

The Social Justice Alliance of Contra Costa County

By Franklin Burroughs & Rev. Will McGarvey

Pause for a moment and glance back at Contra Costa County in the mid-20th century. What the Greenbelt Alliance referred to as county sprawl in the 2003 publication titled “Contra Costa County Smart Growth or Sprawl” in the 2003 publication titled “Contra Costa County Smart Growth or Sprawl”

quickly transformed the originally Native American villages and Spanish-ranch area into a community with a sea of suburban homes, freeway congestion, less and less open space and ever-increasing human diversity.

The continued “smart growth” in the county prompted the establishment of several organizations in the 1970s, including the Social Justice Alliance (SOJA) of Contra Costa County, which came together to address the increasing poverty and injustices the faith community was seeing. For several years, SOJA operated as an independent unit of the Council, but in 1989 it became a standing committee of the Council. This Council was the Council of Churches, which eventually became the Interfaith Council in 1998. At that time, the SOJA was more inclusive of the whole faith community, welcoming Jewish, Catholic and those of other traditions while the Council of Churches limited themselves to Mainline Protestants. This partnership soon exposed the limitations of the Council’s welcome, so they did the work of shifting from a work primarily around community Chaplaincy in the hospitals and jails to the Interfaith Council we know today doing programming on Interfaith understanding, peacemaking, and the new volunteer ministry called ICARE (Interfaith Community Action Revitalization), which organizes teams of volunteers from across our congregational diversity.

Since the Great Depression, the phrase “social justice” has become prominent in our common vernacular, as well as today on the internet, social media and print media. The phrase embodies a plethora of emotions, concepts and principles that exceed civic and criminal law. It often provides a political and even moral framework for the development of equal access to healthcare, wealth, justice and opportunity among individuals and societies. The phrase serves as the guiding principle of SOJA, because when people of faith use the term, they often mean that their faith calls them to make the world a place filled with more racial equity, equality in the workplace for people of all genders, and especially a

The logo for the Social Justice Alliance is displayed on a black rectangular background. The words "Social", "Justice", and "Alliance" are stacked vertically in a bold, yellow, serif font. "Social" is at the top, "Justice" is in the middle, and "Alliance" is at the bottom.

concern for the plight of the poor.

Promoting “social justice” requires alliances, and effective alliances require common interests. Since its establishment, SOJA has successfully allied with numerous organizations to bring about positive change in Contra Costa County. It has kept residents informed about the need for greater justice, represented the less fortunate to public officials and worked with the officials and its allies in improving social justice.

To assist young, undocumented immigrants gain a legal status, SOJA works closely with the Migrant and Immigrant Community Action (MICA) Project. The SOJA-MICA team provides financial assistance, legal counseling and education to the applicants. The basic objectives of the team effort are the promotion of human dignity, immigration reform and the achievement of citizenship. Sadly, the members working on this project have seen immigrants dry up in the last 4 years of the Trump Administration’s policies, so they have been working primarily with first generation immigrants still in need of accompaniment through a few of our congregations.

Members of SOJA work with the faith-based advocacy group known as the Multi-Faith Action Coalition in attacking systems that make people people poor, and keep people poor. The Coalition focuses on problems like food and housing insecurity, health care needs, wages and workforce development, racism and the limitations of the social safety net. MFAC focuses on these systems inside our county.

SOJA has long advocated for broader, global issues as well as universal healthcare by hosting events and lobbying elected officials. Gun violence has long been a major SOJA concern, prompting the members to partner with a national coalition of more than forty faith groups known as “Faiths United to Prevent Gun Violence.” The partnership has called for the requirement for a background check on the buyer of every gun, a mandate for the development and maintenance of a national gun registry data base, a ban on high capacity and assault weapons and the passage of a law that would make gun trafficking a federal crime. SOJA has issued numerous public statements regarding the need to end gun violence.

In 2004, The Interfaith Council asked SOJA to form the Winter Nights Family Shelter as a program to meet the needs of the increasing numbers of families living without shelter we were seeing in the county. The program began with a limited number of families and seniors but rapidly became a major provider of temporary hideaways and services for homeless families. After a couple of years, the shelter decided to focus on families with children as the two populations didn't sleep well in the same gymnasiums. Winter Nights transitioned to become an independent non-profit organization in July of 2020.

For more than fifteen years, members of SOJA have regularly attended Concord City Council meetings to support the creation of a homeless accommodation as part of the re-development of the Naval Weapons Station. A definite plan has yet to be presented, but SOJA members persist and remain hopeful.

SOJA officially endorses "The Poor People's Campaign: A National Call for a Moral Revival," which addresses such issues as perceived systemic racism, impoverishment through wage suppression, ending the military economy, protecting Indigenous rights and environmental justice. Learn more at: <https://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org>

The Interfaith Climate Action Network (ICAN) includes a partnership between SOJA and a group of local congregations. ICAN works with the California Interfaith Power and Light, GreenFaith and secular environmental groups to decrease pollution in Contra Costa County's poorest neighborhoods near Industrial and refinery centers.

SOJA celebrates Martin Luther King Day the third Monday of January each year with a community service. The celebration focuses on Dr. King's passion for equal rights for African Americans, the disadvantaged and victims of injustice. It provides an opportunity for local citizens and politicians to interact while remembering Dr. King's many accomplishments and contributions to the advancement of racial equality. This annual service began after the Rodney King riots in Los Angeles.

Members of SOJA regularly correspond with local leaders and politicians regarding proposed legislation and upcoming political decisions. They focus on

issues they consider consequential and build a common opinion before issuing a written statement. The issues vary from voting rights to the immigration process, housing policies to Peace in the Middle East, to rebuilding the social safety net. SOJA often partners with other faith and secular groups (such as the Mt. Diablo Peace and Justice Center, and the Lafayette Crosses) when doing their advocacy, and they are open to having membership from diverse faith perspectives and life philosophies. To join, please contact one of our team of leaders: Jo Kerner at jvkrnr@aol.com or Kristina Martin at cntmartin@comcast.net.

SOJA's varied activities clearly demonstrate a diversity consciousness and suggest its members envision a world where societies treat all their citizens equally and enable them to realize their full potential. SOJA celebrates diversity, equity and inclusion. It promotes human dignity and contends all voices should be heard. It serves a crucial role in increasing respect for human dignity in Contra Costa County. In a county without a Human Rights Commission, it serves as the closest thing to a conscience for our region's elected leaders and faith leaders as well.

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