

Welcome to our *Together Baton Rouge: Faith, Community and Justice* connect group page!

Our *Mission Statement* is to:

- (1) Bring together UBC members who are interested in participating in practical applications of faith in our community.
- (2) Educate our congregation about Together Baton Rouge (TBR) and other similar organizations with whom our church currently partners.
- (3) And promote continued support and affiliation with these partner organizations who work for justice and the good of all in our community.



### *What is Together Baton Rouge (TBR)?*

- TBR is a broad-based coalition of member organizations from the Baton Rouge Community
  - three quarters of those organizations are churches and synagogues
  - one quarter are community and professional organizations
  - membership is limited to organizations – there are no individual membersFor a complete list of members go to [www.togetherbr.org/leadership](http://www.togetherbr.org/leadership).
- TBR intentionally brings together people across lines of race, religion, neighborhoods, and political affiliation for the betterment of the community.
- TBR is a non-partisan organization. It is not affiliated with any candidates or political party.
- TBR works on issues affecting families and communities.
- TBR's basic goals are
  - building relationships based on trust and willingness to listen to each other
  - equipping members and leadership with skills and practices that gets results
  - achieving change on concrete issues as part of our common call to justice

### *What is the philosophy of TBR?*

- TBR believes that relationships should precede issues—that efforts for change must begin by building trust, otherwise they will remain fragile and temporary.
- TBR believes in stories, not ideology, to identify issues. The issues we work on come out of small-group gatherings called “house meetings,” where people share their stories about issues they would like to see changed. The organization is driven by the testimony of concrete experience, not pre-conceived ideology.
- TBR believes the best solutions to a problem come from the people affected by that problem. Solutions come from issues identified from bottom-up, not top-down meetings and feedback.
- TBR believes the price of critique is a viable alternative. It is not enough merely to raise awareness about a problem. We must identify solutions, which should be pragmatic and achievable.
- TBR believes in institutions. Our religious and civic organizations have extraordinary potential to be a vehicle for people's development as leaders and for the transformation of the world. But we often don't seize their full potential.
- TBR believes in ownership. We accept no money from government sources. The organization is funded by pledges from its member institutions, in addition to some foundation and business support. This allows the organization to belong to and be accountable to the institutions that make it up. It adheres to all requirements of a 501(c)(3) non-profit institutional membership organization.

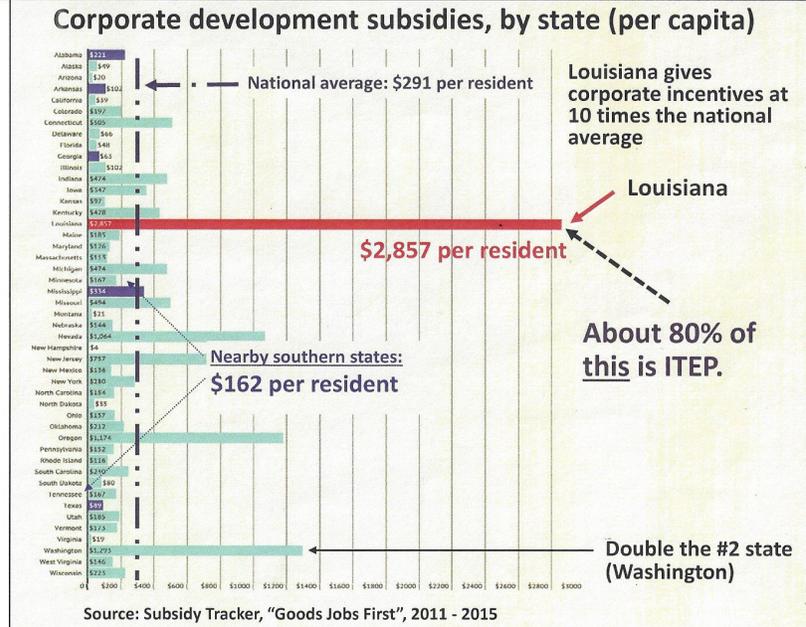
### *What are some of the projects TBR has worked on?*

- The best resource is here: <https://www.togetherbr.org/accomplishments>. Example areas of focus include:
  - Health Equity
  - Food access in food desert communities
  - Public safety
  - Clean water
  - Helping small businesses
  - Tax exemption fairness and reform
  - Flood needs, prevention and reform
  - Criminal justice and reform
  - City blight
- The following video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWTic9btP38>) about why Louisiana stays poor is very good. This video is especially related to tax exemption fairness and reform, which is one of TBR's more complicated projects. The chart below also gives a visual picture of tax credits by all 50 states and shows how our state has the largest exemption in the country, resulting in less money available for our schools, libraries, police, firefighters, and infrastructure.

# LOUISIANA IS GENEROUS

Louisiana gives more in corporate development subsidies per capita than any other state:

- 10 times the national average
- 18 times the southern average
- 32 times as much as Texas



## What affiliations does TBR have?

- TBR is one of several Together groups in 7 cities in Louisiana. The coordinated efforts of these groups are called Together Louisiana, of which TBR is a part.
- Many similar groups to TBR and Together Louisiana exist all over the United States and have the primary purpose to promote action:
  - for Social change
  - and practice what the founding fathers preached: to make life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness a reality for more Americans.
- The larger affiliation for the groups above is IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation) which stands on the following principles:
  - Faith: Its work is rooted in the common prophetic call of our diverse religious traditions.
  - Democracy: It believes that people working together have the power to change their communities and their country for the better.
  - Relationships: It believes in developing trust and building community across the lines that usually divide us.
  - Leadership: It works with people who want to transform the world from what it is to what they believe it should be.
  - Impact: It has seven decades of experience winning tough battles to help ordinary people across the nation.

## *What do I need to know about the partnership between UBC and TBR?*

- UBC became affiliated with Together Baton Rouge in 2017.
- Pastors and a number of members of UBC have participated in, hosted, lead and worked on TBR activities and projects.
- UBC is a pledge paying member of TBR, supporting their efforts to help others in the Baton Rouge community.
- UBC hosted the Together Louisiana statewide conference in 2017, attended by over 300 people, including the governor, that had T.V. coverage.
- In August of 2020 UBC formed the TBR: Faith, Community and Justice Connect Group and are working on carrying out its mission statement.

## *History of TBR and IAF*

In November 2010, Rev. Lee T. Wesley joined together with about 12 other local pastors to create a place for religious institutions, civic organizations, unions and non-profits to come together and address the pressures facing families in Baton Rouge and across Louisiana, particularly the underserved and disadvantaged. Their idea was that in serving the least of us we ensure a safe, productive community for all of us. TBR started as a faith-based initiative and soon expanded to include a broad base of churches – black, white and mixed congregations, synagogues and mosques across the city’s neighborhoods. This gave special meaning to the name Together Baton Rouge. While it later incorporated other civic organizations, it holds fast to its roots, opens and closes meetings with prayer, and focuses on God’s message of the importance of being a good neighbor. Back in the early days, Rev. Wesley reached out to the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation’s best-known organization for training leaders of local faith based and community-organizations (see more below). Louisiana’s relationship with IAF actually goes back to around 1992 when a regional organization was established in the Shreveport-Bossier area, then in Monroe, Alexandria and in New Orleans in 1998. Together Baton Rouge has joined up with the other regional organizations and formed a state-wide organization called Together Louisiana, which is comprised of 250 religious congregations and civic organizations across the state, one of the largest grassroots organizations in the history of Louisiana.

Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF): The IAF was founded in 1940 in Chicago by Saul Alinsky and a board of directors including Chicago Sun-Times publisher Marshall Field, Roman Catholic Bishop Sheil and Catherine Lewis, daughter of John L. Lewis, President of United Mine Workers. They focused on developing organizing tools and training, taking on issues related to Community Building, Neighborhood Development, Jobs, Criminal Justice, Voter Engagement, Anti-Corruption, Financial Reform, Healthcare, Education, Housing, Environment, Public Safety, Senior Issues and Immigration. The IAF has grown to include organizations/affiliates in 22 states. Saul Alinsky is considered the founder of modern community organizing and his

organizational skills were focused on improving the living conditions of poor communities. William F. Buckley called him an organizational genius. Adlai Stevenson said Alinsky's aims "most faithfully reflect our ideals of brotherhood, tolerance, charity and dignity of the individual." Alinsky died in 1972 and the IAF still claims to be "the nation's largest and longest-standing network of local faith and community-based organizations." They report "victories" on, among other issues, housing and neighborhood revitalization, public transport and infrastructure, living-wage jobs and workforce development, support for local labor unions, criminal justice reform, and tackling the opioid crisis. [Wikipedia] An important point to remember is that IAF did not come into Baton Rouge to organize people around their political agenda. Local leaders asked IAF to help train, lead, and organize their members to address issues considered important by the local organizations. The Baton Rouge member organizations set the priorities and select the issues to be addressed.

### *Editorials and Personal Reflections*

#### Why Participate in Together Baton Rouge (TBR)?

by Ron & Patsy Perritt

1. Our Christian responsibility is to follow the teachings of Jesus who said that God's will was for us to love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. Jesus' ministry shows that he was concerned not only with spiritual health, but also physical health as evidenced by the many healings he performed. For Jesus, loving your neighbor was not passive but active. Jesus did not simply wish for his neighbors to be well, he actively worked to help make their lives better and criticized others who refused to use their political power to help improve the lives of the less fortunate in their communities.
2. Communities have always sought to improve through the passage of laws, rules and regulations. These constitute our public policy. Unfortunately, the disadvantaged in the community often don't have the political influence to change those policies that hold them at a disadvantage. Historically we have seen this in the disparities in housing, education, voting rights and many other areas. Loving our neighbors means that we cannot ignore public policies that work to disadvantage or oppress our neighbors.
3. Public policy is often shaped by forces that benefit economically from these policies and who have the financial and political resources to secure their privileged status. A single individual or even an entire congregation has little chance of changing this situation. Only by joining forces with other faith-based organizations will we have enough influence to bring about positive change. The methods of TBR do not include endorsing individual candidates or parties, or by making campaign contributions. TBR does try to inform elected officials and candidates about what is important to their members, help formulate solutions to problems in our community, and hold elected officials accountable to their constituents. Letting elected officials know that their job depends on listening to their constituents is effective. Lobbying for improving the lives of our neighbors is consistent with the teaching of Jesus. If

some good people had not been willing to lobby for what they thought was right, women wouldn't have the right to vote, equal pay for equal work would be even less a reality, we would still live in the worst of the pre-civil rights era, African-Americans would not have the right to vote easily if at all, and many more Americans would be doomed to live in poverty without a chance for a decent education or the privileges that we who are more affluent enjoy. It is our duty as Christians to be faithful to what Jesus called us to do.

4. TBR is, at the present time, the largest and most effective faith-based organization working in our community. There simply is no viable alternative. They have the organizational skills and leadership which are necessary to efficiently address the issues which member organizations decide are important. Working through TBR provides resources to identify problems, organize community wide groups interested in working on these issues, access relevant information, and bring the issues to the attention of people throughout our community. This saves our members an enormous amount of time and effort, allows us to get a much wider perspective on issues and get to know others in our community who share our desire to make things better for all our citizens.
5. Our church has for many decades been courageous in following the teachings of Jesus. We were among the very first to permit women deacons, to be accepting of people different from us, to reject the bigotry and racism we see around us even today. Those decisions were made by careful and sometimes contentious discernment by our church about being true to our Christian calling. Back then, we chose to be faithful regardless of what other people might have thought of us.
6. If UBC does not participate in TBR, it will send a clear and unmistakable message to our community that we, as a church, are not only unwilling to participate in working to address the problems in our community but are also unwilling to support others in their efforts to do so. Our church will be perceived as just another rich white church that professes the importance of loving your neighbor but refuses to actually do it publicly. When someone asks if our church is partnering with others in our community who are working for social justice, how will we answer, and will we be proud, or embarrassed, with that answer? The image of our church in the community affects our Christian witness. Will we be seen as a church that continues our tradition of doing what Jesus called us to do, even when it is not popular or fashionable to some people, or will UBC be seen as another church that M L King wrote about in his *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*?
7. UBC has ministered to our community in many ways, notably through Highland Elementary School, and gifts to the homeless and the Food Bank. Many of our individual members are engaged in ministry and service which are not supported formally through the church budget. While these activities are admirable, they do not address the systemic problems for many in our community such as lack of access to health care facilities and healthy food, equal justice for everyone, and tax reform. It is admirable to volunteer to help paint and clean the neighborhood elementary

school. Is it not more important to try and solve the problem of why the school system does not have the resources to keep the school in good repair, and pay its teachers a decent wage?

8. We believe that to engage in the difficult work of loving others as ourselves means helping to improve the lives of the disadvantaged in our community and thus is consistent with the teachings of Jesus. Working with others across religious, cultural, and ethnic lines gives us a chance to get to know others, to learn about their situations and their desire to provide a decent life for themselves and their children.