

COVENANT FOR JUSTICE

December 1, 2008

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Looking Ahead to the 2009 Legislative Session

During the past few months, the NYS budget has taken center stage. The Governor has proposed major cuts in the current (2008-2009) budget and promises to deliver a budget in mid-December with major cuts for 2009-2010. The proposed cuts in education, health care and services for the poor and marginalized are especially troubling.

IINYS is working with the Better Choices campaign, which includes more than 100 organizations, to advocate for sensible solutions and with the Faith and Hunger Network to advocate for an increase in the welfare grant. The budget negotiations will be intense this year, and our progressive religious voice for social and economic justice needs to be heard.

The NYS Senate has a Democratic majority for the first time in many decades; however, three Democratic Senators are threatening to defect, which puts the Senate leadership in doubt. One of the issues they oppose is same-sex marriage. (See page 2 for a letter to the editor on this subject.) Another is Senator Malcolm Smith's leadership of the Democratic conference.

Assuming that the Senate is controlled by the Democrats, there is hope that some of the legislation we have supported will finally pass. For example, the Rockefeller era drug laws may finally be abolished; the Healthy Teens Act could pass; and the Dignity for All Students Act has a real chance of becoming law.

Other issues IINYS is supporting include universal health care, the Bigger Better Bottle Bill and reform of the public defender system. As usual, we will oppose any attempt to revive the death penalty.

The IINYS Board is reviewing options for our annual advocacy day. The date selected will depend on how issues appear to be developing. The Board will make an announcement soon so that you can put it on your calendar.

IINYS Mission Statement

At its retreat in August, the board approved the following statement:

The mission of Interfaith Impact of New York State, Inc. is to work for the common good through progressive religious advocacy.

Changes on the IINYS Board

Mrs. Bailey Bloom, who has been a member of IINYS from its beginning, stepped down in August as President of the IINYS Board of Directors. Her wisdom, knowledge and energy have been invaluable to the organization during her years of service on the board. She helped make IINYS a respected voice in the NYS public policy arena. She has our profound gratitude for her years of service and all that she accomplished.

Rabbi Bernard Bloom also decided to leave the board after years of service. Rabbi Bloom has been a guiding voice for Reform Jewish values during his years of service and we thank him for his invaluable guidance.

The Rev. Paul Rees-Rohrbacher became President of Interfaith Impact at the August board meeting. He is Pastor of St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Albany and previously served as Vice President of IINYS.

We have two new Regional Vice Presidents. On November 17, 2008, the board appointed The Rev. Dr. Richard S. Gilbert, Regional Vice President (Western New York) and The Rev. Raymond E. Strawn, Jr., Regional Vice President (Long Island).

Pat Rector, who serves on the boards of the Central New York Labor Religion Coalition and the New York Immigration Coalition, has joined the IINYS board.

LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) Rights

The Albany Times Union published the following letter from IINYS Executive Director Robb Smith on Saturday, Nov.22, 2008. It's OK to use this as the basis for your own letter to the editor in other papers.

Same-sex marriage isn't a bargaining chip

The recent introduction of the same-sex marriage issue as a bargaining chip for control of the state Senate is profoundly troubling, because it brings up a controversial religious dogma that discriminates against same-sex couples.

In California, voters this November added a theological definition of marriage to their state constitution, and three other states passed similar restrictions. These laws discriminate against loving, same-sex couples who seek the protections of marriage for themselves and their families. This is a violation of church-state separation.

Let's not allow anything like this to happen here in New York.

The principle of church-state separation requires a distinction between religious marriage and civil marriage. Each religious group should have the right to define marriage in its own way. People of faith and good will can and do disagree about what constitutes marriage; however, New York law should not impose a single, religiously-biased definition of marriage on all citizens.

Using the popular vote to enshrine a theological stricture into law is an example of what our Founding Fathers called a "tyranny of the majority." Democracy requires a delicate balance between majority rule and the rights of minorities, and nowhere is this more so than in matters of religious doctrine.

We live in a multifaith society where freedom of conscience is protected. Denying the legal rights of marriage to same-sex couples on the basis of religion is forbidden by the Constitution.

In addition to strong support for marriage equality, regardless of gender, IINYS will advocate for a Dignity for All Students Act that includes protection for students with gender variant identity and expression.

The Healthy Teens Act for Comprehensive Sexuality Education

One year ago, New York State opted out of the unsuccessful federal “abstinence only” sex-education program, but the State still does not fund age-appropriate, comprehensive sexuality education in our public schools. The Healthy Teens Act will provide the money New York needs for real sex education for teens and will be an IINYS priority in the 2009 legislative session.

Universal Health Care

The Urban Institute report on models for universal health care in New York is expected in mid-December. Our Legislative Action Committee will review the information and recommend a response. IINYS strongly advocates for a quality, sustainable health care system that covers everyone in New York State.

Environment

IINYS supports the Bigger Better Bottle Bill, which would require a deposit on plastic water bottles. This is in keeping with our shared commitment to stewardship of the environment.

Criminal Justice

A report on sentencing reform, including the NYS drug laws, is pending publication. We will let you know as soon as that report becomes available.

Education

Budget cuts proposed by Governor Paterson threaten the historic \$1.75 billion commitment to education made in the 2008-2009 NYS education budget. IINYS is working with the Alliance for Quality Education and other allies to oppose the cuts.

Welfare

IINYS members have been working with the Faith and Hunger Network to advocate for an increase in the basic welfare grant and other services for the poor. The Governor’s 2009-2010 budget has been in development for the past few months, and during that time we have met with Commissioner David Hansel, Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, and Executive Chamber budget staff. More meetings are planned. If you have a special interest in this area and would like to learn more, e-mail robb@interfaithimpactnys.org.

Interfaith Impact of New York State Foundation, Inc.

The Board of Directors of the IINYS Foundation, adopted a revised mission statement on August 11, 2008:

The mission of the Interfaith Impact Foundation of New York State, Inc. is to Inform and encourage progressive faith based participation in public dialog.

Donations to the IINYS Foundation are tax deductible. The Foundation has been presenting Conscience in Public Life forums across the state. A special report on Foundation activities will be published in 2009 and video clips from forums will soon be available on the Internet. Check www.interfaithimpactnys.org periodically for updates.

Year-End Giving

If you're thinking about making a year-end gift to Interfaith Impact, now is the time. There are two ways to give. First, you can support the direct advocacy and grass-roots organizing done by Interfaith Impact of NYS, Inc.. This work is vital but contributions and membership donations are not tax deductible. Second, you can make a tax-deductible contribution to the Interfaith Impact of NYS Foundation, Inc., which informs and encourages progressive faith-based participation in public dialogs.

Individuals over the age of 70 ½ can make annual tax-free deductions in 2008 and 2009 of up to \$100,000 from their IRAs directly to Interfaith Impact of New York State Foundation, Inc. This is a limited time opportunity.

Yes, I want to help make our shared progressive and liberal religious values heard in the NYS

Legislature and Executive Chamber. I want to ___ donate ___ renew my membership.

___ Interfaith Impact of NYS for issue advocacy (not tax deductible)

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Amount: ___ \$15; ___ \$25; ___ \$50; ___ \$100; ___ \$250; ___ \$500; ___ Other \$ _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

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Mail to: Interfaith Impact of NYS, 646 State Street, Albany, NY 12203

Your donations make the voice of progressive religious values heard in New York State and help put them at the table when the Legislature and Executive make public policy.

Interfaith Impact of NYS: advocating for progressive religious values in New York State

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**WISHING YOU HAPPY HOLIDAYS
AND
A WONDERFUL NEW YEAR!**

