



# Central in Action FAQs

An Introduction to congregation-based community organizing

May 2018



## 1. WHAT IS CONGREGATION-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

Congregation-based community organizing is a model of social justice work that prioritizes relationship-building and allows us to address injustices at the root cause of problems. The process begins with listening to each other's stories. We will sit face-to-face or in small groups and learn what issues are most deeply and widely felt by those in our congregation. What challenges do we, our families, or our neighbors face and what motivates us to want to do something to address those challenges? Where do we see suffering in our own lives and the lives of others throughout New York City and New York State? We take each other's stories seriously as they help us determine what issue we will tackle first.

Some models of social justice initiatives address immediate and urgent needs. This important work is often referred to as "direct service." Central participates in very meaningful direct service opportunities such as our breakfast program, English in Action, and more. Community organizing, however, addresses the root causes of problems to address suffering at a systemic level.

More than 260 Reform congregations throughout North America participate in congregation-based community organizing. Central Synagogue was one of the first synagogues to use this model as a way of making meaningful change in the world and living our Jewish values in the public square when members of the congregation organized to get a new public school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to address overcrowding in local public schools.

It is not simple to make systemic changes to address suffering and requires partnerships with other like-minded groups. In the months and years ahead, we will learn from and work with people across lines of race, socio-economic groups, and faith. This will help increase our understanding of how people in our city are struggling and how we might have a bigger impact. We will also build meaningful relationships with other individuals and organizations that share our values.

Through Central in Action, we will find many ways to show up for one another, show up for the most vulnerable, and show up for New York City. Imagine what it might mean for us to stand together with others who share our values and our concerns and be part of creating a more just and compassionate New York City.

## 2. WHY JUSTICE? WHY ORGANIZING?

As Jews, we are called to partner with God in repairing the world. We do that in very personal ways, such as offering a hand to someone in need. And we do it in more systemic ways, such as taking action to protect the most vulnerable members of society. Our sacred texts call on us to care for the stranger, the widow, the orphan – categories of people who have fewer opportunities. Today, we see that the categories of the most vulnerable may include ourselves and our families, our neighbors, fellow people of faith, people we care about, and beyond. Central Synagogue is blessed and, we believe, uniquely positioned to have a significant impact on issues of injustice and suffering.

Community organizing allows us not just to

address the immediate and urgent problem, but also to make sure that there are systems in place to ease suffering and bring about greater equality and opportunity for all people long-term. Finally, elected officials count on the people to let them know what issues and solutions are important to them. If our tradition guides us toward healing suffering, then engaging in this work is part of our legacy.

Beyond the opportunity to repair our world, community organizing also helps bring us closer together as a congregation. As we come to listen to one another's stories, we come to really know each other, care for one another, and find ways to help each other. We put people and relationships first at Central and community organizing is a model that helps us do that even more. As a sacred community, we believe that who we are to one another really matters. And being able to help each other, connect with each other, and experience joy and learning with each other, even as we bring about a world of greater compassion, justice, and peace, is a primary value for our congregation.

### **3. WHO IS LEADING THE CENTRAL'S INITIATIVE?**

There is a Leadership Team comprised of dedicated Central members and staff who have participated in multiple trainings together over many months to learn the tools of organizing. They have committed to guiding this experience for the Central community. That said, there will be many opportunities for members to get involved and become leaders.

### **4. HOW WILL WE KNOW WHAT ISSUE OR ISSUES WE WILL TAKE ON FIRST? AND THEN NEXT?**

As we meet with one another face to face and in small groups, we will gather the stories, lived experiences, and interests of our community – the things that break our hearts, the suffering that we want to address. Because this is a model of justice work that is about many people acting together, it wouldn't be enough for a lot of people to say they



Central in Action together with Central Clergy and staff are committed to congregation-based community organizing as a model of social justice work that prioritizes relationship-building and creates real change in our communities through advocacy at the local and state levels.

want the Leadership Team or Central to take action on a certain issue. Rather, we want to find an issue that our community cares so much about that you want to get involved and participate. It takes a lot of people to make significant change in our world, so the issue we pick is something we want to work on together.

We don't ever expect to find the magic issue that is everyone's first choice, but instead look for something that inspires, agitates, and motivates us to take action as a community. At the same time, we look for an issue for which, if we were to get involved, we could have a real impact – something that is potentially "winnable." The Leadership Team will discern the sweet spot between those two important qualities. If your first choice isn't our first campaign, perhaps we will take it on next, or at some point on our path. And in the meantime, there is so much to be done, perhaps you will be inspired to get involved in an issue that is newer to you!

### **5. WHAT HAVE OTHER CONGREGATIONS DONE?**

Reform Congregations around the country have used the tools of community organizing to make many meaningful changes in their towns, cities, and states. Temple Israel in Boston passed the most comprehensive piece of anti-bullying legisla-

tion in the state. In California, Reform congregations worked in coalition to win billions of dollars for affordable housing. In Dallas, Texas, Congregation Emanu-El won ongoing dedicated state funding for a new durable medical goods exchange warehouse. In Massachusetts, congregations won near universal healthcare. In Cleveland, Fairmount Temple created deeper relationships between police and local communities that led to policy changes and mutual accountability between law enforcement and civilians. In Los Angeles, Leo Baeck Temple is on the verge of winning a new rapid transit line on the 405 expressway. And our very own Central Synagogue built a new public school on the Upper East Side of Manhattan to address overcrowding. This work was accomplished in partnership with churches, mosques, and other synagogues, people of faith who share our values and our concerns.

## 6. WHY NOT JUST LET THE EXPERTS WORK ON THESE ISSUES?

Very often, the experts do not have “the base” to do what needs to be done. Organizations who focus on certain areas are more and more looking to the faith community to help build enough power to have an impact on the issues that matter to both the experts and the faith communities. Also, when we care enough about an issue, we go out and talk to all the experts we can find, learn from the best, and become experts ourselves – more than we might have expected. It’s not uncommon for the faith community to show up with greater expertise on an issue than elected officials, as such, we are able to teach them the facts as well as share stories that move them.

## 7. IS THIS A PARTISAN EFFORT? SHOULD CENTRAL REALLY BE INVOLVED IN POLITICS?

Congregation-based community organizing is non-partisan work. We do not align with any political party or work for any candidate. We work

to find smart answers to difficult questions. We sometimes work in partnership with public officials and sometimes we gather together to ask public officials to take actions that will help us reach our goals. We work on every side of the aisle and on no side, creating solutions that work for the people we seek to help.

Community organizing is, however, “political,” in the original sense of the word. In Greek society, the people used to gather at the center of the city, called the “polis,” to determine by what rules they would live their lives together. We engage in the tools of politics because that is how measurable and real change is made at a systemic level. By bringing the faith voice to the table on issues that reflect our values and affect our families and neighbors, we ensure a more just and compassionate city. (To learn about what the Religion Action Center of Reform Judaism has to say about participating in politics as a congregation, [click here.](#))

## 8. IS THIS OPEN TO NONMEMBERS?

Our intention is that this will serve to deepen connections between our members, and with the broader congregation. Therefore, in order to participate, you must be: (a) a member of Central Synagogue; (b) a child of a member; or (c) a participant in Central Synagogue’s 20s and 30s programming.

