

## **Social Justice Education among Women within the African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple**

### **Abstract**

Social justice, often used interchangeably with social change, arguably has different definitions to different people. Social justice requires advocacy and teamwork. Politicians, special interest groups, and ordinary citizens have used advocacy to effect change. Many non-profit organizations have served as advocates, a voice, for the hopeless, helpless, and others who have been disenfranchised. Religious institutions, as non-profits, have a long track record of social justice. They have used a variety of methods to evoke change in individuals, communities, and society in general. This study explored to what extent social justice is addressed in religious institutions—the African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple.

### **Background**

It can be surmised that part of the mission of some religious institutions has been that of change agent. Not only have these entities concerned themselves with the religious and spiritual growth of their members; they have also given attention to personal development and the betterment of communities and society. They, in essence, have been conduits for social justice and societal change. While some advocacy groups have come and gone, sometimes as a result of diminished resources, religious institutions, like Christian churches, Jewish temples, and synagogues have a long-standing record of advocacy and activism. Advocacy is represented in different forms. For some religious institutions it meant informal and formal learning (Anderson, 1988), the establishment of special schools (Isaac, 1999; Kusimo & Truler, 2000), providing a forum for leadership development (Isaac & Tempesta, 2004), job training, economic development (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990), and the need to imbue self-ethnic pride.

Religious institutions have long been transmitters of knowledge in one form or another. These transmissions were not only used to effect moral and ethical changes in the hearers, they were also used to foster changes on a broader level. Therefore, while religious institutions are most often known for their religious teachings, a closer examination reveals an expansive educational program. They provide one of the greatest opportunities for learning and sources for change. For example, to effect change, African American churches played an instrumental role during the civil rights movements. For Jews, the temples provided education when other avenues were closed.

Women have traditionally attended worship services in higher numbers than men and often are the backbone of religious institutions. Hence, they often participate in educational offerings and attend worship more often than men. For this reason, this study explored to what extent social justice issues are addressed within faith-based institutions from the perspective of women. More specifically, we examined social justice within the context of the African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple. For purposes of this study, an African American Church is defined as one whose leadership is African American and whose congregation is predominately African American. A Reform Jewish Temple is defined as one that follows Reform Judaism's tenets with congregants who are from a variety of ethnic and religious backgrounds and whose leaders are just as diverse. These two particular institutions were chosen based on the researchers' respective association with each.

## Social Justice

In *The American Century Dictionary* social is defined as “of society or its organization, especially of the relations between people or classes of people.” It also defined it as “living in organized communities.” On the other hand, it delineates justice as “justness; fairness” or “to treat fairly” and “appreciate properly.” However, when these terms are coalesced, they take on new meaning. According to Novak (2000), “The trouble with ‘social justice’ begins with the very meaning of the term” (para. 2). Novak asserts that it is often used to designate a virtue (i.e., moral). Wade (2004) stated that it is a term “often used but rarely defined” (para. 3). Most descriptions attached to social justice “appertain to impersonal states of affairs—‘high unemployment’ or ‘inequality of incomes’ or ‘lack of a living wage’” (Novak, para. 3). Social justice has been delineated in simple terms as “preventing human rights abuses and ensuring adherence to international law” (Social justice, n.d.). According to Reid (2004), “Social justice concerns the degree to which a society contains and supports the conditions necessary for all individuals to exercise capacities, express experiences, and participate in determining actions” (p. 3). A broad view of social justice, which we have adopted for purposes of our discussion, is the obtainment and maintenance of human rights for all people. To that end, Social justice “requires not the melting away of difference, but the promotion and respect for group differences without oppression (Young, 1990)” (Reid, p. 3). This is significant as we continue to receive reports of religious, ethnic, and age discrimination. As Holt (1926) proclaimed, “Giving of justice builds social faith and makes permanent community life possible” (p. 136). Therefore, social justice has a rippling affect because it reaches beyond one individual; it impacts society.

Aging populations, changes in socio-demographics, and rising numbers of parents living alone are some of the factors contributing to social inequities (Reid, 2004). Balancing the scales of justice requires the collective and collaborative efforts of several entities. Reid points out that social change, which is often juxtaposed with social justice, “can be envisioned as the outcome of deliberate individual and collective actions” (p. 10). Novak (2000) states that, “Social justice rightly understood is a specific habit of justice that is “social” in two senses. First, the skills it requires are those of inspiring, working with, and organizing others to accomplish together a work of justice” (para. 12). Secondly, “it aims at the good of the city, not at the good of one agent only” (para. 13). Along those same lines, the Center for Economic and Social Justice (n.d.) believes social justice “imposes on each of us a personal responsibility to work with others to design and continually perfect our institutions as tools for personal and social development” (para. 6). Holt (1926) believed that Christians were banded together for the task of promoting social justice not only in themselves, but also in others. A long standing tradition of all Jews is the value Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world. This is carried out through social action that strives to provide social justice for all people in society, not just those of the Jewish faith (Katz, n.d.; Kertzer, 1993; Trepp, 1973; Union for Reform Judaism, 2005). Holt proclaimed decades ago that the “church is probably the greatest single agent in binding up the wounds of a suffering humanity” (p. 138). Religious institutions have always stood in the gap to be conduits for equity and social justice.

Religious institutions have duties toward social justice. They have to become acquainted with their resources for social ministrations. They must “work out methods of social service which are adapted to the needs of the various communities” (Holt, 1926, p.138) in which they must live. A review of the literature reveals that some religious institutions have heard the clarion call. The literature is replete with examples of religious institutions collaborating with

health professionals, conducting workshops and seminars, and providing a plethora of resources not only to their congregants, but to others in the communities in which they serve. Howard (1985) noted it is through churches that African Americans should be awakened and equipped “to take action for progress in politics and in other arenas” (p. 8). Likewise, Kertzer (1993) pointed out that “Jews tend to vote in higher numbers than the norm, and to support such liberalizing movements as civil rights, clean air acts, and higher education budgets” (p. 30). Religious activity takes three forms, one of which is social. Hence, when religion is viewed as a social matter, the activities of religion will be those of philanthropy, efforts of social justice, and endeavors for the removal of social wrong (The Church in Religious Education, 1912). The African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple are but two examples of religious institutions that have taken individual and collective actions to effect change in our society.

### **African American Church**

Cox (1984) noted years ago, “It has long been a matter of consensus among observers of the dynamics of the black community in the United States that the black church has historically been one of its major institutions” (p. 25). According to Howard (1985), the African American Church (AAC) “is the institution which is closest to the masses of Black people” (p. 8). While some may believe that the “church has fallen into a state of psychological and emotional relaxation” (Bennett, 1965, p. vi), examples of its multi-functional nature and impact in the African American community cannot be minimized. The degree to which the multi-purpose function of the Church serves African American communities “depends on the state of history and the degree of dependency by the black communities upon the major institutions of the wider society” (Cox, p. 25). The AAC, as the primary institution within the African American community has had to take on more than saving souls (Calhoun-Brown, 1996). Dougherty (2003) states that African American churches “across religious traditions continue to serve important religious and non-religious functions for African American individuals and communities” (para. 3). Billingsley (1992) points to the secular functions of the church when he states that, from birth, “community service has been an element of black religious expression” (p. 352). This is espoused by Calhoun-Brown who states that “As the institution in the black community which predates even the family, the church has long combined spiritual and secular concerns” (p. 937).

The AAC has been an agent of social change and empowerment, which has fostered stability and growth within African American communities (Morris & Robinson, 1996). According to Kusimo and Truler (2000), “African American churches have a long history of rallying and mobilizing African Americans to action” (p. 1). This, in part, is a result of its early functions of social cohesion and social control, economic cooperation and development, education, and politics (Cox, 1984). It is within the church that members have “felt hope, experienced community, and crafted social justice” (Thompson & McRae, 2001, p. 41). The Church was injected with an altruistic mission to help the least, the less, and the lost. Thus, it serves as a foundation for social justice and community service. Morris and Robinson (1996) support this belief when they state that the meaning of Christian religion may be found in church members’ “beliefs and actions regarding social reform” (p. 65). Kusimo and Truler further indicate how the Church has been the focal point of change. According to them, the AAC still holds a unique place in the African American culture, that of an advocate and activist.

An examination of the historical nature of the AAC reveals its advocacy role in many arenas. It has “traditionally been a power base politically, socially, and religiously” (Calhoun-

Brown, 1996, p. 935). Cox (1984) found that the church was the primary institution around which members of the black community rallied “to seek out solutions to social problems and to move towards social justice” (p. 24). Calhoun-Brown further states that “From the time of slavery until the present day the black church has been integral to the development of not only the black community but to the progress of American society in general” (p. 935). After all, it was the AAC that permitted “true” worship for enslaved Africans and African Americans during clandestine church meetings. Interestingly, Cox notes the growth of the Black Baptist Church “grew rapidly because of its preoccupation with submerged baptism, which was reminiscent of ritual practices by the river cults in Africa” (p. 25). The AAC advocated education and provided it when it was illegal to do so. Historically, many clergy believed strongly in the relationship between education and religion and subsequently believed that education was a step towards social betterment. To that end, many Black denominations and churches laid the foundation for the development of many extant historically black colleges and universities.

As it continued to gain prominence in the U.S. the AAC advocated for better health, economics, and employment conditions for African Americans. The church was a welfare agency that dispensed help to the sick and poor (Quarles, 1996). “Faith-based initiatives have long been a part of the African American community, in which churches and congregations have met the physical as well as spiritual needs of the larger community” (Kotecki, 2002, p. 13). The AAC provides opportunities to develop and enhance self-esteem and self-development, and to nurture leadership (Billingsley, 1992). Many African American leaders were groomed in the church. The church encourages business development and fellowship outside its walls (Billingsley). The AAC has served as a political advocate to the extent that some ministers, like Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., held political offices. During the civil rights era, strategies for social justice were developed in the church. Even today, the AAC church is viewed as a model of social justice.

### **Reform Jewish Temple**

When Jews first arrived in the United States, their main goals were to obtain jobs and gain citizenship. These challenges were compounded by the emphasis from the surrounding communities to diminish their Jewishness and become more Americanized. The Jewish immigrants, however, believed in tolerance, freedom, and equality and began to advocate for themselves. Eventually, as they gained additional freedom, Jewish communities and temples grew wherever they lived. In addition, if a community lacked a public school, they would teach the children (Trepp, 1973). The one place where Jews felt most comfortable in the U.S. was in the temple. It became a “spiritual haven, gave emotional security to the immigrants, and perpetuated customs of the old country in an alien surrounding” (Trepp, p. 373).

The main difference between the denominations of Judaism is their respective interpretations and observance of the Jewish scriptures. Members of Reform Judaism believe that as Jews they must study Jewish tradition. They also believe that Jewish tradition has never been static, it is continuously evolving to adapt to modern life. They are committed to the Jewish tradition, but want to have the option to interpret it individually and use informed choices when selecting the traditions and customs they will observe in their homes and their temples (Katz, n.d.; Kertzer, 1993; Trepp, 1973). In addition, they are the largest and fastest growing Jewish movement in North America, with 42 percent of the Jewish population observing the traditions of Reform Judaism (Kertzer). According to Reform Jews (RJ), “the one true God

demands an absolute commitment to justice, universal harmony among peoples everywhere, and such elementary rights as dignity and freedom” (Kertzer, p. 12).

Reform Jews support, promote, and educate the community at large about their ethical values (Kertzer, 1993; Trepp, 1973). This devotion to human rights has governed the ethical teachings of Judaism for centuries (Kertzer). According to Pruess (1997), “Beginning with the Pittsburgh Platform in the 1880s, repairing the world became a mandate and accounted for the Reform rabbinate’s strong emphasis on social justice” (p. 268). For instance, the Reform denomination was the first Jewish religion to recognize that women are equal to men and to ordain women into the rabbinate (Kertzer; Union for Reform Judaism, 2005). Furthermore, Reform Jewish congregations have social action committees that advocate fair treatment for all people and especially those who are living in poverty, are being discriminated against, or are living in areas at war (Kertzer).

Dealing with others justly is where all Jewish teachings begin. For example, RJ follow the guidance prescribed by Talmudic Rabbis that “the world rests on three foundations -- justice, truth and peace” (Kertzer, 1993, p. 30). One way that RJ support these foundations is through The Jewish Chautauqua Society. This organization dispatches Rabbis to universities and colleges to educate students and faculty about the structure of Reform Judaism and its ethical views. Furthermore, The Jewish Chautauqua Society, along with congregational social action committees, discuss their ethical points of view with policymakers. (Trepp, 1973). A core tenet of Judaism is found in the Jewish principle for treating their neighbors fairly, respecting their rights, possessions, and especially their person. By teaching and living these ideals, RJ set an example for their children and their communities that supporting freedom, equality, and caring for one another is valued above all else (Kertzer; Trepp).

Many religious institutions have historically been advocates of social justice. In addition to helping their own members, their advocacy has transcended communities and society. With a history of advocacy and action, how are social justice issues addressed within faith-based institutions? This study explored this issue from the perspective of women within the African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple (RJT).

### **Methodology**

Qualitative methodology was employed for this study. Using convenience sampling, non-randomization, nine women from a large metropolitan area in the Midwestern U.S. were selected to participate in the study. They were either members of a Reform Jewish Temple or an African American Church. The women were divided into two focus groups. One group included four women that are members of Reform Jewish Temples and the other included five women who are members of African American churches.

In-depth focus group interviews were used as the primary data collection method. The women were initially asked to provide some background information about themselves such as employment status, education and income level, and the number of times they attend worship services. A semi-structured interview format followed. The women were asked how many times sexism (women’s issues), homosexuality, classism, and religiosity were discussed within their respective religious institution between March and August 2005. Other comments flowed from the initial questions.

### **Findings**

Among the women who are members of African American churches, two of them are married while three are divorced. One woman is between the ages of 30-39 and another one is

between 50 to 59 years old. Three are between 40 and 49 years of age. The majority of women are employed full-time. One is employed part-time. They hold administrative and professional positions. The majority of the women earned over \$40,000 a year. One woman has a high school diploma. Two of the women have bachelor's degree and another two have a master's degree. Two of the women are Baptist, one is African Methodist Episcopal (AME), and two are members of a non-denominational church (ND). On average, they attend worship services 6.8 times a month.

Of the four Reform Jewish women, one each is married, divorced, single/never married, and widowed. One woman is between the ages of 30-39 and another is between 80-89 years old. Two are between the ages of 50 and 59 years of age. As far as employment status, two are employed full-time, one is unemployed, and one is retired. The majority of the women's yearly income earnings are over \$20,000 and one is \$20,000 or less. The women had various educational levels. For example, one of the women has a high school diploma and another has an associate's degree. Of the other two women one holds a bachelor's degree and the other a master's degree. They attended worship services an average of 4.5 times a month.

Based on the findings, women's issues were not addressed to a great extent according to the African American women (see Table 1) or the Reform Jewish women (see Table 2). Most of the African American women indicated that the topic had only been addressed 1-5 times within a six-month period. Unlike women's issues, homosexuality was addressed more often with most of the women indicating it had been addressed six or more times. Among the five women, classism was almost distributed evenly with two women stating it had been addressed 1-5 times and two saying it had been addressed 6-10 times. Religiosity appeared to be a popular topic as it was addressed more often than not 11 times or more. Only two of the Reform Jewish women remember women's issues being discussed during the six-month period and this fell in the 1-5 times category. The other two did recall discussions on women's issues; however, they occurred prior to the research time table. Most of the women indicated that homosexuality was discussed quite a few times ranging from one to five and six or more. The majority of the women recalled classism being addressed. In regards to the topic of religiosity, the women said it was addressed no fewer than 6-10 times.

Table 1  
African American Women's Responses

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Issue	Participant	Number of Times Addressed			
		0	1-5	6-10	11 or more
Women	A			X	
	B		X		
	C		X		
	D		X		
	E		X		
Homosexuality	A		X		
	B			X	
	C				X
	D			X	
	E				X
Classism	A		X		
	B			X	
	C				X
	D		X		
	E			X	
Religiosity	A				X
	B		X		
	C		X		
	D				X
	E				X

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Table 2  
Reform Jewish Women's Responses

Issue	Participant	Number of Times Addressed			
		0	1-5	6-10	11 or more
Women	A		X		
	B		X		
	C		X		
	D	X			
Homosexuality	A				X
	B		X		
	C		X		
	D		X		
Classism	A	X			
	B		X		
	C			X	
	D		X		
Religiosity	A			X	
	B				X
	C			X	
	D			X	

### Discussion

Although women may hold key leadership roles such as pastor or Rabbi, some religious institutions fail to address issues that impact them directly. One of the African American women indicated that women are not a priority in her church. Another participant, a member of a Baptist church, indicated how Baptist pastors “will not support women ministers.” Male pastors that do support women clergy are often ostracized by those ministers who do not. Interestingly, the AME participant indicated that the entire staff at her church, other than the pastor, is female. However, women's issues were only addressed 1-5 times within a six-month period. One participant, a member of a large Baptist Church stated that issues for younger and professional women are not being addressed. Furthermore, women between the ages of 28-50 “get thrown into the mix, but real issues are not addressed.” The Reform Jewish participant who is retired noted that at her temple they have had several speakers address the topic of “sexism in the workplace” and she passes the information on to her three daughters who are employed in



professional positions. According to another of the Reform Jewish women, women's rights to privacy in reproductive issues and access to all methods of birth control has been a topic of discussion in her temple. She stated that this topic "has taken on religious overtones, not from a Reform Jewish point of view [but] from a Christian conservative point of view. Our religious point of view is being trod upon by people who believe differently [about women's rights]." She went on to say that her temple has ongoing programs that assist women and their children who are living in domestic violence shelters. For instance, they provide "a bag for the children that contains personal care items, socks, and a stuffed animal so the children receive comfort. [It is] important [that the families are] not totally lost."

Homosexuality, while once only a covert topic, is discussed more openly as there is more awareness about it. Interestingly, homosexuality was discussed more in the African American churches than the Reform Jewish temples during this six-month period. However, this could be misleading because the Reform Jewish women reported that homosexuality has been discussed at length in the past. One of the Baptist participants stated that her church is conservative, thus, "it's the under-the-table thing." However, her pastor brings it up in sermons, but "it's never addressed in informal settings." The AME participant stated that "if people have a problem with sexuality" her pastor "addresses them separately." One ND participant, stated, "we are stuck on it." Her pastor speaks out about it regularly. One of the RJ women stated that homosexuality was addressed as part of the content of a Torah study during Shabbat services. This was the Torah portion for the week and the "Rabbi was [more] discreet [than usual] because there were children present in the service." Another participant from the same temple indicated that their temple had a Civil Unions committee which held discussions on "[a] way to protect life partners regardless if you [they] are married or not. You have a right to have a say so in life decisions [such as] medical decisions."

Similar to the topic of homosexuality, classism was reportedly discussed more often in the AAC's than in the RJT's. This issue elicited a lengthy discussion from the African American women. One participant stated that her pastor incorporates classism throughout his sermons. Another participant shared how her church has a casual day each month in an effort to make everyone feel welcome, especially those who are not as fortunate. A RJ participant stated, "Even though classism was not discussed [during the period being studied] I'm very aware of it." Another woman said there is a "Basic Jewish principle, Tikkun Olam, repair the world, especially for those who are less fortunate—repair their world if you can." According to another RJ participant, this topic was also addressed in a committee meeting when the Rabbi informed the committee that the "Upper echelon is asked often to give [money]. [We] can only ask so many times and for certain causes. They get tired of being asked. [The Rabbi has to] make sure [the] upper echelon does not feel like [there is a] constant bombardment of asking for money."

Among both groups of women religiosity was discussed a number of times within the research period. However, it was discussed more within the AAC's than it was in the RJT's. One Baptist participant declared her pastor is "a teaching pastor. He doesn't like to leave out other religions." One of the RJT participants noted that her congregation often discussed other religions and invited Christian churches to attend Friday night worship services at her temple. Another indicated that "Judaism would not have survived if we [Reform Jews] did not change. We make it easy to be Jews. The Orthodoxy is too stringent." Two of the women mentioned that their respective Rabbi discussed the importance of supporting Reform Jews in Israel. There is an organization that advocates for Reform Jews in Israel, Association of Reform Zionists of

America. One of the women, a participant in the Israel Committee in her temple, went on to say that this organization “is trying to get a stronger voice in Israel, which can affect government policy for Jews of Israel and America.”

### **Conclusion**

Social justice can be hard to define. Most definitions incorporate individual and collective action. Nonetheless, despite the challenge in providing a myopic description of it, some religious institutions have taken a stand to bring equity and justice to all. The African American Church “has been in a position to assist black people in America to cope with and on occasion to overcome the social and political barriers to unequal access to resources” (Eng, Hatch, & Callan, 1985, p. 81). The Reform Jewish Temple, through a variety of venues, has promoted social change among its congregants.

The obtainment and maintenance of human rights in the greater society are still important goals for religious institutions. Many promote awareness and advocacy as methods to confront social justice. While there are numerous issues that fall under the rubric of social justice, this study focused on a few—sexism, homosexuality, classism, and religiosity. As demonstrated, all these issues are addressed to some degree within the African American Church and the Reform Jewish Temple. Some however, are discussed more than others. Many factors could impact the extent to which social justice is addressed among religious entities. This calls for further exploration. Since this research was limited to women, future research should include men. Furthermore, a larger sample could be employed to generalize to a larger population. Also, since religious leaders often impact the success or failure of a ministry or program within their purview, a study should be conducted to explore how and to what extent they address and advocate social justice issues. In general, it appears that religious institutions will continue to promote equity and be the impetus for balancing the scales of justice.

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