

# At the Intersection of Justice and Faith

## Exploring the Information-seeking Behaviors of Religious Leaders Working for Social Justice

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**NOTE** This essay is the winner of our 2020 Student Essay Contest. For more information on the winner and the contest, please visit: [www.atla.com/blog/winner-of-2021-theological-librarianship-student-essay-contest](http://www.atla.com/blog/winner-of-2021-theological-librarianship-student-essay-contest). *Theological Librarianship* plans to run another essay contest in 2022; announcements will go out soon.

**ABSTRACT** Religious leaders involved in social justice activities (SJC) exist at the junction of two information communities—religious leaders and social justice activists—possessing unique information needs and information-seeking behaviors. There are no existing studies focusing on the information needs of SJC, but much can be gleaned from the explorations around the information seeking behaviors of clergy, religious leaders, and activists. SJC information behaviors can be viewed through the lens of a variety of information systems and frameworks but particularly within the encountering of information in information grounds. Due to the diversity of SJC, many of their information grounds exist in online communities utilizing social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. There is a need for further research on the information-seeking behaviors of SJC, to further understand their information needs so information professionals can provide better assistance to this unique information community.

Information communities of social justice activists form around shared ideas, seeking to change structures and systems that are broken, inequitable, unjust, and exclusionary (Immergluck 2003, 2). Within these communities, a subgroup of religious leaders, of all faiths and creeds, work together towards goals of justice and equity. Religious leaders have long been involved in movements to drive change and fight unjust structures (Mohamed and Cox 2020; Reiger 2007). For some this is a small portion of their work; others dedicate a considerable amount of energy as well as both their work and leisure time in fighting for equity, justice, diversity, and inclusion.

These individuals function at the intersection of religious leadership and social justice, with a deep conviction that their “[a]ctivism is not something added on top of religion but inextricably tied to the heart of religion itself” (Reiger 2007, 3). For some this includes an official title or credential as a social justice minister, but for many it is just a part of their larger ministerial duties—one piece of their larger life calling.

Throughout this study, religious leaders involved in social justice will be referred to as social justice clergy (SJC). This is an imperfect label, as the term “clergy” is not necessarily a proper label for religious leaders of all faith traditions, but the intention is to look at leaders across religious practices who are active in social justice work. These individuals form a unique information-seeking community that reaches across barriers such as faith tradition and geography. The SJC are not a formalized group in any way, but rather a loosely connected network of individuals with some basic similarities, such as a shared understanding of the privilege inherent in their roles and need to leverage that privilege in work towards justice (Molina 2020). SJC benefit from the lessons of those who came before them, such as how to place themselves between police and protestors and serve as communicators; these are also examples of how they may utilize their privilege in action (Pluralism Project 2020).

While formal groups do exist that focus on specific issues, such as Interfaith Workers Justice, Religions for Peace, and a variety of interfaith centers that encourage laity and leaders alike to get involved in faith-based justice work, a less formal network develops among SJC. Connections are made at protests and demonstrations, through conversation held online and in person, at panel presentations and lectures, and through shared educational opportunities and backgrounds. Within their networks is a recognized need for diverse voices, each leader bringing their own training, study, faith, lived experience, and background to contribute.

This community has unique information needs, sharing their information behaviors with both clergy and activists and existing in both words simultaneously. They serve as a bridge between religious leaders and activists as well as the larger population (such as their congregations and others who may attribute the clergy with certain levels of authority based on their profession). This unique sociocultural location influences their information behaviors, including where they look, how they determine reliability, and how interpersonal relationships and interactions influence information gathering.

We are in a time of social unrest with increasing awareness of the inequities of our society. At protests, discussions, and actions, SJC can be seen either in physical presence or in background roles of support and communication. Studies about this community are lacking and further research (both quantitative and qualitative) about the information-seeking behaviors of SJC will help information professionals better serve this unique information community.

This essay will begin with a review of existing literature exploring the information behaviors of clergy and activists, divided into sections reflecting key points of interest for SJC information behaviors, to form a theoretical basis of understanding around the information behaviors of SJC. After a brief explanation of my methodology for this study will be an exploration of the information worlds of SJC. Finally, I will conclude with identifying some ways in which libraries can increase their service to SJC and provide some suggestions for further study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

While no literature focuses specifically on SJC information needs, much can be gleaned through the information seeking behaviors of activists and clergy, with particular attention paid to the overlap between the two. Most studies evaluated in this paper focus on clergy and religious leaders, with studies of activists supplementing and supporting our understanding of the information-seeking behaviors of clergy. I have chosen to focus primarily on clergy and religious leaders in this literature review as it is an essential piece of the identity of SJC and, for many, a driving factor behind their justice work (Reiger 2007). The role of religious leader comes with certain expectations, levels of privilege, and education that may influence the information-seeking behaviors of these individuals.

It should be noted that most of these studies were conducted at least a decade past, with the preeminent study being Wick's work from 1999. Technology has changed greatly in that time, including not only what information is available online but also how people interact with technology. Despite this, the exploration in the early studies provides a solid groundwork to build from. Additionally, it must be noted that the majority of studies focused on Christian clergy, providing a narrowed lens.

### *Work Worlds and Work Roles*

In his study *The Information-Seeking Behavior of Pastoral Clergy*, Wicks was the first to take a qualitative look at the information-seeking habits of clergy, exploring their "work worlds and work roles" (Roland 2021, 2; Wicks 1999, 206). Utilizing earlier quantitative studies to inform his own research, Wicks defined the work worlds in which clergy seek information as theological, denominational, or congregational. He established the roles clergy fulfilled within these worlds as: preacher, caregiver, and administrator (120).

Wicks found the intersection of the worlds and the roles in which information was being sought influenced the clergy's information-seeking behavior, as well as impacting if they were working within

open or closed systems. For example, he observed that pastors who are on the more extreme ends (both conservative and liberal) in their theological world were more likely to use resources from within their own theological traditions (closed system) when preparing for their work role of preaching than those identified as theologically “middle” (211). In contrast, the denominational world from which a pastor is working did not appear to influence their use of an open or closed system in seeking information for preaching (213).

In a further exploration of these roles, Lambert (2010) identified specific activities performed by the clergy and expressed interest in the reason behind why clergy chose to stop in their information seeking (7). For the most part, the clergy seemed to stop seeking information when they had enough for the task, or when the seeking of information no longer seemed worth the effort. Only one of the ministers in this study stopped their seeking due to a lack of access (12). However, Lambert notes that the study drew from a single denomination, with only male representatives, and is not “generalizable to all information seekers or all ministers” (16).

This is an oft-repeated sentiment across the literature, with studies drawing from small sample sizes and often from a single denomination. It is recognized that numerous factors, such as denomination, theological convictions, liberal/conservative levels, gender, race, geographical region and access to resources, influence their information-seeking behaviors (Dankasa 2015; Lambert 2010; Michels 2009; Park and Taylor 2007; Roland 2012; Wicks 1999). While the information can be used to extrapolate some generalities, a more extensive study of the information behaviors of clergy would be beneficial. More diversity in the participants of a study would allow for exploring how different factors may change the information behaviors, as well as helping establish similarities which might stretch across the divides.

After 1999, most studies about the information behaviors of clergy use Wicks’s model as a baseline. Primary focus has been on details within these worlds and roles, examining what types of resources clergy use, with nearly exclusive focus on their working lives. While Wicks’s model of work worlds and roles provides a framework that can be used for exploring SJC information behavior, the worlds and roles probably look different for SJC when engaged in their social justice work than when serving in a different role (such as preacher) within their faith or congregation.

### *Utilizing Information Grounds and Technology*

One important element of understanding the information behaviors of SJC is where they seek information. Dankasa (2015) notes that both “formal and informal sources” are used by clergy (25); this is supported by a study that showed highly educated and experienced ministry professional participants used the Internet, newspapers, radio news, and periodicals to find the information they were searching for, drawing from both religious and non-religious sources (Park and Taylor 2007). Many of these sources would fall into what Michels (2009) calls “intentional seeking,” purposefully accessing something in search of information. Michels identified two other paths through which clergy seek information: “devotional gathering,” and “dialoguing.” Both of these rely on the concept of information grounds.

Fisher refers to information grounds as places where people gather “for a primary, instrumental purpose other than information sharing and seeking” (Savolainen 2017, 1512). While social interaction may be the primary purpose of these, “information flow is a byproduct,” and that flow occurs in many directions, including both formal and informal ways. Information grounds can be powerful places for dialoguing and information exchange and are seen often in social justice work. For instance, a message board for fans of a Korean band became the source of a sustained national protest in Korea, as “word-of-mouth marketing” expanded beyond a small community of teenage girls to a much larger audience (Shirky 2010, 65). The phenomenon of information spread is a key part to the ways in which a cognitive surplus (excess time, energy, and creativity) can be harnessed and utilized for change. A feedback loop can develop when members of the group have a sense of belonging, which can lead to increased knowledge and developments on the product they may be working on (Shirky 2010, 103). The paths of communication and reach can extend well beyond the immediate and original community, and information grounds can become

powerful locations for “information encountering,” where answers to problems can be discovered in unexpected places (Erdelez 1999).

Technology plays an important role for social justice communities, social media being an excellent example of information grounds, a platform where “collectively identifying, articulating, and contesting radical injustices” can occur, giving space for those voices that are often marginalized (Bonilla and Rosa 2015, 6). This has been seen in movements and organizations that grew out of hashtags such as #BlackLivesMatter or #WeNeedDiverseBooks.

Bonilla and Rosa (2015, 7) point out that emergent technologies have long been used within social movements “to disseminate, escalate, and enlarge the scope of their struggles: Transistor radios allowed Cuban guerilla fighters to transmit from the Sierra Maestra; television coverage transformed the riots in Selma, Alabama, into a national event; and email accounts allowed Zapatistas in Chiapas to launch global communiques.” The Internet serves as an important hub during political movements, so it is not surprising to find social justice movements taking strong hold within social media (Robbins and Buente 2008).

Studies also often identify the Internet as a source of information for clergy. Lambert’s (2010) study of experienced clergy noted that they used the Internet as a source for administrative tasks and sermon preparation, as well as to keep up to date on current trends and news (10). However, much of what is contained in those studies about clergy’s information behaviors around technology is outdated due to changes in technology and focus primarily on questions of integrity around using the Internet as a resource for sermon development (Lambert 2010; Michels 2009; Van der Laan 2009).

A 2015 study by the Barna Group gathered information from just over 600 Protestant senior pastors about their Internet use and thoughts about the Internet in relation to church life. These pastors showed increased use and appreciation for the Internet as a tool during a 15-year period; in 2000, only 35% saw the Internet as a “powerful tool for effective ministry,” while in 2015 this number had risen to 54% (Barna 2015). At the time of the study, 97% of the pastors used the Internet to find information (up from 78% in 2000). Other areas of Internet use that saw a similar increase included keeping up on existing relationships, having spiritual or religious experiences, and making new friends. It was also noted that some elements of ministry were starting to move online—a trend that, undoubtedly, will return even higher numbers in a post-COVID study.

### *Trustworthy Sources*

Savolainen (2007) explained how environmentalists determined credibility and authority of information, noting that the decision around trustworthiness and authority of a source depended highly on the situation in which it was presented or found. Factors such as previous interaction with the source, as well as the medium in which the information is presented (discussion boards versus newsletters, for instance), influenced how much trust was granted and which sources were selected. An earlier analysis of the same population by Savolainen (2006) noted that availability and accessibility were of primary importance, following the actual content of the information.

From Lambert (2010) we know that personal contacts serve as an important source of information seeking for clergy as well (10). Both clergy and activists form networks with individuals who share similar interests, motivations, and backgrounds and can serve as information sources as well as assist in vetting information found elsewhere.

### *Reflecting on the Literature*

Previous studies serve as a useful launching point to understand SJC’s information behaviors. Wicks’s (1999) division of the pastor’s information-seeking behavior into a junction of their “world” and “role” can be a guide for studying the SJC behaviors within their justice work. Does the type of justice work they are doing influence where they seek the information? For instance, would the behavior be different if the information was being sought for the purpose of educating others, organizing an event, or supporting a protest movement? Additionally, does the location where an SJC will be sharing their information influ-

ence their behavior; would they look to the same sources when preparing a talk for an inter-religious, or even non-religious, population as they would when preparing a sermon for their own faith tradition? Do the “work worlds” from which SJC operate impact where they seek that information? The shifting technological landscape inevitably plays a role in how SJC seek (and share) information; how does it influence which sources they trust or how they go about vetting the information they find?

While many of these questions require further in-depth study, I will share some initial understanding of SJC information behaviors, particularly around questions of their work worlds and roles, technology use, and locations of information gathering. This serves two purposes: first, to develop a basic grounding from which further research can grow and, second, to provide a few ideas of how information professionals can serve this unique community.

## METHODOLOGY

A variety of search methods were used to find existing research for the literature review. I utilized the San José State University general library search “OneSearch” along with the specialized database “Library and Information Science Sources” and Google Scholar. I also used the general library search for Portland State University, as this provided access to slightly different databases, thus allowing a larger sweep of potential sources.

Using combinations of terms such as: “Religious Leader,” “Clergy,” “Rabbi,” “Muslim,” “Pastor,” “Social Justice,” “Activist,” with “Information Science,” “Information Behavior,” and “Information Seeking,” I was able to develop an extensive list of potential sources. The resource lists of these articles were then analyzed to discover other articles that might be of use, and threads were followed, when possible, to seek articles that cited the originally discovered sources in hopes of finding more current research. Dankasa’s (2015) survey of literature was particularly useful in identifying sources of information, seeing what research had already been done about clergy, and was used as a launching point for further research. In addition to this search of scholarly journals and articles, some general Google searches along the same search terms were completed to find community resources, news articles, and other materials such as personal blogs, social media pages, panel discussions and justice organizations.

Individuals who spoke on panels and were quoted in interviews were then searched for on Twitter and Facebook to see what resources they were sharing and get a feel for the interactions of the community in real-time, as well as to discern suggestions for additional studies. I created a Twitter list to put these individuals and organizations in one place, which has not only provided a way of seeing their posts over time but has also led to new individuals and accounts to add to the list. Studying these individuals (and their connection) on Twitter and Facebook, in addition to articles, essays, and talks that they have given about their social justice work, serves as the primary basis of my analysis of the information behaviors of SJC.

A number of the studies observed that clergy in general are more open about their information behaviors to “insiders” who have some understanding of their working worlds (Dankasa 2015, 25). The reality is that the work of religious leaders tends to be seen as a calling into a very specialized profession, and this comes with its own set of in-built expectations and systems which may be better understood by those who have some familiarity with the field. This raises the question of how much this role of “insider” can help to provide understanding of information behaviors. The inclusion of the social justice and activist community creates another layer of “worlds” in which the clergy operate, which might expand the boundaries of who SJC trust to be honest around questions of information behavior. I have an advantage in this regard of having nearly joined the ranks of clergy and being close to several individuals who would fit into the SJC category. While it was beyond the scope of this particular project to conduct interviews, my positionality has given me the opportunity to view SJC information behaviors “behind the scenes” and influences many of the questions I would like to see addressed in more formal future studies.

## EXPLORING THE INFORMATION WORLDS OF SJC

SJC information seeking occurs across all aspects of their “work worlds and roles” as well as reaching beyond their formal work as clergy in their interaction with non-religious social justice workers and leaders. As is the case with many clergy members, SJC’s formal “work” life and their “leisure” life often blur, with the activities they pursue in their leisure time informing their working time and vice versa. This may be especially true for the SJC whose professional role doesn’t officially designate them as responsible for social justice work. Because of this mix of work and leisure life, utilizing McKenzie’s (2002) model of “everyday-life information seeking” (ELIS) can provide a method for evaluating the information seeking behaviors of SJC. This model divides information seeking into “four modes: active seeking, active scanning, nondirected monitoring, and obtaining information by proxy,” which comes into play either at the time of originally encountering the information, or at the point of connecting with the information (Savolainen 2017, 1511).

For SJC, active seeking could take the form of consulting a known source, such as an expert in the field, or a highly regarded book. Active scanning might look like perusing a website that seems promising or looking through information shared by a source that has previously been useful. Nondirected monitoring could also be referred to as information encountering, which Lambert (2010, 4) explains as occurring while one is doing other things, the information often being stored away for later reference. Finally, obtaining information by proxy would be if SJC were sent a link to an article of interest.

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, often serve as a new form of “face-to-face” resources that include socio-emotional support as well as information acquisition and sharing, allowing for easier browsing, monitoring, and “opportunistic information acquisition” (Khoo 2014). Once a location has shown itself to be a good place for information gathering, an individual is likely to continue to look for information in those places (and using those methods) when actively seeking information (Erdelez 1999). SJC utilize social media as a tool to interact with their congregants and connect with colleagues, not to mention within their personal lives (Oord 2017). Thus, while likely still employing some of the more traditional methods of information seeking, social media can become a place where SJC communities gather and where information can be acquired and shared.

In their article “#Ferguson,” Bonilla and Rosa (2015) approach the idea of utilizing a hashtag as an anthropological “site.” This brings into consideration social media platforms as information grounds, where stumbling upon, or even tracing, specific hashtags can provide information that the SJC had not been seeking out. The Internet has served as an important place for information sharing and coordination in times of war and conflict (Robbins and Buente 2008; Shirky 2010), and this has extended to more lasting work around injustice issues and unrest.

SJC have found social media to provide them a place to encounter voices that they might not otherwise hear. During the rise of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, one SJC realized they didn’t encounter many Black voices on a regular basis, so “immediately went to Facebook and Twitter and searched out voices of color and followed them. I committed to listen only, not to engage. I’ve gained incomparable insight into conversations to which I am a cultural outsider” (Forasteros 2017, 140). When they realized that they needed to learn and gain insight into a situation, they immediately turned to social media, indicating it as a place seen as fertile grounds for information discovery.

Another SJC noted that relationships developed and made possible through social media allowed them to see “more clearly the depth and complexity of the racism endemic to our society . . . from perspectives I never would have found on my own,” calling him to a deeper understanding and “wider awareness of the racist tendencies still at work in my own affections and imagination, as well as my responsibility to my neighbors” (Green 2017, 176). Through the wide reach of the Internet, SJs are able to connect with much more diverse communities, encountering information and perspectives that they might not otherwise be privy to.

Having established that these platforms are useful for connecting and organizing, they become prime locations for SJC to turn to when looking for specific information (Pui-Lan 2017, 263). The phenomenon of

“crowd-sourcing” can be observed across several SJs’ social media platforms, some visible to the greater public (or, engaged with an open system), some only visible to a curated network of friends (a closed system). These requests can vary greatly in content; examples have included seeking resource suggestions for an immigrant family needing legal aid or a trans youth moving to a new town; questions about preferred identification language in neurodivergent communities, or what the current understanding in queer circles was regarding certain terminology; inquiries about BIPOC organizations to make donations to, and how to best engage (or get their congregations to engage) in current justice issues. These are just a handful of the information SJC look to their online communities for.

The ability to turn to a larger network of other SJC is particularly helpful for SJC that may face barriers in their information seeking. A report from the Brookings Institute noted that “[r]eligious progressives are sometimes viewed with mistrust and suspicion by their secular allies” (Dionne et. al. 2014, 9). This sometimes means that SJC are greeted with suspicion when stepping into locations where social justice work is occurring or in groups where information is being shared, such as locations of upcoming actions, strategies for approach, and so forth.

At the same time, there are some who find themselves at odds with their own faith tradition. For instance, for many years the United Methodist Church has been divided around the issues of same-sex marriage and the ordination of “practicing” LGBTQ clergy, both of which are currently not allowed and could result in “disciplinary action” (United Methodist Church n.d.). In recent years, this has become a more prominent issue, and clergy within this faith have spoken out more and made their voices heard, but the official stance of their denomination is at odds with the social justice work that many of them undertake and the beliefs they hold. This means that clergy may not always be able to turn to their own faith community for information and resources regarding the LGBTQ community.

One final obstacle that some SJC face in their information seeking is one that many individuals face, and that is lack of access. While early studies noted that SJC did not tend to utilize public libraries, leaning more heavily on their personal libraries and (more recently) Internet research, the question of how or if they would utilize academic libraries is unclear (Barna 2015; Lambert 2010, 9; Wicks 1999, 207). Some institutions let their alumni use their library materials, which provides an access point for those SJC, but for those without such access rights, the ability to get their hands on more traditional resources, databases, and articles in academic journals can present real challenges.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

### *Serving SJC as Information Professionals*

Updated research is needed to identify if SJC are utilizing their local public libraries or nearby academic libraries (if they have access) for their justice work. If they are not using these resources, why not? Is it a matter of lack of access (real or perceived) to academic libraries? Do public libraries not stock the specific materials they might be looking for? Even if they are not using libraries within their SJC role, that does not mean that they are not using libraries for other purposes. SJC are many things outside of their identity as religious leaders, with a habit of information encountering in unexpected places. This knowledge can be used by libraries and information professionals to provide opportunities for information encountering within provided library services.

Libraries can evaluate what resources they do have available and how they make those resources known to local SJC. If an academic library is able to open their collections to those beyond their immediate academic community, has this been made known? If that isn’t possible, are there certain resources that can be provided?

Creating information grounds where SJC can participate in conversations around relevant justice topics and providing opportunities for networking and education could go a long way in helping to serve the information needs of SJC. This could take the form of speakers, panel discussions, art displays, discussion

groups, or even workshops where SJC can learn alongside the larger community about topics such as basic educational techniques, de-escalation, social navigation, understanding privilege, and understanding protester's rights.

An important part of thinking about what offerings libraries and information professionals can provide to SJC is that they aren't necessarily presenting themselves in the world as clergy members, so the offerings may not be specifically directed at the subset of SJC but rather couched in terms of greater interest. By offering broader programs that encourage cross-cultural dialogue, provide helpful information, training, and opportunities to practice skills, libraries can serve a large swath of the community while also meeting the needs of a smaller segment. Careful marketing could help to get information about such events to SJC, such as making sure information about upcoming programs is sent to local faith communities.

### *The Need for More Research*

As has been noted many times, further study is needed to gain a deeper understanding of SJC's information-seeking behaviors. McKenzie's ELIS model, combined with a reconsidered version of Wicks's work worlds and work roles, could provide a guide for the study. It would be important to look at how SJC seek different types of information and what factors influence where and how they look.

To fight the obstacle that many earlier studies encountered, where the actions of sometimes as few as one individual are used to assume behaviors of an entire community, a more extensive pool of participants would be needed to provide a picture of the actual information needs of SJC. A larger base of participants could also provide insight into how variables such as religion, race, gender, and geographical location may influence SJC information needs and behaviors. I would suggest utilizing a combined approach of an online survey sent directly to identified SJC as well as shared through social networks to reach a wider audience. A randomly selected proportionate stratification, reflecting the religions represented by the survey respondents, with attention paid to racial, gender, and age divides, if possible, could then be interviewed for deeper understanding of their information behaviors.

In many ways, the information-seeking behaviors of SJC are heavily in flux right now. Information is available at a fast pace, and it is up to the individual to identify the relevance of what they find, digging out what will be useful and constantly reevaluating sources for understating of their authority and trustworthiness. Methods of information seeking that were useful even in the early 2000s have had to shift and change with the times. While a clergy member in a more traditional pastoral role may still utilize more conventional methods of information seeking, the necessity of being "up to the minute" for SJC likely has a strong influence on their information habits. Further research is necessary to determine how information professionals can provide quality access and information to SJC, but, in the meantime, libraries can begin to reach SJC with programming and additional opportunities for expanding their network of connections.

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