

Citizenship and Civic Responsibility - 1993

I cannot think of any point in human history that demanded Jewish activism more than now... And you have only one choice—to be the author of... decisions or to be the audience; to speak out or to remain silent.

(D. Saperstein, "Mandate for Social Justice," in Outlook. New York: Women's League for Conservative Judaism, Winter 1989.)

Issue

To empower Sisterhood women to act on state, provincial and local issues and to clarify, expand and strengthen the advocacy role of the District Federation, its Critical Issues Task Force and individual Sisterhoods.

Background

Resolutions are the foundation of the critical issues agenda of the Women of Reform Judaism; they authorize the NFTS to take positions on behalf of its members. Because they include issue, position and action components, they enable Sisterhoods to address issues and serve as a guide to action and advocacy. The NFTS can identify issues, bring resolutions to Assemblies and suggest action agendas.

It can monitor activity in the national and international arenas. It cannot monitor every statehouse, provincial legislature and municipality. This should be done by District Federation Critical Issues Chairwomen and Task Forces and Sisterhood Critical Issues Committees.

In the United States most legislation on domestic issues is first enacted at state and municipal levels of government. We live by those laws in the absence of overriding federal law. In Canada the federal government exercises constitutional language to create national programs by paying a substantial portion of the program cost on condition that the provinces meet the federal government's standard of service. It is therefore incumbent upon us to assure that state, provincial and local legislation addresses issues of concern to us and our values.

In this context political reality demands reference to the Religious Right, a coalition of conservative religious and political organizations with an agenda antithetical to ours: public school prayer, vouchers for use in private secular and parochial schools, the rejection of AIDS and sex-education curricula, censorship of books and art, gay and lesbian discrimination, denial of reproductive rights for women and the defeat of liberal candidates who oppose this agenda. In 1981 NFTS gave early warning, calling the Religious Right an extremist group with effective but destructive force. Appealing to a broad-based Christian fundamentalist constituency that seeks to return "religious values" to government and its institutions, it is now a major political player with sufficient members and money to threaten our liberties. Its success in electing candidates to state and local offices in the United States in 1992 testifies to the efficacy of its new grassroots-based approach, which will require community vigilance and action for the foreseeable future.

Resolution

The Women of Reform Judaism, in affirmation of the precepts that Judaism permits no surrogates and that action is an individual responsibility, calls on all Sisterhood women to set local agendas empowered by NFTS resolutions to:

1. Address issues that arise at the state, provincial and local levels of government.
2. Remain vigilant to all local challenges to Reform Jewish values.

For more information on WRJ and Social Justice, visit www.wrj.org/social-justice-home

3. Work through their Critical Issues Committees, with the help of District Federation Critical Issues Chairwomen and Task Forces, to set and implement action agendas on their own and in concert with other local, state and provincial Sisterhoods.
4. Provide the basis for informed action and advocacy with programs that educate constituencies, congregations and communities on issues of local concern and explore ways to turn concern into action.
5. Act in coalition with state, provincial and community-based organizations and chapters of national coalition partners to achieve mutual goals.
6. Monitor statehouses, provincial legislatures and municipal boards and councils and be prepared to intervene with advocacy at all stages of the legislative process.
7. Engage in voter registration drives, facilitate candidate forums, hold forums on ballot referenda and encourage citizens to serve as volunteers in electoral campaigns and to exercise their privilege to vote in all elections and special referenda.
8. Intensify efforts to monitor grassroots activities of the Religious Right and to develop and implement strategies to:
 1. educate constituencies, congregations and communities to recognize and oppose issues that comprise its agenda;
 2. recognize early warning signs of community targeting and begin counteraction;
 3. focus attention on elections for statehouses and provincial legislatures, municipal councils and school, library, hospital and zoning boards and on appointments to such boards, to forestall take over;
 4. identify candidates in terms of group affiliations and positions on issues;
 5. address knowledgeably and persuasively the threat that its fundamentalist agenda poses to constitutional rights and civil liberties; and
 6. counter its claim that it represents the religious voice of the United States and the common perception that this claim has merit.