

Engaging the Religious Community in Worker Justice

A Mini-Guide for Unions

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Why?

Engaging the religious community:

Encourages workers: As you know, workers are often fearful, mostly of employers – but if they're immigrants, sometimes they're fearful of unions. The religious community can and does connect people with unions, encourage workers to stand up for their rights (and what is right), and helps them to be proud of what they are doing. Workers are more willing to step forward if they know their religious leaders are behind them.

Challenges employers: Most employers think of themselves as good people. Many are active in their churches and synagogues. They don't really want their neighbors knowing what they're doing. Religious community pressure on employers becomes one more "thorn in the flesh" that encourages them to change their positions.

Changes the perception and understanding in the community: Employers, and too often newspapers, want to portray contract and organizing fights as merely "labor-management" disputes. The engagement of the religious community changes the focus from labor-management to community and ethics. When labor acts alone, it is pegged as a "special interest." When labor and the religious community act together, we are the community.

How?

If you come to me and say, "I'd like to get the religious community involved in

XYZ campaign (organizing or contract)," I will ask you the following questions:

Where do your members (or prospective members) attend religious services? How do you know? Ask them. Ask your members to introduce the organizers and leadership to their religious leaders. Form a religious or-

ganizing committee to reach out to religious leaders of members. Ask those religious leaders to:

- Allow you to meet in their meeting space
- Lead a prayer at a meeting
- Participate in a fact-finding delegation
- Join a worker rights board
- Participate in a delegation to meet with the owner (after having done some of the aforementioned things with workers)
- Sit in on negotiations (if it's a contract struggle)

Where does the employer attend religious services? How do you know? Check out weddings or obituaries of family members. Where were the services held? Does he/she give to a religious charity or school? And when in doubt, follow the person to weekend services. The pastor might raise the issue with him/her in a pastoral setting, although is unlikely to play a public role. You can also engage other members of the local denomination to reach out to the employer.

Are there special religious connects? Does the religious community purchase products or services? Does the religious community use contractors in building or repairing congregations? Do any of the denominations own stock in the company?

Is there an Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) affiliated group in your area? Check the IWJ website at www.iwj.org. Get on the mailing list via the website. Affiliated groups are listed on the website and in every newsletter. Start with these folks. Explain your campaign. Convince them why your campaign is important and how you will work as a good partner with them. These groups are probably the community coordinators for the Labor in the Pulpits program over Labor Day weekend. This is a great opportunity to reach out to area congregations.

If there are no IWJ affiliated groups in your area, then you can either help start one or build some structure for engaging the religious community. Call Interfaith Worker Justice at (773) 728-8400 and ask for an organizer.

10 Ten Tips for Effective Union-religious Partnerships

1. *View the religious community as partners and allies, not puppets.* The biggest complaint religious leaders have around the country about working with labor is what we call “rent a collar.” They don’t just want you to call and ask them to do select tactics.

2. *Give religious allies the whole story.* Don’t just tell religious leaders part of the story. They’re going to hear from the employer, so they might as well hear it from you. Think of it as “inoculation.” Prepare religious leaders for the worst things the employer will say.

3. *Talk with them NOW.* Don’t wait till there is a crisis. Religious leaders don’t work all that well quickly. Get them involved early in the campaign.

4. *Allow the religious community to make its own plans.* Make sure the religious leaders understand your priorities and concerns. Work out an arrangement where you can hear what they’re thinking ahead of time and flag concerns that you may have. If religious leaders plan things that would be harmful, you must explain the problem and ask that they not do them. On the other hand, they are likely to plan things that you wouldn’t do or perhaps that you don’t think are all that important. Unless it will be harmful, let the religious community do things its own way. You may be surprised at how effective it will be and it will prepare the religious leaders for taking stronger actions. If you try to control all the planning, religious leaders will resent it and will not join you in significant numbers.

5. *Don’t ask for too much too soon.* Most religious leaders get into issues cautiously and carefully. If you ask them to get arrested on day one, they will probably not respond well. On the other hand, after religious leaders have met regularly with workers, perhaps participated in a delegation to an employer, met with vendors, and worked on a campaign for a few months or maybe years, religious leaders will often plan courageous and bold actions.

6. *Don’t require complete belief in unions.* Many religious folks don’t know much about unions. They

only know what they read in books or newspapers. They certainly don’t get card check. But they do understand living wages, respect, and health care. They want to stop poverty. Give them time to learn about unions.

7. *Be careful about stereotypes.* Like unions, religious congregations are incredibly diverse. There are no simple road maps to the “best” congregations on labor issues. Although there are particularly strong labor histories with Catholic and Jewish congregations, there are many other congregations that are terrific supporters of workers and unions.

8. *Make all events family friendly.* Religious leaders will only be comfortable engaging members of their congregations if the events and rallies are appropriate for families. Watch the tone and language.

9. *Don’t expect the religious community and religious leaders to be perfect.* The religious community has much of the same tensions, racism, sexism and excessive egos that exist in the labor movement. Religious leaders won’t be shocked to learn that unions and union leaders are not perfect. As one religious leader said, “We specialize in sin.”

10. *Build relationships for the long-haul.* Build relationships with the religious community that will grow and develop over the next 30 (or more) years. Relationships can’t be just for one particular campaign. If we’re serious about changing power and addressing economic disparity in the nation, we must build long-term partnerships. Our work for justice is not a short-term sprint, but a long-term marathon.

Unions are the most important anti-poverty vehicle in the nation. Unions are essential for social and economic justice. Many unions are doing the work of God, although the work is seldom described as such – by you or others. The core mission and values you hold are central to most faith teachings. Engaging the religious community, helping it put its faith into action and partner with you, is important for today, but even more important for the future.



For additional resources, visit www.iwj.org or contact **Interfaith Worker Justice**,
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