strategies help give women faith that political activism can work, inspire comfort with activism motivated by religious values, and encourage women to claim their political voices? What tactics can help minimize or counteract resistance to women's authority when they take on political leadership? This section describes ways that groups have successfully accomplished these goals.

The recommendations outlined below are based on three main sources: themes observed within the interviews conducted for the study, strategies articulated as effective by women who had experienced them (again within the interviews), and observations by IWPR researchers of programs developed by organizations. The recommendations are organized into six main strategies, described in more detail in the following sections:

- 1 Provide Political Role Models of Women Who Break the Mold
- 2 Provide Space for Women to Address Their Fears and Embrace Their Anger
- 3 Build Connections Across Lines of Race and Class
- 4 Gently Push Women into Political Leadership (with Force if Necessary)
- 5 Develop Mentoring Programs with Activist Components
- 6 Meet Women Where They Are

Interspersed with these recommendations are case studies of four groups that have used combinations of the recommended strategies: the Ntosake Women's Leadership Training Program of the Gamaliel Foundation, the Interfaith Children's Movement of Metropolitan Atlanta, the Georgia Citizens' Coalition on Hunger, and Interfaith Worker Justice.

1

STRATEGY #1: Provide Political Role Models of Women Who Break the Mold

One strategy for promoting women’s political voice is to hold up role models for women’s political activism. Role modeling, of course, has been proven effective in many settings, including work, community, and political life. Role models in activists groups can help women see new possibilities for their potential involvement in politics and activism. Just seeing someone “like them” do similar work can be enlightening and empowering.

An obvious place for groups to start providing role models is by ensuring that women are in positions of organizational leadership, particularly in their political work. The women activists we interviewed argue strongly that seeing women in these positions is both eye-opening and inspiring. In fact, in our interviews we found an interesting testament to the importance of role models: women voting with their feet. Not only did many women say that they were attracted to the work of their organization by women’s leadership, but in most of the organizations in this study that are led by women directors, women are also the majority of staff and volunteers. In contrast, groups with male leaders tend to be more mixed.

Women who did not have their own role models—often pioneers in their work—also see the importance of this strategy. Many express a hope that their work can provide an example for younger women that they can “do” both politics and religion. As one said,

When I look at the activist things I’m involved in, as a Muslim I would say the most important attribute is to show people that what I do is in the service of God. And then I don’t care anymore what anybody says. That’s an important example I try to set for, say, young women who are involved in other groups, and maybe facing the same things. It keeps you moving forward, because you’re always working towards that goal. Once people see that you are unwavering in your commitment to God, they will be more inclined to follow you.

For women of color, and those from smaller U.S. religions such as Islam or Hinduism, role modeling can also address a common fear of vulnerability to attack, from the broader U.S. community or even within their own communities. Muslim women, for example, describe the power of seeing their role models define Islamic womanhood for themselves, in front of both Muslims and non-Muslims. African American women describe the importance of a Black woman minister taking on a public role. Simply seeing women like them engaging in political struggle opens new doors for what, in their eyes, is possible.

Organizations can also provide role models for women’s activism and leadership using historical or scriptural figures. A common figure cited by groups, for example, is the Biblical model of Esther, who stood up to her husband, the king of Persia, to save her Jewish people. Groups often use her example to encourage Jewish and Christian women to claim their own power as leaders. Similarly, Islamic groups use figures such as Fatima or Aisha to exemplify women’s strength and political savvy. Groups also use more recent examples of women’s religious and political activism, such as Dorothy Day, Delores Huerta, or Fannie Lou Hamer. These figures suggest that women do not violate religious principles or values by participating in political activism, and that women can work as effective and powerful religious and political authorities.

To summarize, providing role models for women’s public leadership encourages women to see themselves in a new light—as potential leaders. Groups can accomplish this in several ways:

- By ensuring that women, including women from disadvantaged racial, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds, are in positions of political authority within organizational life.
- By encouraging women in leadership positions to articulate how claiming power is inspired and legitimated by their religious values and understandings.
- By illustrating the possibility and importance of women’s public roles through models of women religious and political leaders in scripture, history, or contemporary life.

2

STRATEGY #2: Provide Space for Women to Address Their Fears and Embrace Their Anger

A second strategy for encouraging women into political activism is to provide targeted opportunities to discuss their barriers to doing so, including their discomfort with political roles and their concerns about expressing anger or outrage, particularly in public settings. Groups can provide this kind of space through workshops, retreats, or other training settings devoted specifically to women's public voice. Larger, existing training programs, particularly those that deal with questions of power and authority, can also include components dedicated to addressing women's psychological barriers to political activism.

Many community groups provide some kind of training to their volunteers, ranging from skills development, to scriptural discussions of religious values, to training on religious or racial diversity. Groups incorporate political content into their trainings, teaching skills such as how to conduct public hearings, how to hold a press conference, or how to tell personal stories effectively. Some groups sponsor community organizing workshops or longer trainings, often in the style pioneered and developed by Saul Alinsky, where participants are encouraged to analyze political relationships through a lens of power and self-interest. These trainings frequently incorporate religious imagery, often to show participants that themes like struggling for and against power, fighting for justice, articulating self-interest, and expressing anger and outrage are all evident in their religious values and traditions. For example, one group leader describes using the example of God attracting Moses' attention with a burning bush—a symbol of power and energy—in order to send Moses on a journey to free the Jewish people:

We've taken the burning bush dialogue and turned that into a three-person play. We have people read it and then have the group analyze it.... In the conversation God is agitating Moses around his vision, around his self-interest... Then you say, is there a situation like that that we're dealing with?

Another frequent strategy involves outlining the approaches of different religious traditions to social justice issues. How, for example, does Islam approach issues of worker justice? How do its ideas and values compare with those of Catholicism or Judaism? Women describe this strategy as helping them see the values that are common to various religions, which then builds a sense of solidarity and empowerment about addressing social justice from a religious perspective.

Trainings of this type have a long and effective history of producing political leadership within community organizing. They have been developed and

implemented by a variety of organizations, often religious ones, including the Industrial Areas Foundation, the Gamaliel Foundation, the Pacific Institute for Community Organizing, and others. They are described by many participants, men and women alike, as empowering their political activism and leadership (e.g., Warren 2001, Wood 2002; for more information on the community organizing strategies involved, see also Bobo, Kendall, and Max 2001). The approaches used in such trainings can help women in particular, though, by helping them see both political activism and anger as appropriate *religious* responses to injustice. These are two responses that women are traditionally discouraged from embracing.

At the same time, community organizing trainings only rarely involve analyses of how gender roles and expectations shape women's experiences in organizing or political work, despite the implications of gender for concepts such as power, diversity, and religious values. As a woman priest argues,

[The community organizing training] is a model that's based on relationships, and it gets people committed to one another, and then gets them committed to the issues.... But if your goal is to undo patriarchy, then you've got to do a little bit of gender training and help that out.... You do the power analysis of who's got the power, what's the culture, who are we trying to talk to. But we did not put gender in there specifically, and we should have.

In fact, the women we interviewed who have experienced trainings that address issues of gender explicitly report being empowered, politically, by the experience. Leaders we interviewed describe the same patterns among women they have observed. In other words, when this kind of analysis exists, women embrace it with enthusiasm.

Groups that incorporate gender analyses into their work use a variety of techniques. One is to give women space to interpret religious values, traditions, and symbols that acknowledge and celebrate their lives and experiences. This can entail focusing on women religious or scriptural figures who have taken leadership, particularly on behalf of justice: from Judaism's Esther to Islam's Aisha to Hinduism's Vishnu. Such work can also make use of more recent examples of women's religious leadership around justice issues, drawing on figures such as Rosa Parks or Jane Addams for modern examples of women's religious and political leadership. And it can involve discussing feminist theologies and reinterpretations of texts. Several Islamic organizations, for example, seek to mobilize women by pointing to support for women's leadership in scripture. Allowing women to see their own lives and concerns reflected in their religious values and traditions can give them comfort with religious authority, which they can then apply to claiming political authority.

It also allows women to see political activism as appropriate to their lives as religious women.

Another strategy involves providing women the space to name and explore their psychological barriers to politics and leadership. Such programs encourage women to think about why they are uncomfortable taking on a public role, including how their socialization and the patterns of their lives contribute to their hesitations. They push women to apply their analysis of power distribution and self-interest to their activism and leadership as women.

Programs use a combination of strategies for encouraging women's activism: role plays and public readings on the issues being addressed, group facilitated discussions with leaders who push women to share and analyze their experiences, one-on-one conversations that follow up on concerns and hesitations, even simple opportunities to stand up in front of a larger group and talk about what holds women back. The techniques have several underlying goals: to engage women's personal emotions so that they are more comfortable expressing their anger; to link their private lives and roles with their public hesitations; and to articulate and assert their self-interest. In general, these trainings encourage women to embrace power, both for themselves and on behalf of change. (A good example of a training model that uses these and other strategies is provided in the section on the Ntosake Women's Leadership Training Program of the Gamaliel Foundation, on page 22.)

For many women, this process is difficult, because it requires them to examine how they have conformed to expectations and limits imposed on them as women by religious and other institutions. As one community organizer says,

More often than not, women conform to these demands. This approach provides a sense of safety, innocence, acceptance, etc. It also allows one to live without responsibility for our own lives or the lives of the ones we care about. Many women wind up frustrated, disappointed, feeling powerless and without direction. A reflection into one's own life is not only about your hesitations or fears about the public world, but about how you became that way and what you would lose if you entered.

When groups encourage women to engage in this process, they also need to recognize how difficult it can be and provide women the supports they need to get through it successfully. This can include, for example, group and one-on-one settings where they can examine their lives and fears with other women. Such settings need to communicate, fundamentally, a sense of respect and dignity to the women involved, a recognition of what the process entails emotionally and psychologically.

The most effective programs for empowering women’s political participation also allow women to define the terms and topics of conversation about the issues facing them, rather than imposing traditional concepts and structures that tend to be developed and defined by men. Not only can this process give women the experience of taking on voice and leadership, but it encourages women to bring the particular experiences and concerns of their lives and backgrounds to the table. Women can explore how issues of gender, race, ethnicity, class, or religious difference—as well as personal relationships, joys, and tragedies—have shaped their lives. And they can do so on their own terms.

Giving women this authority, of course, can involve radical transformations of traditional trainings, a process that can be threatening to some leaders. But the payoff for women is profound: the experience of revamping trainings from their own perspectives has a uniquely empowering effect for both trainers and other participants. One long-term organizer even argues that the experience of designing a new training led to a rapid influx of women taking on leadership positions in her organization.

To summarize, organizations can encourage women to explicitly address their barriers to claiming public role using several strategies:

- ▶ By framing political issues and anger with religious values, stories, and figures—especially women—in order to increase women’s comfort with outrage and political activism as appropriate religious responses.
- ▶ By creating opportunities for women to reflect on and interpret religious texts, values, traditions, and role models, particularly as they are linked to women’s actual and potential public roles, based on their own lives and experiences.
- ▶ By providing the space and opportunity for women to discuss, analyze, and address their hesitations and experiences with resistance to leadership, within existing trainings or in trainings just for women.
- ▶ Within these trainings, by encouraging women to express their emotions and embrace their anger, particularly on behalf of change, and to link their private lives to their public hesitations, so that they can feel more comfortable claiming power and articulating self-interest. This can be done using role plays, group-based analysis of central concepts and how they relate to women’s lives, one-on-one analysis designed to push women toward public roles, and other techniques.
- ▶ By allowing women themselves to define and facilitate this kind of analysis.



Redefining Power and Self-Interest: The Ntosake Women's Leadership Training Program, Gamaliel Foundation

For over twenty years, the Gamaliel Foundation has been training community organizers across the country to advocate around housing, transportation, and other community welfare issues. Originally established in 1968 to fight discrimination by financial institutions on Chicago's Westside, Gamaliel was restructured in 1986 into an organizing institute that supports community leaders as they develop organizations in low-income communities. Gamaliel now has more than 45 affiliates in 17 U.S. states and three provinces of South Africa.

Mary Gonzales, a founder and now Director of Western Territory for Gamaliel, has been involved with community organizing since her childhood in the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago, when her mother brought her to meetings to serve as typist. She was trained in organizing primarily by men and has been a trainer herself for many years. She was Gamaliel's first woman trainer. In that role, Gonzales was approached by women members of Gamaliel, who insisted that women needed an alternative training model to address the particular hesitations and barriers they have to leadership.

From this history came the founding of the Ntosake Women's Leadership Training Program. Gonzales describes the development of the new training, which was largely implemented by the women participating:

I asked different small teams of women, "Would you take care of the opening piece? Would you take care of the closing piece?" And so the women, they brought in candles, books, photographs, ribbons.... They did role plays, they did a redefinition of power and self-interest from a woman's perspective, public and private from a woman's perspective, what women bring to the public arena that never gets acknowledged either in the training or in the way we do the actual actions.

Also at this first meeting, participants adopted the name Ntosake, a South African word meaning "she who walks with lions and carries her own things." This concept was introduced by a participant during an ecumenical prayer service that was part of the training.

Gonzales points to several key elements of the training. First, it was generated by women themselves. The women who designed it had been through Gamaliel's national training program and were familiar with the concepts used by the organization, but they decided to use an alternative model for women that would complement and in some ways replace how that training is done, rather than simply replicating it in a women-only setting. Second, the model

they developed specifically addresses the links between women’s private or family lives, their emotions, and their public work. It encourages women to tap into the emotional core of their community activism, and it acknowledges that elements of women’s private lives shape their public experiences, both by affecting their opportunities and expectations and by shaping their priorities in public life.

A central part of the Ntosake training is encouraging women to rethink their ideas about religious faith, anger, and power. Many women who attend are uncomfortable with anger as a religious value: they see it instead as destructive and unholy. Gamaliel, however, encourages them to think about how religious figures (including Christ) have embraced and used their own anger to influence their actions and have also embraced power in both traditional and untraditional forms. It offers models of women’s anger and power, from Audre Lorde to Mother Jones. It explicitly encourages women to move into their gut so that they do less “screening” of their anger—it tries to move women away from their constant concerns about being “good girls.” At one training, for example, a session leader argued that “the powers that be want us to think we can’t be angry,” and asked women to embrace power and ambition on behalf of their anger.

Another central concept in Ntosake is self-interest. Trainers argue that women often let others define their interests, and that women must be aware of and comfortable with asserting their own self-interest. As a trainer said in one session, “As long as you are a nobody I can shape you.” The training even explicitly asks women to define self-interest outside of marriage and family—here, again, Ntosake encourages women to link but distinguish between public and private. Trainers also connect the concept of self-interest to women’s faith lives, arguing that only by embracing their own power and self-interest do women manifest God in the world.

Ntosake trainers argue that the basic community organizing tools of confrontation and agitation—often done in one-on-one sessions with colleagues, but also with political figures—are a strategy that women should embrace as a religious act. As the facilitator of one training session said, “When we do agitation we say, I see God in you.” Importantly, this concept is key to how the program itself is run. Although it is emotionally draining, and often fairly confrontational itself, trainers affirm and embrace participants in a way that expresses their fundamental respect for each other. This helps women engage in the difficult process of examining their lives and fears, including the risks of taking on a public role. As Gonzales describes how she and other Ntosake trainers approaches this role,

I get very high ratings as a trainer... [Our director] sat down with me and we debated this for several hours one time. And he said, "I think I've figured it out." He said, "I think I've figured out why. You kick the hell out of people and when it's over they love you.... You hold people accountable. You engage people at the deepest level... But they never ever feel like you don't care what's going to happen to them. They never get the sense that this is just an exercise. They actually believe that what you're doing with them at the moment is as important to you as it is to them."

This approach is used not only by Gonzales but by other trainers in the Ntosake program.

Another effective component of Ntosake is that it brings together women from a variety of backgrounds to encourage their leadership development. A typical recent training, for example, involved Latina, African American, Asian American, and white women; women with doctorates and those who never finished high school; ministers, lay people, and agnostics; welfare recipients, college professors, and retirees. As described below, this experience itself can be a profound way to empower women's public voice. Involving diverse women, of course, also develops leadership among women from a wide variety of backgrounds, which in turn provides a deep pool for role modeling women's leadership within the organization.

Gamaliel has reaped tremendous benefits from Ntosake in the years since its founding:

Within three years, 50 percent of all the presidents in [the group] became women. And suddenly, I wasn't the only [woman] trainer. There were ten women training... If you ask [our director] today, has the training changed in the last 20 years, he'd say absolutely. And if you asked him what was the major change, he would say the women who began to train.

Ntosake's leaders hope to build on the success of the program to influence the programmatic work of Gamaliel. As Gonzales says,

My constant agitation to the women of Gamaliel is, when is your stuff going to get on the table? Every time I hear the issue platform, it's always male stuff: Violence, housing, land development, transportation systems. Those are the things men think about. But the things that women have to struggle with, the care of elderly parents, the quality of schools, whether there are Head Start programs for working parents or working mothers, single mothers, health care—those issues are not getting on the table.... We've got to somehow politicize the women to say this isn't only about community stuff; it's about politics; it's about power.

These efforts have made inroads, as some of Gamaliel’s affiliates have started promoting local policies with women’s issues in mind. Recent efforts, for example, have promoted set-asides for women among government contracts for construction and transportation jobs, and Gonzales hopes to pursue similar set-asides for single-mother families in subsidized housing.

Ntosake exemplifies the effectiveness of several strategies for mobilizing women. It provides a women-centered and -designed program that deals with the specific psychological barriers women have to politics. It is especially concerned with teaching women to embrace power and anger on behalf of change. It accomplishes this by linking women’s political activism to faith values, scripture, and religious figures, and in doing so, it defines religious work broadly to encompass activism itself. Finally, it brings together women from diverse communities and encourages them to share their experiences, dreams, and hesitations. Together, these elements have helped Ntosake, and Gamaliel, develop women’s public roles.

Linking Injustice, Empathy, and Religious Values: The Interfaith Children's Movement of Metropolitan Atlanta

On September 11, 2001, the Interfaith Children's Movement of Metropolitan Atlanta held its first major event: an interfaith prayer breakfast designed to launch a movement on behalf of children's issues in Georgia. After the service, attendees and planners learned about the tragedy that had hit the country that day. They were, like the rest of the country, devastated. But they used their pain to help inspire them as they moved forward with work on behalf of Atlanta's children in a way that is truly interfaith, bringing together not just Christians but Jews, Muslims, Unitarians, Hindus, Baha'is, and others in the Atlanta community.

ICMMA works on many difficult issues. A main focus is battling efforts to treat juvenile offenders like adults in the legal and prison systems and to improve the conditions that they face in both. Although these issues are generally difficult to mobilize people around, ICMMA has been successful at getting women involved in its work. Its strategies for doing so, including its work combining public education, skills development, and a focus on faith and moral values, illustrate some effective ways to inspire women's political activism.

One of ICMMA's founders and current board members, Rev. Roslyn Satchel, describes ICMMA's work in congregations to raise awareness of the issues it addresses:

Most of the congregations are far more interested in coming out and doing work on behalf of children than simply coming to a meeting.... So we do skills-building workshops at these meetings. So the draw is, learn how to be an effective child advocate at the Interfaith Children's Movement meeting on Wednesday, September 22nd. Folks want to learn how to be an advocate. People come out in large numbers. And we have wonderful workshops teaching them how to do the work of advocacy. We bring in lobbyists, we bring in legislators, and we talk about a specific issue-area of child advocacy, such as juvenile justice, foster care or healthcare for children. For example, we advertise, "Come and learn what's happening with kids in the juvenile court system," and we have judges, probation officers, and other key players present at the meeting. So, 30-45 minutes of a 90 minute meeting would be a skills-building program with an educational component on current issues in the respective system. Our meetings became an education opportunity and a mobilization opportunity.

Here, ICMMA uses skills workshops to attract people and then expose them to issues of juvenile justice.

ICMMA focuses its presentation of the issues on the impact on individual young people's lives. Drawing people into political action around juvenile justice poses a unique challenge, because many people do not have sympathy for the young people for whom ICMMA advocates. As a result, its public education workshops are designed to build empathy for the children by taking a very personal approach to the issues:

When we walk in there, and we're talking about children who rape, murder, molest, and rob with weapons, at first the audience may be thinking, my daughter was robbed at gunpoint and I'm not going to even—and by the end they're thinking, but these are kids, 13, 14, 15 years old, locked up for life, with a 10-year mandatory minimum. And then folks start thinking about, "when I was 15 I did this, and God, how my life would have been different if I had been locked up with criminals, adult criminals, for 10 years." So, to see the lights go off, and the eyes well up with tears, and the faces turn beet red, and then to have people come up afterwards and say, I was not really open to this until you started telling me stories about these kids, and now I just need to know what to do...I need to do something, and if it's just writing a letter or if it's going out and doing a workshop with another group...I'll do it. And then having those same people come out in the middle of their work week at 7:00 p.m. for another workshop to talk about what's going on in the legislature, who do we need to talk to next, what's the next mode of action.... And having them call back in the middle of their work day and say, I can't stop thinking about what's happening with these kids. That's an amazing success.

Satchel estimates that at least two-thirds of those who attend the workshops are women. Many of these women have followed up by attending or even speaking at legislative hearings in the city. The workshops seem to effectively inspire empathy and even anger, and, by combining this approach with skills development, give women the tools to take the next step. Importantly, the combination of political skills development, public education with personal stories, and holding events in religious settings is also a way for women to see that their anger can be applied to political work in a religiously appropriate way.

Another component of ICMMA's success is its work connecting social justice issues to religious values and traditions using a deliberately interfaith strategy. Satchel sees both the faith connection and the interfaith experience as initially attractive to many people, but also as a mechanism for keeping them involved. For example, an early event brought together over 400 people around a children's Sabbath:

We had Filipino traditional dancers, we had African drummers, we had Native American griots, we had Sikh singers, we had Baha'i poets, we had a little bit of every culture represented in our meetings in that worship service. And what we wanted to make sure we did was to have everybody really, truly, authentically bring who they were to the table, and I think that's what made it so strong.... After that people said, what can we do to be involved? Whatever it takes, we've got to continue this.... What do we do to take this to the next level? And a lot of those people have been around for the long haul... That's what really got people to bring all their skills to the fore.

ICMMA has prioritized keeping itself truly interfaith by using these and other strategies to publicly exemplify its commitment to multiculturalism. Its board represents many religious traditions, and its meetings are rotated among a variety of congregations. As a former leader argues, "I think it's important that those members who are not Christians don't feel like they're on the periphery of the organization." This work has not always been easy; as one member noted, "When we started to have a really serious conversation about moving beyond Christendom, it made a lot of people uncomfortable." Still, it has become a central part of how ICMMA organizes its work and activities.

ICMMA's work exemplifies the importance of several key strategies. In addition to providing its volunteers with specific political skills, it works to raise awareness and empathy for those affected by its main issues, often through the use of individual stories. It connects injustice to faith, and the values common to many religions, by using religious imagery in an interfaith setting. These strategies help motivate political involvement among women as activists and leaders.

STRATEGY #3: Build Connections Across Lines of Race and Class

Another strategy that can empower women's public voice is to build connections among women across race and class. Many groups, of course, encourage these connections without the specific goal of mobilizing women's activism. But crossing lines of race and class seems to have two benefits for women: it encourages a sense of empathy that inspires commitment and a builds a stronger sense of shared responsibility for social justice. Building relationships across race and class lines can also empower women as they discover that some of their hesitations with public voice are shared—even while they acknowledge the importance of differences in race, class, and religion.

Many community organizing groups, of course, bring together people of different backgrounds. This is especially true of interfaith groups, which, by building coalitions among different congregations and denominations, can break through the racial and ethnic segregation that still exists on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Through interfaith organizing, women encounter others they would not normally come across in their daily lives.

To build an experience that is empowering and fosters empathy among women, groups can provide space for women to explore their common and distinct experiences. If groups create multicultural settings in workshops designed to address women's barriers to public voice, for example, they can encourage diverse women to see that their experiences have common threads. This, in turn, can encourage women to feel more confident in their ability to defy the expectations and limits placed on them. As a low-income African American woman describes her experience in workshops devoted to analyzing individual hesitations with leadership:

Most of the community organizers went to college, but they come here and they've got issues, too. And their issues may be similar to ours.... We start feeling like, okay, they may think they're better than we are, until you learn different stuff about them.... It just lets you know that people are people, and sometimes we come with some of the same baggage.

As this woman suggests, such sharing can show women that their perceived limitations are not unique—and can be overcome.

This kind of relationship building may be particularly effective if it includes women who are already in leadership positions within organizations. Their involvement can reveal to less experienced women that their concerns and hesitations are shared even by women who have seemingly moved beyond

them—which can, again, be empowering. Many women interviewed, in fact, said that hearing about the fears of their role models helped them overcome their own. One younger woman, for example, describes the importance of hearing about her director’s experiences: “She tells you her story. Tells you all the things that she wonders, and doesn’t sugarcoat it. She doesn’t hide it. She just lets you know that you can be great.”

To summarize, building connections across race and class lines is an important strategy for encouraging women’s political activism. Groups can encourage this process:

- By creating forums for women of different backgrounds to share experiences and express their issues with public voice, which can build confidence, empathy, and awareness and, as a result, empower and politicize women.
- By involving women leaders in these exchanges, so that women can see that even their role models experience difficulties—but have also overcome them.

STRATEGY #4: Gently Push Women into Political Leadership (with Force if Necessary)

A fourth effective strategy for promoting women's political activism is to ease—and then push—women into leadership. Groups can start by giving women relatively low-risk opportunities to lead, and gradually move them into more responsible and public forums, somewhat forcefully if necessary. This approach gives women opportunities to practice taking positions of authority in relatively safe spaces, but over time can transition them into increasingly public—and political—roles. It helps women gradually break out of expectations and limitations on their public voice. It can also help women build political skills as they move into leadership, helping compensate for a skills gap that often exists between men and women.

Among disadvantaged women, this process may be particularly important for helping confront fears related to taking on visible, public, political roles. It can gradually increase confidence, diminish a sense of unwelcome or lack of belonging, and alleviate concerns about conflict or retribution, as over time women get used to a public voice.

A group committed to mobilizing low-income Latinas for community advocacy provides an effective example of this strategy. The program began with a participatory research project in which low-income Latinas were trained to do interviews and focus groups about their community's experiences and concerns. This work was designed in part to increase their confidence:

Even when they've participated in focus groups, that's public speaking. It's not in front of a board, and it's not out there in front of strangers, but even speaking out in a group, sharing their experience in a public space, it's the not the same thing as being in their home talking to others.

The group has then encouraged women into increasingly public space:

It has developed their public speaking confidence and ability. I have also tried to [have] them take different steps. Attend a meeting, just be present. That in and of itself is a huge step, because it's a foreign space, it's not a welcoming space, it's not a space where they see themselves included or mirrored, because there's nobody else like them in there, so even that step is huge.

Eventually, women in the program spoke in front of their city council on behalf of the issues they had identified as important. By encouraging women to take steps into public leadership, the program successfully mobilized them into directly political activism. Importantly, the increasingly public work from

the beginning also involved opportunities to voice their own experiences and perspectives.

Groups using this strategy must make a concerted effort at several stages. First, they must create low-risk settings for public voice: the interviews described above are one tactic, and staff meetings or retreats might be another. But groups must also take the step of translating increased comfort with leadership to more public settings. Sometimes, this can mean insisting on it:

[We try to stress that] failure is not the issue for which we should be concerned, it's failing to act, so making the mistake is minor, because we can always help correct any mistake that gets made. But not trying is the worst sin in our operation. So all our staff have to get up and speak in front of public audiences. All of them have to speak to foundation staff that come to visit us.... And they agonize, they just literally some of them cry, please don't make me do it. I will give them two byes, and after that you've just got to jump in the deep.

Groups should provide women leadership opportunities that involve exercising religious and political authority in particular, because women are generally given fewer opportunities than men to lead within religious or political settings. For women, the experience of talking about the values that drive them, and interpreting those values in public settings, is highly unusual but can be empowering. Again, groups can ease women into this work by first asking them to do so in relatively safe spaces. The participatory research described above, where women were asked for their own perspectives on political and economic inequalities, is one example of a way to do this and is particularly valuable because of its directly political follow up. Another program provides space for women (and men) to share their values at its weekly meetings:

*We start meetings with *conocimiento*, and it's more than just a check in, it's more than just who are you, who are you with, who do you represent. It's an opportunity for people to be who they are and to share something of significance to them, positive or painful.... And it's been very powerful.... People have come to recognize that beyond the work, this is grounded in a deeper place.*

Again, though, this work needs to be applied eventually to more public settings—as this group does in fact do—to be maximally effective.

Encouraging women in this way can inspire other women by providing them public role models. Once women take on political leadership, they send a message that their organizations trust women enough to represent them—and thus to be an authority on political and/or religious values. As a young Muslim women said,

Our spokesperson is a female, and I'm constantly interacting with FBI, with congress people, with many people who are higher up in the social strata. So if I'm the person out in the field, that means something—that they're comfortable with me being the image and providing the substance of our organization.... I think internally it's very empowering and liberating, not to mention quite encouraging.

Finally, the process of easing women into authority can help women build skills, such as public speaking or running a meeting, as they take on leadership. This is important because research shows that women, in general, have fewer political skills and less experience practicing them than men do (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001). Groups can help bridge that gap.

To summarize, organizations can encourage women's political activism by easing them into increasingly public roles:

- ▶ By creating safe spaces within the organization for women to take on leadership, especially in political and religious matters.
- ▶ By then easing them—pushing if necessary—into more public roles that relay trust in their abilities to speak for the organization, so they can become more comfortable with those roles through experience.
- ▶ By ensuring that this process also builds political skills among women, to help close what is often a skills and experience gap with men.

Mobilizing Low-Income Women: The Georgia Citizens' Coalition on Hunger

In 1975, the Georgia Citizens' Coalition on Hunger was founded to address issues of hunger among low-income Georgia residents. The group has always had a political mission, and over the years it has addressed a broad range of issues around social welfare. It is also specifically charged with mobilizing those most affected by policies concerning poverty and social welfare. To that end, it has developed programs that provide basic services to disadvantaged people and communities, such as a hunger hotline, a food co-op, and a thrift shop. Through these programs, GCCH also recruits low-income people into its advocacy work and to work as staff members:

People need to be convinced that organizations, agencies, helping institutions really are looking for ways to help people, as opposed to how many of them operate—looking how to disqualify someone from help. And so as a result of that, sometimes we can't help the person, but we give them some time to vent because people need a place to deposit that anger and that frustration and that hurt; and when we're able to do that we often win friends who are really wanting to help us. And in the end they get involved, it catches them, and they actually begin to like the stuff that they're doing with us. But we've got a lot of people to get involved simply because in their mind they owed us. <laughter> That's alright, I don't mind them believing that they owe us, because once they're hooked then they do it for themselves.... It is a vehicle and we didn't do that by accident, it was strategic.

Rev. Sandra Robertson, Executive Director of GCCH, sees a primary role of her work as empowering poor African American woman:

My role has been to help Black women feel comfortable being in charge, and in fact encouraging them to take charge in the outside world...taking on leadership roles, taking on responsibilities within organizations that they are affiliated with, not always allowing someone else to be the one making the decisions, but feeling confident enough and capable enough to also make decisions and also carry out the responsibilities of a decision maker. And so there is a team of women that has worked very closely with the Hunger Coalition who's learned to do that quite effectively. And we're continuing to try and promote and involve—oftentimes people don't take leadership because they don't feel comfortable carrying that responsibility and failure.

To encourage leadership among the staff, GCCH provides intense training to staff members, most of whom are former welfare recipients. The organization develops their skills in specific areas, whether technology, fundraising,

or counseling, and coaches them as they take on additional responsibility. Robertson also models leadership in ways that her coworkers find profoundly moving. For example, a focal point of GCCH's activities is an annual Poor People's Day, a training, march, and lobby event at the State Capitol. One year's march involved a confrontation with the police. A staff member describes the day's events:

The police at our State Capitol stopped [participants] during a peaceful Jericho March around the Capitol and appointments to see our State Representatives. And you see your leader being pushed by the Capitol Police. Now, what is she going to do now? And you would come away from that horrible scene feeling so proud, because she stood there and she stuck up for what she believes in. She even got in to see the Governor, and we also got our appointments with State Representatives. There are many times I just stand back, I'd rather be in the background, and I'd rather be the glue that holds it together. But what if you're faced with that? Looking at her [our leader] in that situation, she didn't come unglued.

GCCH arranges programming to address the various forms of oppression—sexism, racism, classism—experienced by its staff and volunteers. In these workshops, participants are encouraged to identify and sort through their fears and hesitations:

We have internalized oppressions sessions as a part of our staff meetings, where you have to identify with your “isms.” I remember the first meeting that we had. It was about four or five years ago, and I am a product of internalized oppression. I said what is she talking about?...I'm finally out of public housing, I got a house, I got a car, I'm doing good, and we are getting along fine here [at my job]. So what is all this about? But when we started doing internalized oppression sessions, all kinds of stuff was just lifting up off of me, even things that I'd forgotten. Later, I told her about what I experienced and she just laughed. I figured then she knew I had gotten it, gotten in touch with my realities.

Often, these workshops involve discussions of religion and spirituality, linking women's faith lives to their activist lives. As Robertson says, “We pray a lot.”

Women who work at GCCH describe a transformation that provides them with a sense of authority and voice:

Being on public assistance, being in public housing, going to do your recertification interviews about your monthly check that you're receiving, most of the time when you come in, you have to abide by whatever that they would say to you. And so politically speaking, it made me feel like I didn't have a voice. When I first came to the Hunger Coalition, my director said that we need to go down to the State Capitol. It was scary for me. They were trying to

pass a bill called the Learn Fare Bill. The Director said, you have children, you should speak to this. When I got up there I was just shaking. And all of a sudden something came over me, and I began to calm down, because these are people, like I am. These people right here maneuver through this world, maybe in a different lifestyle, but just like I do. So get a grip, and say what you got to say. And that's when I wrote everything down, I had a page full. I said what I had to say.

A final important component of the GCCH program is that it encourages interaction that crosses racial and class lines. Staff members interact regularly with board members and funders, most of whom come from more privileged backgrounds. In addition, the service component of the group's work relies on volunteers from all over Atlanta, often recruited from religious congregations or universities. The backgrounds of these volunteers vary and also allow staff members, most of whom come from low-income African American communities, to interact with a more economically privileged set of volunteers, sometimes supervising them. Staff members also work closely with the community organizers who join their efforts, who themselves commonly have college degrees. Individuals from all of these groups participate in ongoing training and group sessions devoted to addressing forms of internalized oppression, in which people (including the director) share their stories, the obstacles holding them back, and how they are working to overcome them. As a deliberate strategy of GCCH, this tactic seems effective for building long-term devotion to the group's goals among women from many walks of life.

GCCH illustrates several effective strategies for mobilizing women. At a basic level, it recruits women into political activism through its service provision—in essence, meeting them where they are. It creates opportunities for women to take on public roles, but it first does so in internal settings. It also addresses, explicitly, psychological barriers to public activism in workshops and individual mentoring. It brings together women and men from different backgrounds, and it provides a profound example of women's strong and effective leadership. Together, these strategies mobilize women's political activism on behalf of low-income communities.

STRATEGY #5: Develop Mentoring Programs with Activist Components

Groups can also promote women's political involvement by adopting mentoring programs, particularly those that are focused on political activism. Mentoring, of course, is discussed as a strategy for women's empowerment and leadership in a wide range of fields, because it can help encourage confidence, build networks, and develop specific skills. Its value also applies to encouraging political activism within social justice organizing.

Mentoring strategies often combine several of the strategies described in previous sections: providing role models, giving women space to address issues of public voice, and helping them take on increasingly public roles. Mentors can use those strategies in their individual work to encourage women's public voice and political activism. Because mentoring usually happens on a one-on-one basis, it can be particularly effective for women who have hesitation with public voice—it provides encouragement in a private and relatively safe setting.

In our interviews with women activists, many—approximately two-thirds—described mentoring as important to their experiences claiming a political voice and leadership, as mentors, mentees, or both. As one, a Latina from an immigrant family, describes her own transformative experience with mentors,

All of [my mentors early in my activism] in their own ways had been politicized, and I was living in the midst of what should have politicized me.... Their constant agitation for me to get out of my own head and begin to understand what was around me, and how it was influencing what I dreamed about for my own little tiny girl that I was having, that is what transformed me. And then the actual having to do it, so it wasn't enough to just agitate me, but then pushing me into the public arena and forcing me to do something that I normally would never have considered. And those two constant things going on, I could literally feel my skin stretching.

Mentoring can involve many different kinds of interaction. Through their mentoring experiences, many women gain or pass along specific skill sets: how to facilitate meetings, how to fundraise, how to lead others diplomatically, even how to operate new technology. Some focus on the intangibles of how to survive life in the nonprofit world: how not to burn out, or how to assess power relationships in communities. Some address how to survive as women in social justice organizing.

The best political mentoring programs involve ongoing conversation and advice, in general coaching women to take on increasingly responsible opportunities to become politically active and make decisions about political strategies. A young woman describes someone who is both supervisor and mentor for the campaigns she directs:

We talk about just issues that come up... and I'll talk through them with her and try and come up with something. She's definitely supportive, she's given me a lot of leeway to come in and plan what I want to do, the way that I want do it. It's not like she says, here is what you need to do for outreach, go. We talk about it, and then I work with my staff to develop a plan, and we have the green light.

Women activists describe effective mentors who are both men and women. Older women in particular have often had male mentors, in part because of the lack of women in positions that might have provided mentoring. Many of these women found mentors who encouraged them to claim a public voice, forcing them to speak on camera or at press conferences or pushing them to confront politicians. The skills and confidence that women gained from these experiences show the importance that mentoring in general can provide.

At the same time, women also point to the benefits of having a woman mentor them. For women of color and those from the smaller U.S. religions, finding a mentor from a similar background can also be important. The reason is simple: someone with common experiences or background can address the specific difficulties that women have as they claim political space. As one leader, who has an ongoing co-mentoring relationship with one of her colleagues, describes the dynamic:

When I see her retreating to her little safe place, not to hurt a man's ego or something, then I talk to her one-on-one, not to embarrass her because I don't do that. And I review with her what she's done and ask her, what's it going to take for her to stop giving her power away? And we have a little understanding, and she says okay, thank you, I appreciate that you brought that to my attention.

In other words, women mentors can effectively keep other women from giving up their public voice, in part because they recognize how easily it can happen.

To summarize, mentoring programs can encourage women's political activism:

- ▶ By using a safe relationship to push women into political roles with increasing responsibility, challenging women beyond their comfort zone.
- ▶ By providing feedback and advice that specifically addresses the hesitations that women feel in taking on public and/or political work.
- ▶ By encouraging mentor/mentee relationships among women of similar racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, so that they can share experiences and concerns.

Mentoring Women in a Man's World: Interfaith Worker Justice

Based in Chicago, Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) started in 1991 as a local group dedicated to building religious support for workers' rights. Since then, it has evolved into a national organization with over 60 affiliates in 22 states and the District of Columbia. These affiliates have been involved in campaigns on behalf of workers in industries ranging from textiles to newspaper production to poultry farming.

IWJ's founder, Kim Bobo, is a bit of an anomaly in the worlds she inhabits: she works closely with leaders in religion and labor, both heavily male-dominated fields. IWJ's staff, though, is mainly comprised of women. In part, women's leadership in the group seems to be the result of Bobo's leadership and IWJ's commitment to mentoring staff, using deliberate and thoughtful methods of leadership development, with a particular eye toward encouraging political leadership.

IWJ's strategies range from encouraging staff members to lead internal meetings, to asking them to replace her in public speaking engagements, to giving them advice on their dress and appearance in public settings. Bobo sees all this as a way to bring them respect and voice as women:

We do training, both in group settings and individually, around, how do you present stuff in a way that you'll be taken seriously? How do you run a meeting so that you're taken seriously? And how do you deal with the problem people you're going to have?... Most of it—it's not very scientific, it's pretty practical. I push particularly young women staff—we have a joke around our office about, I want you to have the church lady look, right? <laughter> It's the little Betty business suit, and it's the hose.... I want it conservative and formal because I want them to be taken seriously.... Women will say, oh, I don't know anything, I couldn't possibly do that.... You don't have confidence? Fine. Pretend for awhile. And eventually you'll get some.

Bobo argues that IWJ is able to promote women's public voice through a combination of giving women opportunities, trusting them to make decisions, and providing personal guidance:

I would say 60 or 70 percent of the young women that I have mentored...were afraid of public speaking. [They] were fine to do things one-on-one, were not all that comfortable in doing cold calls.... And so, it sounds kind of trite but my main thing is you push people to do stuff. You let them watch, you let them experiment, you let them try, but fundamentally, you push them out into stuff that they're not necessarily

comfortable with, and over time you have opportunities to talk about it. I also try to build in with people that it's okay not to be perfect. What is not okay is to not try and not to do your best, right? If you tried and you did your best, then you can do it better the next time and that's all we need, right? We do not need perfection. In fact, we don't have time for perfection.

The concrete strategies IWJ uses are simple. Not only does Bobo spend individual time coaching her younger staff through decisions, but she often takes them along for meetings, speaking engagements, or trips to observe her work and participate themselves. Traveling with her is a rite of passage for staff. Staff members are also asked to design and run internal meetings, including weekly prayer services, and to develop expertise in various skills that they can pass along to others—for example, how to create a PowerPoint presentation—through staff trainings or technical assistance. This, again, is a way to create a sense of authority and public voice. Bobo describes the work as basic organizing tactics.

Women who have been mentored by Bobo at IWJ speak about the experience as foundational to their subsequent work as activists, and they describe their time working with her as integral to their development as well-grounded political leaders. They describe her success as coming from a combination of passing along the wisdom of experience and being open to new ways of doing things:

She's helped me with everything from public speaking and workshop leading to how to work with the board, and she'll invest time. We'll do trips together so that I can see how she'll handle various situations. If I have a question about well, this person's a challenge for me in terms of getting them to respond, or I don't feel like they're responding in a helpful way, what am I doing wrong, what can I do differently, her door is always open.

She's very responsive in that way and she's very honest, but she's also willing, since many of us are young on staff...she listens to our input and she's willing to take chances on things that someone might come up with as an idea to help a campaign move forward.... There are some things that are tried and true, and she's willing to work with us so that we kind of ingrain that and are able to use it as a back-up, but if there's any other way to make it work, usually she lets us do that. And if it doesn't succeed, then you just try another tactic. So she doesn't stifle the creativity of the staff.

The ability of IWJ to grow and inspire active leadership, particularly in political work, by women in the very male-dominated fields of religion and union organizing exemplifies the power of deliberate and women-oriented

mentoring strategies for encouraging women's leadership. When those strategies recognize and address the question and problem of women claiming their voice, they can be particularly successful.

STRATEGY #6: Meet Women Where They Are

A final set of strategies involves recognizing that the rhythms and patterns of women's lives often differ from men's. As a result, to recruit women into political work, groups must recognize where they are and meet them there. For most groups, of course, targeting volunteers involves doing just this. Rarely, though, do groups explicitly acknowledge that including women in their work may require different strategies than involving men. This recommendation calls for groups to consider how their existing recruitment strategies and program design may make participation easier or harder on women.

The patterns of women's lives, of course, will differ from community to community, often based on factors such as race, education, and income. Rather than make specific recommendations for ways to find and include more women in their political work, this section calls for groups to listen to what women in their communities say about how to reach them and how to make engagement as easy as possible. It asks that groups bring gender to the table in the most basic organizing work of recruitment and issue engagement.

Our interviews and existing research on women's lives point to examples of the issues that groups may need to consider as they examine their program design. First, because women are generally more responsible for their children's lives—including their education—they are more involved in institutions such as child care centers and schools. Within congregations, they are also more likely to volunteer for educational programs. Groups might look to these and similar settings to find and engage women as volunteers.

Women may also need groups to provide or identify particular services that will support their activism. Again, because of their family responsibilities, women may need help with child care when they are involved in activist work. In addition, low-income women are even less likely than other women to have the time and energy to provide volunteer services, and groups can think about supports that might help these women participate, such as help finding services that will ease the strains of having fewer resources, including basics such as housing or food. Organizations that combine service and political work can often effectively draw low-income women into activism.

Groups should also consider how they work with congregations to recruit volunteers. Within congregations, women are less frequently tapped for positions of leadership than men are. As a result, relying primarily on clergy and other religious leadership to serve as or identify potential volunteers or leaders—as many religious community groups do—may exclude potential activists who are women.

Finally, at a basic level, groups should consider women’s perspectives in choosing and analyzing the issues and policies they address. Are their focus areas and policy positions equally compelling to—or relevant to—women’s lives as they are to men’s? Does the design of proposed policies or framing of issues consider how women might be affected? Groups can likely engage more women in political activism if they promote issues that seem like they will make a difference to women’s well-being. Although at face value this recommendation may seem obvious, most groups do not explicitly consider the angle of gender as they choose and define issues.

To summarize, groups should consider whether their recruitment and program design strategies effectively encourage women’s activism:

- By recognizing that the patterns of women’s lives can differ from men’s, and designing programs and services accordingly.
- By adopting mechanisms for listening to what women in their communities say would help them become politically engaged.
- By engaging issues and policy positions that are relevant to women’s lives and promoting women’s well-being.

conclusion: Women and Public Voice

The strategies outlined in this report have an important common theme. Fundamentally, they are about women claiming a voice of authority in areas where they have traditionally been excluded—religion and politics. Many of the most successful tactics outlined here directly address the issue of overcoming women’s hesitations and concerns with claiming this voice. They encourage women to break out of a set of roles and expectations that limit women, rather than conforming to them. This can be a difficult process for many women, but community organizing groups devoted to increasing women’s leadership and activism have identified and developed effective strategies to facilitate it.

Once involved, many women are addicted to politics, especially when they see the impact of their work. Over and over again, women describe a process of finding their voice—and then growing more and more comfortable with it. They depict the joy of articulating their passions and values, as well as their pride in making a difference in their communities, by changing a law or regulation, impacting the opinion of an elected official, or simply encouraging other women to speak for themselves. As a young woman describes her experience:

I’m like, government actually works! People actually get stuff done! I was just so excited to be a part of that. So I’ve been involved the last four years.... I’ve snowballed into a better activist.... I’m just trying to do as much as I can, because I think that the more people who get involved, the more we can change our country.

Helping women take that initial step, though, is both crucial and, in many cases, difficult. Successful strategies for doing so are described in this report, so that other religious, community, and political groups might learn from their success.

By encouraging women’s political activism within their work, community groups can not only tap into a source of support and leadership for the issues they work on, but can help more fully integrate women’s perspectives into that work. Several of the groups profiled in this report suggest that women’s involvement brings a distinct public vision to their political activism, perhaps even changing their policy goals and priorities. Increasing the visibility and influence of women’s voices could transform politics at the local and national levels, both by contributing stronger support for critical programs and by more fully incorporating women’s experiences and concerns into political life.

To encourage this transformation, we hope that an increasing number of organizations will prioritize cultivating women’s political activism and leadership. Doing so is crucial to building a truly inclusive American democracy.

appendix I: Research Design and Methodology

This report is primarily based on two sources: a series of 75 in-depth, qualitative interviews, and observation of trainings and events held by organizations involved in the interviews.

Most of the interviews were done with women working as volunteers, staff, or leaders of interfaith groups working on social justice issues. The vast majority of the 44 groups involved in the study operate locally, within their communities, although a few work nationally or as coordinating bodies for local efforts. As interfaith groups, they operate as their own independent groups—often affiliated with but not solely run by a specific congregation or denomination—to mobilize and encourage participation across religious lines. As social justice groups, they bring together women and men to address specific local, state, or national issues. Most use religious language and imagery to accomplish this, and most rely on the religious networks that exist in their communities.

As points of comparison, we also included a few groups that do not fit this description. A handful of people—about 15—were interviewed from social justice groups sponsored by, or affiliated with, a particular religious denomination or congregation. In each of the four cities where we conducted interviews, we also interviewed people from one “secular” group—organizations that do not have either an interfaith or denominational affiliation. In almost every case, though, women spoke of the strong importance of their faith and were eager to discuss their religious values as relevant to their work. Again, this theme will be discussed in more detail later in the series. As is evident in chapter 4, we also included seven women from groups that do not have a social justice orientation, but rather are focused on so-called cultural issues from a conservative perspective. The different approaches that these women bring to their work are explored in this report. Finally, we interviewed seven men. Most of these men are leaders of organizations, and their insights on women’s involvement and leadership were used to explore how women come to claim a public voice. This set of issues is discussed somewhat in this report but, again, will be explored in more depth in future publications.

About half of our respondents work in the leadership of organizations, generally as manager or organizers, and half work as activists in some other capacity. More details on the activities they engage in are below.

The interviews were conducted in four sites: Atlanta, Chicago, the metropolitan region of the District of Columbia, and the area of Southern California from Los Angeles north to Santa Barbara. These regions were chosen for their geographic diversity—a southeastern, Midwestern, northeastern, and Western city are each included. Each also has a distinct demographic composition and specific history of organizing. Atlanta, a home for the civil rights movement, is mostly African American (32 percent) and white (56 percent). Another 7 percent of the population is Latino/a, and 4 percent is Asian American. In Chicago, 57 percent of the population is white, 20 percent is African American, 17 percent is Hispanic, and 5 percent Asian American. Chicago’s history of civil rights organizing and conflict is also long and at times difficult. It is one of the main centers of the Alinsky style of organizing, which often encompasses a religious component to its work and trainings. Metropolitan Washington, DC, is better known for its national organizations, but many local activists work in the shadows of these groups. Historically, many have focused on the civil rights and economic development of African Americans, who make up 30 percent of the area’s population, but its growing diversity is being addressed in part by groups dedicated to serving and organizing Hispanics (10 percent of the population) and Asian Americans (8 percent). Finally, Southern California encompasses both big-city and small-town life. In Los Angeles, Latinos/as are the largest racial or ethnic group, at 44 percent of the population, compared with 33 percent for whites and 8 percent for African Americans. Los Angeles is also home to the largest proportion of Asian Americans among our study’s sites, at 13 percent of the population. A few hours north, Santa Barbara also has a large Hispanic population, at 28 percent, while whites make up 63 percent of the population. Asian Americans are 4 percent and African Americans 1 percent of the population (all data on demographics in this paragraph are from U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004b). The Southern California region has some of the more visible and active efforts to organize Hispanics and Asian Americans among the sites we chose, in part because those communities are so well represented in the area.

Methodology

The sample for our study was not randomly selected. Instead, a snowball method was used to allow for a more diverse sample and to ensure that the voices of a wide range of people of faith were heard. As the interviewing process began, new participants were often recommended to the study’s interviewers via “word of mouth” referrals.

Because the sample is small and not random, findings from this study cannot be assumed to be representative of religious social justice activists and organizations nationwide. This is particularly true where we provide percentages

of our sample who give certain types of responses: they cannot be assumed to represent how a random sample of women doing this work might answer. However, analysis of findings from the interviews can provide an in-depth look at the experiences of many women in this type of activism, particularly where there is relatively deep consensus among the women interviewed.

Who Participates in Religiously Based Activism?

A 2001 study called *Faith-based Community Organizing: The State of the Field* gives a good sense of what religiously based social justice work looks like in the United States. While its data are not directly comparable to the demographics of our interview participants and organizations, this research provides a helpful backdrop for our work. It is based on a survey of a nationally representative sample of “interfaith, broad-based, locally constituted, multi-issue and nonpartisan” organizations that follow the Industrial Areas Foundation model of interfaith organizing¹ (Warren and Wood 2001; 1). The study’s findings describe member institutions, head or lead organizers, and board members of the organizations surveyed.

From this survey, we have a general picture of the racial, gender, and denominational make-up of these organizations. They involve a diverse set of member organizations, for example: 36 percent of the organizations’ member institutions (i.e., congregations or other community organizations) are predominantly white, 35 percent are predominantly African American, 21 percent are predominantly Hispanic, 11 percent are immigrant of various races, 7 percent are interracial, and a little over 1 percent are Asian (Warren and Wood 2001; information on racial and ethnic composition of the United States is below).

Leadership of these groups is also relatively well integrated. Boards of directors have a slightly higher ratio of women to men, at 51.3 percent to 48.7 percent. Among organizers, men had a greater presence at 56.3 percent, versus 43.7 percent women.

Religious organizing is perhaps not as interfaith as it could be. About 95 percent of member institutions of the organizations surveyed are Christian (Warren and Wood 2001). Of the remaining member groups, 2 percent are Jewish, 2 percent are Unitarian Universalist, and nearly 1 percent are other non-Christian denominations (Warren and Wood 2001). This survey found very few Evangelical Christian congregations participating in faith-based organizing.

The Women (and Men) We Interviewed

Due to our study’s focus on women’s participation and experience within religiously based activism, nearly 91 percent of the people interviewed were

¹ This model generally includes a lead or head organizer that engages in the recruitment of volunteer activists from member institutions, which are often congregations (Warren and Wood 2001).

women. Although it is nowhere near as skewed, women do have a greater presence than men across a wide range of denominations. The American Religious Identification Survey from 2001 found that across religious denominations, adult women (18 years or older) usually represent more than half of membership. For example, women represent 53 percent of Catholic membership, 54 percent of Baptist membership, 57 percent of Evangelical/Born Again Christian membership, 57 percent of Methodist membership, 59 percent of Pentecostal membership, 59 percent of Episcopalian/Anglican membership, and 64 percent of Church of God membership (Keysar et al. 2001). As noted above, women are also more than half of board members, but slightly less than half of organizers, among interfaith community organizations.

More than half (54 percent) of interview participants in our study identified themselves as white, compared with 69 percent of Americans who were categorized as white in the Census. In our sample, 5 percent of participants are Arab American. In the United States, the Census includes Arab Americans in the category “white,” and includes them in the 69 percent. The Census Bureau does, though, estimate that 0.42 percent of Americans are of Arab descent (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2003, 2004a and 2004b). The next largest racial and ethnic groups in our sample are African Americans and Hispanics, each 15 percent of those interviewed, compared with 12 and 13 percent of the U.S. population, respectively (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). Asian Americans are a much larger proportion of our study’s sample, at 9 percent, as in the United States, where they are 4 percent of the population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). We were unable to interview any Native Americans, who are 0.7 percent of the U.S. population (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2004a). In a next phase of interviews planned for 2005 and 2006, we will be expanding our sample of women of color, including Native American women, and will be able to explore their values and experiences in religious social justice work.

Interview participants in the study span the life cycle. Those 30 years or under are 19 percent of our sample, and those aged 30 to 45 are 31 percent. Nearly 23 percent are between 46 to 55 years old, and 24 percent are aged 56 to 70. Only one interviewee is over 70 (the age of one participant was unknown). Although parallel age categories were not available, according to the 2000 Census, our sample is older on average than the U.S. population: nationally, 37 percent of Americans are between 20 and 44 years of age, 13 percent between 45 to 54 years of age, and 21 percent was 55 years or older (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2001). Our sample more closely reflects the age distribution of religious Americans: According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 23 percent of U.S. adults with a religious affiliation are between the ages of 18 and 29, and 16 percent

are 65 years or older, with the majority (about 60 percent) between ages 30 through 64 (Keysar et al. 2001).

About 73 percent of interview participants are affiliated with a Christian religion, although denominations within this group vary. Catholics make up 20 percent of the sample and Mainline Protestants make up 27 percent. Another 17 percent of interview participants are white or Hispanic Evangelical Christians. African American Christians—who are generally from evangelical denominations but differ theologically and historically from white or Hispanic evangelical traditions—are 12 percent. Of non-Christian denominations, Muslims make up 11 percent of interviewees. Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and Unitarian Universalists are each about 3 percent, and one each are Baha'i and Sikh. Only one participant reported no religious affiliation. The high representation of Christians in our study mirrors national data on Christian affiliation in the United States. According to the American Religious Identification Survey, 76.5 percent surveyed identified themselves as Christian (Keysar et al. 2001). Our study, however, has a higher proportion of Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, and Unitarian Universalist affiliation than does the United States. These religions are 1.3, 0.5, 0.4, 0.5, and 0.3 percent of the country respectively. Outside of their activist work, 63 of 74 interview participants reported belonging to a congregation and attending services, while 10 said they did not.

The Nature of Work Among the Groups Involved

The leaders and activists interviewed in the study take on a range of activities to further the work of their organizations and causes. These activities include engaging in visionary and strategic planning that guides the direction of the organization; directing and managing the overall functioning of the organization; providing program support; engaging in advocacy and political organizing through interactions with policymakers; directing the mobilization of grassroots membership around national issues; engaging in outreach and community organizing through local, door-to-door style community interactions and mobilization of community members around local issues; and providing direct services. The activities performed by most of interview participants fell into more than one of the above mentioned categories of activity, as they took on multiple roles within organizations.

Many of the interviewees for our study, and their organizations, work on a local level. More than half of those interviewed are engaged in outreach and community organizing. About a third of respondents do advocacy and political organizing at either the national or local level. More than one-third of the study's interviewees serve as executive directors or managers of their organization, and over half are responsible for organizational vision and strategy, either from the position of a lead organizer or executive director, or as a board

member or long-time activist. Nine interview participants engaged in direct service work and seven provided program support to their organization.

The 44 organizations represented in the sample have a wide range of functions. One-fifth of the organizations do not engage in any type of advocacy or political activity. Instead these organizations focus on direct social services and community building. Another one-fifth are also mainly service-oriented organizations but do occasionally engage in advocacy or political work around the issues faced by those they serve. Almost half of the organizations engage in issue advocacy as a means to creating social and economic change. These organizations engage in voter drives, issue education, and membership mobilization and politicization within local communities, all designed to engage decision-makers and the local political system on issues they care about. The remaining one-tenth of the organizations engage in more direct political action such as supporting specific political candidates and lobbying. They also usually encourage their membership to support specific legislation and candidates.

The issues addressed by the organizations in this study also vary widely. For those engaging in direct service provision, issues include networking among youth or within a religious or gender group to build community or providing clothing, housing, counseling, immigrant services, and/or medical assistance to fill people's basic needs. Organizations that mainly engage in direct service provision, but that also engage in advocacy when needed, tend to cover similar issue areas. Many also do public education on issues such as religious intolerance and racial and ethnic discrimination.

Organizations that specifically focus on advocacy focus more heavily on economic issues such as housing, wages and labor rights, community development, environmental sustainability, immigrant rights and civil liberties, criminal justice, racial discrimination, child care, or welfare.

Half of the groups represented in the sample explicitly discuss and reflect on religious values and take part in prayer on a daily basis. These organizations specifically link their work to religious values and traditions. In another third, religion is a central component but less explicitly visible in daily routines. In three organizations, religion is never explicitly discussed, and another four consider themselves completely secular.

Racial, Religious, and Gender Diversity Among the Groups Involved

Of the 44 organizations represented in the sample, half were identified by interview participants as not particularly diverse in terms of their racial and ethnic make-up. These organizations are almost, if not solely, comprised of

only one racial or ethnic group. Of those 22, twelve are predominantly Caucasian, four are predominantly Arab American, two are predominantly Hispanic, two are predominantly Asian American, and two are predominantly African American. Seven of the organizations were described as equally comprised of two racial groups. The remaining ten were identified as even more racially diverse or mixed, with no one group accounting for more than half of the organization's membership or staff.

In terms of religious diversity, more than two-thirds of the organizations represented in our study are interfaith, twelve are of one denomination, and one is secular. Of the organizations categorized as interfaith, eight involve members from different Christian denominations only, and three of these span conservative Christian evangelical denominations. Five interfaith organizations are Christian and Jewish only, and three are Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. Another fifteen are interfaith in its broadest sense, and include membership from a wide range of both Christian and non-Christian denominations: Muslims and Jews as well as smaller religions such as Hindus, Buddhists, and Baha'is.

Interviewees were also asked about the gender diversity within their organizations. Some interviewees responded to this question by detailing the gender breakdown of the organization's leaders, or members of the Board or Advisory Committees. Others gave the gender breakdown of their staff and volunteers. Of the 20 interviewees that discussed the gender make up of their Board, eight of the organizations represented by these interviewees were identified as having mostly women board members, six as having half men and half women, and another six as having mostly male board members. For the 21 interviewees that detailed the gender make up of staff, 17 responded that their organization had a predominantly female staff, one indicated that the staff at his/her organization was an equal mix of women and men, two indicated that their staff was predominantly male, and one person was uncertain as to the exact breakdown. Forty-three interviewees provided information about the gender breakdown among their volunteer membership. Of those 43 interviewees, 33 said their volunteers were mostly women, seven indicated there was an equal number of men and women volunteers, and three indicated that their organization's volunteers were predominantly male.

appendix 2: Contact Information for Profiled Groups

Georgia Citizens' Coalition on Hunger
9 Gammon Ave, SW
Atlanta, GA 30315
Phone: (404) 622-7778
Fax: (404) 622-7992
<http://www.gahungercoalition.org/>

Interfaith Children's Movement of Metropolitan Atlanta
1301 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30322
Phone: (770) 498-2141
Fax: (770) 498-2419
<http://icmma.org/>

Interfaith Worker Justice
1020 West Bryn Mawr Avenue, 4th Floor
Chicago, IL 60660
Phone: (773) 728-8400
Fax: (773) 728-8409
<http://www.iwj.org/>

NTOSAKE Women's Leadership Training Program
Gamaliel Foundation
203 North Wabash Avenue, Suite 808
Chicago, IL 60601
Phone: (312) 357-2639
Fax: (312) 357-6735
<http://www.gamaliel.org/Ntosake/NtosakeIndex.htm>

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about the author

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