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## Yikes! A community organizer?

### Building hope, and community, is not all that scary

By Danyrea Hassan-Hall and Rosa Gutierrez

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There has been a great deal of talk about "community organizing" in this year's presidential campaign. This talk has generated an almost equal amount of speculation about what community organizing is and its contribution to American society. After nearly 30 years of doing congregation-based community organizing in San Diego, we would like to shed some light on the subject.

We are the San Diego Organizing Project, a nonpartisan, multi-issue, multi-faith federation of 25 congregations in San Diego, National City, La Mesa, El Cajon and Chula Vista, representing more than 43,000 families. It is part of the PICO National Network, a network of 53 faith-based community organizations doing grass-roots community organizing and leadership development in 150 cities and towns in 17 states across the country.

Our organizing locally resulted in the 6-to-6 after-school program, a nationally recognized community policing reform effort, Learn and Earn, High Tech High, affordable housing development and renter protections, and too many local neighborhood improvements to mention.

We consider community organizing to be a ministry – a ministry that brings faith to action. In all of our religious traditions, we learn to love and care for our neighbors. Charitable outreach is one expression of that love. People of faith also are compelled to act on behalf of their neighbor when public and private institutions fail to treat all people with equity and justice.

Across this country, millions of families are grappling with tremendous challenges – skyrocketing health care costs, the rising cost of living, stagnating wages, ballooning mortgage payments, failing public schools, increasing violence in their neighborhoods, to name just a few. Yours may very well be one of those families.

While these issues have a direct impact on millions of Americans, you would be hard-pressed to find many ordinary people who feel like they have the power to have a meaningful impact on most of these issues. These problems feel overwhelming. Where do you even start to get some leverage on them?

Community organizing begins with the belief that when people come together, get to know each other, share their common concerns – and their common dreams – and then decide to take action, something amazing happens. They find that they can begin to have an impact on those issues that feel so overwhelming. They can begin to find practical solutions to problems that they have been coping with for years. They find that there is power – and strength – in finding common ground and working together.

Obviously, this takes hope. Without hope, few would dare to take the first step. But hope and persistence make a tremendous couple. Through hope and persistence people begin to realize that the power to change their lives, their communities, their cities, their states, and even the nation resides in their hands. This is truly an amazing realization. With hope comes vision. When people come together they shape the vision of what their communities can truly be. In Scripture, the prophet Habakkuk proclaimed God's word to his people to "Write the vision. And make it plain on tablets."

This is the stuff of community organizing. The process starts with deep listening to hundreds – and thousands – of ordinary people in our neighborhoods, our congregations, our schools about what they most care about, and a clear invitation to them to be part of the solution.

Throughout the nation, community organizers help individuals and families be empowered as citizens to shape their own futures and to embrace their shared personal responsibility in a democracy without regard to partisan politics. Community organizing teaches people how to conduct careful research around those issues they have identified, in order to develop positive, practical solutions. Organizing creates many of the policy solutions that public officials later claim as their biggest accomplishments.

Finally, community organizing teaches people how to work with elected officials to enact their solutions. While inspiring people to take the first step and get involved can be challenging, the biggest challenge often is keeping people involved when they encounter an unresponsive political system that does not see their participation as necessary or legitimate.

Meet people. Find out what they care about. Help them identify where they want to go. And give them the tools, motivation and support to get there. This is community organizing. It is truly awe-inspiring work. Beneath it all is a core belief that people should have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. It is no accident that our membership is composed of faith communities that articulate a vision of the world where all people are treated with dignity and respect.

Bishop Roy Dixon of Faith Chapel Church of God in Christ, and who is a community leader of the San Diego Organizing Project, stated, "When people come together in my church hall to improve our community, they're building the Kingdom of God in San Diego. We see the fruits of community organizing in safer streets, new parks and new affordable housing. It's the spirit of democracy for people to have a say and we need more of it."

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■ Hall and Gutierrez are co-chairs of the San Diego Organizing Project.

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