

Faith Alliance reaches out to Jewish congregations

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Speaking to a diverse array of community leaders from around the Puget Sound, Rabbi Jonah Pesner wasn't bashful about success.

"This year the world is going to change in a profound way," said the charismatic Pesner, wearing optimism as comfortably as his blue sports coat and red and pink flowered tie.

The rabbi was referring to a new health care plan that will go into effect in his home state of Massachusetts in July. The legislation has been praised for providing coverage to nearly every state resident and has been held up as an example of bipartisan cooperation.

But according to Pesner, state politicians would never have approved the legislative package if not for a network of community organizations in Massachusetts who, without their help or encouragement of public officials, first engaged in discussions across racial, religious and ethnic boundaries to solve what they said was a "health-care crisis."

"They never would have had the political will," he told the group. "It took pressure, and that pressure came from people like us."

It is the success of that network, known as the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization, that a growing coalition of community leaders hopes to emulate in Washington. For the past 16 months organizers for Sound Alliance, as the Seattle-based organization is called, have been meeting with education associations, religious congregations, and labor unions as part of the beginning stages of forming the organization's membership.

As part of that effort, Sound Alliance's four professional organizers have reached out to the Jewish community, with some success — as was evident by the attendance of many members of the Jewish community at the Dec. 14 leadership meeting at Temple De Hirsch Sinai on Capitol Hill, where Pesner spoke.

What Pesner and the organizers of Sound Alliance say they can offer the Jewish community is a different approach to social justice activism. Called "broad-based community organizing," the approach links together the citizen-leaders of diverse communities by the common concerns they share. Organizations like Sound Alliance or GBIO say they have no predetermined agenda. Rather, they bring together their members to find solutions to issues the members themselves decide are important.

As a coalition, the idea goes, the members can leverage their collective power to achieve their goals.

The challenge, according to Pesner, is recruiting Jewish congregations into a style of activism that is different from the model they have historically practiced.

"The methodology, for Jews, is pretty new. The commitment isn't new," said Pesner, who was hired by the Union for Reform Judaism as director of Just Congregations to train congregations across the country in organizing. "Organizing says we don't treat [a congregant] like a consumer, we treat you like a citizen."

Jewish groups have commonly pursued social justice through direct service, such as feeding the homeless. There is also a tradition of top-down advocacy, such as when a rabbi gives a sermon or a social action committee organizes an event. And while Pesner said he doesn't discourage those forms of tikkun olam, he believes broad-based organizing is more effective.

"This isn't just a political advocacy tool," he told JTNews, "but the power of a congregation to realize its religious vision in the world."

In Seattle, Sound Alliance's supporters within the Jewish community also said that getting congregations to participate could be a challenge.

"I'm personally supportive of the concept," said Rabbi James Mirel of Temple B'nai Tora who has been working with Sound Alliance, though peripherally. "For a congregation to get involved it takes a lot of energy...it's a real buy-in by the congregation to get into it."

But Rabbi Zari Weiss of Bet Chaverim Community Synagogue of South King County said a limited amount of energy will likely keep her small congregation from involvement with Sound Alliance. She did say that that down the line, once the congregation has solidified its own community, there might be an opportunity to participate.

Supporters say that once the process is started, participants find that their personal stories and aspirations have much in common with people who they otherwise might never have met.

"People are so worried about taking care of their own family, that they don't realize they can work together and make some big changes," said Hilary Stern a member of Congregation Beth Shalom and executive director of Casa Latina, a group that works with Latino immigrants.

Sapina Pele, a Samoan immigrant and associate executive director of the Seattle Education Association, agreed that people generally want the same things, such as the ability to pay the bills and take the families to the movies.

"There are issues we all share so once the barriers are brought down it's amazing," she said.

However, it is Pele's own background that can sometimes be the greatest challenge to attracting the participation of Jews. A practicing Catholic, Pele first became active in this kind of activism through her church and remains an active churchgoer today.

"The model is largely inhabited with church folk, who are very comfortable with Jesus language and organizing out of their faith tradition," said Pesner.

The language of Christianity, in particular, can make Jews uncomfortable and hesitant to participate, said Pesner. Exacerbating these feelings can be conflicting positions by the two faiths on issues such as abortion and gay rights.

However, Rebecca Fischer, a community organizer for Sound Alliance, said that this is also what makes organizing so compelling.

"What's interesting about this work is that security for Jews in the United States isn't just about economic advancement, but about developing relationships with other communities," she told JTNews.

Since its creation, Sound Alliance has been in a three-year organizing process that will culminate with a Founding Assembly in mid-2008. It is also beginning to develop its 2008 legislative agenda and has begun to take action on issues such as education with programs like Opportunity Works NW, which aims to lower the dropout rate at Washington's high schools by educating students about meaningful opportunities available to graduates, such as apprenticeship programs with labor unions.

Four school districts, including Seattle, Tacoma, Clover Park, and Bethel, have agreed to commit resources to the project.

"I hope it succeeds, whether or not the Jewish community is involved or not," said Mirel. "I think in the Puget Sound area if the Jewish community wasn't involved, I don't think it would defeat it. If it was L.A. or Chicago, it would be bad."