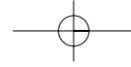


**good for the soul,
good for the whole**

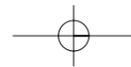
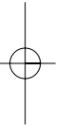


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**Faith-Based Community Organizing
and the Renewal of Congregations**



A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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vision

Congregations involved in Faith-based community organizing have discovered the power of the values and visions they hold in common, and are working to transform themselves and their institutions and communities.

Hope in turbulent times

We live in a time of enormous cultural change. No one knows this better than America's faith communities. Many congregations today find themselves struggling with decreasing membership and dwindling budgets, confronting a culture of individualism and tending to the casualties of a market economy. Feeling unable to take on difficult public issues, all they believe they can do is address private pain and their own survival.



A recent study by Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico reveals a potent antidote to both the worst inequities of the new economic order and the institutional ills of decline and contraction. It introduces us to 45 of the more than 3,500 faith communities across America that have decided to venture beyond their walls through **faith-based community organizing (FBCO)** to address the larger causes of the pressures they confront every day.



Faith-based community organizing differs dramatically from "faith-based initiatives," which emphasize compassion and service but avoid any political engagement with the forces and institutions that leave troubling numbers of people without food, without health care, without homes, and without work. Congregations involved in FBCO have discovered the power of the values and visions they hold in common, and are working to transform themselves and their institutions and communities.

A recent study by InterFaith Funders and the University of New Mexico introduces us to 45 of the more than 3,500 Faith communities across America that have decided to venture beyond their walls through Faith-based community organizing.

Left: Leaders Fran Godine and Blessing Tawengwa, Greater Boston Interfaith Organization

What is Faith-based community organizing?

Faith communities that undertake a community organizing campaign seek out the leaders in their midst—and find surprising new talent. Through patient, one-to-one conversations, a community learns to elicit the unvoiced hurt and anger of its members. Clergy, leaders, and FBCO organizers identify people whose capacity to lead may never have been encouraged, offer them training, and engage them in identifying the shared concerns of community members.



Leadership training, San Diego Organizing Project

Most FBCO groups choose to affiliate with one of the regional or national training networks of faith-based community organizing: *Pacific Institute for Community Organization, Industrial Areas Foundation, Gamaliel Foundation, Direct Action and Research Training Center, Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center, InterValley Project, and Organizing Leadership and Training Center.*

With the hiring of trained professional organizers, a steadily widening circle of people then develops strategic plans for action and reaches out to build relationships with other religious communities, unions, community organizations, and schools. Those relationships are channeled into powerful networks for the public good.

FBCO gets impressive results: expansion of health care options, creation of affordable housing, renewal of schools, development of jobs for the people who need them the most. **But as this study reveals, this work, done well, can also transform the faith communities themselves.** The new leaders developed for public action sometimes offer unexpected new energy and commitment; when this happens, congregations can be strengthened and even transformed.

nine years: ST. JOSEPH THE WORKER CATHOLIC CHURCH

The pews at St. Joseph the Worker, a Catholic church in McAllen, Texas serving Mexican immigrants, were nearly empty when Father Bart Flaar arrived. Today, nine years later, the parish boasts 3,000 families ranging from migrant farm workers and the working poor to public school teachers, middle-income service and managerial workers, and health care professionals.

Fr. Flaar had experienced the benefits of working with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in San Antonio; when he first came to McAllen, he contacted Valley Interfaith, an organization of congregations and schools sponsored by the IAF.

Working with Valley Interfaith's professional organizers, St. Joseph's began to create "small faith communities," after a Latin American model. These communities built relationships among congregants, involved them in decision-making at all levels, and challenged them to become active leaders. After several months of reflection and training and a broad outreach campaign of one-to-one meetings, they held house meetings to identify issues for possible action, mobilize for action, and attract additional leaders. With other Valley Interfaith member churches and schools, St. Joseph's began advocating for changes in local laws and policies. They launched a successful campaign to change McAllen's city council structure, which had kept whites in power for decades, to a system that would make it easier to elect Hispanics.

Today, St. Joseph's continues its integration of spirituality and public action. Congregants conduct regular house meetings where members and non-members talk about the issues affecting their families, constantly keeping a finger on the pulse of the neighborhood. The church is well known in the town of McAllen and alternately celebrated and cursed by the politicians who are being held accountable for living-wage jobs, quality education and health care, and a clean and safe environment.



a SYNAGOGUE TRANSFORMED: TEMPLE ISRAEL

Reform synagogue Temple Israel of Boston is New England's largest synagogue, with 1,500 mostly middle- to upper-income member families. Despite a long tradition of social action, when Rabbi Jonah Pesner and synagogue members evaluated their social action programs in 2000, they found that reality did not live up to self-image. Isolated rabbinical calls for action and small direct service programs like soup kitchens did

not get at the root causes of poverty. According to Rabbi Pesner, "There wasn't an engagement throughout the congregation in social action. We as a synagogue didn't stand for much as a community, and we weren't effecting social change."

Working with Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO), an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, Temple Israel drew up plans to revitalize

their social justice work. Hiring an experienced part-time organizer, they began "Ohel Tzedek" (Tent of Justice), an eight-week community-building campaign of more than 800 individual and group meetings designed to identify shared social justice concerns and values.

That year, when several hundred members gathered at Passover to tell the traditional story of their liberation from slavery in Egypt, they heard it linked to the social justice stories that had emerged from the campaign — stories about the lack of affordable housing, the need for access to quality health care, and the deterioration of Boston's public education system. Hundreds of people went on to participate in planning meetings, training, and large-scale actions.

There have been significant victories, but the impact of Ohel Tzedek isn't limited to the social justice work. It has strengthened the synagogue as a whole. Leader Fran Godine says, "The leaders who have emerged from this whole process have affected the congregation as a whole. We have sixty new people who can run a really good meeting. They understand the culture of being on time. They root things in text. We have evolved!"



"[It is not only about] healing the world, but also bringing together this congregation and making people feel like they are part of something. No one should show up to synagogue and feel like they don't belong or have a part."

— RABBI JONAH PESNER
(ABOVE WITH LEADER FRAN PUTNOI), TEMPLE ISRAEL, BOSTON

community

What we studied

Interfaith Funders was already convinced of the potential of FBCO for societal change, but we were unsure about its impact on congregations.

Over a two-year period, researchers and IF members led by Dr. Richard L.



Organizing meeting, San Diego Organizing Project

Wood of the University of New Mexico observed congregations in action and interviewed leaders, clergy, and organizers across America. We interviewed Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical congregations. Some were highly multiracial and others were majority Latino, African-American, black Caribbean, or white European.

What we learned

Nearly all congregations, clergy and leaders alike, reported some benefits from the relationship with FBCO. Where these benefits were most substantial, they included:

- **More and deeper relationships** both among congregants and with members of other faith traditions.
- **Leadership development:** leaders learned new skills like public speaking, conducting one-to-one meetings, holding one another

accountable, selecting a “winnable” issue, and running an effective meeting. They also found their faith enlivened through this new connection to social justice.

After leading her fifth rosary for a young member killed in a gang fight, Lupita Mendiola of St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas asked herself “What am I really doing here? If I just keep on praying these rosaries [and nothing more], nothing is going to change. I need to do something.”

Despite a lack of formal education, she attended the national ten-day training of the Industrial Areas Foundation. Once afraid to approach even the priest, she now has the confidence to speak with anyone.

- **Increased lay leader involvement** in congregational work and public action.

At New Faith Baptist Church—a primarily African-American congregation in Columbus, Ohio—leaders gained the confidence and skills to carry out a one-to-one campaign that led to a re-visioning of the mission and identity of the church. Grounded in their history of community involvement, these and other leaders are creating a larger public role and more accountability for their congregation.

- **A heightened public profile** for the congregation within the community.

Leaders also found their faith enlivened through this new connection to social justice.

Clergywoman Bernadette Anderson from Sword of the Spirit Christian Church in Camden, New Jersey spoke of her leaders’ increased skill in building relationships with political figures and about the victories they have won (including working with Camden Churches Organized for People to secure \$175 million in state funds for economic recovery in Camden).

What we learned, continued on page 12...



leadership

“The more we reach out in the community in faith-based organizing, the more people come to our church.”

— BISHOP ROY DIXON, FAITH CHAPEL, SAN DIEGO

a MINISTRY OF THEIR OWN: FAITH CHAPEL

“Let’s not be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.”

— BISHOP ROY DIXON

Bishop Roy Dixon used to own a dozen Taco Bells. Now he and his congregation at Faith Chapel own the “Faith Chapel Organizing Ministry” that is growing the church membership rolls and addressing social injustices in the community. In 1985 Bishop Dixon started Faith Chapel in the boardroom of his business with six people. Over 1,500 people, mostly African-American, now call it their faith home.

In 1986, Bishop Dixon attended the national training offered by the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), where he learned organizing principles and practices like the benefits of relationship-building, using power to influence public officials, and the need for accountability. No stranger to political power (he is a staunch, outspoken Republican, a prominent businessman, and the overseer of 30 Pentecostal congregations in the San Diego area), Bishop Dixon was convinced by the PICO training and organizers from PICO’s local affiliate, the San Diego Organizing Project (SDOP), that if he was to accomplish real congregational development and community change, he needed to develop people from his congregation to lead the organizing work. He began sending potential leaders to national training. They returned empowered to hold one-to-one meetings, to speak in public, and to hold one another and the pastor accountable.

With their first civic victory — the construction of a sidewalk for their children to walk to school safely — the growing team of leaders and other congregational members caught a glimpse of the power and politics of change, and the power in numbers. And they’ve been organizing ever since. Bishop Dixon and his leaders credit SDOP for the rewards of these sustained efforts — a larger and stronger Faith Chapel and an organizing ministry truly owned by the whole congregation that influences public life at the neighborhood, city and state levels.

Stephanie Gut, lead organizer of SDOP, believes “Most congregations have mercy and charity at the center of their ministry — we suggest they add justice. Now Bishop Dixon sees it as a central tenet to who he is as a pastor, and as a person of faith.”



What we learned, continued...

- **Deeper understanding** of the faith tradition's call for social justice.

"The [FBCO group's] work is making me see life differently because where before, working in the charismatic movement was a spiritual movement; I saw it more as prayer and renewing lives. But with [the FBCO group] it's more looking outward...It's going out from the church and into society. It's not only the piety to pray, but also to reach out."

— ROSEL LEBRETON, NOTRE DAME D'HAITI CATHOLIC CHURCH, MIAMI



Bishop Roy Dixon and leader Cookie Hassan

- **In some cases, an increase in congregational membership.**

Using the principles and practices of FBCO in order to draw new members, Bishop Roy Dixon and lay leaders like Cookie Hassan and Elder Duret Gray of Faith Chapel Church of God in Christ in San Diego increased the membership of their congregation from six to 1,500 over the past 17 years.

We also learned that FBCO principles and practices can strengthen congregations.

If clergy and leaders creatively link such key FBCO tools as accountability and one-to-one meetings to their own vision and internal culture, congregational development is further enhanced.

*Leaders at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Boston, not all of them literate, carry out congregation-wide one-to-one meetings, sometimes done as ice cream socials, and hold house meetings to discuss what they've learned. They have hosted accountability sessions with political leaders and participated in actions on affordable housing. "It's one thing to explain the theory, but for someone to spend an hour and a half with the president of the synod, or the mayor...they just **get it** much more quickly."*

— REVEREND BURNS STANFIELD

What it takes

Faith-based community organizing takes work, and while congregational development may follow, it is not automatic. We found that it requires:

- ongoing implementation of FBCO principles and practices by leaders;
- active participation by clergy—providing entrée to their congregations, legitimizing the organizing effort, and infusing a sense of spiritual meaning into the work;
- experienced, sophisticated organizers who approach congregational development with creativity and a rich understanding of the congregation's vision; and
- relationships of trust, collaboration—and challenge—between organizers and clergy.

No simple matter

Not all congregations reap such obvious benefits. None comes by them easily; there can be obstacles and resistance. Many clergy are overburdened or distracted; families are under extensive pressures and the demands on their time are overwhelming.

Successful faith-based community organizing requires sustained, patient, hard work and sufficient resources in both time and people.

Successful faith-based community organizing requires sustained, patient, hard work and sufficient resources in both time and people.

There is a shortage of organizers who can focus equally on external campaigns and on the slow work of deep congregational development. Sometimes an organizer works with so many congregations that it is difficult to focus on each congregation's development.

THE PASSION: ST. MATTHEW'S EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH

"Two years ago, the question was 'Do we kind of sit back for the ride as long as we can do this, and then close?' No one's thinking that way now."

— PASTOR GRANT STEVENSEN

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church serves a comfortable working-class neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. When Pastor Grant Stevensen arrived in 1999, its membership had fallen so low it was in danger of closing. Stevensen knew he wanted to make justice work an essential element in his ministry, so at the urging of the bishop's staff he attended a week-long training sponsored by the Gamaliel Foundation, a national network.



Stevenson worked with organizers from ISAIAH, the local Gamaliel affiliate, to launch an "in-reach" within the congregation to build relationships and identify potential new leaders. As Leader Diane Brennan described it, "We went through the membership list and each of us took maybe three, four, or five... Part of the point of the one-on-one conversations is to get beyond the



'Hi, how are you?' to actually get to know one another."

A core team worked to address issues in the surrounding community and to change the organizational culture of the congregation. There was a new emphasis on relationships, accountability, mutual challenge, and reflective evaluation. Church meetings were expected to start and end on time, be well-focused, and be followed by an evaluation.



Today, membership has stabilized at about 200. Attendance at worship services has increased 20 percent, and the congregation worships with a new vitality.

"We're a growing congregation. I mean, we're growing out of near death... For 10 years our eyes were focused on 'how do we keep the doors open and the heat on...' All the energy was going into that only. The last year and a half, we've just seen a blossoming—not just in numbers, [but] in the passion!"

— RON STAMPER, LEADER

Worth the effort

Congregations in many faith traditions today are struggling to make community worship meaningful and, sometimes, to survive. One response is to focus on "church growth" at almost any cost, with the key to growth found in internally-focused programs and therapeutic ministries. Such an emphasis can make religious leaders feel forced to choose between

Our study supports a powerful counterclaim: community organizing, when done well by leaders, clergy, and organizers, can be an instrument of transformation. It is democracy in action and democracy at its best.

building strong congregations and living out the call to work for justice.

Our study supports a powerful counterclaim: community organizing, when done well by leaders, clergy, and organizers, can be an instrument

of transformation. It is democracy in action and democracy at its best. Grounded in traditions that call them to humanity's highest ideals,

people are asked to find their own powerful voices and to act as citizens in the largest sense of the word. This citizenship is not narrowly defined by cards of any color, but by participation in the public arena. Insisting that the institutions that are intended to serve them must do just that, congregations find that their sacred texts live in a new way, that the words of their clergy resonate in action, and that the artificial separation between the life of a citizen and the life of the spirit is healed.



Leadership training, San Diego Organizing Project

Resources for Further Exploration

IF PUBLICATIONS

- *Renewing Congregations: The Contribution of Faith-Based Community Organizing.* By Interfaith Funders, 2003.
(A resource publication based on the Congregational Development Research Study conducted by Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico.) To order copies call Augsburg Fortress Order Center at (800)328-4648. Ask for ISBN 6-0001-7670-8.
- *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field, 2001.*
By Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood. Interfaith Funders, 2001.
- *FBCO: Building Democracy for the Next Millennium.* By Interfaith Funders, 2001.
- *FBCO: Five Stories of Community Change.* By Interfaith Funders, 2001.

To order copies of "Good for the Soul, Good for the Whole" and other IF publications (except for *Renewing Congregations*), please contact Mary Ann Flaherty by e-mail at maflahertyif@yahoo.com. For more information about Interfaith Funders, contact Jeannie Appleman by e-mail at interfaithfunders@yahoo.com, call her at (516)364-8922, or contact Mary Ann Flaherty as above.

BOOKS

- Gecan, Michael. *Going Public: An Inside Story of Disrupting Politics as Usual.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.
- Jacobsen, Dennis A. *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing.* Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003.
- Neumark, Rev. Heidi B. *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.
- Warren, Mark. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy.* Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- Wood, Richard L. *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

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- Swarts, Heidi J. "Setting the State's Agenda: Church-Based Community Organizations in American Urban Politics," in *States, Parties, and Social Movements*, Jack A. Goldstone, ed. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Warren, Mark. "Building Democracy: Faith-Based Community Organization Today," *Shelterforce* (Jan/Feb. 2001).
- Wood, Richard L. "Faith-Based Organizing and the Struggle for Justice," in *Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, Michele Dillon, ed. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR THE FOUR LARGEST FBCO NETWORKS

- Direct Action and Research Training Center, 137 N.E. 19th St., Miami, FL 33132, (305)576-8020
- Gamaliel Foundation, 203 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago, IL 60601, (312)357-2639
- Industrial Areas Foundation, 220 West Kinzie, Fifth Floor, Chicago, IL 60610, (312)245-9211
- Pacific Institute for Community Organization, 171 Santa Rosa Ave., Oakland, CA 99610, (510)655-2801

What is Interfaith Funders?

InterFaith Funders (IF) is a network of eight faith-based and three secular grantmakers committed to social change and economic justice. IF's mission is to act as a collective voice for faith-based funders, and to advance social and economic justice through support of grassroots community organizing. To fulfill its mission, IF engages in:

- **Collaborative grantmaking**—over the last five years, IF has awarded \$1.8 million in grants to faith-based community organizing groups and networks to promote living wages, school and welfare reform, economic development for impoverished communities, and organizer recruitment in the field;
- **Collaborative research**—IF conducted the first ever field-wide, national study of FBCO, the findings of which are documented in "Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field" (2001). Through its newly published study on congregational development IF seeks to increase support for and engagement in FBCO among congregations and faith traditions;
- **Strategic convening**—IF brings together organizers, leaders in faith traditions, funders, and scholars to discuss the current state and future of the field, and other topics of mutual interest such as the role of FBCO in strengthening congregations; and
- **Education and outreach sessions**—IF provides workshops on FBCO at funder conferences and briefings, and gatherings of faith communities, as well as individual meetings.

Each IF member also supports a broad range of community organizing groups in low- and moderate-income communities around the country, including faith-based groups and those using other organizing models.

IF's current members are: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Division for Church in Society, One Great Hour of Sharing Fund of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, Jewish Fund for Justice, Dominican Sisters of Springfield, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The C.S. Mott Foundation, Needmor Fund, the New York Foundation, and the Marianist Sharing Fund are Associate Members.

