



THE INTERFAITH

ECONOMIC & RACIAL JUSTICE
COMPACT FOR NYC

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ICNY
Interfaith Center of New York

The Interfaith Racial & Economic Justice Compact For New York City

Submitted by the Micah Institute, the Interfaith Center of New York, and our Diverse Faith Partners

June 18, 2021

Preamble

This document reflects the views and values of diverse New York City religious leaders – representatives of the city’s many faith communities, who were brought together for prayerful reflection and discussion by the Micah Institute and the Interfaith Center of New York. As an organization, this is not the first time we have developed a platform representing the needs and concerns of New York’s faith communities. In 2013 we put forth the *Micah Covenant*, and in 2017 we supported the *Faith over Fear Interfaith Platform*. We submit this compact to build on the moral vision we articulated in past election years.

Approximately 75% of New Yorkers describe themselves as religious and/or identify with a particular faith tradition.¹ Faith communities form a vital part of New York’s civic life, and their leaders must play an integral role in the formation of just and inclusive government policies, reflecting the best interests of *all* New Yorkers. Candidates for elected office in the City of New York are asking the electorate to trust that they will faithfully serve all residents of the city, by seeking to understand their needs, discerning effective programs, and policies, and acting justly with full transparency. A fully collaborative relationship with a broad spectrum of local faith communities will help elected officials meet these essential ethical standards. This document aims, above all, to foster such a relationship between faith leaders and elected officials. It is in this spirit that we present the following for your consideration and affirmation.

We are asking candidates for elected office in New York City in 2021 to commit to the following recommendations. Our concerns are focused on five major areas of government policy and city life: **1) Mayoral Faith-Based Liaison, 2) Racial Justice, 3) Economic Justice, 4) Housing Justice, and 5) Immigrant Justice.** On behalf of the religiously diverse New Yorkers we represent, we urgently and respectfully present these concerns to you.

¹ Pew Research Center, 2014 Religious Landscape Study. See <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/new-york-city-metro-area>.

1) Faith in NYC Civic Life

The Office of the Mayor should be accessible to diverse religious leaders, with an open-door policy to engage in discussion of critical social issues, and consideration of major initiatives related to the health, safety, and social and economic wellbeing of our communities. In broad strokes, New York's diverse religious leaders ask that as mayor you:

- Create an independent faith-based office and faith leader roundtable within the mayor's office, with direct access to the mayor, that will work with both the mayor and his/her staff to help formulate policies, programs, and/or action plans related to issues of major importance to the welfare of the city.
- Ensure that faith leaders with recognized expertise in crucial policy areas such as housing, hunger, education, racial justice, and criminal justice reform are assigned to the faith leader roundtable.
- Hold face-to-face quarterly meetings with the faith leader roundtable.
- Staff this office with members of New York's diverse faith communities, including a director of the caliber of its former directors, who understood the value of open, honest, and responsive communication.

(See Appendix below for further discussion of the mayoral faith-based liaison.)

2) Racial Justice

As New Yorkers of diverse faith traditions, we know that there are no areas of our collective life untouched by the legacy of racial injustice. We recognize this reality and propose reforms to the criminal justice system, healthcare system, and to our schools as concrete ways the next administration can address the stain of systemic racism in our city.

- Follow through on the New York City Council's decision to close the Rikers Island prison facilities (#CloseRikers) in as timely a manner as possible, and with the input of impacted communities.
- Create a city-wide Reentry Director, or Reentry "Czar," and appoint a leading policy maker or seasoned organizer from the New York City reentry sector to this key position.
- Create a mental health corps of culturally competent providers, to support grieving individuals, families, and communities that have suffered loss due to COVID-19, hate crimes, and ongoing community violence.

- Allocate sufficient ongoing funding to community-based violence interrupter programs and establish a Gun Violence Taskforce including diverse and representative community leaders.
- Increase funding for research on health equity and health disparities, particularly as they impact communities of color, and commit to implementing recommendations for a more patient-centered healthcare system.
- Strengthen the Mayor's Office for the Prevention of Hate Crimes, to address hate crimes aggressively throughout New York City.
- Create a New York City Racial Equity Commission to receive annual reports from all city agencies on the racial equity outcomes of their operations, and to evaluate new city policies and legislation to ensure accountability through a racial equity lens.
- Build on the work of the mayor's School Diversity Advisory Group by creating an Office of School Diversity within the City's Human Rights Commission, to address the issue of segregation within the public school system.
- Ensure budgetary support for programs in the Department of Education that respond to students' mental health needs, including social workers, counselors, school-based mental health clinics, restorative justice programs, and community schools offering wrap-around student and family services.

3) Economic Justice

New York City leads the nation in income inequality with the top one percent of Manhattanites earning 113 times more than the bottom 99% (Economic Policy Institute, 2018). The next administration must protect the rights of the poor and of “contingent” and other workers who supply city’s needs and should be afforded dignity and the ability to thrive.

- Create a partnership between the city and diverse faith communities, to reach out to all city residents who are eligible for the Fund for Excluded Workers but may not yet know about it. Targeted populations for this educational/outreach program would include undocumented immigrants, women, communities of color, low-income New Yorkers, and other excluded groups.
- Create a joint commission including the Office of the Mayor, City Council, Comptroller, and Public Advocate, to determine the “Real Living Wage” for New York City residents and produce a White Paper with recommendations for reaching that goal and making our city livable for all New Yorkers.
- Support City Council legislation to ensure full rights and protections for employees at app-based ride hailing and delivery companies, often described as “contingent workers,” and restrict their misclassification as “independent contractors.”

4) Housing Justice

In New York, we have a city of 80,000 unhoused men, women, and children, whose health, education, and human potential is unalterably damaged by a lack of stable, accessible housing. As faith leaders we call on the next administration to end the scourge of homelessness and the lack of affordable housing that leads to it.

- Affirm that affordable and supportive housing, not shelters, must be the solution to homelessness.
- Ensure that appropriate resources from all levels of government are prioritized to fund housing vouchers, to enable homeless and low-income New Yorkers to pay for housing with no more than 30% of their income.
- Ensure that rental subsidies to those who are homeless or at risk of homelessness are structured to incentivize – rather than discourage – their personal and professional development and full community engagement.
- Affirm the fundamental ethical principle that affordable housing should be available in every New York City neighborhood.
- Establish concrete practices to ensure that New Yorkers experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity have a seat at the table in formulating and implementing housing and homelessness policies.
- Establish an office within the Department of Housing Preservation and Development to help property-owning congregations and faith-based organizations develop affordable and supportive housing on their property.

5) Immigrant Justice

Our faith communities are located in the shadow of the Statue of Liberty, which for centuries has promised hope for recently arrived New Yorkers seeking and a better life. Our congregations strive to be home for new neighbors who have often overcome extraordinary obstacles to make it to our city. We call on our elected officials to do everything in their power to make sure immigrant New Yorkers find a hospitable and respectful welcome, remembering we have all been strangers in an unfamiliar land.

- Maintain New York City's status as a "Sanctuary City," in the deepest ethical sense of this term – providing safety and security for all New Yorkers, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.
- Support municipal voting rights for all New Yorkers, regardless of citizenship or immigration status.

- Establish a partnership between the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Affairs and diverse local faith communities, to create a series of trainings for faith community members who wish to assist asylum seekers.

Appendix: Lessons Learned from the Previous Administration Regarding the Mayoral Faith-Based Liaison

The DeBlasio administration established the Center for Faith and Community Partnerships within the Office of Community Affairs in response to a policy recommendation in the 2013 Micah Covenant. We were pleased with this decision but believe there are valuable lessons learned in recent years that should inform all parties going forward. They are as follows:

- Representatives of New York's diverse faith communities have appreciated their access to the Office of the Mayor, as well as to city agencies and program providers who shared information and resources for the benefit of their respective communities.
- Unfortunately, however, frustration and resentment has built up within many faith communities, as it became increasingly clear that the Center for Faith and Community Partnerships was primarily oriented towards dispensing information related to city policies, programs, and initiatives, rather than soliciting substantive input from the city's faith communities.
- The Mayor's pledge to hold regular face-to-face meetings with diverse faith leaders became sporadic, and these meetings have primarily been used to dispense information on decisions already made or create photo opportunities that give the appearance of support from local faith communities.
- Future staffing of this office should be of the caliber of its former directors Jonathan Soto and Rev. Dominique Atchison, both of whom understood the value of open, honest, and responsive communication with faith leaders, but seemed to be constrained in this regard by mayoral policies and priorities.