

# Clergy Leadership in Faith-Rooted Organizing



## **PART** **3** Navigating Risk

For many clergy, involvement in social activism can be seen as risky. Clergy often worry about creating tension within the congregation and even alienating members. Congregations may be made up of people who come from a variety of political perspectives. In some cases, members may just feel, regardless of the issue, the congregation should not involve itself in “political” issues or in social action; it should stick to charitable activities and direct service.

The question of risk, however, is more complex. Our faith traditions challenge us to speak out on justice, and in doing so, they push us to take risks. We also have to ask ourselves what risk we incur by remaining silent in the face of injustice. Do we place our own integrity at risk, and that of our members, by staying on the sidelines?

In the video, Rev. Bernadette Hickman-Maynard addresses this question of risk through the concept of the Overton window, a term from the field of political science. It refers to the range of ideas that are acceptable to a community at a given time. This range is dynamic, not static. For example, even as recent as the 1990’s, the notion of universal health coverage was considered to be quite radical, and not politically viable. With the passage of Obamacare in 2012, the idea became mainstream for most Americans. The campaign to pass Obamacare, in which faith leaders played a key part, stretched the window of what people thought was acceptable, and viable. Efforts to undo Obamacare have largely failed. Now the debate often revolves around how to make Obamacare even more universal.

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Rev. Hickman-Maynard suggests that clergy must have a good sense for the “Overton window” within their congregation, and the ideas and messages that constitute this window. At the same time, clergy must stretch people beyond their comfort zone over time through an arc of preaching and teaching that equips their people with deeper connections between their faith and prophetic action.

Organizing provides congregation members with the opportunity to share experiences often not discussed within the congregation. Congregants may sit side by side for years and not know that their fellow members and their families have experienced police brutality, or deportation, or housing discrimination. Organizing gives the congregation as a body the opportunity to deepen its awareness and understanding of community needs. As congregants interact with public officials, they gain an understanding of forces that maintain the status quo and the need for public action. These experiences stretch the Overton window in a congregation and enhance the ability of a clergyperson to play a public role in social action.

In the video, Rev. Brendan Busse S.J. points out that if clergy do not actively organize their own community, they allow others to dominate the narrative space. Clergy incur risk either way. If they are silent, they allow voices and messages that run counter to the building of the beloved community go uncontested.

Finally, Rev. Molly Housh-Gordon and Rabbi Benjamin Ross stress how important it is for clergy to explore these themes together, to learn from each other and to provide mutual support. Through fellowship and friendship, clergy can increase their skills in engaging their congregations, navigating risk and in leading organizing efforts. Clergy who are isolated often find it far more difficult to live out their prophetic role.

Organizing is about consciousness-raising, growing awareness of systematic injustice and about action. Organizing thrives in community. In order to take prophetic risk, clergy benefit from actively engaging congregational members and from building kinship with other faith leaders.