

BY JIM MERRITT

Special to Newsday

Houses of worship don't exist in a vacuum, but are often in or near communities with challenges such as food insecurity, health disparities and a lack of equal rights and opportunity. This week's clergy discuss how they fulfill their faith's call to public service in their neighborhoods and beyond.

Rabbi Joel M. Levenson

Midway Jewish Center, Syosset

The unique Jewish notion of *tzedakah*, or charitable giving, as a moral obligation and a religious mandate, has motivated Jews to create a worldwide network for giving. According to the Talmud, "Tzedakah is as important as all the other commandments put together." (Tractate Baba Batra, Page 9a)

Our congregation frequently encourages donations of nonperishable food and money to support the Hatzilu Rescue Organization and the Rudman Family Food Pantry at the Mid-Island Y JCC in Plainview. We are an active participant in The Tikkun Alliance of the North Shore, a collaborative community effort formed to address issues affecting our world. Right now we're collecting new toiletries.

When Russia invaded Ukraine, our members filled our lobby with clothes and medical supplies that were ultimately shipped to an Israeli pop-up hospital at the Poland-Ukraine border. The first century sage Hillel taught, "If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, who am I? If not now, when?" (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:14)



ALEX M. WOLFF

Joel M. Levenson

DAVID CARL OLSON

David Carl Olson

JEFFREY BASINGER

Dwight Lee Wolter

ASKING THE CLERGY

What do houses of worship owe their communities?

It is through our work of loving and caring that we perform the highest form of spiritual art. And in doing so, we show the world that love has power.

The Rev. David Carl Olson

Associate minister for Congregational Life, Unitarian Universalist Congregation at Shelter Rock, Manhasset

Religion includes a call to the development of character. This happens individually through study and devotion, of course, but it is best refined congregationally through public service. Starting in the congregation, we provide a helping hand where it is needed. Then together, in ways that seek to transform, we serve by shorten-

ing the distance between our congregation and the communities where we live our public lives.

We learn to identify with the community, to know its heart — joys and woes, assets and deficits. We apply that collective character that we've developed. We show leadership by making stronger connections within the community and even make a civic demand. The late U.S. Rep. John Lewis, speaking atop the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on March 1, 2020, urged us, "Get in good trouble! Necessary trouble! And help redeem the soul of America." It is the faith that we practice — of seeing our interconnectedness and the inherent worth of each person — that allows us to en-

gage the community not as outside agitators, but as community members and community leaders. Community members not afraid to make a little good trouble, community members willing to do our part in implementing what we demand.

The Rev. Dwight Lee Wolter

Pastor, Congregational Church of Patchogue

Our responsibility could be defined as our ability to respond. It is contingent on being welcoming, relevant and vital. If our church were to close someday, a tribute would be people saying, as they twist the locked door-knob, "What are we going to do now?" We have our own joys and concerns; but we also turn our eyes from self-concern to concern for neighbors.

Jesus said, "For I was hungry, and you gave me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; I needed clothes, and you clothed me; I was sick, and you looked after me; I was in prison, and you came to visit me." (Matthew 25: 35-36) We have a free barber shop, a mobile shower unit, a soup kitchen, food and clothes pantries and, when needed, vaccination clinics.

We've hosted Latino arts festivals, a live concert series on the spirituality of popular music, and forums on immigration and agriculture. On a recent Sunday, we also replaced the pulpit and lectern with a shampoo sink and barber chair. Jesus washed feet. We washed and cut hair. We are our brother's and sister's helper.

DO YOU HAVE QUESTIONS you'd like Newsday to ask the clergy? Email them to LLife@newsday.com. Find more LI Life stories at newsday.com/LLife.