

## **Press release from URJ for Just Congregations initiative: NEW YORK,**

FEBRUARY 6, 2006 – The Union for Reform Judaism today announced the creation of “Just Congregations,” a new social action program to foster congregation-based community organizing in communities across the country. The new initiative was made possible through the support of the Nathan Cummings Foundations and generous individual donors and will be run in partnership with the Jewish FundS for Justice, which is helping to fund the initiative.

“Social Action has always been one of the hallmarks of the Reform Movement. Our congregations are, in so many ways, the hands of God – feeding hungry people, providing shelter, improving their communities in so many ways,” said Rabbi Eric Yoffie, President of the Union for Reform Judaism. “Now, with the expertise the Jewish FundS for Justice has developed in this field, we will be able to help our congregations learn and develop a creative new methodology for congregational advocacy and have a far broader impact,” he said.

The Just Congregations program will provide training and support for a corps of congregations to serve as role models to the Movement in Congregation-Based Community Organizing (CBCO), which fosters relationships among and between members of diverse religious congregations. Congregation-based community organizations leverage the membership, relationships and leadership of congregations to build power and become a potent force for social justice. Across the country, CBCOs have won local battles for quality education, health care access, living wages, and other issues of social and economic justice.

Rabbi Jonah Pesner, currently at Temple Israel in Boston, will join the Union’s staff as director of the “Just Congregations” program this summer. “Rabbi Pesner is one of the most respected clergy in the country in faith-based community organizing work, and his success in developing and implementing a similar program at Temple Israel in Boston, one of our flagship congregations, has set a standard for synagogues working on such issue,” Yoffie said. With his ability to teach and to inspire, he is a superb choice to lead this effort for us.”

Simon Greer, president of Jewish FundS for Justice, said the partnership with the Union will enable many more communities to organize and greatly extend the reach and power of the Movement in Faith-Based Community Organizing.

“After supporting the CBCO model for over a decade and facilitating synagogue involvement for the past four years, Jewish FundS for Justice is thrilled to be working in partnership with the Union on its Just Congregations initiative,” Greer said. “We are inspired by Rabbi Yoffie’s and Rabbi Saperstein’s ongoing commitment to social justice and their willingness to lead by embracing a strategy that can help synagogues bring about systemic change.”

Rabbi Pesner said the Just Congregations effort will help to counter the religious right, which has monopolized the language of faith. “We are calling on all our congregations to engage more of their members and address the root causes of injustice. In so doing, it will enable Reform synagogues to become agents of social change, responding to the prophetic call to integrate the pursuit of justice with worship and learning,” he said.

Just Congregations builds upon the work the Reform Movement is already doing to forge partnerships among faith groups. As Rabbi David Saperstein, Director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism explained, “Congregation-Based Community Organizing is a transformative process both for the synagogues who undertake such efforts and for the communities in which they work. The community organizing model fosters relationships among and between members of diverse religious congregations, and, through the process, the congregations and their members become a potent force for social justice.”

