

Congregation-Based Community Organizing

Christians Supporting Community Organizing is in part based on a careful definition of "community," namely: "a group of individuals, sharing a common history and tradition, who support and challenge each other to act powerfully, both individually and collectively, to affirm, celebrate, defend and advance their values and interests." Acting on this understanding of "community," many congregations throughout the country have joined together in local organizations which strengthen the internal life of the body and bring the members of the body into action in the world guided by the values of the Reign of God. Typically, these local organizations are federations of from twelve to forty churches and other faith communities. Sometimes other groups are also members of these federations. But in all cases, faith is at the heart of the local organization. By beginning with a careful listening process within each of the local congregation members of the federation, concerns of families are learned. By visiting with neighbors, a broader group is involved--including both members of the church and non-members. The latter, because of their experience with Christians engaging in serious, faith-guided, action often become more interested in the local church. By challenging the people with the concerns to act on them, responsibility for action is placed squarely on those with the concerns.

Thus there is a major shift away from the church that does programs for people (who mainly take the role of consumers) to a church which engages its own members and their neighbors in doing things for themselves as co-creators, thereby strengthening their bodies and neighborhoods. By carefully thinking through what can be done about various concerns, a plan is developed in which people gain initial successes and build on these successes so that they can tackle more difficult problems. In each instance, a small full-time staff of professional community organizers assists local congregation leaders to engage in this process--and assists the congregations to come together with one another so they can address those problems and issues which are too large for any one of them to tackle alone.

The concerns which are heard from the families who are visited and who become involved include unemployment, crime, drugs, toxic waste, inadequate schools, lack of affordable housing, unavailability of loans and/or insurance, health care and a host of others. Beneath these is the broader sense of powerlessness to do anything about these problems and, accompanying this sense of powerlessness, expressions of distrust of our major institutions. Acting together on their own felt needs, people learn to do research, conduct effective meetings, meet with institutional decision makers, negotiate with these decision makers and hold them accountable for things that are God's intent for the stewardship of their institutions.

This kind of action is guided by process of reflection on faith. Prior to becoming involved in a local congregation-based organizing project, the pastor, staff and lay leaders engage in biblical reflection to determine what their faith says about being part of such a project. Prior to meetings and action undertaken by the organization, reflection connects faith to the specifics of a local situation. Reflection also takes place after action is undertaken so that people discern the connection between their deeply (but often abstractly) held beliefs and daily life. While this process is imperfectly implemented, it is an intrinsic part of congregation based community organizing. The process of shifting people from "apathy" to participation involves continuous leadership development. These organizations, often

with a capacity to bring together 5,000 people in a public meeting with a superintendent of schools, a bank president or mayor of a city, typically have a very small staff of professional organizers--one, two or three people. Professional organizers working in this tradition see their principal role as one of developing the gifts and talents of local people so that they can develop their own organizations--both their particular congregations and the federation as a whole.

While these organizations support community development projects undertaken by member congregations or, in some cases, may engage in major community development efforts themselves, the thing that differentiates them from most other efforts to address social problems is that they train local leaders to engage directly with decision-makers in the major institutions from which most Americans are now so alienated. These organizations seek good-faith negotiations with those decision-makers. When such negotiations take place, new relationships emerge which can effectively address problems because the people with the problems and the institutions with the resources and competencies to address the problems have entered into a relationship of mutual respect. When such negotiations do not take place, these organizations understand how to mount major campaigns to bring decision-makers to the negotiating table.

Community Organizing and Community Development

Community organizing is often confused with community (economic) development. The two are distinct, sometimes complementary and sometimes antagonistic, activities. The best community development work involves residents of a neighborhood in the development of programs that address particular problems in their communities. These problems may be identified in a process that involves a "needs assessment" or by direct engagement of residents. A community development organization might build and manage affordable housing, provide tutorial assistance for public school students, offer job training and counseling, hold self-esteem classes or develop any other specific activities that respond to needs identified by the community.

The activities of the community development organization are typically limited by the funding it can obtain and the talents, donations and volunteer time it can mobilize in its targeted community and in the larger metropolitan area. For example, an affordable housing project might obtain funds from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. It might further decrease the cost of housing by getting architects to donate their time, builders to donate materials, suburban volunteers to donate labor, future residents to donate sweat equity and local government to donate land.

Community development organizations are generally administered as typical nonprofit organizations. A board of directors, with rotating members who are replaced by an internal nominating process, governs the organization. An executive director and staff implement board policy. Community organizing is a process that seeks to build the power of a community or group of communities to address problems identified by the residents of that community, or those communities. Residents of the community become involved in the organizing process so that they develop the solutions to the problems they have identified. While community development approaches may be used by such an organization, its principal approach is to negotiate with public and private institutions to make them more

accountable to the community itself. When good faith negotiations fail to take place, such organizations mount public campaigns to bring pressure to bear on unaccountable institutions.

Community organizing seeks to involve people who have often given up on being active citizens in their community, and who hold the view that "you can't fight (or change) City Hall." A small professional community organizing staff listens to the deeply felt concerns of the people, challenges them to act on them, thinks through with local leaders what can be done about problems that have been identified and trains them in the skills necessary to bring about accountability from major public and private institutions. The paid staff assists leaders to make and implement their own policies. Broadly-based community organizations involve hundreds and even thousands of residents of low- to middle-income communities in public action. The broad membership of these organizations elects organizational leadership at annual or bi-annual meetings, and is actively involved in the on-going life of the organization.

Some community organizations are developed by door-to-door recruitment. Others are "institutionally-based," typically in the religious congregations of a community.

Congregation-based organizing contributes to the development of faith-based communities by: offering a new way of doing evangelism; providing concrete means by which faith can be translated into action in the world; identifying, recruiting and training existing and new leaders; assisting congregation leadership in making other church programs effective; and otherwise providing training to church leaders who often find themselves doing all the work of the congregation while 95% of the members are passive participants.

Congregation-based community organizing links faith to citizenship in a democratic society by engaging the members of a congregation and their neighbors in directly addressing, and sometimes confronting, public and private institutions that fail to respond to the needs and interests of residents of neighborhoods that are often faced with serious problems of crime, drugs, inadequate public schools, poor public services, high rates of un- or under-employment, absence of decent, safe, sanitary and affordable housing and other social problems.