

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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## COMMUNITY ORGANIZER ONE-TO-ONE VISITS IN FAITH-BASED, CONGREGATIONAL ORGANIZING

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These notes describe the full range of material covered in my one-to-one visits (circa 1990) when clergy referred me to a parishioner or member of their congregation.\* Not surprisingly, no two of those one-to-ones were alike. They varied remarkably, reflecting the interests, capacities, intellect, education, culture, and many other unique characteristics of the person being visited, and of course they varied according to my own skill, knowledge, and emotional resources at any particular moment in time. Withal, there was virtually no instance in which all or even most of the material presented here would actually be used in any given one-to-one visit.

Although I didn't carry a list of questions or statements that I repeated by rote in each one-to-one visit, there was nonetheless in my mind an infrastructure of basic points that I wanted to cover. And, given my experience in faith-based, congregational organizing, there are a number of ways in which I came to think and talk about such organizing in one-to-one visits.

One may react to these notes with the thought that, "It's not do-able!" That is, it's not do-able if one is to stay within a maximum hour-long one-to-one. Whether this variety of one-to-one is *desirable* is certainly open to question, but it is *do-able*. To do such visits successfully, however, requires a good deal of discipline by the organizer.

Lay members and leaders may use a simplified one-to-one, which incorporates the essentials described here: credentialing, personal sharing, digging concerns and problems, communicating enthusiasm about what's happening in the organization, and selectively extending an invitation to participate.

### *Credentialing*

The starting place of my one-to-one visits is a re-statement of the credential that I gave over the

phone when I called to arrange the visit. The key elements of the credential sound like this:

"As I mentioned on the phone, I'm working with the Orange County Congregation Community Organizations, O-C-C-C-O, which is a federation of Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish congregations, representing 25,000 families, that are working together to deal with problems in their communities, particularly problems that are seriously affecting family life.

"The Rabbi is exploring whether Temple Beth Emeth should be a part of the project and asked me to visit with you. I hope to learn more about your concerns about the community and to tell you about what we're doing."

### *Vision, Values & Religious Legitimization*

I may expand that initial credential with an explanation that is aimed to clarify the conceptual and value base of the organizing:

"Let me try to give you a bit of an idea of what this project is about. A dozen leaders of major religious denominations, and other civic leaders in the community, founded the project five years ago. These included the district superintendent of the Methodists, the Presbyter of the Presbyterian Church, the Catholic Bishop's official representative, an official representative from the Board of Rabbis, and others such as Executive Director of the County Human Relations Commission, and a minority business executive. You get the idea.

"The sponsor committee has a point of view that provides the foundation for the project. They see a number of forces in the city that, at best, are heavily pressuring families and, at worst, are destroying them. You can make your own list, maybe you already have, of things you see happening in the city that deeply concern you.

"The sponsors' conviction is that there's no group of experts, no matter how well-intentioned or well-endowed—not police, not priests, not politicians, not teachers or social workers—who can fix these problems, alone or all together. That, in

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\* The term "congregation" is used here in its generic sense, to also include parishes.

fact, to deal with these problems effectively, many people like us have to be involved.

“Their conviction is that the only hope we have for that to happen is that people of faith begin working together in large numbers, people of all faiths, on an interfaith basis.

“Does that make sense to you from the point of view of your own congregation? In other words, does it make sense to you that many people in your congregation should get together, that they should begin to talk together about their deepest concerns about the life of the city and their own day-to-day pressures, that they should begin to work out a vision—if this isn’t how we want to live, what do we want?—and that they should begin to find practical ways to change things? Does that make sense to you as at least part of what congregations should be doing?”

Now if I get anything other than a clear affirmative answer to that question, I’m going to dig into it. I’m going to explore it and ask questions. If I get a firm “no,” that’s not the role they see for their church or synagogue, I’m going to move toward closing questions fairly quickly, probably ending the visit within 10 to 20 minutes.

It’s very rare, however, that I get a firm “no” answer. By and large, even people who aren’t sure will give affirmative answers to the question of their congregation’s role in the world. Occasionally someone will say, “I’m not sure what you mean when you talk about ‘practical ways to change things.’” I reply, “I understand and that’s what we’re going to be talking about in a few moments—but in general does it make sense that people in the congregation should be talking about forces in the city that are destroying families and that they’re beginning to work out ways to do something about those forces?”

In effect, I begin by establishing a conceptual framework for organizing, one that’s legitimized by religious leaders, that says this is the way that we’re looking at the world, that people of faith have to act together to do something about what’s wrong.

I don’t ask people what they think should be done; I don’t assume that they have worked out a strategic organizing vision—which is what I propose to them. In fact, my experience has been that such open-ended questions typically elicit and reinforce nonsensical responses, leaving me one-down and taking up a good deal of valuable time trying to displace.

This process falls under the general framework of options I have in all situations of leadership development. That is, whenever I’m working to develop someone’s capacities, I have three choices: asking a question, proposing alternatives, or making a statement. My decision about which is the most useful is based on an assessment of the re-

sources of the individual—his or her experience, intellect, maturity, emotional stability, etc.—given the particular subject under discussion. If they bring substantial resources, I ask a question; if their resources are moderate, I propose alternatives for them to consider—and give them time to do that, sometimes days or weeks; and if their resources are very modest to nonexistent, I make statements followed by questions that check their understanding and agreement.

Thus my initial rap is a statement of values and vision, because in virtually all initial one-to-ones it’s been my experience that it would be unrealistic and unproductive to raise this topic in the form of a question.

I don’t want to steam-roll people into accepting things that don’t make sense to them. I do, however, want to offer an engaging strategic vision, which, once they hear it, motivates them to say, “Yes, I like that, it makes sense—I’m willing to try it.” When someone says, “No, I’m not sure about this—I want to think about it,” I don’t push or get into an argument. I test to make sure that I’ve clearly communicated and that they understand and, if confirmed, I let go, hopefully with grace and the private thought that most things change in time, and this person may come along at some future date, say after we’ve had a first successful action. We want to give people an opportunity to agree with something they can believe in and to which they can commit themselves—something they’re unlikely to think of on their own.

### *Personal Biography & Surfacing Pressures*

The transition question, going back to the one-to-one, was whether the strategic vision of the religious leaders made sense for this individual in their own congregation.

I listen carefully to the answer to that question. If I have any doubts about that answer, I test it. If the person looks doubtful or confused, I ask what their experience has been or what they know about the history of their congregation in this regard. I don’t want to proceed too quickly to assume that they’re not interested or that they are if I’m getting mixed messages about their view of the congregation’s role in the world.

If the person says “yes”—in effect, that the congregation should be active in the world—I’m going to shift gears and move into personal biography: “Tell me about yourself. When did your family move here?”—or some variation that gets us into personal sharing. We’re going to spend 15 or 20 minutes talking about their life, and I’m going to share a *bit* of my own personal history. This is not a game; this is not manipulation. We’re really going to become acquainted and begin building a relationship.

As we move through this conversation, I'm sensitive to learning certain things about the person, but I don't direct the talk with a heavy hand to discover those things. I'm looking for personal experience that gives the individual an emotional and intellectual stake in taking action, and indicators of potential leadership capacity.

Typically such conversation tends to move chronologically. As we get up to date, I begin transitioning talk toward deeper pressures, if we haven't already reached them. For instance, as someone talks about their children, I'll ask, "Are there things that you see happening right now in the city that deeply concern you for the welfare of your children?" The operative words in this question are "in the city" and the "welfare of your children." I'm interested in two things here: If I ask what are your concerns in the "community," that term is so vague and means so many things to different people, it's easy for people to say "everything's fine," because they think of the community as their immediate neighborhood or block, or their congregation—in which case they often have no deep concerns, especially if they're moderate- to middle-income people. I want to make sure that they're thinking about the whole city, so I frame the question in that specific way. The second part of the question that gets underscored is designed to encourage people to tell me things they don't normally talk about, things that deeply trouble them, so the question focuses on their children and gets framed with explicit language and by my tone of voice, which is serious, attentive, and sympathetic. I want to dig below the surface here.

Ordinarily this will lead into 10 to 20 minutes of personal sharing. The basic goals I have in this conversation are: (1) to put my nose to the ground, to ask a lot of questions and learn specifics about their pressures, preferably through first-person stories and anecdotes that remind them of their own injuries and pains, increasing their motivation to act and teaching me important things that will be helpful in organizing; and (2) I am not interested and will actively discourage, in a nice way, analyzing or strategizing on their part. If someone says to me, "I think the thing we need to do is . . ." I'll say something like, "Well hold off on that for the moment—just tell me the story about what actually happened—let's not get into that right now." In a nice way I say, let's leave that alone for now.

Sometimes it's impossible to control the situation, but my goal is to keep away from analyses and strategies at this early stage. My favorite story in this vein is about the middle-aged father with two teenagers in Santa Ana who said to me, "I think we ought to shoot every son-of-a-bitchin' drug dealer we catch!" He's serious, looks me in the eye, and waits expectantly for my response, and finally says, "Don't you think so, Moshe?" So I

say, "I'll tell you what I think. I think I'm an ignoramus about what the solution is to this problem. I think that I'll have an idea of what we should do when the people in the organization get together and we do some research, talking to a lot of the people who are responsible for making decisions about dealing with this problem. And then, after we've talked to them and asked them a lot of tough questions, and after we sit down and talk among ourselves about their answers, then you and all the rest of the members of the organization will tell me what you think should be done about the drug problem."

I like to deal with the inclination some people have toward premature analyzing and strategizing by setting expectations that create culture within the organization about how we come to conclusions regarding action, and I do that by defining myself as an ignoramus and talking about the necessity for organizational research.

We talk for 10 to 20 minutes about this person's pressures—occasionally I'll raise questions about hopes and dreams—and when we've played out most of the energy, if I think it's necessary or useful I'll say something like, "Let me tell you what we're doing, why, how we do it, and where we think it's going." At this point I've listened for maybe a half-hour; now I may do most of the talking for a roughly equal amount of time.

### *Strategic Organizing Vision*

Typically I move into this explanation by going back and picking up the piece about the sponsor committee that I dropped at the beginning of the one-to-one:

"As I was saying when we began talking, the project sponsor committee—the religious leaders who sponsored the formation of this project—believe that large numbers of people like us, people of faith, have to be working together if we're going to do something about the kinds of problems we've been talking about. You've raised concerns about the schools, the drug activity, and high rents. The sponsor committee point of view is that experts and professionals alone can't fix these problems.

"The difficulty with this idea is that when we look at the life of our religious congregations, mostly we don't see people doing anything about these problems. Occasionally we see religious people organized to provide immediate help to the needy, but rarely are they organized to get at the root causes, to change public policies and laws. A lot of us are saying that some of our problems have reached epidemic proportions; most of us in Santa Ana agree that drug and gang problems are at the epidemic stage. Yet large numbers of people in religious congregations aren't doing anything to turn this situation around.

“We see there’s a lack of leadership—not by the pastor or the bishop or the corporation executive, but by people like you and me. We don’t expect great speech-making or that kind of thing, but much more talk about what’s happening, like, ‘We’ve been getting more and more graffiti in the neighborhood, we’re seeing more and more kids in gangs. We need to get some people together to see what we can do about it.’ So we mean leadership where many people begin to take responsibility for what’s going on in their own community. And we see very little of that.”

If I see any doubt in the person’s response, I’ll ask, “What do you think? Does that fit your experience?” Most will answer “yes” and talk about the immobilization of their congregation if I ask directly about it.

“The question we ask ourselves is this: If the problems are epidemic, why aren’t people doing something? We believe that relationships in congregational life, in one respect, aren’t working nearly as well as they might. That’s not to say that if you’ve been a member of a congregation for a number of years that you don’t have some wonderful friendships. Of course you do.

“If I ask people, as I do over and over again, ‘How do you feel about folks in your congregation?’ typically the answer I get sounds like this: ‘Oh, wonderful. I’ve been a member for years and I’m on the festival committee, and I just love it. Some of my best friends are members of the congregation.’

“Then I say, ‘That’s great. Let me ask you another question. In the last year, how many times have you sat down with another member of the congregation, not your best friend, for a half-hour or 45 minutes, while that person shared with you their deepest concerns—whether about the community, or their own health, or their children’s welfare, whatever—and you just listened, without interrupting or correcting or giving advice? Or where you shared those things with someone else? Or where one of you shared your hopes and dreams with the other? How many times have you done that in the last year?’ If I ask that question of 50 people, not more than one or two say that they do that. All the rest will tell me, ‘Oh, I don’t talk to people in the congregation about those things.’

“What’s your experience of that?” I then ask. And most will promptly acknowledge that they too rarely if ever have such one-to-one conversations with other members of their congregation. Occasionally someone will respond that they do have such contacts. So I ask, “What are the circumstances?” And they answer that they’re involved in the congregation’s program to feed the homeless or some other structured program sponsored by the congregation. Usually they will acknowledge that, although they personally are doing it, it isn’t hap-

pening generally within the life of the congregation.

I continue: “We have some simple conclusions about all of this. People have learned not to think about the things that most deeply concern them, the things they yearn for most in life. Why? Maybe because of fear or powerlessness or early upbringing. What kind of fear? If you live on a street where there’s a drug house, it’s frightening to think about calling the police. What if the police come to your house first and then go to the drug house, and what if you’re identified by the drug dealers? That can be scary when you see the drug dealers. Or maybe it’s powerlessness. You spend two hours a day in traffic, but there’s nothing you can do about it—so why think about it. There’s no point in thinking about things we have no power to change. Or maybe you were raised with the idea that public problems should be left to public officials.

“Whatever the specific reason, many people have learned not to think about the things that most deeply concern them and not to think about their most cherished hopes and dreams. If they don’t think about them, they don’t talk about them; if they don’t talk about them, they don’t act on them. That’s what we’re seeing.

“Our conclusion, then, is that there’s something missing in the relationships between people in congregational life—which, again, is not to say that you don’t have wonderful friendships with people in your congregation. It is to say, however, that we believe relationships in congregational life should include the things that most deeply concern us, and our deepest hopes for our families—which should be shared throughout the congregation. That sharing is like a conversation that percolates through the life of the congregation, in the form of many one-to-one contacts. The context, of course, is the vision and the values of the congregation, to bring the kingdom of God on earth. That’s what our religion should be about—to enhance, to uplift human life. But we can’t uplift it with only the vision and values if we’re not talking with each other and then acting on that talk.

“We have an approach that directly tackles this shortcoming in relationships. It began when I met your rabbi. I knew the day we met that, no matter what I proposed, I must build a relationship with him. He must be able to look at me and positively answer the questions: ‘Is he honest—does he have integrity? Is he competent—can he do what he says he wants to do? Is he committed—will he stick? Do I like him—do I want him to be around me and my congregants?’ If he can’t affirmatively answer these questions in his own mind, if I can’t build a relationship with him, then whatever I have to propose will go nowhere.

“If I do build a relationship with him and he considers the possibility of the congregation being

a part of this project, then he suggests that I talk with the congregational staff and some key leaders. Then finally he suggests that I talk with many people in the congregation, which of course is why I'm here today. This gives me an opportunity to get acquainted with people, to learn the concerns of members of the congregation, and to share with them how we approach these problems.

"The approach includes a series of workshops, usually three, each lasting about an hour and a half to two hours, scheduled about a week apart, say on a weekday evening from seven to nine o'clock. I want to tell you a little about these workshops—there's not time to explain everything that happens—to give you an idea of what they're about.

"In the first workshop we spend about a half-hour sharing with one another what the real world is about, the day to day world, particularly the down side. People describe everything you can imagine—what they're facing, the things that are pressuring them and their loved ones—lack of affordable housing, drug and alcohol use by young people, poor schools, impossible traffic, gangs, some of the things you've talked about today, and a lot more. In that first half-hour we hear every emotion: fear, frustration, anger, resentment. In the second half-hour, we ask people to share their hopes and dreams—not pie in the sky in the bye and bye, but what the world could look like 10 or 15 years from now if most of the people of faith in our city were working together in a positive way. What's the world you want for the next generation, your children or grandchildren? We take a half-hour to talk about these things. In the third half-hour we do something that people often don't initially see the connection to. We ask them to describe the characteristics of healthy relationships between any two human beings—spouses, parents and children, friends, neighbors, relatives, co-workers. We make a list of those things. You can obviously make such a list yourself—respect, trust, honesty, reliability and responsibility etc. Finally, we ask people to consider the connection between those qualities of healthy relationships and the real and ideal worlds. It rarely takes more than a moment or two for people to see that the real world is marked by the absence of those relationship qualities and that we define the ideal world largely in terms of those qualities. The point we want to emphasize is that the quality of our relationships, one-to-one, determine the quality of the larger world we live in.

"In the second workshop we analyze some of those real-world problems. That is, the church members do the actual analysis. I begin by asking them to pick three or four problems, from the previous week's workshop, to analyze. Here's an example. We did a workshop at St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Santa Ana and I asked what problems

they wanted to analyze. One woman raised her hand and said 'drugs.' I said, 'Fine, what's the specific problem?' She replied, 'I live right across the street from the parish school and the church, in the apartment building on the corner of Lacy and Civic Center.' I know that corner because I'm at the church regularly. She continued, 'We have a drug dealer in front of the apartment building every afternoon, right across the street from the school and the church.' 'Okay,' I say, 'here's the first analytical question: How do you practically accommodate that problem? What do you do, as a practical matter in your life, to live with that problem?' She says, 'Well, two years ago I stopped letting the kids play in the park after school because of the drug dealers there. Now I don't let them play on the sidewalk in front of our building anymore. When school's out, they come directly home and into the apartment. They stay inside until they go to school again in the morning, except on weekends when my husband or I can be with them outside.' 'Okay,' I say, 'you practically accommodate this problem by keeping your children indoors whenever they're not in school. Here's the second analytical question: What pressure is being created in your family by your practical accommodation of the problem?' She says, 'I've got five children. We live in a three bedroom apartment. It's small and crowded—my younger brother is staying with us. They're young, healthy children—the oldest is only eleven—and they're yelling and running and throwing things all the time.' I say, 'Boy, that's a lot of pressure.' She says, 'Yes, my husband doesn't like it—he gets upset.' 'Well, that gets into the third question,' I go on: 'What's going badly in your family because of this pressure?' She says, 'I'm yelling and screaming and I've been hitting the children.' If you looked around the room at St. Joseph's that night, it was clear that at least a half-dozen folks were nodding in agreement; they were living with variations on this woman's problem. They not only understood the problem but they had some idea of what was coming in this woman's family if the sickness wasn't checked, if the violence continued.

"The point of this analysis is this: no matter what problem we begin with—we usually analyze three or four problems like this—it starts out with people thinking it's "out there" in the community, like drugs or bad schools. But when they analyze it through their own experience, they come to see that its consequences are "in here," inside their family, and that it's destroying their family. That's new for most of us, to understand that connection between so-called community problems and family problems.

"Ordinarily, at this point in the workshop, I ask people, 'Who do you turn to for help with these problems?' Some people say family, friends, or professionals, but usually the largest group—from

a quarter to a third of everyone present—say they turn to the church, by which they mean the staff. The pastor and some of the staff are usually there—I’ve invited them and talked ahead of time with them about this part of the workshop—and I ask them about this. I asked Fr. Jerome at St. Anne one night, ‘What do you do when this tidal wave of family and community problems washes up on your beach?’ He said, ‘I wave my magic wand until it all goes away.’ People chuckled and when they stopped laughing he began talking in earnest. His reply was a variation on what we typically hear from church staff in these situations: ‘I’m doing so many weddings and baptisms and masses and classes, I’m overwhelmed by my regular responsibilities. Every week scores of people come to me with terrible problems, I’m rarely able to see them for more than a half-hour, and I know I’m not able to give them real help with these family and community troubles. I often feel like a failure and wonder what I’m doing in the ministry.’ Normally, of course, pastors don’t say those things because there’s no constructive place for them to do so. But in these workshops we often hear the church staff saying publicly for the first time that they can’t help people with these problems.

“At this point, people in the workshop begin to spontaneously acknowledge that ‘Of course, we all have to be the church. It can’t only be Fr. Jerome and the staff. We all have to help in fixing these problems. We can’t rely entirely on the professionals, the priests and social workers and teachers.’ People begin to acknowledge that the congregation—not just the staff—has to become a living body in the faith, with response-ability for bringing the Kingdom of God on earth. Typically, as they’re seeing and affirming this, I’ll ask them, ‘why haven’t you been? Why haven’t you been thinking of the congregation as the church, instead of relying so much on the staff?’ And people will think about it for a moment or two and say, ‘because we haven’t talking about these kinds of things in our church. We haven’t been doing in our church what we’ve been doing in these workshops for the past two weeks.’ We then begin to acknowledge as a group that the relationships in the church have not normally included one-to-one sharing about deepest concerns and hopes and dreams. I then ask, ‘Do you think it’s important that many people in the church begin to talk about those things, and begin to have the kind of conversations you’ve been having in these workshops? Do you think it’s important that people in your church get together to find ways to deal with these problems in the world that are destroying family life, to bring the values and the vision of the church to life in the world? Don’t answer that tonight, but if you think so, come back next week for the final workshop and we’ll focus on how to begin doing that!’

“In the last workshop, we spend most of the time with role-plays and demonstrations that show how to set up a one-to-one visit. There’s a couple of key things to know: The purpose of this visit is not to do a survey—we’re not census-takers. The purpose is relationship-building, to begin or deepen a relationship. That relationship will become as real as any other you have right now, hopefully with respect and affection, mutual purpose and pleasure—all the things that we want in relationships. We’re also going to find out someone’s concerns by listening a lot—not judging, advising, or arguing. We ask a few questions, but mostly we listen. In this third workshop, then, we talk about the practicalities of how to do a one-to-one visit.

“At the end of the third workshop, those present make a decision, individually and as a group, with the guidance of the pastor, to form a church community organization. That organization becomes the cutting edge of the congregation in bringing the values and vision of the church to life in the world in a way that changes life-destroying forces in the larger community.

“I want to give you an idea of how the church is able to affect problems in the larger community. The simplest way is to tell you a story about a church that did just that. Let me tell you about St. Anne. It’s a large church on the south side of Santa Ana. They had been trying for 14 years to get the city to install a traffic signal at the corner of Borchard and Main streets, where the church and its school are located, because the crosswalk there had been the site of several deaths, innumerable injuries, and a constant source of terror for those trying to get from one side of the street to the other. The city had rebuffed every initiative of the church to get a traffic signal.

Then the church went through this process. They did one-to-one visits, several hundred; thirty or so people from the workshops formed a parish community organization, and they began to meet every three or four weeks. They reported back on the one-to-one visits, sharing the kinds of concerns they heard from people, and after a couple of months they decided—based on their training—that the problem they wanted to work on was the dangerous crosswalk.

They began with the first step—research. Groups of five, six, seven people began to interview the key decision-makers who had some responsibility for this situation. They went to the traffic division of the police department and they learned the actual number of deaths and injuries in the crosswalk over the past two or three years, by official statistics. They went to the streets department of the city and found out that there was a priority list for such installations and where their intersection was on the list. Near the bottom! The city engineer said that there wasn’t sufficient traffic

coming out of Borchard street onto Main to warrant, on a technical basis, the installation of a signal—and the city didn't plan to put one in. They interviewed county and state officials and learned their standards for installing traffic signals. The last research they did was with the official, lowest in the city bureaucracy, who had the power to give them what they wanted. In this case that was the city manager, because they had determined from their research that, although deaths and injuries were taking place in the crosswalk, they wouldn't be given a signal on "technical" grounds and would have to win it "politically."

"Three important things happened in that meeting with a half-dozen leaders from the church and the city manager. First, you should know that the demeanor of the church members was friendly and respectful, but businesslike. They weren't loud or rude or making ridiculous demands. They weren't there to ask for anything except information. They began, after introductions, by having a couple of people give "testimony," that is, they talked for about a minute each, describing their (or their child's) personal experience in the crosswalk. That allowed the city manager to begin to understand the problem from their point of view. Then the spokesperson for the group asked the city manager the two key questions: 'What is the general policy of the city or your office about situations such as this?' As he answered that question they listened respectfully, regardless of what they thought or felt about his answer, and then asked him the second question: 'What do you plan to do about this particular situation?' They listened carefully to that answer, which was very unsatisfying for them because he largely repeated what they had been told by the city's traffic engineer. They told him that many members of the church were concerned about the situation, and they invited him to a meeting of the parish community organization to tell all the parishioners what he had just explained to them. He agreed to do that. He's a political appointee. He understands that St. Anne is a substantial church, that he needs to deal with it.

"The week before he came to the meeting of the parish community organization, two or three leaders of the organization arranged an appointment with him, went to his office, and shared a copy of the agenda for the upcoming meeting and a list of the specific questions he would be asked. We don't want to blindside people and give them bad surprises.

"What is it that the St. Anne people wanted? Of course they wanted to get a traffic signal installed, but equally or maybe more important, they wanted to develop a relationship with this decision-maker. The crosswalk was only one, small problem among many. They wanted a relationship of mutual respect that would enable them to deal effectively

on a number of problems. Now, our people typically respect public officials. They may not like them or agree with them, but they respect them. That is, they respect their power. They understand that these officials have the power to make decisions that can affect their lives for good or ill. What they want is respect from the decision-maker. What does that mean? It means that when they tell the official that they have a problem, the official is listening in earnest. And when they ask the official what's going to be done about the problem, a substantive solution is proposed to them. That's respect.

"Our understanding about how we get 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 a lot of money; our power is based on numbers. When we want to influence a public official, we turn out with large numbers of people—at least 150, 200 or 300 hundred is much better—but not rude people, not obnoxious people. The second thing is, 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 planning. 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 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. They respect that discipline; they like working with 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 pain of these problems for people. If the decision-maker only knows of the problem from reading reports or listening to bureaucrats, there's no real understanding. In public meetings with decision-makers, we have people go to the microphone and give testimony. These are people who have first-hand experience with the problem. They're given very simple instructions: you're to talk for no more than one minute, you're to reveal any emotion that you feel genuinely—grief, anger, frustration, whatever, and you're not to attack the official personally. We compel officials to listen to the real pain of these problems. When Marty Maciel gave testimony in our meeting with 1200 church members and the mayors of Anaheim and Santa Ana, she talked about her brother Tommy who died a drug addict in the county jail. Probably more than half the people in that audito-

rium had tears in their eyes—and the two mayors were obviously moved. 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.

“What happened at St. Anne? The city manager came to the meeting of the parish community organization. More than 450 members of the church turned out for the meeting in the parish hall. There were two head tables at the front, the city manager and his assistant at one, four of the organization’s leaders at the other. There was a report on the research that had been done, testimony given about the crosswalk, the city manager had five minutes to make a statement, the leaders asked him a number of clarifying questions, and finally one of the parish community organization’s leaders at the head table—someone we call a ‘pinner’—directed the ‘closing’ question to the city manager: ‘Given everything that’s been said tonight, are you willing to make a commitment now to install a traffic signal at the corner of Borchard and Main in the next 120 days? What do you say, can we count on your commitment to do that?’ What he actually answered was, ‘No, I will not make that commitment. But this is what I will do: I’ll order a crossing guard immediately—you’ll have that by tomorrow, and I’ll put the traffic signal in next year’s budget—you’ll have it then.’ He got a terrific round of applause; we declared him a ‘hero of the people.’

“From that day on, the St. Anne parish community organization and its leaders had a working relationship with the city manager—they had earned his respect.

“Does that make sense to you?—working that way with decision-makers. Are you concerned enough about the things you mentioned earlier and does this make enough sense to you that you’d want to come to a first workshop? I assume that if the workshop doesn’t make sense or doesn’t seem relevant to you, you wouldn’t come back for the second—there’s no obligation. What do you think?”

### ***Stumbling Blocks***

There are, of course, a number of questions, concerns, objections, and rationalizations that are raised in these one-to-ones.

One of my “favorites”—we encountered it regularly at founding meetings of neighborhood organizations years ago—is the person who says, “We don’t need to go through all this organizing stuff. I personally know councilman Fnork. I can talk with him tomorrow morning and straighten all this out.” A more subtle and contemporary variation on this theme is the person who says, “Two of the council members are congregants in our church. They’re wonderful people and we’ve

known them for years. I’m sure they’ll listen to our concerns and do something about these problems.”

This response represents a number of different variables. On one level it may represent a fear of conflict and ignorance of the potential benefits to be realized through constructive conflict. On another level it may represent a resistance to look at what the city council hasn’t been doing, the extent to which personal relationships aren’t sufficient to move political processes, particularly when scarce resources are at stake. This response also fails to see the necessity for building power in larger arenas, which requires the federation of organizations—a number of churches must work together to influence not only city council members but county, state, and corporate officials.

On a more abstract level, I take the point of view that there are two kinds of things in the world that we want: those we can have for the asking—most of those things we’ve already asked for and got—we don’t need to organize to get them; and those things we can’t get for the asking—we have to work and struggle and fight for them.

There’s another useful perspective about this question that was conveyed to me by a local public official, a director of planning in a small city in Orange County. He said, “I learned a long time ago that when one or two people come into my office with demands that I change some policy or procedure, I don’t have to pay attention to them. They don’t represent anyone but themselves. But when several hundred people show up to tell me that something’s wrong and something needs to be done, as a responsible official I need to pay close attention—they probably represent the sentiments of thousands of people—not only because what they say is likely to be valuable information for me to do my job but for my own political well-being too.”

### ***Organizer Objectives & Methods***

This one-to-one visit takes about an hour—occasionally less, rarely more. It goes against accepted wisdom in the field of contemporary, institutionally-based community organizing, namely that a first one-to-one should be limited to 20 to 30 minutes. But I find that, apart from the value of relationship-building, which is enhanced by the additional investment of time, it lays a great deal of groundwork that translates into supportive organizational culture, improving prospects for successful workshops and a one-to-one drive subsequent to the workshops.

There are a number of basic principles and points, a sort of infrastructure if you will, contained in this visit. The principles include building organizational culture, normative understandings about what’s going to happen and why and how and by whom, by setting expectations, using anecdotes



and stories as much as possible, to convey what's happened in the past. The key points include a credential, sharing of personal biography, exploration of concerns, explanation of the strategic organizing vision, and invitation to participate.

Throughout it's essential to convey our values and vision and to make palpable their connection to our faith and institutional religious commitments. That's done, in part, through explicit talk about bringing faith to life in action in the world and specifically describing our demeanor in public actions when meeting with decision-makers—that we're friendly, cordial, respectful, and businesslike.

One of my main goals in the first one-to-one, apart from initiating a relationship, is to begin building organizational culture. That is, to remove from normal rhetoric and relational activity the acquisition of understanding about what happens and why and how and by whom, and instead to create culture within the organization, a kind of "wallpaper" that supports general understanding throughout the organization about these things, independent of one-to-one relationships, efforts at personal persuasion, or misguided exhortation. Reducing these things to culture has the benefit of creating an ambiance in which everyone understands them but they don't have to be talked about endlessly.

The culture-building process begins with my setting expectations which, after a time, come to be seen as "that's the way it is." It doesn't take very

long, for instance, for people to understand that we do research, that we don't launch ourselves into action simply because we're mad about something—beginning with setting expectations, the understanding grows that "that's how we do it." Once established in the culture, these understandings no longer have to be argued or promoted but are owned at a deeper level of the organization's collective psyche.

### *Memory Aids*

Whenever I'm developing a new one-to-one format and content, I find that it involves a daunting amount of both substantive and process information that I have to remember—which is particularly difficult for me because my memory is poor.

It's been my practice in these situations to unselfconsciously rely on a simple short outline of the main substantive points I want to cover. I have the outline in front of me, visible, during the one-to-one. I may even refer to it conversationally, saying, "There are some things I want to be sure that I cover with you in our talk today."

In terms of process, my most important guide is to remain conscious of whether at any particular point the most effective choice is to ask a question, suggest alternatives, or make a statement, depending on the resources of the person I'm talking with. I try to remember that asking people things they can't know robs them of their dignity; telling them things they can't understand robs me of my dignity.

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