

ORGANIZING

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CONGREGATIONAL ORGANIZING: Relationship-Driven Leadership Development*

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“Why should our congregation get involved in congregational community organizing?” is a question we have heard many times from clergy and congregational leaders. The accepted wisdom among professional community organizers is that we shouldn’t tell people more than they need to know to take the next incremental step in the organizing process. It’s a good rule most of the time, but like all rules it has exceptions. One obvious exception is that at the start many people ask for an overview of the process. When they don’t get clear and direct answers to their questions, they become distrustful. Another exception to the rule is that eventually everyone needs to understand not only what is to be done, but *why* and *how*—particularly in relation to their deepest faith and values. Thus it seems that sooner or later we have to talk about the underpinnings of community organizing.

We have learned to think and talk about congregational community organizing from three analytical perspectives. The first is *institutional corruption*, which reflects a quasi-sociological analysis. The second is *institutional unification*, which reflects an organizational analysis (of congregational life). And the third is *institutional reconstruction*, which reflects a scriptural analysis. All three perspectives point to a community organizing methodology, answering the question, “How is the organizing accomplished at the person-to-person level?”

We call this methodology “relationship-driven leadership development.” The three perspectives on which it is based are the basic understandings around which our leadership development initiatives are designed.

Institutional Corruption

The sociological analysis begins with the observation that there has been a corruption of institutional values in our society and in our cities. It does not mean, of course, that everyone is evil who works as an “institutional functionary.” But it does suggest that the values driving institutional life are mostly “bottom-line” values—the appreciation and cultivation of physique, position, prestige, possessions, and power, as opposed to the values of spirituality, family, community, productivity, and democracy—and that the distorted values affect our individual and communal lives in destructive ways.

We can see without straining that institutional values have become corrupted. This observation suggests some questions: Is this inevitable? Are we on a great downward slide of Western or American civilization? Is it true that under the circumstances the only intelligent thing to do is to sit back, enjoy the ride, and make the best of life before the end of the empire?

Certainly not, at least if one believes in the main tenets of Judaism, Christianity, or Islam, that there is a “God of history”—that all is not foreordained but that the Creator has given us a world in which we can shape our future history. For us, as Jews, this belief revolves around the Covenant made at Mount Sinai, that in following the Commandments we become co-producers with God in creating the world in which we are to live.

If we believe in a God of history, we must ask ourselves: What can be done, by whom, and how? In trying to answer that question, we are guided by two key principles, both well grounded in the theory and practice of community organizing. First, there is no special class of people, no matter how well-endowed or how well-intentioned—not all the

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clergy, not all the teachers, not all the police, not all the judges, not all the doctors, and not all of them together—that can fix what is wrong in our society, which is not to say that we don't need them. We do need them—but we now see them trying to fix things and we also see their overall effect is unmistakably insufficient. And second, we should never do for others what they can do for themselves, lest we ensure that they never do for themselves. Our conclusion is that large numbers of “ordinary” people—not acting as professionals, officials, institutional managers, or wealth-holders, but as citizens—must be involved in the fix, and they must act for themselves, in their own self-interest.

Who might such people be? Where are they in our communities? How can we find them and help them to act in their common interest? Arguably they are people who have some connection with deeper values and visions that can be actualized. There are several institutional and communal settings in which such people and values may be found. The “faith communities,” however, are the main ones in this country.

The difficulty of identifying faith communities as the best hope for remedying institutional corruption is that we have to acknowledge that most congregations are not instruments for constructive change, and many have themselves become corrupted in their own way. Apart from limited charity and caring ministries, most congregations are serving as “escape hatches,” where the majority of members seek to avoid the pressures and problems of everyday life.

Why is this so? Our analysis is that there is a failure of leadership. Not the leadership of the bishop, pastor, or rabbi, although they certainly play a role, but lay leadership. This leadership failure can be seen in several ways. It is visible in the reluctance of most people in our society to take responsibility for the shared, public problems, an abandonment of the commonweal. The inclination of people a century or even a half-century ago to assume responsibility for problems in their neighborhood, their city, or their workplace, has been transformed into a drive to increasing privatization, subsequent isolation, and devastating disintegration of the web of relationships that make up community.

Why? If the ordinary person is now unwilling to speak and act in the interests of the community in which that person is nominally a part, what has gone wrong?

The linchpin of this analysis is that there is a massive failure of relationships. This is not to say that most people in congregations do not have relationships that they value highly. In our experience, irrespective of whether you ask a Protestant, Catholic, or Jew about their feelings toward members of

their congregation, the answers sound similar. (We have yet to do extended work with people of other faiths.) People invariably say something like: “I've been a member of the congregation for 15 years and some of my dearest friends are members. I work on the festival committee and it really doesn't seem like work most of the time because I enjoy the people so much.”

Then we ask: How many times in the past year did you sit down with someone from the congregation, not a good friend, and listen for 15 to 30 minutes while that person told you his or her deepest concerns—about health or marriage or children or community or whatever—without you interrupting, arguing, or giving advice? How many times did you share your deepest pain or concerns while someone else listened? Or how many times did you or someone else share your deepest hopes, which may be shattered by this point in your life? How many times did you do any one of these things in the past year?

Out of a hundred people who answer that question, three to five say they shared deeply with another member of their congregation in the past year. These people usually are involved in some formal ministry of the congregation. But the vast majority of people admit openly that they do not talk with members of their congregation about such things. Conversation is typically on the level of “Did you have a nice vacation?” and “How is the family?”—to which they answer, “Just fine.”

Our conclusion is that incalculable numbers of people, not only in congregational life, but certainly there too, have learned for a variety of reasons not to feel, not to think about, not to talk about, and therefore not to act on, their deepest pain, their deepest concerns, and their deepest hopes. It is a failure of their relationships that leads to a failure of leadership. Whatever those relationships offer, they do not encompass sharing deepest concerns and hopes, and they do not lead to action.

Congregational community organizing directly confronts the missing dimensions of relationships, as a first step in leadership development that can ultimately confront the corruption of institutional values. It seeks through a number of practical steps to remedy the endemic failure of relationships.

Institutional Unification

The re-unifying of congregational life begins with the idea that faith- and other value-bearing communities are comprised mainly of their people, who have relationships with one another. The essential elements of these institutions are not books and buildings but people. Such communities have both “internal” and “external” lives, that is, they have an internal life when their members come together in worship and fellowship, and they have an external life when their members are apart from each other.

The faith community thus typically has two incarnations—the holy, one-day in the week, and the profane, the other six days in the week. (Surprisingly, much the same can be said, with some modification of terminology, for labor unions and civic associations.)

When we look at most congregations and we explore with clergy and lay leaders those two dimensions of faith-life in community, we hear common themes over and over again: Looking at the one-day-a-week life, there is acknowledgment of deep vision and values. Most people of faith share the conviction that the biblical vision and values are the most moving and powerful that they have encountered in life. They also say that during that one day a week there is a striking absence of resources—a lack of time, energy, and money—to make the faith community effective in its ministries and missions, both within the congregation and in the surrounding community. Pastors share their frustration of trying to get people to fill congregational offices, raise the budget, or simply hold hands during worship. They describe conversations with parishioners who don't want to come to church because Sunday is the only day they have off work. Clergy not uncommonly feel alone and isolated—not allied with strong lay leaders—in the burdens of doing God's work. Lay leaders talk about "burnout," many of them frustrated and disillusioned by how few of their fellow members are willing to actively author, plan, and organize the programs and activities of the congregation. So within the internal life of the faith community there is the paradox of deep and stimulating visions and values coupled with a dearth of resources, a lack of committed time and energy and money to make the institution powerful in realizing those visions and values in practical ways.

When we look at the other six days of the week, the situation is reversed. There is a perversion of values and vision, evidenced in the institutional life of the society at large, in most of the organizations in which we spend our working lives, and in the mass media that have such a potent effect on children in particular and social life in general. The greed and corruption in government and commerce that is revealed regularly in mass media reports sickens many of us. The commercialization of news gathering and reporting itself, evidenced by the transformation of professional hard news programs into marketing-driven "shows," to many of us is strikingly cynical in its indifference to the public interest. And few of us want to know about, never mind see, more than a handful of the scores of movies that are released every year, so many of which have gratuitous violence as their *raison d'être*.

Yet we also see in the six-day-a-week life an extraordinary commitment of resources—time, en-

ergy, and money—on the part of most people we know. The plaint of "overwhelm," that is, emotional and physical exhaustion from an excess of responsibility and frantic activity in the service of governmental and corporate institutions, is no longer heard only from fast-lane professionals but from blue-collar workers, technicians, artists, homemakers, and human service providers—virtually everyone we know. A recent visit with a lay member of a congregation suggests that this phenomenon has reached down to pre-school children. This seasoned pre-school teacher reported that in recent decades fewer pre-school children are taking afternoon naps, which are essential to their physical and emotional health, because they have been "infected" by the frantic lifestyles of their parents and they are now revealing parallel symptoms.

Congregational organizing seeks to join the one-day and the six-day worlds: to have the values and vision that are the heart of the first become the driving force of the second; to have a significant part of one's six-day-a-week resources fed into the congregation. That doesn't mean attending worship once or twice a year and contributing one percent of one's income a year, but instead making congregation the center of one's life and contributing 10 or even 15 percent a year.

On what basis is it not absurd to imagine such a shift of resources and realities? For us the beginning point is to envision an authentic community, which is not the same as a fellowship (a small number of like-spirited souls) or religious agency (a handful of active producers and a large number of passive consumers)—the models most of us know in congregational life.

A community in our definition entails a substantial group of people who are in face-to-face relationships. They have a common history of responding to pressures and challenges in their lives. Together they have evolved shared faith, values, and customs that guide their responses. They have survived and succeeded individually and as a body through their corporate action to effectively promote their common values and self-interests in the larger world. Not all of us want this kind of community—but many of us do.

In this view of community there is no discontinuity between internal and external elements of congregational life. What most of us believe, for example, about the value of children, about their upbringing, and about the essentials of realizing their full potential in God's design, is, in an authentic community, directly connected with our ability to influence events in the larger world in a way that effectively ensures we are responding to the present crisis of threats to children. These threats include the decades-old drug epidemic, the recent and massive increase in youth gang violence, the failure of public schools to prepare most of the

non-college-bound for employment that is both financially and spiritually rewarding, and much more.

On the one hand, there is ample evidence to believe that without such community capacity, there is no reason to suppose that significant numbers of people of faith will find it sufficiently in their interest to commit their time and energy and resources to congregational life. On the other hand, our experience demonstrates that congregations can become faith-driven, empowered communities, able to realize the faith of their members by achieving practical solutions, in the image of God, to the day-to-day conditions that are destroying their lives, their families, their neighborhoods and cities. When this happens, there can be a revolutionary change in every aspect of congregational life, moving religiosity from private spirituality and rote prayer to faith in action, and moving stewardship from begging and guilt-tripping to self-motivation.

The re-unifying of faith-driven institutions, breaking down the fragmentation and discontinuity of holy and profane life and replacing it with authentic community, is central to understanding congregational community organizing. It is also the first step in creating empowered institutions of faith that become the harbingers of larger institutional reconstruction, with the power to actually transform the profane world in the image of God.

When we ask why this reunification hasn't happened, we are once again led to the linked ideas of relationship-building and leadership development. The majority of contemporary congregations are family-dominated, clergy-dominated, or program-dominated. In the first, goals and objectives, roles and positions, rewards and recognition, are dominated by a handful of hereditary leaders who are the members of select families, usually founders or financial sponsors. They are the creators and owners of the congregational vision and the activities that are sanctioned in relation to it. They are largely in relationship with one another rather than the general membership of the congregation, and they have little or no stake in expanding the circle of leadership. The clergy-dominated model of governance reflects a similar narrow method of authoritarian control and limited vision, except that a single institutional leader holds the reins. The authoritarian pastor, priest, rabbi, or imam is usually in relationship with a handful of "chief lieutenants" who can be counted on to support his or her initiatives. In the program-dominated congregation, control at the top is narrowly held but participation at middle and lower levels is open. Typically there is a comparable failure of leadership and vision. Vision in this model is still the product of a handful of leaders—members of the board, council, vestry, session, etc.—but at middle and lower levels of the organization large

numbers of individuals are free to participate and innovate in the committee life of the congregation. The outcome is a congregation that is "busy" with programs, lacking in unifying vision, and undermined in achieving larger goals and objectives by formal leadership that is narrowly held and informal leadership that is scattered. It inevitably fails to become a unified instrument of God with clear-cut and widely owned aims and methods.

In all three forms of institutional control described above, formal leadership is narrowly vested, thus ordinarily not producing a vision and a mission that are relevant to, owned by, and invested in by the congregation at large. In none of these models does the vision of the existing leadership promote leadership development as the central task of leadership. When leaders understand and have a stake in the idea that their main job is to develop other leaders, they necessarily are invested in building relationships beyond a narrow circle.

With congregational organizing, congregational life is guided by a broadly based vision and mission. The vision is generated and owned by many members of the congregation, which results mostly from intensive building of relationships. The mission is implemented by a relatively fluid structure of leaders and committees, which are accountable to the vision. The main methodology is relationship-driven leadership development.

Institutional Reconstruction

The idea of transforming the larger world of corrupted institutions moves us to the third underpinning for congregation community organizing.

Our favorite book of the Tanakh (i.e., Hebrew Bible) is Nehemiah, which is must-read literature for every organizer working in a congregational setting. Nehemiah was "cup-bearer" to the king, which was not a very complicated job but one that entailed a great trust because of the potential to be suborned to murder for money or power. He was away from the city that he loved, Jerusalem, serving the King, when his brother and others came to him with the news that the city he loved was in ruins and the people demoralized.

If you can imagine loving a city deeply, which in modernity is difficult because of our residential mobility and the paucity of cities that are worthy of such emotions (given the absence of authentic community and godly values), then you can imagine grieving over the loss of such a place. You can also understand what Nehemiah did when he heard this news. He wept for days. He grieved over it, as we would over the loss of anything we love dearly.

He went back to court. The King asked why he was so long-faced and Nehemiah told him. The King asked if he had a request, and Nehemiah asked for permission to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. The King granted his request.

The first thing Nehemiah did after his return to Jerusalem was to ride around the city, presumably to observe the physical destruction and to talk with people, to reconnoiter the situation—what today we would call “action research.”

Of course, every city offers myriad possibilities for actionable issues. But Nehemiah began organizing people to rebuild the walls and the gates of the city. It isn’t difficult to understand why he did that if we are thinking like organizers. Suppose a next-door neighbor comes to your front door with the news that your local fire department has been disbanded. Can you imagine how insecure you would feel with no fire protection? One would have had similar feelings of insecurity living in an ancient city without walls and gates. It must have been a deeply felt problem for most people; it would also have been an issue on which there was unanimity, largely irrespective of social and economic class; and the requirements of rebuilding the walls and gates would have compelled cooperation between neighbors, regardless of past differences.

In the middle of Nehemiah’s organizing campaign to rebuild the walls and gates, there was public ridicule and powerful opposition by the governor and a major landowner. But the people overcame the opposition by their willingness to stand guard and protect their work, physically risking their lives. In less than two months they accomplished their aim.

Nehemiah and Ezra then convened all the people, numbering about 50,000. That may seem like a great number, but it is of the same magnitude as the number of people represented in the participating congregations of most congregational community organizing projects with which we are familiar. Such projects typically represent 25,000 to 50,000 people in their member-congregations. The number of people Nehemiah convened is in fact not much larger than the number we might convene.

The purpose of the convocation, in our shorthand, was to teach the people the blessings and the commandments of the holy scripture. Their message affirmed that the scripture marked the path for day-to-day life, that it informed the people of the blessings of God, and that it clarified their responsibilities to one another and to God in the Covenant. Then ten percent of the people were asked to move back into the city to rebuild it as the city of God, a city in which daily life would be ruled by godly values.

If you had asked Nehemiah why he returned to Jerusalem, undoubtedly his answer would not be to rebuild walls and gates. They were issues, but that’s all. He had a larger purpose. If he was articulating that purpose for a press release, he might well have said, “I came back to rebuild Jerusalem as a city of God, so that the godly values in our holy scripture and our worship life would be reflected

in the day-to-day life of the city.” But if by some time-machine magic we had Nehemiah here with us today, and we could talk organizer to organizer, we might ask: In addition to the larger goal of rebuilding the city in the image of God, what practically did you have to do to make that happen? What were the most important week-to-week objectives?

We imagine him answering in modern language: “My job was to rebuild the confidence of the people—in their own faith, in the congregation, in our religion, and in our God; that these things, when we are fully invested in them, have the actual power to transform the world, to remedy the pressures and problems that are demoralizing us and that are responsible for the destruction of our social and physical environment.”

Thus the third underpinning of congregational community organizing entails the reconstruction of corrupted institutions via the actions of empowered faith communities. And it is clear that relationship-driven leadership development is the sine qua non of that empowerment.

Leadership Development

We have implicitly assumed here that congregational organizing offers the realistic prospect of transforming the world. But is that believable?

We know for ourselves that the answer is mostly a matter of faith and hope. We have faith in our ability to respond in the image of God. Using all that God has given us to uplift others and ourselves is divine by definition. That is, we know that we are part of a Limitless One, that because of our relationship with God we have the capacity to draw on unlimited abilities, given by our Creator, and that we can respond and sanctify all of the Divine Creation, ourselves included. We have faith when we experience this empowerment by God.

Our hopefulness is grounded in what we have learned in the course of consciously doing right and wrong in our lives. We have found that hope reflects our persistence in doing good—the more good we do, the more hopeful we become. It builds on our faith, on our awareness of our ability to respond in the image of God. And we know that our ability to respond comes not only directly from God, but also through our people and our religious institutions.

We frankly do not see any limit to the practical achievements of faith and hope when they are acting powerfully in large numbers of organized people. When that happens, the potential to transform the values, goals, and methods of institutional life is unlimited, as history has so often illustrated.

The question we are left with is this: How is this development to actually happen? Of course, we want to build or rebuild people’s confidence in their own faith, in their congregations, in their reli-

gions, and in their God—but let’s get down to the basics. What does one actually have to do to do that? We believe that Nehemiah’s answer would focus on the experiences that are essential in developing human beings, and in much larger numbers. That is not the same as identifying people who already have abilities and capacities and then placing them into positions of responsibility. Leadership development means instead that we look at each and every individual, assessing the unique gifts of each person that can be contributed in a model of shared leadership.

Irrespective of any individual’s gifts, we seek to develop leadership capacities that will allow transforming movement, using a model that incorporates support, challenge, and accountability in relationship. That is to say, first, if we help people to grow in a way related to authentic leadership, then they are mostly deepening their capacity for relationships with other people. Anyone who doesn’t want to be in relationship with other people or who doesn’t care about other people, whatever else we might say about that person, can’t meaningfully be called a leader. So we are hopefully feeding the capacity of individuals to be in relationship. The main relationship-building abilities we are attempting to foster in prospective leaders are support, challenge and accountability, both of themselves and others.

If those are the fundamental objectives, what is the obstacle? Why is it that so many people whom we believe to have the wherewithal for building relationships can’t or won’t do it? We encounter much resistance and reluctance. Why?

Most of the individuals who have a workshop experience or extensive conversations with staff or leaders, who are excited about the possibilities of organizing, and who we are asking to reach out to others in their congregations, ordinarily believe they have to sell the organizing process or the project. They believe it’s necessary to convince people of the merits, to explain the factual details, with a sales pitch of some kind—which leaves them feeling degraded and leaves the people they contact feeling put-upon and resentful.

What is the alternative to selling? We know that the conventional one-to-one personal visit, after the initial credential, begins with getting to know someone. In the course of hearing personal biography, the effective leader identifies areas of potential pain and problems, about which more may be learned by sensitive questions. These areas

may encompass concerns about children, aged parents, one’s own job prospects, a spouse’s health, property values, fear of crime, and so on. Once there has been an acknowledgment of problems or pressures, the leader has reached a critical point—but then what?

In the traditional model of caring ministry this is the point at which the visitor offers some form of service or support. In congregational organizing there is a temptation to begin selling, to begin explaining in extravagant or self-conscious language the benefits of the organizing and the attractiveness of the method and vision. This usually is a mistake. The most common result of such efforts is that the person being visited decides he or she understands what it’s all about, already has a full plate of interests and activities, and does not have the time or energy to be part of the organizing.

The most important knowledge and skill that we can incorporate at the outset in relationship-driven leadership development is the ability to witness one’s own faith and its link to action. The resistance to this learning would be laughable if its consequences were not so serious. The typical response to the idea is, “I want to live my religion, not talk about it” or “If I start talking about God, eyes glaze over.” But it is possible to make simple, unpretentious, heartfelt personal statements of faith that are not off-putting.

We, as Jews, might express our faith by paraphrasing the Talmud: “If we don’t protest evil, we feel like accomplices”—and then go on to describe our own experience of that faith in action. Such witness for a Christian might sound like what we heard recently from a leader: “You know, I’ve always believed that faith without works is dead. But I never really knew what to do, that would make a real difference. Now that I’ve been involved in the congregational organizing project I’m beginning to see people of different faiths come together with a similar belief about doing something important in the world—and it’s giving me real hope.”

What can we do to help people jump that first and most difficult hurdle in building relationships that encompass challenge and accountability? We believe that the most practical thing we can do is to teach each individual how to witness his or her own faith and how that faith is linked to action in the world that is transforming in the image of God. This is the beginning of leadership development that is driven by the building relationships.

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