

**THE RICHNESS OF FAITH**  
by  
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Community organizing has had a long association with congregational life and the faith element it represents. In the early days of community organizing, Alinsky's organizations, while secular in name, operated and used the mobilizing power of congregations but viewed the doctrinal differences of denominations as limiting. Values were simply viewed in a hierarchical dimension where decisions are made for the overall good of community. Nicholas von Hoffman correctly observes in his essay Finding and Making Leaders, "The organizer's first job is to organize, not right wrongs, nor avenge injustice, not to win the battle for freedom."

As community organizing in PICO moves deeper into the life of congregations, the questions of values and faith still linger. Congregation community organizations and their federations in metropolitan areas are still often relegated to community or social justice ministries. This is done as a response to an obligation to relate to community even if in a deeper way than direct service. Pastors often do not recognize the spiritual dimension of organizing. Instead, issues dominate the discussion, and while driving the organization, lack a clear connection to faith.

For the organizing staff, faith is a powerful organizing tool to build an organization, but still subject to von Hoffman's tenet, "the organizer's first job is to organize". The organizer uses faith as a form of self-interest. Leaders in congregations often see organizing as a form of living their faith and self-sacrifice. As a result, congregations can act on issues in a powerful way by involving people who are both personally affected by the concern and are willing to stand for their faith and values. Politicians, often not understanding what is at play, respond to this in action. One County Commissioner in Orange County, Florida said in a recent article following a meeting with 300 people, "Boy, do they get the numbers out. And since we have limited resources, you want to move on projects that have more than one person behind them. I think it's great."

The relationship between religious faith and community organizing is a critical one for PICO. We must ask whether our organizing has become what it has been labeled. Is organizing another program using the church and congregation? How is the congregation being nourished and its faith strengthened through organizing? How could a deeper connection with faith strengthen the power of our congregations and federations?

In the past we have defined a healthy organization as an evenly-balanced stool consisting of three legs - issue development, organizational development, and fund development. A fourth leg might be spiritual or reflective development. We have found this particularly important following very active periods where leaders have had to move quickly to stay on top of issues; mobilize people; break away from their family routines; and take risks as they stand up for what they believe in.

Organizing is neither cheap or easy and leaders pay a price for their participation. The challenge is to retain experienced leaders and to recruit new leaders who can share the workload. If the validity of the work is questioned, leaders will step back and the organization will slip into a slow spiral of decline.

We believe that action and spiritual renewal work hand in hand. Leaders need to stop and reflect on their experiences to grow personally and spiritually. For leaders of FOCUS (Federation of Congregations United to Serve) in Orlando, this means taking the time to do it. Following eight months (including summer) of continued local and federated action, people were clearly showing signs of wear. The organization had achieved impressive victories including a \$1.1 million commitment for eleven new comprehensive after-school programs, a new County Nuisance Abatement ordinance, and the commitment by the newly elected County Chairman to a Comprehensive Plan for Youth. However, continued action would have weakened the organization. Seeing this, the organization declared a break from all organizing activities except research and focused its attention on reflection.

Five congregations held one or more sessions led by their pastors for leaders and others in the church. These faith-sharing groups looked at scripture and other readings. The discussions were exciting. "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew Chapter 5) became a wake-up call to develop a strategy to reach out to other congregations and a local housing project. A Catholic parish discussed "Communities of Salt and Light", the 1993 U.S. Conference of Bishops pastoral reflection. This gave leaders a new understanding of their own church and its faith commitment to communities. Ezekiel (Chapter 37) has been read by leaders as a call to see how God is giving hope and vision for the City. Christ's journey into the desert to pray, reflect, and heal was used as a lesson for leaders in both their public and private lives.

A strong clergy caucus has helped to sustain this effort. Discussions among pastors helped to clarify the relationship between faith and organizing. Pastors connected the organizing with the overall role of the congregation and its' growth spiritually. These pastors see the faith actions in community giving spiritual life to the church. In a couple of cases the faith-sharing led into a form of discipleship where leaders went out two by two to give brief reports to committees and ministries in the congregation. These 3-5 minute "enactment" reports gave updates on results of actions, and thanked those for attending. Sometimes questions would come up in these small groups that led to a better understanding of the organization's work. During this period of low public visibility there was some anxiety on the part of the Executive Director. Would lack of action lead to lack of interest? We learned that reflection was a powerful and effective complement to sustained organizing activity. Rather than weakening the interest in organizing, the break for reflection actually deepened and fortified the commitment of leaders.

Community organizing can foster another important dimension in spiritual growth - personal conversion. Pastors and organizers have noted numbers of leaders who have gone through a spiritual journey resulting in a deepening of their relationship with God. Here is when organizing becomes for the first time faith-centered. God's presence is felt not only in worship but comes to

life in the almost unearthly miracles of the work. These people now view their personal growth, their relationships with other leaders across the city, and the response of elected officials in a faith context or spiritual dimension. They have never seen anything like it.

Discussion of conversion between pastors and leaders can create a new level of self-interest. A number of pastors are interested in exploring this with leaders. The work of conversion begins with a personal visit. The visit is an opportunity for others to start a spiritual journey. This is not discussed specifically but develops as people move into the work. Leaders understand that they are there to nurture the discussion when the opportunity presents itself.

Spiritual development requires organizational energy and focus. It may be simpler to move an issue directly from point A to point B. Spiritual development means moving in other directions and working with people where they are, not where you want them to be. I believe there is a deep hunger in our congregations to bridge the spiritual and social gap. Organizing will always be considered “another ministry” until it penetrates the life of the congregation. The gap will only be closed when the spiritual development of our people matures to encompass organizing. When it does I see pastors and their members moving people in new ways we have not seen.