

A Short History
of the
Economic Justice Program
in the
Episcopal Church



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In October, 1987, the Urban Bishops Coalition (consisting of eighty bishops of the Episcopal Church USA) issued a working paper “Economic Justice and the Christian Conscience”. Their description of the economic situation in the U.S. at that time differs little from conditions today: the bishops underscored the excessive drive for wealth and power for their own sake that had produced new forms of social catastrophe: plant closings and relocations, rapid automation, the expansion of low-paying service jobs, the international trade deficit. They called for a fundamental re-ordering of human values “if we are to have any hope of challenging society’s present enchantment with overweening individualism, human avarice and social irresponsibility.” In response to the paper, the House of Bishops without a dissenting voice voted to encourage dioceses to bring forward to the General Convention of 1988 resolutions for action in response to their paper.

In response to the urban bishops request, Bishop Coleman McGehee of the Diocese of Michigan, mindful that the 1988 General Convention was to take place in Detroit, called together a national committee of experienced social ministers to prepare an economic development plan for the Church. At the Convention he invited delegates to bus tours of city neighborhoods, highlighting both neglected and suffering neighborhoods as well as those with

strong revitalization programs. A forty page booklet was prepared, "Taking Action for Economic Justice", to guide dioceses in implementing the suggested program.

The thrust of Michigan's resolution to the Convention was to call the Church to support neighborhood- and community-based economic development at the parish, diocesan and national church levels: "urging the Church at every level to utilize, where possible, its buildings, properties, personnel, financial resources and moral power in support of this ministry...and to work in conjunction with other bodies for public policies at the municipal, state and federal levels which are supportive of community economic development." The resolution especially stressed high participation of community members in the work of community development, with the cooperative model being the ideal: credit unions, housing cooperatives, and worker-owned businesses. A substantial theological paper was developed by Dr. James Perkinson, a Detroit resident, as a support for the resolution.

Support for this resolution by the Convention delegates was nearly unanimous. And support was also strong in many communities when the delegates returned home. A fund of 7 million dollars was committed by the national church to support community development projects with low interest loans (the fund continues to operate successfully today). At least one

diocese (Michigan) established its own loan fund which grew to several million dollars, for low-income housing and business development; another diocese (Los Angeles) created a diocesan community development credit union for similar purposes. Several large dioceses (Connecticut, Pennsylvania and New Hampshire among them) invested significant moneys in local already-established loan funds; and smaller dioceses and parishes invested in local community development banks, funds and credit unions. Many parishes and dioceses joined in the work of neighborhood and community organizations that sponsored local neighborhood development and improvement. The Diocese of New York was especially active in the creation of new housing. A major criterion of all these activities was the maximum possible participation and control by local communities, their residents and businesses.

In support of the mandate to initiate and support community economic development, another mandate of the 1988 Convention resolution was “Urging the church at every level to work in conjunction with other bodies for public policies at the municipal, state and federal levels, which are supportive of Community Economic Development.” The ENEJ has consistently created and supported other Convention resolutions to adopt public policies to support the needs of the poor. Among the resolutions it supported were a policy of pay equity (equal pay for equal work),

implementation of the biblical imperatives of debt forgiveness, faithful stewardship of God's creation, and human liberation; and the promotion of both an increase in the minimum wage and a commitment to the living wage. Some of the other issues dealt with by issue papers of ENEJ are predatory lending, immigration, outsourcing, racism and economic oppression, fair trade, hunger, the effect of the price of gas on the working family, economic impact of the war, environmental justice, fresh water and economic justice, children's health, prisons and incarceration, the economic impact of the prison-industrial complex, health care policy and economic justice, and access to fresh local food.

Following the 1988 Convention the envisioned program was guided by an implementation task force appointed by the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church. Gloria Brown, a member of the Church Center staff, introduced the program and organized economic justice conferences and workshops throughout the Church. At the end of six years the mission of the task force ended. Participants in the economic justice program, feeling the need for solidarity in the national program, met in Chicago and called for the formation of an economic justice network "to strengthen and support those in engaged in such ministries and to continue to advocate for economic justice initiatives in the Episcopal Church." Potential members and organizations

met in November of 1996 in Burlingame, California and formed the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice. The organization has met annually either on its own or during the conference of the Episcopal Urban Caucus. In both venues workshops were offered and awards given to outstanding volunteers and local economic justice projects.

Since then ENEJ has promoted a new way of doing business and doing church, with cooperative and grass roots values, the organization has from time to time developed educational materials to assist people to implement its suggestions:

1. **Organizing for Economic Justice (1990), (sponsored by the Economic Justice Implementation Committee)**
2. **Six educational modules on various aspects of economic justice developed in conjunction with United for a Fair Economy.**
3. **The Economic Justice How-To Action Manual, an Educational Resource for Parishes (2006)**
4. **Community Investing: an Alternative for Religious Congregations Seeking a Social as Well as a Financial Return (1999)**
5. **Twenty Years Later: Response to a Crisis (2009)**
6. **Economic Justice Issues, Explanations and Suggested Action Steps for Key Issues (2005, 2008, 2009 and 2012)**

The ENEJ has been supported financially primarily by its members (dioceses, parishes, other organizations and individual members) with some assistance from the national church until 2014. In that year national church leadership decided to end funding for ENEJ and other church organizations. In order to continue its work, ENEJ has been incorporated and in 2015 was granted tax exempt status (501-c-3) by the IRS. ENEJ has recently formed a consortium with the Union of Black Episcopalians and the Episcopal Ecological Network, adopting a new cooperative framework and strengthening the outreach work of the Church. The Collaborative's joint education program also includes a new set of issue papers. Both the issue papers and webinars are available at www.enej.org. Through its networking, publications, listserv, and website, ENEJ continues to hold up the rich traditions of economic justice education and action which the Urban Bishops Coalition affirmed in 1987.

If you wish to join the Episcopal Network for Economic Justice or if you would like to contribute to the cost of our work, use the form or visit us at www.enej.org.

ENEJ Membership Form

Suggested amounts

- Individual membership \$50
- Congregations/other organizations \$100
- Diocesan membership large \$1,000; small \$250
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- Low income membership \$10

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