



New York
330 7th Avenue, Suite 1902
New York, NY 10001
phone: (212) 213 2113
fax: (212) 213 2233

Philadelphia
8459 Ridge Avenue
Philadelphia, PA 19128
phone: (215) 483 4004
fax: (215) 483 4429

Baltimore
3600 Clipper Mill Road, Suite 228
Baltimore, MD 21218
phone: (410) 366 4151
fax: (410) 366 4083

Los Angeles
2433 Main Street, Suite C
Santa Monica, CA 90405
phone: (310) 450 3390
fax: (310) 450 2390

website: www.jewishjustice.org blog: www.jsjspot.org

**Preliminary Key Findings from
K'hilot K'doshot: Holy Congregations, Just Communities
JFSJ's 2nd National Gathering of Synagogues engaged in
Congregation-Based Community Organizing
February 11-13, 2007**

For three days in February, 2007, nearly 300 Jewish leaders—a two and a half fold increase from JFSJ's first national gathering in 2005—joined together in Santa Clara, California to learn, train, pray and explore synagogue engagement in organizing. Five years after JFSJ began its effort to engage synagogues in congregation-based community organizing, the gathering presented us with an opportunity to reflect on the advancement of the field, where and why efforts have been successful, and learn more about the role we can play to strengthen and develop Jewish involvement in this model of social justice.

This working document presents preliminary key findings from the national gathering. These findings are based on paper and web-based evaluations, a series of follow up conversations with participants, and in person feedback we received during and immediately after the gathering. We plan to continue to add to these learnings, which will guide our next steps in the coming months.

What is Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO)?

CBCO is a unique model of doing justice that brings individuals together in one-to-one conversations to uncover the issues and concerns they care about, the events that have shaped their lives, and their reflections on how to make their communities stronger. Through this process, congregations become stronger institutions, new leaders emerge, and the community identifies issues of common concern. As part of this model, congregations become part of a local organizing coalition that might include 20+ congregations, non profits, schools, and other community groups, working together to improve their communities, strengthen their institutions, and cultivate grassroots leadership. Participating congregations are able to pool and exert their power on communal issues to achieve such victories as increasing access to healthcare and developing affordable housing for their families, ensuring quality education for their children, and ensuring best practices at nursing homes where their parents reside.

Why gather?

Since 2002 the number of synagogues involved in CBCO has greatly expanded from 30 to 80. *K'hilot K'doshot* was both an opportunity to celebrate this growth and to identify opportunities for strengthening and advancing this transformative work in the Jewish community. During the gathering, participants attended training on cultivating personal narratives, working in interfaith settings, and engaging power. There were also intensive Beit Midrash sessions framing the theological intersection of Judaism, synagogue transformation and torah.

A highlight of *K'hilot K'doshot* was an experiential excursion to a local synagogue, Congregation Shir Hadash, which was holding its first public action. Participants joined the congregation and hundreds of lay leaders in urging local elected officials to secure health care access for uninsured residents of Santa Clara County, California. Seeing a congregation in action, and experiencing a new model of how Jews and congregations can lead powerful local justice work, proved a meaningful experience for many leaders.

Who gathered?

The geographic diversity and the number of congregations (63), rabbinical students (30), rabbis (35), lay leaders (190) and trainers/organizers (25) represented was astounding. Participants included nine from Chicago, sixteen from Columbus, twenty-four from Boston, eight from Texas, four from Cleveland, eight from Los Angeles, seventy from the Bay Area, and forty five (primarily rabbinical students) from New York City. All four denominations—Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform, as well as the Renewal movement, were represented at the National Gathering.

What have we learned?

Leaders left the gathering inspired to expand the organizing in their communities, launch new campaigns to deepen relationships within their congregations, and strengthen their partnerships with their local interfaith networks. To understand how we can best support their efforts, and the growing movement of synagogues engaged in this powerful model for social justice, JFSJ has invested time in reflection and evaluation of the National Gathering.

Six points of feedback have informed our key findings:

- 1) A pre-gathering survey included as part of the registration form;
- 2) A written evaluation at the end of the gathering completed by 60 participants;
- 3) An online evaluation completed by over 70 participants;
- 4) An conference call evaluation with the national gathering's steering committee;
- 5) An internal JFSJ staff evaluation; and
- 6) 50 one-to-one conversations with organizers, lay and clergy leaders after the gathering.

KEY FINDINGS

Finding #1: Successful synagogue engagement in CBCO is dependent on strong local organizing.

Overall, the largest delegations to the national gathering came from regions where JFSJ has strong partners on the ground, including Boston, the Bay Area and Columbus, OH. The capacity and commitment of these local organizing networks to engage synagogues and provide deep leadership and congregational development has been critical to the successes we've seen on the ground. Corroborating this assessment have been follow up conversations, in which clergy, lay leaders and organizers alike have attributed the synagogue's ability to engage deeply in this work to the investment made by the local network. Conversely, in regions where local organizing is not strong or an organizing network affiliate does not exist, synagogues that have attempted to engage in the model of CBCO on their own have met with frustration. This learning is an important consideration for JFSJ as we explore how we can respond to such synagogues, as well as how we can best support organizing networks in their efforts to reach out and engage synagogues.

Finding #2: Leaders are hungry for connections with other Jews engaged in organizing.

The opportunity to connect and share successes and challenges with this model was a powerful one for many congregants. As noted, nearly 300 Jewish leaders—two and a half times as many as the first national gathering in 2005—attended *K'hilot K'doshot*. This turnout far exceeded our expectations and initial target of 220 participants, and demonstrates the appetite people have for connecting with and learning from others. When asked to share their stories and motivations for attending the gathering on the registration form, dozens of participants wrote of their desire to connect with others. This took the form of sharing stories, learning from and being energized by those with more experience, and inspiring new leaders to join in this work. Similarly, in evaluations and follow up conversations, as well as at the gathering itself, participants expressed interest in participating in future gatherings and convenings, at both the national and local level.

When asked what resources would help participants share resources and learn from other congregations, 75% of respondents listed regional gatherings, and 41% listed CBCO web-tools, including a listserv. These responses point to a keen desire to remain connected with other leaders. Not surprisingly, participants commented that future gatherings would be improved by having additional un-programmed time to connect with others.

Finding #3: Tremendous appetite for organizing exists among rabbinical students

Of the 44 rabbinical students who have participated in JFSJ's CBCO seminary fellowship, 30 attended the national gathering. One student wrote that she came to the national gathering to "better understand organizing and how to use it as a...future rabbi;" similar sentiments were expressed by many others, as well. When asked about greatest learnings from the gathering, another student wrote of the importance of developing the "healthy communal culture of listening," that is central to the CBCO model. Nearly all students made commitments to share their learning and experience, to deepen their own involvement in CBCO and to continue their training in this model. In follow up conversations, a number of rabbinical students expressed interest in developing relationships with rabbis who have successfully implemented CBCO in their communities, so that they can learn from the experience when assuming their own pulpits. Strengthening and expanding our seminary work will be an important focus for JFSJ in the coming years.

Finding #4: Leaders are excited to connect their organizing and social justice work with Jewish text, learning, and spirituality.

JFSJ worked to create a strong Jewish feel for *K'hilot K'doshot* by developing and communicating a theological framework for the gathering, offering multiple opportunities to relate Jewish liturgy to social justice, and including two Beit Midrash learning sessions in the program. The response to this effort was quite positive, with evaluations giving high marks for the Jewish components of the gathering, and expressing a deep appreciation for the Jewish learning and

the ability to develop a Jewish lexicon for talking about organizing. One lay leader from Tifereth Israel in Columbus, OH wrote of his experience “Attending the conference opened my eyes as to why I felt called to fight injustice. I have always tried to be involved in helping the less fortunate, but I never really understood why...at the conference, I was able to see that my involvement is not about me feeling good. It is really about me answering a spiritual call, a call from our ancestors to remember and honor our covenant with God. I was blown away and quite shaken by the experience.” In considering JFSJ’s value added to the field, the ability to root the organizing work in a Jewish context is part of what we can uniquely offer. Of note is that there were some leaders who were attracted to engaging the Jewish theological frame content but uncomfortable with some of the prayer opportunities (see below, Finding #7, first bullet point)

Finding #5: Participants seek opportunities to learn in smaller settings, with cohorts of similar people.

Clergy and lay leaders alike expressed interest in meeting and learning from others who have faced and dealt with challenges similar to their own. For example, many Conservative rabbis and rabbinical students requested opportunities to learn from other Conservative rabbis who have successfully implemented CBCO in their communities, while lay leaders seek guidance in how to navigate specific stages of the organizing cycle such as reorganizing a core team or cultivating board support for CBCO. This specificity speaks to a high degree of interest in intimate and structured learning experiences that can be tailored to specific sets of needs. In addition to the interest expressed in regional gatherings (noted above, Finding #1), participants ranked leadership development opportunities as high on their list of desired resources, and have asked for mentoring programs that would match newer leaders and congregations with those with more experience. Moreover, clergy and lay leaders who face distinct challenges due to denominational or geographic considerations are eager for opportunities to connect with others who can help them negotiate these specific issues. It appears that those who feel most isolated in their attempts to organize are the most eager to make connections with others who can help them navigate the challenges they face.

Finding #6: There exist at least four distinct levels of experience and expertise in CBCO within the Jewish community.

In preparation for gathering JFSJ asked participants to self-select into training sessions for either “newer leaders” or “more experienced leaders.” However, we found these two categories too broad to address the range of participants’ needs and interests. Many participants noted the trainings were not as sufficiently tailored to meet the range of experience at the conference. This finding speaks to a positive trend in recent years, namely, the growth of synagogue engagement in CBCO.

At least four levels of experience were represented at *K'hilot K'doshot*:

- Leaders who have been involved in CBCO for a significant amount of time (2+ years), have experienced the cycle of organizing and have participated in campaigns and actions in their local communities. Leaders from these congregations are looking to build their skills in areas such as maintaining momentum, cultivating new leadership, and learning how to mentor leaders and congregations new to this work.
- Leaders who have begun to move the model forward in their congregations (1-2 years). These individuals have participated in some organizing training, are familiar with the cycle of organizing, and have worked to take the first steps, but have not yet experienced the full cycle including identifying and researching issues on which to act, developing campaigns, and planning and executing actions. In addition to lay leaders and clergy, many rabbinical students who are alumni of JFSJ’s seminary CBCO course are at this stage.
- Individuals who have had some exposure to CBCO, either through training, observing actions in their home community, or attending the 2005 National Gathering, but who have not had experience implementing this model in their congregation. Participants at *K'hilot K'doshot* falling into this category noted that they came to the national gathering looking for guidance in how to begin organizing in their congregations, and wanting to “really get it.”
- Individuals with no to limited familiarity with CBCO. Approximately 10% of *K'hilot K'doshot* participants were individuals primarily active in their synagogue social action work and interested in social justice issues, but with

very limited understanding of organizing. This group does not yet understand the vocabulary and basic building blocks of the CBCO model, and the cycle of organizing.

Finding #7: Synagogue leaders face several unique issues, challenges and opportunities when engaging in CBCO.

Conversations and evaluations from the national gathering surfaced leaders' desire to discuss and engage on the following issues, many of which are unique to the Jewish community:

- ***Working across denominational lines.*** Participants expressed gratitude for the attempts made to create a pluralistic environment at the national gathering (including several interdenominational prayer experiences), and, noting the challenges and tensions that arose from such attempts, suggested additional time for processing and discussion. One funder who attended *K'hilot K'doshot* commented that the gathering was a unique example of interdenominational programming within the Jewish community. In both sessions of the "Organizing in an Interfaith Context" training, participants spoke of issues that arise from working in CBCO with Jews from other denominations, and of the opportunities that organizing presents to bring Jews from different backgrounds in dialogue with each other. JFSJ's position as a national Jewish organization working across denominational lines, uniquely suits us to convene these types of conversations as they relate to organizing, congregational development and social justice engagement.
- ***Wrestling with class and privilege issues.*** Traditionally, synagogue social action programs operate as activities in which those who 'have' help those who 'have not.' The CBCO model asks people to explore their own self interest in social issues—rather than thinking of how they can best 'help' others—and many leaders express difficulty and discomfort with this process, especially as it leads congregations to openly address issues of class and privilege in their communities. Moreover, perceptions of American Jewish congregations as affluent and privileged often act as a barrier, preventing those within the congregations who are struggling economically to come forward and share their stories. A number of participants asked for future opportunities to discuss these issues, and we should consider the role we can play in helping synagogues wrestle productively with this challenge.
- ***Changing the culture of synagogue life.*** Many synagogue leaders report that a major challenge to advancing the CBCO model in their congregations is the prevailing culture in which a small group of leaders or clergy decide on new programs and implement them. By contrast, the CBCO model cultivates a culture in which issues and ideas emerge from building relationships across the membership of the congregation, leading a greater number of members and lay leaders to become part of the process of taking action. The national gathering offered two training sessions devoted to the topic of synagogue culture, yet evaluations showed that neither adequately met the needs of participants. Recognizing that it may be impossible to teach techniques on shifting synagogue culture in a workshop setting, we need to identify other opportunities and fora to help synagogues address this issue.

Finding #8: Communicating the cycle of organizing and how it works remains challenging.

In response to the question "I came to the National Gathering hoping to/looking for..." dozens of participants wrote of their desire to better understand the model of CBCO; similarly, in many evaluations participants noted that the gathering helped them "really get it." These remarks speak to the fact that the cycle of organizing, particularly as it leads to action and social change, is difficult to understand on a theoretical level. As we develop further resources to support synagogue engagement in CBCO, we need to consider concrete ways to help leaders understand and communicate the cycle of organizing, as well as the impact CBCO can have on the individual, the congregation, and the broader community.