

ORGANIZING

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FAITH INTO ACTION—COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN ORANGE COUNTY, CALIFORNIA*

by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

These notes reflect my perspective as a professional community organizer with more than 20 years of experience—learning, teaching, and doing organizing. I was ordained a rabbi only six years ago, with no thought of assuming congregational responsibilities, but to deepen my work as an organizer.

My work for the past two and a half years has been with Organize Training Center (OTC) in San Francisco, where I am the assistant director. OTC provides training and consultation, publications, workshops, internships, and start-up assistance for new projects. We are one of several centers and networks of grassroots community organizing in the United States.

“Community organizing,” as commonly understood, is characterized as bringing together comparatively large numbers of citizens to define for themselves and confront the forces that are undermining their individual lives, families, and communities. Their goal is to reduce and resolve their problems by taking common action that holds accountable and transforms social, political, and economic institutions.

The best contemporary examples of community organizing, however, have gone beyond that common understanding. Current practice is more consciously value-based and vision-inspired, and it is marked by growing professional competence and commitment.

The Orange County Congregation Community Organizations (OCCCO) is part of the PICO national network of organizing projects. It is typical of parish and congregational community organiz-

ing in the U.S., although it also is idiosyncratic in many ways because of its Orange county location.

The common assumption of organizers working in this tradition is that many approaches are necessary to deal with the myriad human problems encountered in our cities and neighborhoods. These approaches include service, advocacy, public education, and others. Nonetheless, it is also recognized that community organizing is essential as a means to change relations of power that feed the continuation of so many problems.

Orange County, California

Orange County, California has had a fairly well-deserved reputation as a politically and religiously conservative stronghold, with a history of prejudice and discrimination toward Latinos and Jews particularly but all minorities generally.

When my father first opened a nightclub and restaurant in the resort town of Balboa in the 1940s, there was a sign posted on the bridge approach to Balboa Island that read, “No Dogs, No Niggers, No Jews Allowed.” A similar sign was posted at the gate of an Orange county golf course as late as 1962.

Although the public image of the county is “white and wealthy,” more than a third of the population is Latino and Asian—most in the low-to moderate-income brackets, many immigrants—who are in deep trouble. Their problems not surprisingly include lack of access to affordable housing, unemployment and underemployment, involvement of their children and youth in drugs and crime, inadequate health care, and large-scale educational failures. Their most fundamental problem,

however, is their powerlessness in the political-economy of the area. Ironically, many of these people are the unseen service workers at the county's famous tourist attractions, Disneyland and Knott's Berry Farm.

Conservative and reactionary whites dominate the County government and the councils of the major cities. Minority representatives are scarce in most of the municipal governments.

Bringing Faith to Life in Action

On a summer evening in 1989, 1200 people from more than a dozen religious congregations came together and filled the auditorium of Servite High School. They represented Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish faith communities. They were racially and ethnically diverse, and they reflected a broad socio-economic spectrum.

The members of these dissimilar faith communities were brought together by a common concern about drugs.

On the stage were the mayors of the county's two largest cities, Anaheim and Santa Ana, plus a half-dozen leaders representing the federation of congregations.

The federation leadership on the stage that night was racially and ethnically diverse and included men and women. If you had asked them 18 months earlier, "Do you imagine that you will ever come face to face with the elected leaders of your city, making demands for more than a thousand people?" every one of the federation leaders would have been incredulous at the suggestion. It was a totally new experience for them, yet they knew what they were doing; they weren't being led; they were leading.

Scores of members and leaders of the federation, working in teams of six to 60, had earlier completed more than three dozen "research actions" over several months. They had conducted in-depth interviews with public and private officials to make themselves knowledgeable about the "drug problem" and potential solutions.

Although within OCCCO the common perception at the outset of the research was that more police were needed to arrest drug dealers, at the conclusion of their research actions a consensus emerged on the necessity to attack "the problem" on several fronts. They identified issues related to criminal justice, prevention, and treatment.

The meeting of 1200 ran on time and according to a printed agenda:

- Opening Reflection (led by a local pastor)
- Reports on Findings of Research Actions
- Testimony Regarding Drug Problems
- Brief Responsive Statements from Mayors
- Questions to Mayors from Leadership Panel
- Requests for Commitments from Mayors

The immediate outcome of this meeting was a commitment by the two mayors to implement the State drug abatement law, which allows local city attorneys to bring civil actions against owners and landlords of rental properties who notoriously rent to drug dealers.

Faith-Based Relationships of Mutual Respect

The more important outcome was the beginning of a relationship of mutual respect between the leadership of the OCCCO federation and the top officials of the county's principal local governments.

What was it that the OCCCO people wanted? Of course they wanted to get specific commitments on drug-related issues. But maybe more important, they wanted to develop a particular kind of relationship with the public decision-makers. They wanted relationships of mutual respect that would enable them to deal effectively on many problems. For them, being respected requires that when they tell an official they have a problem, the official is listening in earnest; when they ask the official what's going to be done about the problem, a substantive solution is proposed to them; when they have a proposal to make to an official, it's taken seriously and becomes the basis for good-faith negotiations. That's their idea of respect—reflecting the values and visions of their faith communities

Our understanding about how to get that respect is simple, although not always quick or easy. It's based on three things. First, people in power respect power. We don't have much money; our power is based on numbers. When we want to influence a public official, we turn out with large numbers of people—for a neighborhood action, at least 150, although 200 or 300 is much better; for a citywide action, at least 1000—but not yelling and screaming, not disrespectful or rude.

The second thing is that we're respected if we're disciplined. That doesn't mean we behave ourselves; we do that as a matter of maturity and common courtesy. By discipline we mean doing our homework, careful research and reflection, holding ourselves accountable for thorough planning and preparation. When we talk with a decision-maker we make it our business to know more than the official does about the problem at hand. Sometimes we catch them short and they're embarrassed, but they respect us for our knowledge. When we say a public meeting will start and end at certain times and that there's a set agenda, that's what happens—and we're respected for it. A week before the meeting, two or three leaders deliver the agenda and any questions the decision-maker may be asked. We don't blind-side people. They respect that discipline; they respond to it.

The third thing that earns the respect of decision-makers is that we compel them to listen to the pain of the problem. We understand that they have

decisions to make about priorities, how money is to be spent to resolve problems for people. We don't think such decisions can make any sense unless they're based on real understanding of the human pain of these problems. If the decision-maker knows the problem only from reading reports or listening to bureaucrats, there's no real understanding. In public meetings with decision-makers, members of the organization are prepared to go to the microphone and give testimony. They are people who have first-hand experience with the problem. They're given very simple directions: talk for no more than three minutes, relate the facts as you personally know them, reveal any emotion that you feel genuinely—grief, anger, frustration, whatever, and do not attack the official personally. We compel officials to listen to the real pain of these problems. When one member gave testimony in the meeting with the mayors of Anaheim and Santa Ana, she talked about her brother who died a drug addict in the county jail. Probably more than half the people in that auditorium had tears in their eyes—and the two mayors obviously were moved. We have learned that the most cynical, indifferent, hard-bitten officials respond to human pain when it's communicated without subjecting them to personal attack.

Those three things—turning out large numbers of people, discipline in research and planning, and constructively sharing the pain of the problem—earn the respect and response of decision-makers.

Several months after the action at Servite, this interfaith federation turned out 2500 members for a meeting with the head of the county government.

Most exciting and, in some ways, most difficult to describe about these actions and the planning meetings that preceded them, is the palpable sense of wonder so widely felt and shared by most of those who were involved. Beginning with the three or four planning meetings that drew an average of 125 participants, repeatedly one heard expressions of excitement and enthusiasm that so many diverse people of God, from very different faith traditions, were acting together on their common concerns.

The OCCCO experience involved elected city and county officials, but the same general principles and practices apply to public bureaucrats, corporate executives, and administrators of nonprofit organizations.

Sponsor Committee & Project Formation

What were the sources of the commitment and competence of the 1200 who brought their faith to life in action that evening at Servite High School?

It began four years earlier with the formation of a "sponsor committee," comprised of clergy, denominational officials, and other community leaders.

They could see forces in the larger urban area (in the major cities of the county) that were des-

trouging the lives of individuals, families, and whole neighborhoods. They accepted that the only authentic hope of dealing with these forces was the combined actions of many people of faith, acting together in an interfaith effort based on their common values and interests.

They recognized their need for outside consultation and training if they were to succeed in such an effort. They approached PICO which, among its other services, furnishes skilled organizers for such federations.

The sponsor committee's vision for the project had three critical components:

- The internal dimensions of the faith community and the external world of congregants and parishioners' daily lives had to become linked in an active reciprocity: the internal dimensions—worship, liturgy, ritual, theology, fellowship, etc.—had to become the guiding forces for action in the external world; and a significant portion of time and energy invested by individuals in the external world had to be redirected to vitalize the internal life of the faith community.
- The integration of internal and external worlds would be founded on initiating new and deepening old relationships among members of the faith communities.
- The central purpose of relationship-building was to surface deepest values and self-interests (i.e., concerns that begin with the self but are related to the concerns of others) and to build a community that could effectively promote those values and self-interests in the larger world in a way that would change practically the destructive conditions and forces.

The process begins with relationship-building, seeks to surface values, and leads to authentic community, that is, the ability to survive and thrive in the world by promoting effectively the shared values and interests of the group. In short, community only exists where and when it survives and succeeds. If a congregation's members aren't engaged in mutual support to address the destructive forces in the larger urban area, that congregation hardly deserves to be called a "community"; the congregation, corporately, and its members, individually, aren't likely to thrive. If surviving and succeeding are the tests, individual redemption isn't sufficient, although it's certainly necessary. We also need faith-driven, organized power.

The sponsor committee's analysis had several basic building blocks. They recognized that unmet challenges in urban life generally and the congregation in particular reflect a failure on the part of congregants to develop relationships that encourage sharing of deeply-felt concerns and hopes, and a parallel failure by people of faith to be respon-

sible for their calling as children of God—to act on their visions. In effect, large numbers have learned to no longer think about, talk about, or act on their deepest concerns and hopes, which are the underpinnings of vision. Conversations about deepest concerns and hopes are no longer typical in relationships among the overwhelming majority of parishioners and congregants, whether Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish.

Within faith communities, the typical experience is that large numbers are not meeting regularly to talk about the forces that are destroying their families, and how they can act effectively in the larger world to promote their values and self-interests in a way that counters those forces. Most parishes and congregations are not clearly and consistently communicating their deepest values and visions for bringing faith to life in action, to uplift people in practical ways.

Given these circumstances, the sponsor committee analysis was that it's not reasonable to expect growth in faith communities and strengthening of their capacity to deal with crises of social life. The predictable result is decline and deterioration in both institutions of faith and secular society.

Methodology & Clergy Participation

The sponsor committee's vision and analysis work well with a methodology that is *not* issue-driven. Instead, the organizing method is driven by relationship-building, surfacing deepest values and common interests, and creating authentic community—again, the capacity to promote effectively those values and interests in the larger world.

But why initially do individual clergy lead their congregations and parishes into such community organizing projects? It's clear that rarely do they invest their valuable personal and institutional resources or take the associated risks because of a concern about or commitment to the “big issues,” those we normally associate with prophetic values of peace and justice.

The motives of clergy to participate are much closer to home. The majority of them are facing extraordinary workload and an endless variety of seemingly intractable problems. These demands are often coupled with deep disappointments in their hopes and plans for building community that will powerfully bring the faith into the world, and a professional isolation that leaves them alone and unsupported in the burdens they carry.

In my visits with clergy their main problems are often revealed in their list of reasons why they and their members can't get involved in community organizing. These objections encompass a remarkable range—including: “it won't work here because of our internal divisions,” whether here is a rural area, suburbia, or particular religious denomination; we're broke and can't pay for your services; our congregation is split on social issues and

would never agree to this type of activity; we only have a half-dozen real leaders now and this would divert them from critical responsibilities to the congregation; and so on.

As we explore their concerns it becomes clear that these problems are real. There are deep divisions within the faith communities—in one case it was an historic antagonism between Anglos and Latinos; there are devastating financial problems—a 5,000-member church forced to operate with a half-time secretary; there are liberal and conservative divisions on so-called big issues, sometimes completely undermining unified action on problems closer to home—a 4,000-member parish unable to convince the city to install a traffic signal, notwithstanding two deaths and innumerable injuries of parish school students; and most important of all, everywhere there is a dearth of leaders—clergy are commonly attending if not running scores of lay organizational meetings, sometimes more than 20 a week; they are frequently relying almost entirely on their own energy, whether in the pulpit or elsewhere, to raise the budget; and they often become the isolated and exhausted prophetic voice in local political arenas.

Clergy come to see that this brand of community organizing is primarily a process of congregational development. This happens through my conversations with them and their associates, their participation in workshops, and their talk with colleagues elsewhere who are already participating in such projects. It becomes apparent to them that their own self-interests, both institutional and personal, can be addressed effectively by the process.

The process begins, then, when an organizer develops a collegial relationship with a pastor, priest, or rabbi, and comes to understand that person's biography, ministry or rabbinate, personal and institutional self-interests, and leadership style. From there the organizer meets with the other staff and leaders of the parish or congregation, and then visits between 25 to 100 members, typically for 45 minutes each. In these visits the organizer asks about deepest concerns, listens carefully, and relates stories of other faith communities that have effectively brought their faith to life in action.

These meetings have three critical outcomes: The organizer learns about the individual member's concerns and hopes. A relationship of trust begins to develop. And, most importantly, the member who is visited becomes much more conscious of his or her deepest values. The organizer typically concludes the visit by extending an invitation for a first workshop in what will be a series of two or three.

Workshops

In a first workshop, a variety of people in the congregation, fully representing its diversity, discovers that they share the same concerns and hopes for

community life, such as safe and secure neighborhoods, decent schools, affordable housing, a healthy environment, opportunities for all people, jobs with decent income, etc. They come to see that they have similar beliefs about the characteristics of healthy relationships, specifically that they involve honesty, mutual respect, caring, sharing, challenging, and the like.

They become aware of the character of relationships within their congregation, discovering that many lack essential qualities. They learn that there is a critical link between the presence or absence of healthy relationships and the quality of family and community life. Since concerns and hopes for family and community life typically are not shared, the congregation fails to challenge and support faith-based action that addresses the concerns and hopes.

They come to see that the bridge connecting the real and ideal worlds is a faith community that nurtures healthy relationships and that acts on the deepest concerns and hopes of its members and their neighbors. The organization of the faith community, in turn, joins with others to develop a federation that can effectively promote their shared values and interests in the larger urban area. The bridge linking the real and ideal worlds is anchored by an organizing committee within the faith community. It allows them to struggle together from where they are to where they want to be. It's both the struggle and the results that are important. The parish or congregation, then, is the action vehicle for the expression and resolution of the concerns and hopes that are shared in relationships.

The linchpin of a second workshop is a series of three analytic questions, by which every individual can show through his or her experience the connection between so-called community concerns, which are "out there," and family troubles, which are "in here." Here are the questions and some typical answers:

- How is your concern (traffic, drug-dealing, poor schools, etc.), which is manifested as a particular problem, accommodated as a practical matter by you?

"I don't allow the children to play in the park anymore because of the drug dealers."

- What pressure(s) does the practical accommodation create in the life of your family?

"The children—all five of them—now have to play in our small apartment after school, and they're always yelling and screaming and breaking things."

- What "sickness" is emerging in your family in response to the pressure(s)?

"I can't stand the children's noise, so lately I've been yelling at them and hitting them when I lose my temper."

Through their own analyses they discover links between their practical means of accommodating larger "community" problems, the pressures created within their families as a consequence of those means, and the destructive results of those pressures for individual family members and relationships between them.

It becomes apparent in the course of the workshop that the congregation (actually the staff), as one of the principal institutions to which the families turn for assistance, is overwhelmed. The staff typically is overloaded by day-to-day responsibilities and almost entirely unable to resolve these family and community concerns.

Through their sharing and analysis, workshop participants conclude that "the congregation" must not be thought of as the staff but the whole faith community—and that hasn't happened largely because of a failure of relationships within the parish or congregation.

Most workshop participants come to see that to change the quality of relationships within the congregation and to lay the foundation for bringing faith into action in the world, it's necessary for many congregants to talk one-to-one about their deepest concerns and hopes. This is the route to begin resolving community problems that undermine families. To make that happen effectively, an organizing committee must be formed within the parish or congregation.

In a third workshop, role-play demonstrations are used to establish the basics of a successful one-to-one visit:

- An effective "credential," both in the initial phone contact and at the outset of the one-to-one visit;
- Not thinking of the visit as an information-gathering mission but initiating a relationship, which typically begins by making personal contact;
- Asking one or two questions about concerns and hopes, and then listening carefully—not interrupting, giving advice, arguing, or making judgments, talking only when necessary to get the conversation focused on specifics or to follow-up on important points; and
- Based on careful evaluation of the person being visited, extending an invitation, if appropriate, for that person to participate in some aspect of the congregational community organization's life, whether the planning committee, the organizing committee, an upcoming research activity, or an action.

The idea is raised and accepted that, to ensure sufficient one-to-one visits are done, leading to action that changes conditions in the community, it's essential that workshop participants vote to form an organizing committee and that each person make an explicit voluntary commitment to do a specific number of one-to-ones in a set period of time.

By the end of the workshop it's understood that everyone will be held accountable for their commitments, beginning at the first regular meeting of the organizing committee, which should take place in about three weeks.

While there are always variations in the approach according to the culture and structure of the congregation, the basic methodology remains constant.

Congregational & Parish Community Organizations

The new organization operates on three levels: eight to 12 main leaders, who are part of a planning committee; 20 to 40 members who usually meet once a month for accountability and decision-making; and 150 to 750 parishioners or congregants—depending on the size of the parish or congregation—in action on specific issues.

In the formation stage of the parish or congregational organizing committee, individuals in the decision-making group visit 100 to 400 members of the faith community. When a consensus begins to emerge on a broad concern, say "youth," more specific problems are identified for research and, in time, research actions are undertaken to define issues.

In Orange County, for example, research revealed that there was not one publicly funded bed for adolescent drug detoxification in the entire county. The research actions uncovered that most of the preventive education in the public schools was at the fifth-grade level, focused on drug use, and administered by police agencies. All education experts, however, recommended that it begin in kindergarten and not focus on drugs but self-destructive behavior and attitudes. It was also learned through research that the County government had not designated a court to deal exclusively with drug cases, as other counties had done, so that judges were ignorant of significant issues and their sentencing policies were inconsistent.

When a specific issue is identified, the parish or congregation community organization begins its action life by identifying the officials responsible for resolving the problem(s). Their goal is to hold the public or private institutional decision-maker accountable. This comes more easily and naturally when the organization's members have learned to hold themselves accountable. Although other approaches to the problem, such as service, self-help, and mutual aid may be useful, at the outset the pre-

ferred approach is to focus on strategies that hold larger institutions accountable. This is essential because such strategies are most neglected, least understood, and most feared; and because refining power is the key to making changes in public or corporate policies and practices that affect long-term problems.

Strengths & Weaknesses

This type of organization incorporates a new vision of leadership in faith communities. It's not leadership that focuses mainly on running the institution and its programs, although it achieves that end as a byproduct. Instead, it treats leadership as transformative relationship-building, with leaders modeling how the internal dimensions of the faith community can be brought to life in the world of urban crises. It leads to a broad corps of leaders with a breadth of skill and knowledge that allows them to develop and direct a complex and powerful organization through which they can effectively promote the values and self-interests of their community.

This is implicitly a view of "preaching" that runs counter to common conventions. It makes no attempt to overtly "sell" those parts of the faith community that are most highly valued. Instead, it begins by seeking to develop and deepen relationships, initially by asking about deepest concerns and hopes, and then listening without judgments, arguments, or advice. It doesn't respond to concerns and hopes by trying to satisfy them through offers of service, advocacy, education, therapy, or personal redemption. Instead, it challenges and supports a process in which the members of the faith community, often those who have been disaffected or alienated, and others in the surrounding neighborhood, from whom the faith community may be isolated, begin to act together as a new, broad-based leadership that vitalizes the parish or congregation—again, bringing the faith to life in effective action in the world.

What are the weaknesses of this process? It relies on mature, educated, sophisticated, and highly-skilled organizers, who are in critically short supply. The process has had only fair success in eliciting the participation of evangelical churches (except those in the African-American community) and upper-middle-income congregations. In few places has the experience of putting faith into action been adequately reflected upon and fed back to influence fundamentally the internal life of the faith community (beyond the experience of the actual participants)—for example, leading to a substantive change in the religious education curriculum or regular worship service.

The process works best when it recognizes and responds to the heavy workload of congregational staff and leaders, when it thoughtfully links the faith life and day-to-day self-interests of the congregation, and when the congregation's long-range

leadership development vision anticipates moving with and beyond current leaders to a new generation that's invested in relationship-building.

Why are we so intensely committed to this methodology? It end-runs “stagnant leadership conspiracies”—those small groups of often-well-intentioned, hard-working officers who keep leadership within their own relatively narrow circle—by creating new, deeper leadership. It gives that expanded leadership, both clergy and laity, a means for renewal and growth not limited to quasi-therapeutic methods of healing or to individual redemption that leave conditions unchanged. It relies instead on building empowered community, guided by clear purpose—committed to translating deeply-held values and visions into effective action—that can reach underlying causes.

It teaches how, creatively and constructively, to manage conflict and tension within the faith community and beyond. It expands and deepens relationships and, again, through them, stimulates action on values, which are keys to organized, faith-driven power.

It builds a “living covenant community,” not a fellowship of individuals who have loose rhetorical understandings but a working commitment and

accountability around faith-based values and visions. Members make commitments, meet them, and challenge and support others who don't.

The ultimate strength of this process, however, is its purpose. Although the methodology is not unlike many parish and congregational “renewal” and “revitalization” processes, the results are dramatically different. Around the country, working with various networks and training centers, federations of parish and congregational community organizations have achieved a string of significant accomplishments. They have produced affordable housing, accessible health care, new initiatives against drug dealing, improvements in public education, expansion of recreation facilities and programs for youth, increases in minimum wages, more employment opportunities, and a host of other reforms and innovations.

More significantly, they have everywhere built the kind of community that can begin to resist and challenge effectively the dominant culture and its perversion of our religious and democratic traditions. They have thus materially changed not only the quality of life for thousands of families, but the prospects for their future generations.

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