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POWER for Good: Organizational Clout and Moral Persuasion in our Interfaith Coalition By Hugh Taft-Morales

Clergy Leader Hugh Taft-Morales explains why the Philadelphia Ethical Society on Rittenhouse Square is a member of POWER, a dynamic, non-partisan interfaith coalition that will turn 10 years old this September.

In the spring of 2011, more than 150 lay and clergy leaders began a dialogue about the systemic issues that plague Philadelphia and particularly harm economically disadvantaged residents and people of color. In order to address these problems more effectively, 2000 people held a “founding convention” on September 25, 2011. One of the largest grassroots civic gatherings in years, it birthed Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower and Rebuild (POWER).

POWER Interfaith, as it is now called, creates opportunities for collective action to transform our city—and now state—so that it serves all its residents. While the Philadelphia Ethical Society (<https://phillyethics.org/>) could easily have focused simply on nurturing its home for humanists at its comfortable location on Rittenhouse Square, the members yearned to support efforts to empower the most marginalized populations in our region. So, we joined POWER and dove into five key areas: education, civic engagement, climate justice, economic dignity, and criminal-justice reform.

POWER Interfaith congregations in Center City with which the Ethical Society had the most active connections included Arch Street Methodist, Arch Street Friends Meeting, Broad Street Ministry, First Unitarian, Mother Bethel AME, Old First Reformed UCC, St. Peter’s Episcopal, and Congregation Leyv Ha-Ir, which shares our space for services. By reaching across denominational lines, the Ethical Society honored our own commitment to “deed before creed” and enjoyed a sense of effective engagement.

POWER has made a real difference to this city due primarily to two factors: constituent numbers and moral persuasion. Regarding numbers, with over 40 congregations dedicated to showing up for justice, POWER has registered voters, organized rallies, and filled committee rooms to pressure elected officials to hear constituent voices too often shut out of policy decisions. I remember Rabbi Julie of Leyv Ha-Ir blowing a shofar at our state capitol to emphasize that POWER meant business, and three POWER trips to Harrisburg when joyous singing in the halls of our legislature left me hoarse but fulfilled.

Few members of the Ethical Society have been so engaged in POWER’s justice work as Kate Esposito. Working with POWER’s Economic Dignity Team, Kate recounts a recent victory for low-wage workers with passage of the 21st Century Living Wage legislation: “With Councilmember Mark Squilla as chief sponsor, we negotiated with Administration officials, lobbied councilmembers and counted City Council votes until a bill was passed and then signed by Mayor Kenney on December 20, 2018, the same day he signed the Fair Work Week legislation, sponsored by Councilmember Helen Gym. Since then, there have

been gradual yearly increases in minimum wage for all municipal workers and city contract and sub-contract workers. Starting on July 1, 2023, they will be making a minimum \$15-an-hour wage with guaranteed yearly COLA increases. This was a lead issue for Mayor Kenney in his re-election campaign. But it was POWER that pushed the bill onto his desk.”



*Mayor Kenney signs the **21st Century Living Wage and Fair Work Week** legislation, courtesy of the Office of Councilmember Helen Gym. Kate Esposito (in yellow scarf) next to Gym. Rev. Greg Holston, POWER's then-executive, stands to the mayor's left.*

While POWER is non-partisan regarding candidates and political parties, its progressive perspective and dedication to equity and justice fuel the second reason for its success: moral persuasion. Of course, it's hard to measure how ethical appeals affect each political player, but the moral clarity of our appeals inspired and motivated me personally to act.

I was privileged to speak to a crowd gathered under the Harrisburg dome, where I said our “commitment to the worth of every person is why I am at the Ethical Society, and why I am here today. Our state budget, and the political priorities that drive it, do not treat every child as unique, irreplaceable and sacred. Year after year of deficit budgets are harming our children—it's fiscal child neglect. This is simply unethical.”

Ethical Society member Sylvia Metzler has been working with Live Free, POWER's criminal-justice reform team, for years. She spoke at POWER's Rally for Police Accountability at Arch Street Methodist Church, in December 2019. District Attorney Larry Krasner has worked with POWER leaders to stamp out racism and humanize our criminal justice system.

Whether you are a member of a POWER congregation or not, consider supporting POWER's work financially or by spreading the word about its moral agenda—visit <https://powerinterfaith.org/>. The pandemic has only increased economic inequality and deepened wounds caused by racism. To be truly a city of sisterly and brotherly love, Philadelphia needs the ethical and organizational clout of POWER.