

# The Challenge of White Christian Guilt in Faith-Based Community Organizing

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## History of White Christian Hegemony

- Labor Abuses and Labor Rights:** white Christians used the Bible to justify slavery  
people of color were explicitly excluded from unions
- National Narrative:** political role of white Christianity in asserting the "Christian Century" and "Moral Majority"
- Interfaith Movement:** legacy of Christian ecumenism rather than religious pluralism

*IWJ recognizes the powerful dominance of white Christianity within labor abuses and labor rights, within the national narrative, and the interfaith movement.*

## Methods

This 3-year project involved participant-observation (June-July 2018) at the national office of Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ.org) and local affiliates and interviews with staff, board members, local clergy, and volunteers, which provided insights into how each organization functions and how it impacts the community. (IWJ, Chicago; Memphis, Madison, Boston).

## Negotiating Guilt

**Step One:** Recognize and analyze personal positions of power and how those positions contribute to injustice.

**Step Two:** Learn how to use positions of power and moral faith voice to advocate for social transformation (in partnership with the minoritized).

*People of privilege in IWJ are engaging in Step One, but not Step Two. In elevating the worker voice, they are eliminating the faith voice. Rather than engaging faith communities, they have shifted to serving and organizing workers.*

## Danger of Guilt as Paralysis

**Constructed Knowing (the goal):** through mutual relationships, one integrates one's own experiences with those of others.

**Connected Knowing:** one suppress one's own experiences to lift up those of others.

While constructed knowing is needed for mutual relationships and effective social transformation, by shifting the focus of the organization almost completely to workers and invalidating the importance of the faith lens IWJ engages in connected knowing.

## Conclusion

Faith communities need to figure out how to move past their guilt in order to understand what their role in the public sphere should be in a pluralistic society in partnership with the oppressed. They must analyze the power of the voice that they have and create strategies to yield it effectively for social transformation.

This undermines the moral authority of the faith voice and their potential for impact, which allows for others to continue perpetuating injustice. Furthermore, it places the burden of the creative work of imagining a just society and strategies towards achieving it on the minoritized.

## INTERFAITH WORKER JUSTICE



**Motto:** All Religions Believe in Justice

**Mission:** Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) advances the rights of workers by engaging diverse faith communities into action, from grassroots organizing to shaping policy at the local, state and national levels.

**Focus Issues:** Just wages  
Equal Protection  
Safe Working Conditions  
Collective Bargaining

**Organization Ethos:** Faith is Important  
To workers. To employers. To the public.

**Affiliates:** Interfaith Coalitions  
Worker Centers