Does Faith-Based Community Organizing Still Matter? How Cultural Shifts are Changing the Conversation

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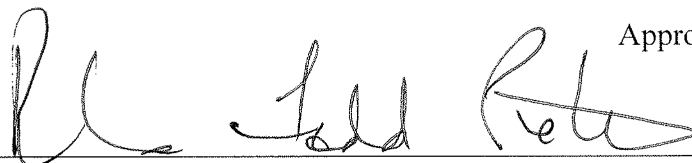

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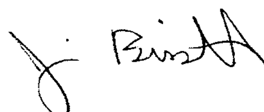

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"Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works."
Hebrews 10:24

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Chapter One - Introduction

From the abolition of slavery to the social gospel to civil rights, Christians have played prominent roles in movements for social change.[1] The significant roles that Christian leaders and congregations have played in various social movements, their understandings of social problems, and their responses have always been influenced by their particular social, political, and ecclesial contexts. The 21st-century marks yet another era of religious involvement in social justice action, and the dramatically changed landscape of the United States means that Christian leaders must rethink their organizing strategies in the midst of a religiously plural and politically divided country.[2]

This thesis draws on ethnographic research conducted in partnership with the faith-based non-profit, Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ). Founded in 1996, IWJ is a national organization that aims to mobilize and train faith communities in support of workers and workers' rights. It operates as a national organization through 60 local affiliates, including both interfaith coalitions and worker centers that exist around the country. In 2015, the founding director stepped down after 18 years. Since then, IWJ has been in a time of transition, reevaluating its mission and structure. The tensions that IWJ faces in this moment of transition are representative of a larger set of issues facing progressive faith-based organizations in the United States.

In a politically changing world of decreasing unionization, increasing hostility toward migrant workers, shifting labor demographics, and rising right-wing nationalism,

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[1] Rebecca Todd. Peters and Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 3.
[2] Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 2001), 77.

many IWJ affiliates are searching for ways to effectively and positively impact the workers marginalized by these shifts. Seeking to balance a public narrative that pits conservative Christianity against progressive secularity as the only two options for political activism with a new awareness of needing to include the voices of those most visibly impacted by injustice, my informants from Memphis to Madison to Boston expressed some of the difficulties they encounter in engaging with social justice work through a faith lens.

Voices from the Field

On a Monday morning in June, I arrived at the Worker's Interfaith Network (WIN) in Memphis, surprised at how little there was besides a table, a couple chairs, and some papers. In the back at his desk was Carlos Ochoa, hired to do outreach and education with religious organizations in the city. As I interviewed him that morning, he seemed rather discouraged and disenchanted by the faith communities in Memphis, confessing to me, "It's been a struggle getting religious organizations to really open their doors for us to come in, [and to] have conversations."[3] As an organizer, he told me, "my time is really super valuable and I have a lot of stuff going on. So, if I'm investing time in something that I don't necessarily believe in or I'm not getting a higher return on the output… I'm going to put my efforts somewhere else."[4] Even though WIN connected me to many progressive religious activists in Memphis who advocating for social justice, Carlos became discouraged because he was trying to engage the conservative congregations in Memphis that do not support the work of the affiliate. Therefore, he felt that the energy

[3] Carlos Ochoa, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 25, 2018.
[4] Ibid.

he put into outreach towards faith communities was wasted effort and better spent elsewhere. All of the staff members at WIN were clearly passionate about justice for workers, but didn't believe that attempting to bring together diverse religious communities was helping them achieve their goal. Instead of engaging the progressive religious activists around them, they focused on the conservative Christian communities in Memphis hindering their progress and wondered whether it would be more effective to focus their work on liberal secular groups instead.

The week before, I had been at Worker Justice Wisconsin (WJW) in Madison. Beside her desk, the staff member, Kristen Taylor had a large poster of the Virgin of Guadalupe because she believes that "it makes some of the workers more comfortable to see that because a lot of [the] immigrant workers, especially, that are coming in... they're religious."[5] Her boss had recently purposely gotten rid of anything in the office with religious symbols or references and asked her to remove the poster. Their organization had recently merged an interfaith coalition with a worker center. In the merger, the majority of the faith leaders were removed from the Board, which thus favored workers and union representatives. Kristen, a wage worker herself, lamented these shifts. She told me, "the merge[r] should've in no means have eliminated [the religious aspect of the organization]. I feel like there should still be people of faith. [We should] have faith leaders and stuff like that on our board. I do think that we need to eliminate maybe some of the pastors... and put workers in their place. But the faith people should always be there." [6] While leaders in the organization spoke of the importance of elevating the voice of the marginalized community rather than the privileged voice, Kristen wondered how it

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[5] Kristen Taylor, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.
[6] Ibid.

might be possible for the faith leaders to continue to contribute their voice without sacrificing the minoritized voices.

On my last stop, I visited Massachusetts Interfaith Worker Justice (MassIWJ) in Boston, where the organizer, Sarah Kelley, works out of the local Jobs with Justice office. When asked what the weaknesses of MassIWJ are, Sarah reflected that their group lacks religious diversity. They have many different Christian denominations, including a large number of Catholics, and a number of Unitarian Universalists. She supposes that this is "because there are other interfaith organizations that are larger than [MassIWJ] that have already formed relationships with the mosques [and synagogues] in the area."[7] Sarah describes how their organization simply doesn't have the connections. When probed further, she thinks aloud, "part of the lack of diversity represented in our group is due to already established relationships in which it would feel very much like tokenism to get an Imam to come to our breakfast when we don't have that relationship."[8] Sarah struggles between the desire for a religiously diverse community, recognizing how it will strengthen their work, and the desire for genuine relationships that are not simply transactional or tokenizing. She wonders how the people of faith in MassIWJ can effectively speak in a religiously diverse context, when they do not also represent that diversity.

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[7] Sarah Kelley, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 16, 2018.
[8] Ibid.

Shifting Contexts in the 21st-Century

Throughout the history of the United States, Christian leaders have followed Jesus' example by engaging in and leading movements for social transformation in the United States. From abolition, to the social gospel in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to civil rights in the late 20th century, Christians have played prominent roles in movements for social change. The 21st-century marks yet another era of religious involvement in social justice action. However, the dramatically changed religious landscape of the United States means that Christian leaders must rethink their organizing strategies in the midst of an increasingly religiously plural country.[9]

Diana Eck, founder of the Pluralism Project, identifies the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as the turning point in the United States for growth in diversity and modern pluralism.[10] The Act of 1965 removed the quota restrictions on immigration, opening up the United States to immigrants from around the world, many of whom brought with them a variety of religious traditions including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and other faith traditions.[11] While these traditions were hardly new to American soil, the increased flow of immigrants swelled the ranks of "minority" religious traditions

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[9] Though I recognize that Catholic faith leaders and parishes have played a significant role in social justice within the United States and IWJ, for the purposes of this paper, I focus on mostly Protestant Christianity. The reason for this focus is the historically dominant position and the cultural influence that Protestants have held, as outlined in Robert P. Jones' book, *The End of White Christian America.* The cultural shift that he outlines is the declining influence of both mainline and evangelical Protestantism. Further, the issues of the roles that Protestant Christianity has played seemed more urgently challenging to my informants.

[10] Eck, *A New Religious America*, 22.

[11] Ibid, 22.

in ways previously unexperienced in the United States. Like many new waves of immigrants, people formed communities with others who originated from similar places around the globe. The influx of immigrants from non-European countries created significant growth of diversity and encounters with difference. Coinciding with this increase in immigration was the civil rights movement, which advocated for the equal rights of black people and their culture in the United States. Both immigrant communities and black communities fought to preserve and share their own cultures, challenging dominant cultural norms instead of assimilating.

In addition to growing religious and cultural diversity, Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), notes that the 21st-century is also marked by significant growth in religious disaffiliation, or people dropping away from organized religion.[12] According to surveys done by PRRI, the percentage of people in the United States who are religiously unaffiliated has grown from 7% in the 1970s to almost 25% in 2016.[13] In the last 50 years, there has been a shift in the US cultural and demographic landscape from one of white Christian hegemony to diversity, something that Jones has marked as "the end of white Christian America."[14]

While many white Christians blame shifting demographics for the current socio-economic and political crises in the United States, social ethicist, Rebecca Todd Peters,

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[12] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 77.
[13] Jones, 50.
[14] Ibid, 49.

shifts the focus to the failures of neoliberalism. Peters argues that the failures of neoliberal capitalism occurred alongside, though not because of, changing religious and racial demographics of the United States. The widespread implementation of neoliberal policies of deregulation, privatization, and an increased emphasis on trade began during Reagan's presidency in the 1980s. In addition to his turn toward neoliberalism, Reagan also endorsed a policy of "trickle-down economics," which held that cutting taxes for the wealthy would lead to investment of the extra capital into the economy, which would eventually benefit the working class.[15] Reagan's tax cuts, however, led to greater wealth accumulation among the owners of capital and increased economic inequality.[16] In a neoliberal global economy focused on maximizing profits, manufacturing businesses, once the lifeblood of US economy, have moved production facilities to low wage countries and replaced jobs with technological innovations. This has transformed the labor market in the United States and further increased the wealth gap. As inequality increases, social mobility decreases and working class people face real hardships. Mystified by capitalism and unwilling to recognize the political and economic failures of neoliberalism as Peters describes, many working class people sought other ways to understand their economic and social hardships. Thus, given the simultaneity of these hardships with the shifting demographics of the United States and the intolerance of

[15] Rebecca Todd Peters, "Renewing the Social Contract: Morality and Economic Theory for a Post-Industrial World," unpublished conference paper presented at the Society of Christian Ethics meeting, Portland, OR, 2018.
[16] Ibid.

Americans for criticizing capitalism, many of the white working class blame their decreasing economic stability on minorities and immigrants.[17]

In the context of growing religious pluralism, the decreasing influence of Christianity, and increasing economic inequality, my research focused on examining how faith-based community organizing (FBCO) adapts to contemporary social justice action in the 21st-century. A significant question that echoed through my conversations with people involved with FBCO was whether faith communities should continue to be engaged as significant actors in the work of social change. Given the changing demographics and increasing religious disaffiliation, this is a valid question. Additionally, if faith communities are going to continue to act in public spaces, how should this look and what are challenges that organizers must address in order to mobilize these voices effectively for social transformation?

Analysis and Argument

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the cultural contexts that influence the pragmatic effectiveness of FBCO in the United States in the 21st-century. My interest in pragmatism is influenced by Reinhold Niebuhr's theory of pragmatic justice, which recognizes that since human systems cannot be perfect, the goal of political work ought to reflect an equality of outcomes approach that seeks to ensure structural equality and

[17] Rebecca Todd Peters, "The Mystification of Capitalism and the Misdirection of White Anger," in *Religion in the Age of Obama*, ed. Juan Marcial Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (London, UK ; Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 93.

equity in social relationships. This perspective provides my research with the necessary mechanisms to analyze FBCO in the United States, which tries to enact change.

For Niebuhr, striving towards justice means striving to achieve a balance of power. Even though, due to sin, all structures contain elements of injustice and a perfect balance of power will never be truly realized on earth, Niebuhr holds that people should continue to work for closer approximations towards "the harmony of love that is perfect justice."[18] In order to work towards justice in such a way, Christian social ethicist Rebecca Todd Peters advocates for a theology of mutuality in which groups work together across lines of difference with the understanding that their well-being is interdependent.[19] She argues that such an ethic of solidarity is necessary in order to transform the structural issues of society that create injustice. Though perfect justice may not be achievable, working together (solidarity) is the key to the kind of social transformation that helps shape a more just society. Thus, this research focuses on the structural analysis of IWJ and how contextual shifts in the nation are challenging the effectiveness of the organization.

I chose to partner with Interfaith Worker Justice (IWJ) for my research because it models both Niebuhr's emphasis on pragmatism and Peters' ethic of mutual solidarity. IWJ is an interfaith organization with a long history of engaging faith communities in social action. It brings together people of faith to advocate for legislation and have supported the labor movement through their interfaith coalitions and are a part of grassroots organizing efforts through their worker centers. The founder of IWJ, Kim

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[18] Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing Jouse, 1986), 92.
[19] Rebecca Todd. Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 40.

Bobo has a pragmatic approach to this work, reflecting her belief that religious communities are important to the public and therefore necessary for social transformation.[20] Bobo structured IWJ around what she believes is an effective approach to change: when faith communities get involved, change happens.

By partnering faith communities with the labor movement to create a more just society, IWJ models the ethic of mutual solidarity outlined by Peters.[21] While IWJ initially began as a coalition of faith communities supporting unions and various strikes occurring around the country, as the organization grew and developed, it also created worker centers. These initial relationship were meant to guide the work of the FBCO, listening to those most visibly impacted to understand how community organizing could best support social justice efforts. Throughout its history as an organization, IWJ has made sure to partner with those people most visibly affected by injustice against workers. They recognize and advocate for the importance of faith communities being involved with workers and vice versa. Faith leaders want to ensure that their congregations can live out their moral agency and engage in their religion to the fullest extent possible as well as recognize the value of religious support for individual workers and the moral authority that they lend to the labor movement. Creating an organization based on building valuable relationships between faith communities and workers demonstrates how IWJ works within the framework of an ethic of mutual solidarity.

In my analysis of IWJ, I identified five significant modern contextual factors that impact not only IWJ but also the broader landscape of faith-based community organizing in the early 21st-century: a hostile political economy, a perceived dichotomy between the

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[20] Joseph A. McCartin, "Building the Interfaith Worker Justice Movement: Kim Bobo's Story," *Labor* 6, no. 1 (March 20, 2009): 87–105, https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-2008-046.
[21] Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 41.

secular left and the Christian right, increasing religious diversity, loss of members and financial resources of mainline churches, and an increasing awareness of privilege. In my work with IWJ, I observed that the national organization and the three affiliates that I studied were wrestling with various aspects of these contemporary realities as they sought to find new ways of engaging in FBCO. While the questions facing IWJ regarding their organizational vision and structure are specific to IWJ, they also offer insight into a set of larger questions facing FBCO in the 21st-century. The struggle to define the work of the organization is also a struggle for progressive religious activists to find a voice and identity in the midst of a diverse and polarized nation.

I examined how each of these factors impacts the work of IWJ with an eye toward how each shapes the work of faith-based community organizing in the current political context. The questions these factors raise include: how can progressive activists effectively respond to contemporary political issues? Where do progressive people of faith fit in a public discourse divided into conservative Christianity and liberal secularity? How do faith communities speak in a multi-religious context? How can pastors and volunteers generate political influence with fewer resources? How should privileged people of faith share space with minoritized communities without ceding their own voice or becoming paralyzed by guilt?

In this thesis I will argue that faith communities do have an essential role to play in the public sphere and that FBCO needs to continue developing new models for mobilizing faith voices in ways that respond to new political, social, and ecclesial contextual factors. For each of the factors, I present evidence for the shift in the United States and then describe the impact on organizing strategies that I witnessed within IWJ.

The work of social justice in religious communities has always developed in the context of particular socio-political conditions; therefore, examining the particular challenges of IWJ can provide insights valuable to FBCO in general in the 21st-century United States.

Methodology

For my participant-observation research, I visited three local affiliates located in Madison, WI; Memphis, TN; Boston, MA; as well as the national headquarters in Chicago, IL. I also visited and interviewed the founding director, Kim Bobo. Out of 60 affiliates, I chose these three, in consultation with national IWJ staff, based on the following criteria 1) visible emphasis on faith investment; 2) involvement with a worker center; 3) demographic and geographic variety; 4) evidence of structural stability and support; 5) willingness to participate in my research.

During my fieldwork, I conducted 50 semi-structured interviews with Board members, staff, and volunteers at the national and local levels. In identifying informants for interviews, my goal was to secure a broad representation of voices and perspectives; this meant seeking out voices that might not be presented in the dominant narrative of the organization. Thus, this research focused not only on the public or established narrative of the organization, but also on the lived experiences of people involved with the organization.

I also grounded my research in a historical understanding of religious pluralism and political involvement in the United States.[22] Therefore, in addition to participant

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[22] Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Kate McCarthy, *Interfaith Encounters in America*, 1 online resource (viii, 233 pages) : illustrations vols. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007), Ebook Library http://www.SLQ.eblib.com.au/patron/FullRecord.aspx?p=316421; Robert D.

observation and interviews, I drew on related literature in ethics, philosophy, and history. Since my research is framed within the context of the United States, I do not assume that a similar understanding of pluralism or ways of engaging religion in the public sphere do or should exist in other countries.

My methodological approach to this research project reflects a commitment to developing constructed knowledge, as defined by Belenky, through a position of mutual solidarity, as described by Peters.[23] Designing my research as a partnership between myself as a researcher and my community partner was an important aspect of my methodology. Designing the research along a model of mutual solidarity meant paying attention to the ways in which my presence and participation could contribute to the work of the organization, rather than objectively studying them without giving back. Clearly, my informants and participants were providing me with data that was valuable and necessary for my research, but through the partnership I was also able to provide them with valuable insight that they did not have the time or resources to gather on their own. I participated in local efforts during my field work, including pickets in two of the cities I visited. In conversation with a Board Member, I developed a variety of projects, including a white paper, publishable resources for the organization, and a meeting with a group of Board members in order to discuss my findings within the specific context of the organization. These projects specifically address the expressed needs of the organizations through a reciprocal relationship. Thus, the methodology of my research

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Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, 1st Simon & Schuster hardcover ed.. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010); Jones, *The End of White Christian America*; Eck, *A New Religious America*.

[23] Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 41.

reflects mutual solidarity in which I, as a researcher, developed a reciprocal relationship with my community partner.

Clarifying Terms

As the field of Interfaith and Interreligious Studies is new and quickly evolving, there are many contested terms within the field. While aware of the conversations and debates concerning these topics, for the purpose of this paper, I had to make choices concerning the language that I would use. Throughout my research, I define "interfaith" engagement as a space in which members of different religious traditions, including nonreligious people, intentionally come together based on their differing faith identities. Other terms that could be used would be "multifaith," "multireligious," or "interreligious." The term "interfaith" is often problematized for the Christian association with the term "faith." Theoretically, this term excludes religions that center more on sacred ritual than individual belief or faith. Additionally, this term excludes worldviews or philosophies. Practically, though, the organizations that I worked with during my research and those that I interviewed use the term "interfaith." Even non-Christians used the term "faith." Further, as I conducted my research, I found many people talking from a place of personal belief in social justice rather than simple ritual obligation to the work. Kristen makes the distinction clear, "I'm not a person of faith but [I] still have faith in things. [I] have to have faith in the organization and that things are going to get better."[24] Even though she doesn't have faith in the religious sense, she articulates that she has faith in the work of the organization. For this reason, I also use the terms "person/people of faith" and "faith communities."

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[24] Kristen Taylor, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.

Throughout my analysis, I also refer to the "wage workers" and the "faith community" or "people of faith," reflecting the language used by my informants. Audrey Crawley, intern at MassIWJ, explained it this way, "I feel like, specifically, my work here is much more [focused] on class. People who are associated with faith or highly involved in faith communities, often have access to more resources."[25] It should be noted that these terms are not descriptive, but rather coded. Many of my informants consciously acknowledged that wage workers are also people of faith and therefore the categories are not mutually exclusive. But, when they were referred to "workers," my informants were talking about a class of marginalized people and the injustices they face when it concerns the work that they do. "Faith communities" and "people of faith," on the other hand, meant communities and individuals who chose to engage in relationships of solidarity with marginalized communities based on personal faith commitment but who were themselves not marginalized based on their employment status.

Overview of Chapters

The second chapter of this thesis, "Political Contexts," outlines the first two of the five factors that I identified: a hostile political economy and a perceived dichotomy between conservative Christianity and liberal secularism. In order to make clear how the national political contextual shifts pose challenges for IWJ's FBCO, I first outline the history of the organization contrasted against their current structures. Many of my informants identified the political context of the country as a significant challenge for engaging in social justice action. As an organization that has traditionally partnered with the labor movement, recent anti-union legislation means that IWJ must reevaluate what their

[25] Audrey Crawley, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 16, 2018.

partnerships with workers looks like without trying to do the work of unions. Also, they must assess what a focus on workers' rights looks like as other legislation is being passed, such as anti-immigrant policies, that intersects with labor rights. Furthermore, the political landscape has shifted to a binary divide between secular progressivism and conservative religion. While there have been and continue to be progressive religious activists, the public narrative implies that religious activism is inherently conservative. Therefore, organizers within IWJ struggle to engage in FBCO rather than shifting towards a secular approach of community organizing.

The third chapter of this thesis, "Social Contexts," similarly outlines the next two contextual factors of my analysis: increasing religious diversity and the loss of members and financial resources of mainline churches. I outline how diversity has been approached throughout US history, from the genocide of Native Americans to the enslavement of Africans to the various ways that pluralism has been understood. This background positions the current work of IWJ as an interfaith organization in a pluralistic democracy trying to engage with and respond to the changing religious demographics of the country. In order to have greater moral authority in a country that is increasingly religiously diverse, IWJ attempts to have diverse representation within their coalition. Often, however, organizers find it difficult to engage minoritized religious communities in relationships of mutuality rather than tokenizing individuals for the sake of representation. Additionally, just as IWJ must reevaluate how their partnerships with unions looks, they must also reevaluate their partnerships with mainline churches. Traditionally, mainline churches have been a significant source of funding, but now

organizers must look for other sources of funding and the specific requirements of those partnerships. This chapter discusses how IWJ is navigating these challenges.

The fourth chapter of my thesis, "Ecclesial Context" describes the final contextual factor that I identified: an increasing awareness of privilege.[26] First, I outline the history of white Christian hegemony in labor abuses and labor rights, in the national context, and in the interfaith movement. These histories are what many of my participants struggle to respond to in a way that is healthy and productive. In response to this awareness of privilege, IWJ is seeking to have greater partnerships with those most visibly impacted by justice who have a greater understanding of how injustices are perpetuated. Rather than engaging in mutual partnerships, though, IWJ has made structural changes that often simply cede faith voices to worker voices. In this chapter, I explore the role that white Christian guilt is playing in IWJ and how it can limit the ability of people of faith to exercise responsibility for their privilege while also placing the burden for imagining a just society on those oppressed. One particular pitfall is the tendency to shift toward a model of charity rather than justice, which has been the motivating principle of IWJ. While charity can help individual workers who have been wronged, it moves IWJ away from addressing social transformation of worker justice at a systemic level. While an increasing awareness of privilege is necessary for social justice work, the challenges for FBCO lie in how individuals and communities respond to this awareness.

The final chapter of this thesis is my conclusion, in which I make the argument that FBCO continues to have an important place in social justice action of the 21st-

[26] The term "ecclesial" indicates specifically Christian congregations. Much of the context that I discuss does stem from an understanding of white Christian privilege, but I also recognize the importance of other faith traditions' congregational contexts as well. If there were an English word that indicates the church context without having a Christian connotation, that is the word I would insert here.

century. I review the history of faith communities engaging in progressive religion, which extends as far back as the abolition movement and continued throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Each of the historical movements responded to their particular political, social, and ecclesial context, engaging with the issues that affected individuals and society at those moments. Though those historical movements were mostly Christian, I argue that contemporary FBCO is part of this historical lineage and that religious communities and faith-based community organizers and religious leaders need to design new ways for this work to thrive into the 21st-century. Organizers and faith communities of all religious traditions definitely have a role to play in social transformation, but they must respond to the contextual shifts that I outlined in order to engage effectively in social justice action.

Chapter 2- Political Context

Christian social justice action, from abolitionists to social gospelers to civil rights advocates, has always been carried out within a particular context, responding to the political issues of the time. One of my concerns in this study was to consider how the particular context of the 21st-century is shaped by new characteristics to which organizers must respond if they wish to continue to be relevant and effective in the work of social transformation.

Over and over, my informants referred with frustration and exhaustion to the challenge posed in their work by the "current political climate." That phrase was the answer so many of my interviewees gave when I asked them what makes social justice work difficult. When invited to expand on what that entails, they referenced the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and the policies and leadership of his current administration. While many of my informants used the election to mark the current context, the election is simply one public manifestation of shifts that had already been occurring for decades. As a result of global neoliberalism, there have been social and economic shifts in the United States that increased poverty and health issues among the working class and poor.[27] Despite clear evidence of how capitalism takes advantage of the lives and bodies

[27] Rebecca Todd Peters, "The Mystification of Capitalism and the Misdirection of White Anger," in *Religion in the Age of Obama*, ed. Juan Marcial Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (London, UK ; Bloomsbury Academic, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2018), 93.

of workers, US society has remained, for the most part, mystified by neoliberal capitalism.[28] This means that the dominant American belief in the salutary effects of capitalism has blinded them to recognizing intrinsic flaws in the capitalist system. Therefore, instead of recognizing and confronting the ways in which neoliberal capitalism in the United States has contributed to their impoverishment, the white working class seeks other places on which they place the blame of their hardships.[29] When their economic instability is associated with the threat of immigrants or minorities taking their jobs or "replacing them," efforts to regain a sense of economic stability and social influence can manifest themselves in tense battles over ethno-racial tensions, immigration policies, and even gun laws.

Another aspect of the current political context is that progressive religious communities have increasingly been addressing LGBTQ rights, racism, and other issues within their congregations. Young church members, often disillusioned by conservativism that exists within many churches, are drawn to these progressive religious communities instead.[30] As these political battles have developed and young members are drawn away from conservative congregations, the political landscape has shifted to a culture war between secular progressivism and conservative religion.[31] Because

[28] Peters, 93.
[29] Peters, 93.
[30] Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories About Faith and Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 5.
[31] Ibid, 5.

progressive FBCO has been more localized through both grassroots organizing and efforts within congregations, these efforts have thus not been as widely visible to the broader public. This has been exacerbated by the fact that media attention often focuses more on the voices and positions of conservative Christian leaders and activists who are portrayed in opposition to progressive social shifts in attitudes toward LGBT issues, abortion, and diversity and inclusion.[32]

In this chapter, I will discuss the political contexts of the 21st-century identified by my informants and the challenges that they pose for FBCO. Specifically, these contextual factors include two of the five factors identified in the introduction: a hostile political economy and a perceived dichotomy between conservative Christianity and liberal secularism. Before analyzing how these contextual shifts have impacted IWJ, I will provide background on the organization's origins, which allows for a better understanding of how the shifts have impacted the work of IWJ.

History of Interfaith Worker Justice

During our interview, Bobo described how the 1989 Pittston coal miners' strike for pensioners' healthcare, prompted her to think about how faith communities were supporting the effort.[33] Upon hearing that there was little in terms of solidarity between the workers and faith communities, Bobo took it upon herself to create a national

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[32] Ibid, 4–5.
[33] Kim Bobo, interview by author, Richmond, VA, July, 13, 2018.

committee of faith communities to support the miners. While the workers won the strike and the faith communities' support made a difference, it was while doing this work that Bobo first realized that the labor movement was not really on the radar of many churches.[34] Most denominations had staff who addressed homelessness or hunger, but she was hard pressed to find anyone who worked on labor issues within any denomination she consulted. Thus began her vision of what would become IWJ, an interfaith coalition that mobilized support for the labor movement. As she pulled together a board for this new organization, seven years after the Pittston strike, Bobo strategically chose prominent religious leaders from the Chicago area who knew and cared about labor to be on the national Board of Directors. Admitting that she knew very little about labor, Bobo recruited people who could guide and teach her about the structure and politics of the labor movement.[35] She describes that her initial vision almost exclusively dealt with support for labor unions and their work.

Listening to Bobo speak, though, it is clear that her heart is for faith communities. She speaks with joy of how fun it is to engage faith communities who do this work from a place of hope and love. She sees that there is a desire in faith communities to be involved, to make things better, to make a difference. Bobo articulates the initial vision of IWJ clearly, to "engage the religious community in supporting workers' rights."[36] Her driving vision created an interfaith coalition that pulls together faith communities to advocate for systemic change in partnership with workers and labor movement leaders. Faith communities are asked to support national campaigns and organize actions to advocate for legislation and to raise public awareness of injustices against wage workers

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[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.

at national and local levels. Education activities include training programs and resource development to educate both clergy and lay practitioners.

Early on in the formation of the organization, faith communities would call Bobo asking for help, explaining that they had non-union workers who hadn't gotten paid or who had lost their jobs due to discrimination. Seeing a clearly prevalent need, Bobo initiated a project to create a workers' rights manual and to conduct workers' rights trainings. This eventually developed into a new programmatic area of IWJ: worker centers. Through both creating new workers' rights centers and accepting previously existing worker centers into their affiliate network, the organization expanded its mission. Bobo articulates that soon after founding IWJ in 1996, she saw the mission expand from a focus on organizing faith communities to support labor unions to providing ways for faith communities to stand in solidarity more actively with workers, including those not represented by unions.

IWJ Mission and Structure

Currently, IWJ operates as a national organization through 60 local affiliates, both interfaith coalitions and worker centers, that exist all around the country. The purpose of the interfaith coalitions is to tap into the local faith communities and mobilize their influence for advocacy or education around labor justice issues, while the purpose of the worker centers is to organize and educate workers about their rights. According to the website, there are 28 interfaith coalitions and 32 affiliate worker centers. While there are very limited requirements to be affiliated and each local organization has its own structure, there are commonalities among the affiliates. Each affiliate has, or has had, at

least one supporting faith community and each affiliate engages, or at some point has engaged, in issues of workers' rights.

Within IWJ coalitions, advocacy takes many different forms. Faith communities are asked to support campaigns like the Fight for $15 or Our Walmart, often through clergy presence. Rabbi Renee Bauer describes the activities of the local Wisconsin affiliate during the Wisconsin Uprisings of 2010,

> We did a lot to make sure there was a religious presence in that, so we had services in the capital when people were sleeping there. We had a Jewish service. We had a pastor come do communion on Sunday. We had, at the rallies where they were speakers and there were tens of thousands of people, a whole group of clergy come up. We would have the firemen would march and then we'd have the clergy march, and then we'd have people give an invocation at the beginning of every rally.[37]

They also organize actions like strikes and prayer vigils or develop publications that raise awareness of injustices against wage workers. Additionally, they fight for specific legislation to be passed at either the local or national level. Education programs include Seminary Summer, a program that educates future faith leaders about labor and Labor in the Pulpit/Minbar/Bimah that works to educate congregants. Mary Bell, president of the WJW Board, describes the efforts of this annual program: "We got members as well as faith leaders from other faiths to be guest speakers in the pulpit of a number of churches around. That allowed us to talk about the worker issues."[38] This provided yearly access to talk about worker issues in congregations. IWJ educational resources include bulletin inserts and scriptural study materials. The website has resources available for many different Christian denominations as well as Buddhist, Muslim, and other faith communities.

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[37] Renee Bauer, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.

[38] Mary Bell, interview by author, virtual, July, 10, 2018.

Worker centers, on the other hand, aim to organize and educate workers. The main goal of the worker centers is to organize non-unionized workers by bringing them together. Based on the National Labor Relations Act, which grants employees the right to join together to address or improve workplace conditions, worker centers create advocacy groups so that workers may become aware of similar issues that are happening among other workers and act together. Advocacy groups, consisting completely of wageworkers, had formed out of each of the worker centers that I visited. Kristen Taylor describes the purpose of Trabajadoras United (Working Women United),

> The whole purpose of that group is to provide a safe place for women workers who have come in to the center, to get together collectively and just kind of talk about their own personal issues and what they want to do about those issues. ... Some of the women has started to really step-up, which is good because the whole vision of that was to give women, low-wage and immigrant-working women, that are having issues in the workplace a bigger voice.[39]

The purpose of these advocacy groups is to provide space for workers. In addition to helping with Trabajadoras Unidas, Kristen describes the main part of her job as lead advocate for the Walk-In Clinic, "[I] do one-on-one with workers to help them with those issues whether it's filing a complaint or connecting with their employer to try to get them paid."[40] These efforts are significantly more focused on addressing the individual needs of workers than addressing labor issues at the systemic level. Most of the time workers don't come in for trainings unless they have a specific complaint with which they need assistance. There is usually one lead advocate who helps with these specific cases.

As a national network, IWJ has a board of prominent faith leaders and an increasing number of affiliate representatives who are invested in labor rights. There is a national staff in Chicago who support the affiliates through various means. For example,

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[39] Kristen Taylor, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.
[40] Ibid.

one of the national staff, Julian Medrano, described how he helped disseminate funds from a grant that they received in 2016 to certain affiliates and helped them to set up health and safety trainings.[41] On an individual level, the national staff provides technical support, like database support, and help troubleshooting interpersonal or organizing issues that affiliates may be having. They also hold an annual conference focused on training, networking, and support of their affiliates.

In 2015, Kim Bobo stepped down after 18 years as the executive director. As most organizations do when a founding director leaves, IWJ has been in a time of transition, reevaluating their mission and structure. During my interviews, however, it was clear that many of the challenges that the national office and the affiliates were navigating were related to more than leadership transition, they were also related to the current political context. In fact, when asked what was difficult about engaging in the work of the organization, one of the most common answers was that advocacy is difficult due to the "toxic political environment." For my IWJ informants, this meant political hostility both to the idea of worker justice and to the task of faith-based community organizing. While both are a part of the political context in which community organizing is taking place in the 21st-century, they have different origins. The first, hostility to worker justice, is a product of a long and persistent attack on labor and labor organizing in this country while the second, hostility to FBCO, is rooted in the different ways that conservative and progressive religious communities have engaged in the public sphere over the past forty years.

Hostile Political Economy

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[41] Julian Medrano, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June, 11, 2018.

One message that was repeated through many of my interviews was that organizers are operating within a hostile political economy.[42] In relation to worker justice, the current political climate includes anti-worker and anti-union legislation. In describing the current political moment, Andy Griswold, member of MassIWJ, said, "Soul crushing is what I would call it. And frightening.... So it seems like any effort to kind of provoke justice out of the system gets really slapped back, and people really get slapped down, and they make it even worse."[43] He describes what I heard from many informants: engaging in social justice work is exhausting and activists are not seeing results. Rev. Peder Johanson, former Board member of the Interfaith Coalition for Work Justice of South Central Wisconsin (ICWJ was the interfaith coalition half of the Worker Justice Wisconsin merge), exclaims, "My gosh, it's like 5, 4 years ago, 3 years ago, 2 years ago I could have stood up in my pulpit and said, 'we have a very clear mandate by scripture to welcome the foreigner, to welcome those seeking asylum without condition and without question.' That wouldn't be controversial. Now, all of the sudden, I'm being anti-Trump."[44] The polarization of the current political atmosphere does not only make is difficult to change legislation, but also makes it difficult to have conversations about the issues at all.

Specifically, during my field work, the Supreme Court decision on the *Janus v AFSCME* case was released. The Supreme Court ruled that public sector employees across the country must elect to be part of the union rather than automatically paying membership dues out of their salary. This decision essentially made every state in the country a "right to work" state. Even though employees may elect to not pay dues, they

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[42] In this paper, even though not identified as such by my informants, I use the term "political economy" to recognize that political and economic policies, opinions and environments are inherently intertwined.
[43] Andrew Griswold, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 17, 2018.
[44] Peder Johanson, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 19, 2018.

still are able to benefit from the collective bargaining. Because they are benefiting, but not paying dues, the unions then have less resources to be able to engage in negotiation. Thus, this legislation weakens the work that the unions can do. Because there are fewer regulations concerning workers' rights that companies must follow, labor abuses against workers increase. Anne Smith, director of WIN, describes the impact of the *Janus* case on WIN (as people were waiting for the outcome), "Now with the *Janus* decision being unknown it has tight-lipped people that were already tight-lipped. ... Less people willing to do work, and go around what we do. A lot less people to come out."[45] With a polarized political economy, people were less willing to engage in advocacy. For IWJ, which historically partnered with unions and supported their efforts, this shift means that they can no longer engage their traditional partners in the ways that they had been. They have to imagine new approaches for advocacy and support of workers.

More generally, when my informants remarked on how toxic and difficult it is to do advocacy in the "current political climate," they refer to the extreme polarization of the country, marked by the 2016 presidential election. Throughout his campaign, Trump made statements that perpetuated xenophobic, Islamophobic, racist and sexist sentiments. These sentiments were evident in his call to build a wall and instigate a "Muslim Ban;" they were evident in his references to countries in Africa as "shithole countries" and in his glib references to grabbing women by their genitals. In electing Trump, hate speech against all types of minoritized people is now coming from and legitimated by the government. In response to this toxic environment, organizers are struggling with how progressive religious activists can effectively respond to these contemporary political issues.

[45] Anne Smith, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 25, 2018.

IWJ began as an organization that was in close partnership with the labor movement. However, as unions decline and worker abuses increase, IWJ must reassess how they support worker justice. Even informants in Boston, which in not in a "right to work" state and has strong unions, expressed concern about the growing anti-worker sentiment in the United States. Rev. Norm Faramelli, who has been working with unions and the labor movement for 75 years, describes how much worse anti-worker sentiments have gotten recently, especially in the wake of *Janus vs AFSCME*. "Climate is much worse. It is much worse. See, the anti union sentiments are stronger. There are a lot of grassroots movements, but there are powerful forces, very powerful forces. … The inequality didn't start with Donald Trump, but it certainly got worse."[46] He describes the work of organizing as more urgent than ever and says, "we have to think of other ways, in terms of how workers' rights are protected other than through labor unions." He advocates for solidarity both with and among workers, "whether they're in unions or not in unions, whether they're organizing or not organizing."[47] As Rev. Faramelli sees the decline in union activity and increasing anti-worker legislation, he advocates for MassIWJ and other organizing groups to find new ways to support and protect workers.

In this political context, there have been fewer "wins" for progressive religious organizations as they remain on the defensive, countering harmful legislation, rather than putting forth new legislation and policy. For example, executive director of Workers Interfaith Network (WIN), Anne, describes how the staff had spent months formulating a policy that would allow consulate IDs to be accepted by the police in Memphis.[48] Just before the city passed the legislation, the state government passed legislation concerning

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[46] Norman Faramelli, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 18, 2018.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Anne Smith, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 25, 2018.

IDs that undermined the policy that WIN had developed. Because their policy could not be passed, there were no public, tangible outcomes from their months of hard work and effort.

In addition to identifying the politically polarized context of the United States as making it difficult to engage in social justice work, many of my informants employed an intersectional lens that recognized how issues of xenophobia, racism, and sexism affected workers' rights. Most prominently, issues of immigration were a recurring theme throughout my participant-observation. Ivan, the staff member for Workers Interfaith Network (WIN), describes how they added immigrant rights trainings in addition to their workers' rights trainings because "you cannot do labor rights without doing immigrant rights because they go hand in hand."[49] He sees the intersectionality of the issues because there are specific challenges that non-citizen workers face that citizen workers do not have to worry about. WIN seeks to address both of those concerns. Immigrants who have language barriers are more likely to be taken advantage of because they often don't know their rights and cannot communicate with legal aid to defend themselves. Even though labor laws protect all workers regardless of citizenship status, Ivan explains how the majority of workers who come into the center end up dropping their cases for fear of being deported. He told me that they "are afraid of coming out because they don't want to create any problems so they get in trouble."[50] By recognizing how immigrant and labor issues are tied together, IWJ recognizes the intersectional nature of justice issues. Because they do not have the resources to address every piece of legislation that directly

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[49] Ivan Flores, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 26, 2018.
[50] Ibid.

or indirectly affects workers, including those that are xenophobic, racist, or sexist, organizers must discern which pieces of legislation they should address.

As the United States moves into a new political moment, where there is greater hostility towards minoritized communities, progressive activists have shifted from offensive strategies to defensive strategies. They are often seeking to minimize the injustice rather than being able to strategize around ways to advocate for a just society. Specifically, in response to the current political environment, organizers are asking the following questions: What are the legislative issues that need our attention right now? How are the issues that we are working on intersectional and how does that impact our response?

Perceived Dichotomy between Secular Left and Christian Right

Another one of the national contextual factors that my research revealed was a perceived dichotomy between the secular left and the Christian right that frames the way that people engage in the public sphere. Many influential Evangelical Christian leaders, like Jerry Falwell Jr., president of Liberty University, and Southern Baptist pastor Robert Jeffress, endorsed Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. These religious leaders are also on the record supporting conservative political agendas, like those denying climate-change or against abortion and same-sex marriage. High-profile conservative religious leaders with large public platforms have become increasingly influential in the political realm as well. While there are many Christian leaders who hold more progressive religious views, they are more often engaged at the local level and in grassroots efforts for social change and do not always have the same public platform for promoting a

Christian perspective that counters that of conservative Christianity. Thus, the fact that many conservative Christian leaders with a national platform use that platform to promote conservative political views serves to shape a dominant narrative that Christianity is necessarily politically conservative. As a result, individuals and groups engaging in progressive social action do not see the value of reaching out to religious communities and see the only alternative as a shift towards a secular approach instead.

In *Religion and Progressive Activism*, Braunstein et al. argue that this distinction between conservative Christianity and progressive secularism is a false dichotomy. Typically, when people speak of progressive religion, they speak of people who are either politically liberal and happen to be religious or liberal theologians who happen to be engaged in social activism.[51] This understanding, however, does not highlight the intersection of religious belief as motive and standard for engagement in social activism. Nor does it consider groups who do not easily fit into the "left." [52] Finally, this dichotomy does not include a category for those who engage in the political sphere from a religious perspective that is anything other than Christian.

Rev. Darrell Hamilton, one of my informants in Boston exclaimed, "If you think this is political, if me rooting my message in Jesus, who he is, what he said, what he preached, how he lived… if you telling me that's too political for your Sunday morning, you ain't trying to come to church… There's a reason why Jesus got crucified."[53] Many Christians, like Rev. Hamilton, tie their own practices of engaging in politics and social justice to the example of Jesus. They understand the practices of Jesus to have been

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[51] Ruth Braunstein, Todd Nicholas Fuist, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Religion and Progressive Activism: New Stories About Faith and Politics* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 7.
[52] Ibid, 7.
[53] Darrell Hamilton, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 20, 2018.

challenging the dominant cultural and religious narratives of his time and upsetting political leaders to the extent that they had him killed. They see Jesus as a prominent religious leader who publicly engaged in politics for social change. Rev. Hamilton's church vocally advocates for Black Lives Matter and has regular safe spaces for LGBTQIA folks. Many of my informants expressed faith motivations and lenses for engaging in work of social transformation and community organizing in ways that counter a narrative of conservative Christianity versus liberal secularity.

Even though this dichotomy is clearly false, in many ways, IWJ is struggling to figure out its place within a society that perpetuates this narrative. WIN, in particular, struggled to recognize the place of FBCO in the current political context. While I was in Memphis, the director of WIN organized my interviews. In four of the interviews that she had arranged with progressive faith leaders, three Christian leaders and a Unitarian Universalist community minister, my interviewees were only at best peripherally involved with the work of WIN. When I asked what her connection with WIN is, Rev. Lucy Waechter Web responded, "not much." The only connection she had with the IWJ affiliate was that her children play on the same playground as the executive director. She, however, was able to talk at length about the progressive work that her congregation does:

> We have particularly done that through a seasonal study that we've been engaged in, so especially during Lent, we will usually pick a social issue. This year it was economic and equity. We were kind of lined up with some of the stuff happening within MLK 50. And supporting groups like Thistle & Bee, which is a group in town that works with folks coming out of human trafficking, offering them a living wage, re-entry into the workforce, that kind of thing.[54]

[54] Lucy Waechter Web, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 27, 2018.

The year before they had focused on mass incarceration and before that they had focused on climate change. Additionally, they have a group of people from their congregation going to the Memphis Interfaith Coalition for Advocacy and Hope (MICAH), which is an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation that was just beginning their work in Memphis during my fieldwork. "It's an incredibly diverse set of organizations coming together across faiths to work on issues of justice and advocacy."[55] My other interviewees all also mentioned MICAH and excitement about having an interfaith coalition to engage faith voices for progressive action. Clearly there is a large community of progressive faith leaders and congregations within Memphis, engaging in social transformation.

Yet, rather than attempting to find progressive faith communities who would engage in this work with them, WIN organizers were transitioning to taking a more secular approach. Ivan Flores, the worker center staff at WIN, remarked, "I don't see the [faith] community helping us out. And like I said earlier, they are very conservative a lot of the times, so we will not get their support. So I feel like those are wasted resources to a certain extent."[56] When I asked why they would not get involved, he remarked that it was "their political views. Being in the Bible Belt, a lot of their political views are very conservative."[57] While they are surrounded by progressive religious activists, the WIN organizers could not escape the narrative that faith congregations are inherently conservative. Instead of engaging with progressive religious communities, they generalize the entire faith community as conservative. Therefore, they are leaning away from engaging faith communities and towards focusing exclusively on a secular approach.

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ivan Flores, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June, 27, 2018.
[57] Ibid.

Historically, IWJ has created pamphlets targeted at faith communities as well as some directed at workers, educating them on their rights and discrimination laws. Along with no longer having a Faith-Based National Field Organizer, IWJ as a national organization has overwhelmingly stopped producing new resources for religious congregations and denominations and they have stopped the Seminary Summer program because they no longer had the resources. As they downsize to respond to a smaller budget, most of the programs being cut are those somehow engaged the faith communities. I found archives of the many articles written in the past about how WJW was bringing faith communities into local efforts, particularly the Wisconsin Uprising that occurred in 2010 when their governor passed anti-worker legislation; however, their recent efforts towards engaging faith communities has been minimal. While an inaccurate representation of individuals and communities engage in the public sphere, the binary between conservative Christianity and secular progressivism significantly frames the way that society and participants of IWJ perceive the work of community organizing.

Conclusion

My informants within IWJ clearly identified the hostile political economy as a factor that challenges the ways they have been going about organizing. Especially as members of an organization that traditionally partnered with the labor movement, they struggle to find effective ways to respond to the anti-worker and anti-union legislations as well as anti-immigrant forces that affect many wageworkers. My participant-observation also revealed that the false dichotomy between Christian right and secular left influences the ways that IWJ imagines its ability to partner with faith communities. Even though many

participants within IWJ articulate the importance of faith as a motivation for engaging in activism, organizers still struggle to identify how faith voices fit into the public sphere. In these ways, shifts in the national political context challenge the effectiveness of the strategies IWJ has pursued. While IWJ may not have all of the answers to how to respond to these shifts, their participants are actively asking the questions and seeking to address these challenges in helpful and productive ways.

Ch 3- Social Context

Historically, movements in the United States that organized based on a progressive religious understanding, such as the civil rights movement, have largely come from a Christian orientation and have rooted their advocacy in Christian theology; however, Robert P. Jones, CEO of the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), argues that increasing diversity and religious disaffiliation contribute to a waning of the hegemonic influence of Christianity in the United States.[58] Even though faith-based community organizing has historically been driven by mainline Christian churches, as the religious diversity of the country increases and as mainline congregations decline in membership, organizers must respond to the new social context of the nation. IWJ recognizes the need to expand its work beyond Christianity and to have the demographics of its organization reflect the demographics of the nation. As its traditional partnerships with mainline churches change, IWJ will need to assess its structures in order to engage its changing social context effectively. Organizers must respond to the new context of the 21st-century if they want to be relevant and effective in social justice work.

In this chapter, I will discuss the social changes that have impacted the United States and the implications and challenges that they pose for FBCO in the 21st-century. Specifically, I will examine how the increasing religious diversity and decline in the membership and financial resources of mainline churches is impacting FBCO. In order to help understand the contemporary pluralistic context of the United States and how that

[58] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 245.

impacts IWJ, I will discuss how religious diversity has been addressed historically in the United States.

History of US Diversity and Pluralism

Although many cite the World Parliament of Religions in 1893 as the beginning of the modern interfaith movement and pluralism in the United States, the history of this country has been one of encounter with the culturally, ethnically, and religiously "other" since its beginning.[59] These original encounters of difference, though, were controlled and suppressed by the power of white Protestants. For example, instead of engaging with the cultures and religions of Native Americans, after pursuing a near complete genocide, the US government placed many Native American children in boarding schools where they could not contact their families, speak their language, or practice their religion. Similarly, African slaves were often prohibited from having their own religious services and forced to attend church services where white preachers emphasized Bible lessons of obedience and servitude.[60] Despite the fact that many white Protestants were fleeing intolerance and persecution in coming to the American colonies, many used their power to attempt to strip other ethnic groups of their religious traditions and to teach a Christianity that served their own purposes.

In 1893 as part of the World's Columbian Exposition to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus "discovering" America, religious leaders and scholars from around the world gathered together in Chicago for the World's Parliament

[59] Michaud, "World Parliament of Religions, 1893," Online Encyclopedia, Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology, accessed February 6, 2018,

[60] Peter Randolph, "Plantation Churches: Visible and Invisible," in *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*, ed. Milton C. Sernett, 2nd ed. (63-68: Duke University Press, 1999).

of Religions. While eventually celebrated as a successful effort to bring together leaders and scholars that represented a variety of faiths, the 1893 Parliament was initially contested by many faith leaders globally. The Archbishop of Canterbury, for instance, claimed that such a gathering would promote the idea that other religions are of equal status with Christianity or any other faith.[61] Despite being dominantly Christian in representation and imagery, with 152 of 194 papers being presented by English-speaking Christians, representatives from the "ten great world religions- Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam" gathered together for 17 days of speeches, addresses, and hymn singing.[62]

The Parliament was problematic for many reasons, including the exclusion of African and Native American religious communities, whose voices have been suppressed since white Christians first came to the shores of what is now the United States, from presentations. Instead, as part of the World's Columbian Exposition, the Parliament included stages of "mock villages" in which Native Americans were exhibited. This exhibit presented the "evolutionary hierarchy of cultures," in which "Western" culture was presented as superior. Despite this treatment of Native Americans, the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions is known for advancing an ethic of pluralism.[63] It was the first time in US history that white Christian men had intentionally invited people into the country to share their different beliefs and worldviews on a seemingly equal platform. Despite including representatives of different world traditions, the pluralism celebrated at the Parliament was largely a Christian perennialism, which claimed that religious

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[61] Derek Michaud, "World Parliament of Religions, 1893," Online Encyclopedia, Boston Collaborative Encyclopedia of Western Theology, accessed February 6, 2018, http://people.bu.edu/wwildman/bce/worldparliamentofreligions1893.htm.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid..

differences are insignificant and that each religion worships the same (Christian) God with only various cultural differences. The polytheistic traditions of Hinduism and the deistic beliefs of Buddhism were disregarded and sublimated to a cultural variation of Christian. Similarly, the distinct negative claims that Islam makes about Christianity were ignored in favor of an evolutionary stance that all of these religions lead to "the one, true religion" of Christianity. Though they failed to truly engage religious communities as they understood and presented themselves, religious leaders and scholars did encourage Americans to consider the potential for cooperation both globally and in an increasingly multicultural United States. This moment in time was a brief hope for unity that was soon overshadowed by two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War. It was 100 years before the next Parliament in 1993.[64]

The current understanding of the interfaith movement as one of engagement rather than disregard for difference is the foundation of IWJ's approach. This model reflects Diana Eck's explanation of modern pluralism, which advocates for engagement across lines of difference rather than simple demographic diversity. Modern pluralism includes the recognition of the various ways that religious communities present themselves and engage with the "secular" structures of the world as well as responding to the specific histories of oppression that those communities have faced. Interfaith engagement occurs when members of different religious traditions and non-religious people intentionally come together in order to engage those specific identities. In order to truly transform society, IWJ's efforts must reflect the diverse and pluralistic nature of the country and the complicated dynamics that that entails. As Peters and Hinson-Hasty describe in *To Do Justice: a Guide for Progressive Christians*, progressive religious

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[64] Michaud.

activism must consider the pluralistic democracy of the United States: it's purpose is to allow for the input of a variety of voices and perspectives so that one faith, or race, or sex, etc. does not dominate.[65] Allowing different voices to speak in different ways, means creating spaces in new ways that allow for the contributions of these communities as well as reimagining what cooperation looks like. In response to this new social context of the United States, IWJ attempts to strategically engage a pluralistic democracy in order to advocate effectively for social transformation.

Religious Diversity

In the religiously plural society of the early 21st-century, my informants did not expect their faith claims to hold the same public authority for others who do not share them. Focusing primarily on the claim that Christianity advocates for fair treatment of workers and just wages is not sufficient. Instead, IWJ seeks to engage each faith community in the work of justice based on the beliefs of their own tradition rather than assuming that Christian faith claims influence or hold true for other faith communities. Rev. Kristin Gorton, Board member of WJW, considers the purpose of an interfaith organization: "I think the value is that in our diversity the changes can be more creative than we imagined, right? I have a certain lens and a certain life experience and I have one perspective. But when I can hear the perspective of other faith traditions, whether it be the Buddhist tradition or the Muslim tradition or the Jewish tradition, I think we can more creatively come up with change and transformation."[66] She seeks religious diversity because she believes that it can spur more effective strategies and approaches to social

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[65] Rebecca Todd Peters and Elizabeth L. Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice: A Guide for Progressive Christians*, 1st ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), xx.
[66] Kristin Gorton, interview by author, virtual, July, 10, 2018.

justice advocacy. Seeking both greater moral authority and a wider faith network, in response to the pluralistic context of the United States, IWJ seeks to engage various religious communities to advocate for worker justice. Nevertheless, the religiously plural context of the country does raise the question for organizers and advocates about the role of faith voices is in a multi-religious context.

Many participants joined the organization based on their personal faith commitments. Rev. Peder Johanson describes his involvement as part of his ministerial call. "As a leader in the church, seeing that the rights of the work and the liberation from economic oppression is certainly being a huge part of what we're called to do and to be as the church.... Jesus talked way more about economics than He did about any singular issue. And certainly the Hebrew scriptures are full of teachings about what it means to be a just society."[67] Clearly there is a connection between the teachings of Jesus and how Rev. Johanson believes he should engage with issues of social justice. In his opinion, it is the calling of the church to engage in issues of social justice. Recognizing this personal call and engaging concerns of justice from a faith perspective within specifically allocated religious spaces, though, is separate from engaging the moral authority of Christianity in the public sphere.

Similarly, Mayumi Swanson, national IWJ staff member explains how she has stayed with the organization for so long because it is a place where she can live out her Buddhist values. "I started to look for a place where all my [Buddhist] values [of not causing harm] would not go against me, right? ... Like the work that I'm doing, my values, [at IWJ] they're all moving in the same direction."[68] The work that she does at

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[67] Peder Johanson, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 19, 2018.
[68] Mayumi Swanson, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June, 1, 2018.

IWJ affirms her religious values and give her a space to embody those teachings. Recognizing that IWJ offers a place for individuals of a broad range of religious identities to live out their religion, though, is different from engaging these religious commitments at a public level.

Even with the desire to engage multiple faith perspectives, my informants describe various difficulties when it comes to increasing the participation of minority faith communities. My informants are well aware of the tendency for interfaith efforts to actually be ecumenical, engaging only various Christian denominations, rather than truly engaging in interfaith work. While they desire to include various religious traditions within the work of IWJ, Rabbi Renee Bauer, the previous director of Worker Justice Wisconsin, described various difficulties of engaging in specifically interfaith work in a religiously plural context. "I think one challenge is not… I don't know what the word is, but people get really excited, like, 'Oh, now I know a Muslim person!' … not tokening."[69] She wants to make sure that she is engaging in mutual relationships with the communities rather than assuming that knowing one individual or having one individual on the Board is sufficient inclusion of that community's perspectives on certain issues. My informants clearly desire diversity and see how it increases impact and effectiveness of the organization, yet they also do not want to tokenize minority faiths. Sarah Kelley described how many masjids in the area already have relationships with other organizations:

> We don't necessarily have any connections with the Muslim population in Massachusetts. I think there's a lot of reasons for that, maybe particularly because there are other interfaith organizations that are larger than us that have already formed relationships with the Mosques in the area…. So part of the lack of diversity represented in our group is due to already established relationships in

[69] Renee Bauer, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.

> which it would feel very much like tokenism to get an Imam to come to our breakfast when we don't have that relationship, and they don't really need Mass IWJ to field all the integrative work, right? So I'm still trying to figure that out.[70]

While forging relationships with these minoritized religious communities would benefit of IWJ and its effectiveness, some of my Muslim informants also related particular challenges in enlisting the cooperation of their faith communities. Taha Hassane the only Muslim faith leader on the IWJ Board of Directors (which includes seven Christian and one Jewish faith leaders). shared some of the difficulties he faces when trying to engage his faith community in issues of worker justice. “I nearly gave the entire sermon on the issue of justice, so I talked about the word 'justice', I talked about what my faith teach us, us Muslims, to do about this work.”[71] However, despite the clear connection to Muslim sacred teaching, Imam Hassane explains that his congregation does not easily respond to his call to action for workers’ rights because, “my community has also their own issues and struggles as you may know.”[72] WIN Board member, Imam Nabil Bayakly, also highlighted specific Qur’anic passages that advocate for worker justice, “So, by putting together what the faith tradition says, or the Prophet Muhammad says, and what the Qur’an says, then it's clearly that you are obligated, if you hire somebody, is to give them their due wages, and the Prophet says, before even their sweat dries. The traditions says, "أعط الرهان قبل أن يجف عرقه", which means that, give them ...their due right, before their sweat dries on their forehead.”[73] These imams both understand clearly the connection between their own faith tradition and worker justice. They are on the Board of IWJ and WJW, respectively, because they desire to connect their faith and

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[70] Sarah Kelley, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 16, 2018.
[71] Taha Hassane, interview by author, virtual, June 12, 2018.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Nabil Bayakly, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June 29, 2018.

faith congregations to worker justice. But these singular connections are not enough to get Muslim congregations involved in the work of IWJ. While these imams try to get their congregations involved, those Muslim congregations are often focusing internally to deal with the oppression that they face because of Islamophobia. While engaging minoritized communities within the work of IWJ is a valuable goal, it is often not realistic because those communities are focused on other forms of discrimination and oppression.

Further, Rabbi Bauer describes the violent history between Christianity and Judaism, which means that "it's not an equal playing field. … we're American and act the same, look the same. But my challenge over time has been that Christianity's relationship to Judaism is a history of murder and oppression."[74] To exemplify how this influences their work together with IWJ, Rabbi Bauer tells me the following story. With the intention of showing unity among different religious groups, a Christian pastor in the area wanted to have an interfaith worship service. The service included communion and the Christian pastor asked Becky Schigiel, a Jewish organizer with Worker Justice Wisconsin (WJW), to hold the communion cup at this service. Becky was fine with this request, more than happy to help in an effort for unity. Rabbi Bauer, on the other hand, was not pleased: "it was all a lovely goal, but it was really inappropriate."[75] She called up the pastor and had a long conversation about how it wasn't an appropriate request nor was communion appropriate in an interfaith worship service. This had to do, of course, with how communion is often an exclusive act of Christian worship- something that only Christians or sometimes members of a specific denomination can take part in.

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[74] Renee Bauer, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.
[75] Ibid.

Furthermore, given the history of Christian persecution of Jews for "causing the death of Jesus" and recognizing that communion represents this act of death and resurrection, this pastor was asking a Jewish person to hold a symbol that is both exclusive and representative of the persecution of Jews. In response to this conversation, the organizing pastor canceled the event. Clearly engaging in religious diversity is more complex than simply getting individuals and communities in the same space or having individuals from minoritized religious communities stand in the place where Christians normally stand. There are more complicated dynamics at work, especially with a history of Christian persecution of other religious communities.

In an attempt to form a religiously diverse coalition, organizers within IWJ identify questions concerning both tokenization, oppression, and Christian dominance. Having a coalition that represents minoritized communities is not as simple as having members of those communities serve in leadership positions. Religiously diverse coalitions also must address challenges that come from the lived oppression and violent histories of religious communities. As they strive to create strategies which embody religious pluralism, my informants struggle with the following questions: How do we create interfaith events that engage ethically and effectively with multiple religious communities? How do we form mutual partnerships with other religious communities?

Loss of Membership and Financial Resources of Mainline Churches

In addition to the increasing religious diversity, the decline of participation in mainline churches is also changing the social landscape of the United States as well as the task of FBCO. While Protestants in 1974 accounted for 63% of the US American population, in

2014 they accounted for only 47%.[76] As membership in mainline Christian congregations declines, their financial coffers have also decreased and they are less able to fund and support external organizations. Thus, organizations that have historically partnered with these congregations and depended on their donations have correspondingly fewer resources. Many of my informants cited this shift as one reason that they had to cut down on their advocacy programs and why their actions were no longer as effective as they had once been. In fact, in 2017, IWJ reported receiving only $12,000 from religious institutions, whereas they had previously reported receiving between $70,000 and $118,000 from religious institutions.[77] This raises serious questions about how FBCO can continue to work with clergy and laity to generate political influence for social transformation on labor issues with fewer resources.

When IWJ was founded in 1996, the majority of its funding came from both mainline Protestant churches and unions. While many informants implicitly referenced the changing funding sources, Rev. Johanson outlined it explicitly:

> Maybe go back 30, 40 years, churches had a lot of resources. They were a lot bigger. There were a lot more people involved. I forget the number but I think it was a generation or two ago, churches were one of the few charities. And so as people gave charitable contributions, they would give it to their church. And so we were pretty much the pie a couple of generations ago and now, you can track this, you can look this up, the number of non-profit charitable organizations has expanded exponentially in the last generation or so. So the church went from being the whole pie to really just a sliver of that pie and we feel that. We're not getting the same income through charitable giving as we used to. And so because of that, a lot of congregations are feeling an economic pinch.[78]

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[76] Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 50. Data on the decline of mainline Protestantism within the United States is consistent with data from the Pew Research Center and the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI).
https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/
https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/

[77] "Archive of Interfaith Worker Justice 990 Forms," Interfaith Worker Justice, accessed March 19, 2019, http://www.iwj.org/about/annual-report/archive-990.

[78] Peder Johanson, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 19, 2018.

Because churches have fewer resources, they focus more on internal church affairs and increasingly cannot afford to donate significant amounts to other causes. Kristin Gorton, the faith leader on the Board of Worker Justice Wisconsin, describes how, at their biggest annual fundraiserm only one faith congregation pledged to financially support the affiliate. Out of sixteen event sponsors, only three were religious communities: two Catholic groups and one mainline Protestant congregation. This ratio of faith community support is small considering that the organization's missional focus is on interfaith organizing. WJW has had to evaluate which structures are needed and which they can cut in response to a smaller budget. The majority of their resources are being spent on services and programs through the worker center, rather than the coalition that engages faith communities.[79] They can only engage in actions that don't require significant resources.

The majority of my informants, at all levels of the organization and in all demographic areas, told me that the biggest factor holding them back from accomplishing more work was financial difficulties. If they had more money, they would be able to hire more organizers or pay their organizers to be full time. Kristen describes how her hours have continually been cut as the organization tries to save money, "I had been working my hours up and I was like 32 hours last year, you know? Becky took over [as the executive director] and she was trying to save the organization and trying to make it work. We did the merge and everything. Then, I got my hours cut. It started in January 1st down to 26 hours [and now I'm down to 20]."[80] The impact of the cut hours is felt, "We're not extremely organized ourselves just because we have me working half-time.

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[79] "Mission & History," Worker Justice Wisconsin, December 26, 2017, https://workerjustice.org/about-us/mission-history/.
[80] Kristen Taylor, interview by author, Madison, WN, June, 20, 2018.

We have a director that's moving down to half-time. ... I've got six job titles technically.... It's really hard with 20 hours a week to obviously do all of those things."[81] These financial issues have significantly impacted both the Madison and Memphis affiliate to the extent that during my fieldwork in the summer, they were not sure whether the organization would still exist at the end of the year. Worker Justice Wisconsin had recently merged the local worker center and interfaith coalition to consolidate debt. They then limited the hours of their director to part time and reduced the worker center staff from 30 to 20 hours per week. The affiliate in Memphis was on the verge of closing completely when they got a grant from the Catholic Church, which allowed them to continue their work for a little while longer while strategizing how to bring in more money.

Similarly, to make up for their loss in revenue in 2016, IWJ national received a $1 million Susan Harwood Training Grant to conduct health and safety trainings with workers.[82] The limitations of being funded by grants, rather than donations from congregations, is that the grant funds can begin to drive organizational programming. In the case of the Harwood Grant, the focus of the grant on conducting trainings for workers meant that there was less staff time and fewer resources that could be used to develop faith resources or advocate for legislation. As national staff member Allison Zidek explains, "Denominations used to have a decent amount of money to contribute to organizations like us and now they don't. ... Our funding sources have changed as well,

[81] Ibid.

[82] "Archive of Interfaith Worker Justice 990 Forms." Except for 2016, from 2011 to 2017, IWJ received between about $200,000 to about $600,000 from foundations and between $49,000 and $151,000 from unions. In 2016, they received no money from foundations and less than $7,000 from unions.

which also, I think, affects the work that gets carried out."[83] In other words, because they no longer get the majority of their support from churches, but rather from grants, they have restrictions about what or how they can advocate.

In response to the decline of membership and financial resources of mainline Protestant churches in the United States, faith-based community organizations must shift their focus towards acquiring money in order to sustain their advocacy and efforts. Clearly, this shift affects their ability to be effective because their resources are limited and restricted and because more mental labor has to go into fundraising rather than strategizing. In the face of this new reality, Board members and staff must invent new strategies for fundraising, weighing the pros and the cons of receiving money with certain strings attached. This has generated its own set of questions as organizers ask where their financial support will come from. Additionally, organizers and faith leaders alike ask how can they generate political power with fewer resources.

Conclusion

As the social context of the United States shifts towards growing religious diversity and the membership and influence of mainline Protestant churches declines, my informants within IWJ discussed several ways in which these shifts impact the effectiveness of their organizing strategies. Structurally, they strive to achieve a diverse coalition without tokenizing specific communities, but rather remaining committed to mutual relationships. Financially, they must find new sources of funding and respond to the specific regulations with which those funds come. The shifting national social context of the United States influences both the structural and financial strategies of IWJ, which

[83] Allison Zidek, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June, 14, 2018.

influences the organizing that they can do. While they still have many questions, my informants continue to address these challenges, attempting to navigate a new 21st-century context in order to effectively engage in social transformation.

Ch 4- Ecclesial Context

Over the past thirty years, mainline Christian churches and the Christian ecumenical movement have placed a strong emphasis on addressing the issue of racism and racial justice. For example, the World Council of Churches established the Program to Combat Racism in 1969, which has been integral in helping white Christians reevaluate their roles in either perpetuating or fighting racism.[84] Alongside the demographic shifts in the United States and increased attention to racial justice in the country more broadly, questions of white privilege have shaped denominational politics and have filtered into the conversations in local churches. This increased awareness about the history and impact of racism in society has also prompted Christian theologians and faith communities to think more concretely about how hegemonic whiteness has intersected with hegemonic Christianity in the United States.

The final factor of the 21st-century social context that I identified in my research was an increasing awareness of privilege among white liberals. Many of my informants who hold various privileged identities demonstrated a heightened awareness of their privilege and a commitment to making sure that those who have traditionally been silenced have opportunities to participate in efforts for social transformation. While recognizing privilege is important, this commitment also generated tensions surrounding the question of which voices should be heard at all. I noticed a pattern in which some people with various forms of privilege responded by ceding their own voice or minimizing their privilege in favor of elevating other aspects of their identity that

[84] Claude E. Welch, "Mobilizing Morality: The World Council of Churches and Its Program to Combat Racism, 1969-1994," *Human Rights Quarterly* 23, no. 4 (2001): 908.

represented targeted populations. These actions raised the question of how privileged people of faith understand and negotiate their privilege and how they can develop relationships of mutual solidarity with minoritized communities without becoming paralyzed by guilt. In this chapter I will examine how these questions have both strengthened the work of IWJ as well as posed significant challenges that IWJ is still navigating. I argue that IWJ (and other faith-based organizations) needs to be able to navigate a new awareness concerning injustice and privilege without negating its own valuable input. They must recognize the value and moral authority of approaching social justice action based on theological understandings in order to truly engage in relationships of mutuality with those most visibly impacted by injustice in order to facilitate effective social transformation for justice.

History of White Christian Hegemony

The issue of how white Christian leaders in IWJ are navigating and reshaping their approach in light of a new consciousness about racial injustice, privilege, and complicity in systemic injustice was a major theme in my interviews. The need for accountability for Christian complicity in injustice and for appropriate ways to recognize participation in a system that privileges whiteness and Christianity is an important aspect of faith-based organizations seeking social justice. It was clear that Christians working with IWJ acknowledge the powerful dominance of white Christianity within labor abuses and labor rights, within the national narrative, and even within the interfaith movement.

This understanding was evident my first day in Boston with the local affiliate (MassIWJ) when I attended an internship meeting for the Jobs with Justice interns. In this

meeting, Marcel Grair, who is on the executive committee of MassIWJ, traced the history of labor abuses in the United States to slavery. She explained that many white Christians justified slavery by appealing to the Bible, arguing that because slaves existed in both Testaments of the Bible and because the apostle Paul called for slaves to obey their masters, owning slaves could be considered a Christian act. Further, supporters argued that slavery was even charitable, because white Christians were removing Africans from a "heathen land" and introducing them to the civilizing and salvific power of the Christian religion.

IWJ members are also keenly aware of the historical dominance of white men in the labor movement. During my first week with Worker Justice Wisconsin (WJW), which was housed in the Labor Temple along with many other union offices, I was warned that most of the other people within their building fit into the "typical union" demographic. In other words, they were older, white, male, and a little rough around the edges. The WJW workers understand that the labor movement's dominant voices have historically been white male voices, as people of color were explicitly excluded from unions for decades. Despite the official non-discrimination policy of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the majority of the unions within the AFL specifically barred African Americans from membership. When the AFL and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) merged to become the AFL-CIO, A. Philip Randolph, among others, formed the Negro American Labor Council in 1960 to fight racial discrimination within the AFL-CIO.[85] Worker Justice Wisconsin, on the other hand, had mostly women on staff and welcomed many Latinx workers into their center.

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[85] Joy Heine, Cynthia Brooke, and Interfaith Worker Justice (Organization), *A Worker Justice Reader: Essential Writings on Religion and Labor* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2010), 35.

While IWJ focuses on worker justice, the impact of white Christianity on the aspects of society that they hope to influence is not limited to issues of labor abuse. White Protestantism has historically been the dominant influential force in both US American culture and politics. Scholar of religion, Robert P. Jones describes the power structure of white Christian hegemony in the United States and how white Protestant faith leaders spoke publicly about the important role that they believed Christianity played in upholding the moral values of the country, often through the political structure.[86] White mainline Protestants at the beginning of the 20th century believed that the final hundred years of the millennium would be the "Christian Century" and Christian principles would shape national policy and world events.[87] In the latter half of the century, influence shifted from white mainline Christianity to white evangelical Christianity and the "Moral Majority."[88] The hegemonic power of white Christianity overflowed into society through seemingly secular institutions like the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) and Boy Scouts that were actually deeply imbued with Christian theology and values. As Jones describes, "for most of the nation's life, White Christian America was big enough, cohesive enough, and influential enough to pull off the illusion that it was the cultural pivot around which the country turned - at least for those living within its expansive confines."[89] In other words, white Christian values significantly shaped the cultural narratives and public policies of the United States. Concerning the 2016 election, Jones describes white evangelical Protestants as "nostalgia voters" who wanted to "make

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[86] Jones, *The End of White Christian America*, 7.
[87] Ibid, 34.
[88] Ibid, 37.
[89] Ibid, 39.

America great again," longing for the time when white Christian churches were the dominant cultural hubs of the country.[90]

In each of these historical instances, white Christians have explicitly asserted their influence in the public sphere. The interfaith movement, on the other hand, seeks effective social transformation by intentionally bringing people together across diverse religious traditions. For example, rather than advocating for legislative change by claiming simply that Christianity promotes just wages, IWJ attempts to reflect a unity of religious beliefs concerning worker justice in a pluralistic society. Still, white Christianity is dominant even within the interfaith movement. The term "interfaith" has often been aspirational rather than descriptive. Interfaith initiatives have often been simply ecumenical (including various denominations of Christianity) rather than truly being inclusive of many faith traditions. IWJ recognizes this tendency of interfaith organizations and attempts to achieve religious diversity in order to have a greater moral authority.

All of this history is backdrop for the actions of IWJ in the present moment. It is good that IWJ leadership recognizes the hegemonic power of white Christianity and that they attempt to incorporate those most visibly impacted by injustice into the decision making process. However, I also observed ways in which some of their strategies for responding to privilege undercut the strength and moral power that a faith perspective can contribute to the fight for worker justice. The challenge that faces white Christian actors in the public sphere in the 21st-century is how to take responsibility for privileges they hold that are a result of injustice and to value the voices of the minoritized without negating or undermining the legitimacy of their own voices.

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[90] Ibid, 246.

Christian social ethicist, Rebecca Todd Peters, describes how people in positions of privilege must first critically analyze their own positions of power as preparation for participating in the transformation of historical patterns of oppression. She also describes the importance of engaging in relationships with people who are marked by social and economic difference in order to gain a greater understanding of the issues in society that perpetuate injustice.[91] This requirement that people of privilege engage in relationships of mutual solidarity is a necessary part of recognizing the epistemological privilege of those most visibly impacted by injustice. Relationships of solidarity also contributes to people's ability to acknowledge their own positions of power within society.[92] Once this step has been engaged, people of privilege must then learn responsible and appropriate ways to contribute their own voice and moral perspectives as part of a larger process of moral discernment and negotiating public authority. The ways in which IWJ is struggling to engage in the second step are evident through two particular challenges. The first challenge is how people with privilege navigate a new awareness about their own complicity in injustice without becoming paralyzed by the guilt. Further, faith communities tend to remain focused on acts of individual charity rather than integrating their own voices to address social problems and advocate for structural change that actually has the potential to create a more just society.

Negotiating Guilt

[91] Rebecca Todd. Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 41.
[92] Ibid, 83.

The paralyzing factor of white Christian guilt came clearly to the forefront of my analysis in my interview with Jim.[93] These themes were also articulated clearly by Board members and staff at national and local levels. The language of "guilt" was assigned to Jim's attitude and behavior by another one of my informants, which then became a useful framework through which my analysis of the organizational approach was formed. I observed three distinct behaviors that indicate an attitude of guilt in community organizing. The first is awareness or recognition of personal privilege. The second is deflection, lifting up the voice of the minoritized and ceding one's own privileged voice. These two behaviors are warning signs for guilt, but can also be engaged in healthy ways. The final behavior that indicates guilt is justification and negation. In response to an awareness of privilege and in order to deflect their own voice, individuals both justify their participation in advocacy by emphasizing minoritized aspects of their identities (over against their dominant positions) and attempt to negate their privilege by ceding the positions of power that they hold.

Jim is a white Christian who has been engaged with IWJ for a long time and is fully invested in the mission to engage people of faith in efforts for worker justice. He recognizes the historical dominance of white middle class Christians within the leadership of IWJ. But then, like many others, he speaks with pride about the shifting demographics of leadership within the organization. IWJ as a national organization has moved to requiring that a minimum of 40% of their board members be from local affiliates. Following this move towards incorporating workers, one affiliate I visited recently removed all but one of the faith leaders from their Board.

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[93] The name of this interviewee has been changed for confidentiality.

Rather than focusing on organizing faith communities to support union efforts, as they have in the past, there has been an upsurge of affiliates directly organizing and providing services to workers rather than engaging faith communities to support worker justice initiatives. These affiliates engage workers directly and envision IWJ as an "arm of organized labor," acting more as a union than an organization geared toward faith communities. While there might be an occasional reflection on a religious holiday or a generic prayer for a labor cause, IWJ no longer develops bulletin inserts or scriptural studies and often relies on previously created denominational resources.

Jim and other informants describe the shift to greater partnership with workers as a better structure because it elevates the workers and the local affiliates: they are the people on the ground who experience the oppression, therefore they should be involved with the decision making. He sees this shift not only as an acknowledgement of the limitations of his view as a white Christian faith leader in the organization but as corrective to his privilege and his blind spots.

This strategy for compensating for positions of power by minimizing the impact of privileged identities was evident in other spaces as well. Participants of IWJ explained the value of their contributions to the organization as independent of their white or Christian identity. One of my interviewees, for example, explained that even though she was white, she was qualified to help workers because she had been on welfare. In this instance, she coded her experience of poverty as granting her authority that mitigated her dominant status as a white person. I noted a frequency in people viewing their privileged identities as a hindrance to effectively engaging in social justice work. In an attempt to feel valuable, these participants justified their involvement in the work by highlighting

their own marginalized identities or experiences. In response to the guilt that stems from their consciousness concerning the complicity of privilege in upholding systems of oppression, they fail to see how their positions of privilege might also contribute to the work of the organization.

Efforts to acknowledge and dismantle privilege are an essential aspect of social justice in the 21st-century. In describing relationships of mutual solidarity, Peters describes how "people are called to think carefully and critically about their sources of power and authority and to try to determine how God is calling them to use their social position and privilege in ways that promote justice." [94] The purpose of recognizing positions of privilege in society is not to imbue guilt, but rather so that people can recognize the ways in which they receive social benefits that they have not earned and respond to that knowledge in ways that transform the social structures of injustice.[95] While it is important that leaders within IWJ, like Jim, acknowledge their complicity in an unjust world and seek to include the voices of workers in their decision-making processes, they should not simply cede their own voices to the voices of the minoritized. People with privilege, like Jim, need to learn how to use their own particular voices in ways that express mutuality and honest engagement with the voices of others.

Danger of Guilt as Paralysis

Mary Belenky's insights in *Women's Ways of Knowing* offer a useful paradigm for helping think through how faith communities in IWJ engage with worker centers and how they should reframe their perception of self in order to engage relationships of

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[94] Rebecca Todd. Peters, *Solidarity Ethics: Transformation in a Globalized World* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 61.
[95] Ibid, 82.

mutuality. A key insight in Belenky's analysis of how women create knowledge highlights the importance of women valuing their own knowledge as an important epistemological resource. The devaluing of experience and perspective with which women struggle is both similar to and different from the ways in which contemporary white Christians struggle with their experiences of privilege. The analogy is imperfect as women have been trained by a patriarchal society to doubt their own contributions, whereas white Christians minimize their potential value due to guilt stemming from their own positions of privilege. Yet, it provides valuable insights in showing how people suppress their own voices.

For the purposes of this thesis, I focus on the last two stages of knowing that Belenky describes. The final stage, and goal, is constructed knowing, in which one integrates one's own experiences with the experiences of others. This stage of knowing produces mutual relationships, in which both parties play significant roles. The way that IWJ attempts to incorporate marginalized voices, however, reflects what Belenky describes as connected knowing, in which women suppress their own knowledge in order to lift up the experiences of others. This stage of knowing cannot lead to mutuality as the knower rejects their own input.

While organizing and lifting the voices of workers for collective power is incredibly important, these efforts target workers rather than faith communities. Faith-based community organizations like IWJ, whose explicit aim is to engage faith communities, should target communities of faith to partner with and support workers. In IWJ's transition, they have seemingly shifted the focus of their organizational structure towards workers and away from the power of faith voices and communities in leveraging

social change. As such, they reflect Belenky's stage of connected knowing because they only value the experiences of workers rather than integrating them with their own religious experiences and theological perspectives.

Another aspect of connected knowing, as Belenky describes, that is helpful to frame how white Christians respond to their guilt is the refusal to judge. In her analysis, she frames this non-judgemental stance through interpersonal relations where a woman does not judge a friend's decision, even if she thinks that the decision will be harmful, so that the friend does not feel alienated.[96] Rather, the friend feels supported and the relationship remains. At an interpersonal level, it is easy to see how this relationship is clearly one-sided and relatively superficial. The friend confides in the woman, yet the woman does not process or respond in a way that accurately reflects her own thoughts and opinions. This type of interaction is unhealthy for the woman who denies her own experiences and knowledge, but it is also detrimental to the relationship because the friend does not get to hear the valuable contribution that the woman has to offer. Often, women engage in this behavior because they do not see the value of their own contribution or because they worry about losing the relationship with that friend.

Faith communities similarly are at risk of losing the value of their faith lens as they seek to develop deeper relationships with marginalized communities of workers. The fear of perpetuating hegemony in these relationships seems to be resulting in progressive white Christian leaders deferring to the perspectives of workers out of a fear of losing their relationships with workers. Faith communities responding to their guilt by invalidating the importance of their own perspectives and experiences of the world negatively impacts efforts for social transformation. On a public level, it undermines faith

[96] Belenky et al., 117.

communities' moral authority and the potential for impact that they have based on their positions of power, which allows for others in power to continue perpetuating injustice.

Additionally, this type of response negatively impacts the labor movement because the creative work of imagining a just society and strategies towards achieving it falls completely on the workers. Rather than integrating their own faith vision for a just community, people of faith hear the needs expressed by the marginalized community and, in the words of another informant, they "bend over backwards" to accomplish those specific tasks. As shown through the effects of the social gospel movement and the civil rights movement, faith communities have powerful theological visions of a just society that have the potential to radically affect how the labor movement engages the work. Furthermore, as 73% of people within the United States claim a religious identity, there is the potential for incredible influence through engaging faith communities.[97] Creating mutual partnerships between workers or labor unions and faith communities creates a stronger voice for impacting society because it includes both the epistemologically privileged voice of the most visibly impacted and the moral voice of faith in a pluralistic country.

Charity as Ineffective

One recurring way in which IWJ ceded the voice of the faith communities was through committing most of their resources towards charity, or problem-solving for individual workers and attention to individual problems, rather than justice, or social transformation. This tendency toward charity work was evident during my week with Worker Justice

[97] "America's Changing Religious Identity," *PRRI* (blog), accessed October 28, 2018, https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.

Wisconsin (WJW). On my last day with this organization, I attended a picket for a worker, Apolonio, who had lost over $12,000 due to wage theft. The whole week the organization had been telling his story so that people would come to the pickett in support: three years prior, in 2015, the worker center staff helped Apolonio make an arrangement with his former employer to be paid his stolen wages. After a while, the former employer stopped paying and members of WJW picketed the bakery where Apolonio had worked until the employer agreed to start paying again. In 2018, the employer had stopped paying yet again and so, helping the same individual on the same case for the third time, the members of WJW went to picket the bakery again. The signs at the picket declared, in English and Spanish, that wage theft is robbery and a crime and only a few signs declared that "Thou shalt not steal," alluding to the 10 Commandments in the Bible. As protesters approached the bakery, the employer immediately agreed to begin paying once again.

These events stemmed from the personal needs of Apolonio, rather than the people of faith in WJW developing a strategy to engage wage theft at a societal level leveraging their moral authority as people of faith. The individuals at the picket expressed a moral conviction that wage theft is wrong, but no religious clergy came to visibly show support or speak to demand justice. There was no discussion of which religious traditions were present. The faith voice was conspicuously absent from the demonstration as the picket reflected the individual faith of those who came to support rather than truly engaging the public moral authority of faith voices. Here public voice and perspective of faith communities had been ceded to simply address the need that a minoritized worker expressed: he needed his money back. Mutual solidarity, as Peters explains, necessarily

involved the integration of all voices involved. The worker voice was clearly present, but faith perspectives were absent. To be clear, there were, of course, individuals of faith at the picket, but they did not leverage their position as a community of faith publicly. It was a transactional effort in which people of faith were called upon to turn out bodies to an event that would assist one worker but failed to connect his situation with the larger social problem of wage theft and the changes in policy needed to address it.

While there is no doubt that regaining the $12,000 for Apolonio is significant, these three efforts of WJW targeted one local small business employee and only assisted one individual rather than focusing energy and efforts on creating a larger impact for workers in the Madison area. The work of WJW is charity, which Peters describes as informed by either sympathy or responsibility, in which there is still a hierarchy of one who helps and one who relies continually on the help. The staff members of the WJW worker center help individual workers who come in and express need. Rather than interpreting the stories of injustice based on a theological vision for a just society, as a constructed knower would do, WJW has become distracted by the individual needs that workers express. The public actions of WJW don't require faith communities to challenge the structural roots of injustice in any way. Rather as Belenky predicts when she writes that connected knowers can only act within the existing system, the members of WJW maintain systems of injustice that force workers to rely on privileged faith communities for acts of charity. The goal of IWJ, to engage in social transformation, remains unfulfilled; the injustices will continue occurring; employers will continue stealing wages from their employees. Modes of charity play into non-mutual relationships in which the faith community provides for the minoritized without engaging the

oppressed in efforts for self-liberating justice. Thus, while expressing gratitude, the workers of Madison, Wisconsin continue to rely on the charity of the worker center.

Faith Voices as Justice

By engaging the moral authority of faith voices through mutual relationships, MassIWJ in Boston, Massachusetts has been able to effectively advocate for a more just society. The MassIWJ staff member, Sarah, is an organizer who communicates and connects with local clergy and individuals of faith. Through monthly membership meetings, the individuals of faith come together to discuss and create action plans concerning local injustices against workers. Jeb Mays, executive committee member, union staff member, and one of my main informants, told me stories of the regular support that they give to striking workers by showing up to pickets with shirts that say "All Religions Believe in Justice." She describes one particularly memorable moment of support. A few years ago, in support of a strike, MassIWJ sent in delegations of people of faith into the airport to publicly confront MassPort, which oversees airport employment, about the unfair and unsafe working conditions. A Catholic priest, Father Phil, spoke in front of the board and then loudly sang "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" all the way through.[98] The board members were made incredibly uncomfortable by this direct confrontation, comparing the injustices and conditions of the airport workers to the crucifixion of Jesus and, thus, comparing the Massport board to the religious rulers who advocated for the death of an innocent man because it served their own greed for power. She describes how to this day when they show up to MassPort, people ask whether or not they will be

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98 Jeb Mays, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 15, 2018.

singing. MassIWJ makes their presence felt as people of faith with the moral authority to affect systemic change.

In this example, the members of MassIWJ describe the particular moral authority of faith voices as support within worker justice efforts. Their action stemmed from relationships of solidarity. The faith community listened to the issues facing the marginalized community and supported the actions in which workers were already engaged. Unlike WJW, they did not create their own pickets, but they went to add their voices to those that were already occurring. But, they also didn't simply add their bodies, indistinguishable from the workers. Father Phil went in as a Catholic priest, intentionally and publicly demonstrating his commitment to social justice as a faith leader. He didn't tell the stories of the workers; the workers were there to do that themselves and he wasn't one of the airport workers. Rather he integrated the experiences that the workers had told him, stories of abuse, and interpreted them based on Catholic Social Teaching, which calls for human dignity and advocating for the common good. Here Father Phil offers a prime example of what Belenky would describe as a constructed knower. Unlike WJW, which was advocating for one specific individual without referencing faith commitments, MassIWJ rallied faith communities in support of the labor union's call for changes in how all airport workers were treated. The effect of their action has the potential to impact over one-thousand MassPort employees and many other contract workers. Also, as MassPort is considered a leader in airport employment, other companies might be encouraged to follow suit. Thus, rather than tunneling lots of energy to help one employee, the strategic approach of MassIWJ can impact thousands of workers at a structural level.

Through constructed knowing, by integrating their own unique voices with the voices of the marginalized, MassIWJ engages in relationships of mutual solidarity which seek to advocate for justice rather than being distracted by the opportunity for acts of charity. According to Peters, relationships of mutuality require faith communities to recognize their own unique positions and understand how they can use their privilege to seek justice beyond simply meeting the immediate needs of people.[99] They should recognize ways that they can act on behalf of minoritized groups in order to change the systems and structures of injustice.[100] This work is achieved once the members of the community have learned to value the importance and potential for contribution of their own voices and, thus, achieve the stage of constructed knower.

The work of MassIWJ clearly reflects mutual solidarity. The mutual relationships that they have with workers and labor unions inform the work that they do, but their work adds a distinctive faith layer. Once they have heard the plights and efforts of those most visibly impacted by injustice against workers, MassIWJ involves the faith communities and their moral authority in the public sphere, often geared towards legislation and large companies, for the establishment of a just society. Thus, MassIWJ, by integrating the faith voices with the experiences of the workers, more effectively strives towards the goal of IWJ than does WJW. The organization got the faith community to employ their moral agency at a public level in order to make change at a systemic level.

Conclusion

[99] Peters, *Solidarity Ethics*, 61.
[100] Ibid, 65.

Throughout my fieldwork, I observed participants struggling to respond to the intersectionality of both privileged and minoritized personal identities and communities. A new ecclesial context that recognizes the privileged position of Christianity in society and the way that white Christianity in particular has been used to perpetuate injustice caused my informants to be weary of engaging the public moral authority of their faith perspective. Being aware of personal positions of power and recognizing the epistemological privilege of those most visibly impacted by injustice is a necessary step that IWJ participants have taken in efforts of progressive social transformation that strive towards an equitable society. But they then struggle to move past guilt and employ their own voices and moral agency. Often they cede the faith voice to worker voices or they focus in on charity rather than justice efforts. In response to an ecclesial shift that acknowledges privilege, the challenge for FBCO is analyze the power of faith voices and create strategies to yield it effectively for social transformation.

Chapter 5- Conclusion

Allison Zidek, a long-time national staff member, reflected that while she does not see much conflict across lines of religious difference in IWJ, the main conflict she sees is affiliates questioning whether the faith component is an important part of IWJ.

> I've seen more of the religious versus no religious conflict come into play with some of the worker centers, who don't think that's an important part of what-the work they're doing. And sometimes I wonder, then, why they are affiliated with IWJ. Because I think that is our mission. Otherwise go be with Jobs With Justice, or some other thing, which are all good organizations as well, but don't have that faith component. [The] Faith component is important. [And] I feel like we've lost a lot of that over the years.[101]

She recognizes that there are many effective grassroots organizations, but that IWJ's mission is distinct. Allison conveys the one question that pervaded my research through all other concerns: is there a place for faith communities in social justice work in the 21st-century? This question was asked both explicitly, as when my informants in Memphis discussed whether or not to continue partnering with faith communities in their organizing, but also implicitly, as when my informants in Madison articulates a FBCO vision but removed the majority of the faith leaders from their board.

Given the five contextual factors outlined in the chapters of this thesis, it is not surprising that my informants are re-evaluating whether or not congregations should still be involved with community organizing. The 21st-century includes a political context where progressive activists are overwhelmed by increasingly aggressive legislation that many conservative Christian faith leaders publicly support and the public narrative claims that the only other option for engagement is liberal secularism. It includes a social

[101] Allison Zidek, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June 14, 2018.

context where religious diversity is rapidly increasing, meaning that the same Christian claims no longer hold for large portions of the population and that traditional Christian partners no longer have the resources to support efforts like they once did. It also includes an ecclesial context where many people of faith are recognizing their positions of privilege, but in an effort to elevate the voices of minoritized communities, they then fail to utilize their own moral agency and claim their faith's vision for a just society. Given these contexts, it is understandable for people of faith and organizers to be questioning the role of faith communities in community organizing.

Despite these factors and the persistent question of whether faith voices matter, though, my informants continually expressed the importance of faith communities in efforts for social justice. Founder Kim Bobo describes their efforts at the beginning of the organization:

> It seemed like every campaign we got involved in just made a difference. It made a difference to workers that the clergy were supporting it, it made a difference to the target, the decision- makers, so the employer or whoever, and it made a difference in the public framing of the issue in the community. And so again there were just lots of campaigns that we just kept winning on like we just made a difference, right? And it was very practical, and very engaging, and we did prayer vigils out in the middle of the street. I mean we just did lots of stuff and people loved it. The faith community loved it because it was very action- oriented. You could see your results quickly.[102]

Clearly the engagement of faith communities was important to the public and the employers. The engagement of the faith community made a significant difference in the campaign, which meant that both the faith and the labor unions appreciated and benefitted from the relationship. Even now, over twenty years after Bobo's original vision, Jeb Mays, executive committee member of MassIWJ describes how the faith communities are influential in social justice action. "We get in the street, we collect

[102] Kim Bobo, interview by author, Richmond, VA, July 13, 2018.

petitions, signatures, we walk picket lines. We are very much present. We are not talking about it, we are doing it."[103] The presence of faith communities is felt within the campaign efforts of local unions. Further, MassIWJ recently decided to collaborate with Raise Up Massachusetts for signature collection in order to petition the state to add ballot questions about raising the minimum wage and paid family and medical leave. "We have been deeply involved in the petition signature gathering. Our activists have themselves taken petitions and moved petitions in their congregations and their grocery stores and their choruses." [104] Congregational partners and individual members who brought the petition to their congregations collected around 1,500 signatures. The involvement of MassIWJ members and the signatures collected from their congregations were integral to getting the questions on the ballot. Throughout the history of IWJ and in the work I observed during my fieldwork, there was clear evidence for the ways in which congregations support progressive social transformation.

Role of Faith Communities in Community Organizing

Within society, faith communities provide valuable contributions to the work of community organizing. Congregations and religious leaders are uniquely placed to provide a voice of moral authority on social issues, to contribute to a vision of a just society, and to mobilize large groups of people to support social change. While the religious demographics of the country are changing, it is also true that the country continues to be made up mostly of people of faith. Indeed 73% of individuals in the

[103] Jeb Mays, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 15, 2018.
[104] Ibid.

United States in 2016 were religiously affiliated.[105] Therefore, various faith claims that advocate for progressive social transformation hold moral authority a significant portion of the country. As people of faith and faith leaders engage in social action, they draw from their religious texts and teachings to creatively imagine a justice society. Further, the networks built through religious congregations allow for greater mobilization and effectiveness in social justice efforts. Clearly engaging faith communities in efforts for social transformation is pragmatically significant in justice action.

Aside from the utility of their presence, an equally important factor is that many people of faith see involvement in social justice action as an embodiment of their faith; this action is seen as just as important to their religious identity and practice as going to church or saying a prayer. Bobo explains the reason that she engages in FBCO, "I really believe a core of who we are as people of faith is to love God and to love our neighbors. And loving our neighbors is around making things better for people. There's such inequality and unfairness in the society, so it feels like the purpose in my life is to make things better for people."[106] For her, engaging in FBCO is integral to living out the core tenants of her faith. She wants to help other people of faith also live out their own faith commitments. Similarly, Jeb describes why she engages in MassIWJ, "I guess to me always, religion was not about talking the talk, but walking the walk. I feel like this is part of how I walk the walk."[107] Many of my informants expressed that similar sentiments that their engagement with IWJ was a form of embodied theology, of of "walking the walk" rather than simply "talking the talk." It was a way for them to live out

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[105] "America's Changing Religious Identity," *PRRI* (blog), accessed October 28, 2018, https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/.
[106] Kim Bobo, interview by author, Richmond, VA, July 13, 2018.
[107] Jeb Mays, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 15, 2018.

the lessons of their faith traditions. Further, Edie Love, Unitarian Universalist community minister in Memphis, describes her entire ecclesial position in terms of engaging social justice, "I am a community minister, so I really feel that my calling is to social justice. That is my calling and my parish is the street. So, the way that I engage with people right now is through direct action."[108] Edie explains that she is not just called to be an advocate for justice, but that her call to progressive social transformation work is through her religious tradition. She is not a secular advocate or an organizer, but has been ordained as a community minister. Not only is the engagement of faith communities pragmatically and externally significant, but it also is internally important for the participants.

History of Progressive Religion in the United States

Neither the external roles of moral authority, envisionment, or mobilization nor the internal importance for faith communities engaging in social justice work is new. There is, in fact, a long history of influential Christian social justice work within the United States. Although many people identify Martin Luther King, Jr. with the civil rights movement and Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone with liberation theologies as having brought progressive religion back into US public space, progressive religion actually has a long and continuous history within the United States, going as far back as abolitionists around the time that liberal theology emerged.[109] Originally, in the eighteenth century, German theologians developed a new method for interpreting Christianity called liberal theology, which argued that the meaning of Christianity comes from modern knowledge

[108] Edie Love, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June 28, 2018.

[109] Braunstein, Fuist, and Williams, 3; Gary J. Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), xv.

and experience.[110] They conceived of liberal theology as a third way that was neither rigid orthodoxy nor "infidelism." [111] This third way translated differently as US American pastors and scholars began to adopt such theological methodology in a way that reflected US culture and the dominant Protestant narrative. These pastors perceived religion to be both personally and socially salvific and liberal theology offered an alternative to religious conservatism that was not rationalistic, secular radicalism.[112]

The earliest US American liberal theologians in the nineteenth century, like Henry Ward Beecher and Horace Bushnell, engaged in progressive religion by concerning themselves mainly with evolution, biblical criticism, and the social problems being created in an industrializing society.[113] Embracing scientific insights and new methodologies for intellectual inquiry and incorporating them into theological thinking was a primary concern for liberal theologians who wanted theology to become modern, yet still remain truly Christian.

It was in the late nineteenth century, with social gospel theologians, like Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch, that liberal theologians and reformers incorporate economic equality into one of their main concerns.[114] Gary J. Dorrien, social ethicist and theologian, explains how the social gospel movement inherited its progressive activism in society from evangelical Protestant antiwar, anti-slavery, and temperance movements as many prominent social gospelers were originally raised in evangelical traditions. He argues that what makes the social gospel movement distinct is not its social reforms, but a specific theology of social salvation, which served as

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[110] Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion 1805-1900*, xiii.
[111] Ibid, xiv.
[112] Ibid, xiv.
[113] Ibid, xviii.
[114] Ibid, xix.

motivation and basis for such activism.[115] A theology of social salvation focuses on using the teachings in the Bible to create a more just society rather than being about whether an individual would go to heaven or hell once they died: Jesus saves the sins of society as well as the individual. For people who saw how society was abusing the marginalized, this became a compelling way to integrate their religious beliefs with efforts to create social transformation and join progressive values with progressive theology and progressive activism.

While individualistic theologies, common in the United States, claimed that Christianity would craft the perfect human, the social gospel, using the rhetoric of "Thy kingdom come on earth," brought forth the idea that Christianity could perfect society.[116] Such theologies put forth the belief that Christianity should be used in a way to affect society as a whole. Social gospelers believed that the faith response to their religion was to advocate for structural and political change towards a society that did not oppress or marginalize. As such, in the nineteenth century social gospelers directed their concerns to issues associated with industrialization like child labor, poverty, and working conditions, in both the United States and in Britain. Thus, they addressed economic concerns in their context by fighting policies that took advantage of the marginalized and increased the social and economic gap in society. Protestants came together to advocate and take public action for social reforms and legislation, like the 8-hour work day and the weekend, the abolition of child labor, and security for the elderly.[117] Clearly the social gospel movement had a lasting impact on society that can still be seen today, even if people don't consciously attribute it to the progressive action of people of faith.

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[115] Ibid, 311.
[116] Ibid, 312.
[117] Peters and Hinson-Hasty, *To Do Justice*, xvi.

While Rauschenbusch alerted faithful Christians to the difference between God's vision for humanity and practical realities in an industrialized world, Niebuhr also emphasized the reality of human sin and, therefore, the limitations of humans addressing social issues. He used his theological commitment to social justice to write arguments concerning what would be the most ethical actions for the United States during both World Wars, beginning with a position of pacifism and eventually understanding the need to engage in the wars. During the Cold War, Niebuhr reminded Christians to be humble, acknowledging that all man-made governments have the potential to be oppressive.[118] Congregations during the Cold War involved themselves in progressive action by campaigning for peace, challenging the morality of a nuclear war, and becoming involved in the Sanctuary Movement, which offered asylum to Central Americans who were fleeing human rights abuses and then helped them file for political asylum.[119]

Thus, there is a continuous history of Christian engagement of progressive religion in the United States from the eighteenth century abolitionists through the Cold War and civil rights movement and into today, in a way that is socially relevant to modern people. The idea of progressive Christianity is not a new way to understand the intersection of faith and politics, but is rather a branch of the tradition that has been continually transforming to address issues of concern in a ways that reflect new social and moral questions that arise as society changes. Today people of faith leverage their public moral authority, vision of a justice society, and ability to mobilize communities for issues like worker justice, LGBTQ rights, and reproductive justice, among others.

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[118] Ibid, xvi.
[119] Ibid, xvii.

Responding to a New Context

Clearly, in addition to a long history of Christian engagement with efforts for progressive social transformation, there is still an important role for faith communities to play. The deeper challenge that I believe my informants were grappling with is not whether faith communities matter, but rather how they can engage social justice action effectively from a faith perspective in the 21st-century. The five contextual factors that define the current era means that the work of FBCO should once again adapt to cultural shifts; however, my research indicates that FBCO needs to respond to the political, social, and ecclesial contexts of the 21st-century in ways that recognize the distinct positions and roles of faith communities within US society.

While the current era contains a hostile political economy, progressive faith communities cannot let hateful, racist, homophobic, xenophobic, sexist forces set the agenda. Rather, advocates for progressive social change should participate in forward-thinking agendas that fulfill their theological understanding of a vision of justice. Further, the increased prominence of intersectional approaches to thinking about the work of social justice has brought about challenges of how to incorporate this theoretical understanding of oppression into the practices of community-organizing. Because many of my informants who recognize the impact of xenophobic, racist, homophobic, and sexist policies on workers, they strive to address all of these issues. Framing social justice work through an intersectional lens does not mean that every organization must do "all the work." Rather, in order to effectively engage in a long-term battle for a just society, there is still a need for issue-oriented approaches that can focus in on creating specific

solutions for specific social problems. This approach can also keep organizers from becoming overwhelmed and burnt out. Jeb explains that MassIWJ has had three organizers in a period of eight years, "It's very hard to figure out a way of getting this work done without burning people out."[120] An intersectional lens for FBCO recognizes how other forms of oppression influence their specific focus area and then actively works to shape their agenda in ways that reflect solidarity with other organizing agendas. This means networking, cooperating with, and supporting other local and national organizations without also taking on their work.

Additionally, this thesis has made clear that the perceived dichotomy between secular left and Christian right is false. In fact, there is an active community of progressive religious activists and leaders who continue to do FBCO in ways that challenge the conservative Christian leaders and communities that dominate the public sphere. Progressive people of faith cannot let conservative Christians control the political arena. Rev. Faramelli explains one of the purposes of MassIWJ, "We tried to get religious institutions involved to engage with our own tradition.... That [justice is] not an addendum. Being involved in economic and social justice and racial justice is not an addendum for Christians. It's an integral part of what the whole faith is about."[121] The desire to show how social justice work is an integral part of a tradition reflects a common theme from my interviews: they engage with IWJ in order to show what a certain tradition "really is" in opposition to conservative stereotypes. Religious activists, leaders, and scholars who support progressive social justice action should publicly claim their own voice and moral authority. Faith congregations, as well, should vocally advocate

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[120] Jeb Mays, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 15, 2018.
[121] Norman Faramelli, interview by author, Boston, MA, July, 18, 2018.

from a faith perspective for progressive social transformation to dismantle the binary that serves to undermine the moral authority of progressive faith voices.

In a related manner, the increasing religious diversity of the social context of the United States means using only Christian strategies for FBCO and simply inserting individuals or scriptures of other religious traditions is not sufficient. Julian Medrano describes IWJ's desire to include religious diversity, "Doing labor in the pulpits, in synagogues, and in mosques, and really trying to build up that as well. And not just being interfaith in name only, but really incorporate that aspect of diversity into what we're actually trying to do."[122] Increased training, knowledge, and experience with each other's traditions will allow organizers and faith leaders to incorporate religious diversity in FBCO. There needs to be sensitivity to differences as organizers develop new strategies for engaging multi-faith coalitions, recognizing that engaging minoritized religious communities means navigating how those communities respond to current experiences oppression and histories of violent persecution. Christian strategies of the past do not properly acknowledge or respond to the differences between faith traditions, scriptures, and beliefs. Having organizers that are competently trained in both the commonalities and differences amongst religious traditions will create more effective coalitions and networks that reflect the religiously plural democracy of the United States.

Further, the loss of members and financial resources of mainline churches within the United States means that progressive religious activists must be creative and innovative in terms of funding models and organizing strategies. Recognizing the significance of being financially secure, the MassIWJ executive committee decided to hire a temporary professional fundraiser rather than hiring another organizer when they

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[122] Julian Medrano, interview by author, Chicago, IL, June, 11, 2018.

had an opening. Jeb explains, "We really mistakenly assumed that a person could be the only staff person and be both the organizer and be the fundraiser. That was impossible. So, one of the people who interviewed for the job turned out [to be] a fundraising consultant. She agreed to come on with us as our fundraising consultant. We didn't hire at that time, [but] we spent six or eight months just putting our financial house in order."[123] This example shows the importance of a broad vision that acknowledges that fundraising is not a separate task to social justice action, but an integral part of it. Hiring a fundraiser rather than an organizer was not a sacrifice, but a creative way of imagining the needs of the organization. Rather than hindering their efforts, this strategy allows them to be even more effective now. This kind of innovative strategizing is essential for FBCO.

Finally, as people of faith recognize their positions of privilege, how those positions originated from violent hegemony, and how those privileges continue to oppress communities, they must not become "so filled with white liberal guilt that [they] can't function."[124] While partnering with those most visibly impacted by injustice is essential for effective FBCO, recognizing the potential impact of positions of power allows for people of faith to engage the moral authority of their own voice. While these positions of power can be used to perpetuate injustice, they can also be used to advocate for a just society. An intersectional approach to social justice means not trying to negate privileged identities, but figuring out how to use those positions of power for the work of justice. There are spaces that are safe for men to occupy, that might be dangerous for women; or safe for heterosexual and cisgendered individuals, that are not for homosexual or transgendered individuals; or safe for white people, that are not for people of color.

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[123] Jeb Mays, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 15, 2018.
[124] Anonymous, interview by author, Boston, MA, July 18, 2018.

Similarly, there are spaces that people of faith can occupy to engage in conversation with their co-religionists. Recognizing the potential value of personal positions of privilege and actively using that power to advocate for marginalized individuals is essential in the work of progressive social transformation.

None of these contextual factors or responses are mutually exclusive. Rather they all intersect and influence one another. People of faith cannot address religious diversity without also addressing privilege because Christianity has been and is used to oppress other faith communities, as seen both in the Crusades and current Islamophobic rhetoric and actions. Similarly, by using personal positions of power to publicly advocate for progressive social transformation based on a faithful vision for a justice society, activists can expose the false dichotomy between conservative Christianity and liberal secuarlity. This thesis separates the factors not because they are naturally exclusive, but because identifying specific questions helps in identifying challenges and focusing on pragmatic responses.

Though many of my informants are questioning the role of faith voices in efforts for social justice, I argue that there are essential important roles for faith communities to play for progressive social transformation in the 21st-century. As progressive religious activists have responded and adapted to the cultural shifts in the past, FBCO needs to consider and respond productively to the cultural shifts that define the context of the 21st-century in order to remain relevant and effective.

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