

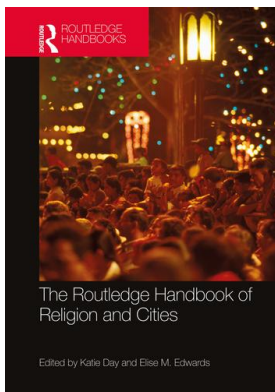
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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING AND CONGREGATIONAL AGENCY IN SHAPING CITY LIFE

Trey Hammond and Phil Tom

“Seek the welfare of the city ... for in its welfare, you will find your own.”

Jeremiah 29:7

The authors will explore the overarching framework for this volume, “analyzing the interactive relationship of religion in its urban contexts,” from the perspective of practitioners.¹ From our work in urban churches, we understand the ways congregations are shaped by the neighborhood and city where they are located, as large societal forces and powerful institutions come to bear. In response, congregations can act with significant agency in shaping the social reality of their context.

In our experience, community organizing is one of the most effective ways for congregations to have an impact on their urban setting, by joining forces with other institutions and acting on shared interests. Community organizations are powerful, multi-institutional coalitions that carry the ethical and social concerns of their constituent institutions, primarily communities of faith, but also schools, unions, and non-profits, into the public arena. At the same time, community organizations develop leaders in urban neighborhoods for effective engagement in the democratic process. Congregations find the disciplines and practices of community organizing an effective way of exerting political power and engaging some of the larger systems and problems that face urban neighborhoods.

There are several different ways that these institution-based community organizations are identified. In the Protestant Christian tradition, these community organizations, primarily comprising religious congregations and communities, are typically called CBCOs (Congregation-Based Community Organizations) or FBCOs (Faith-Based Community Organizations). In the academic world, they are often referred to as IBCOs (Interfaith-Based Community Organizations). Since these organizations also have non-religious institutions, they are sometimes called BBCOs (Broad-Based Community Organizations) or IBCOs (Institution-Based Community Organizations). Though these names have slightly different nuances, they all refer to a movement of similar community organizing strategies that are employed by several different training networks.

The modern American community organizing movement traces its beginnings back to the October of 1939. It sprang from a creative interaction of faith communities and the labor move-

ment in the Back of the Yards neighborhood, a few miles south of downtown Chicago. Two historic meetings took place over the course of a weekend. On a Friday night, the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) gathered for its first large public meeting. Some 350 people were in attendance, representing several Catholic parishes, service organizations, and union affiliates. One of the primary organizers of the meeting was a criminologist from The University of Chicago named Saul Alinsky.

The agenda for the meeting included several pressing community issues, as well as an overture to the Armour meatpacking plant leadership to avert a strike by meeting with the local union. This historic meeting of the BYNC marked the beginning of the community organizing movement.² At the time, Chicago was a patchwork of neighborhoods of immigrants, largely Roman Catholic, from many European countries. Many immigrants worked in factories and were active in labor unions. The Roman Catholic Church had enormous influence and power in city politics.

On Sunday evening, the Packinghouse Workers of Chicago (PWOC) met to discuss a national strike against four major meatpacking plants. There were some 10,000 union members and neighborhood supporters in attendance, including Bishop Bernard Shiel, whose public posture of solidarity with the union was a huge step forward in the Catholic Church's engagement with social justice issues locally. The bishop's embracing of BYNC's community organizing efforts gave it legitimacy and opened doors for others to engage. The overall organizing leader of that meeting was John L. Lewis, the national president of the Committee of Industrial Organizations (CIO).³

That these meetings happened on the same weekend was no coincidence, as this was a community in crisis. Provisionally, two visionary leaders were drawn to addressing the injustice issues facing that neighborhood. John L. Lewis was at the peak of his leadership in revitalizing the labor movement and his tactics were bold and effective. Saul Alinsky was working as a research sociologist in the community and became increasingly interested in direct action. From his exposure to labor organizing efforts, he began to see his work in the community through the lens of creating collective institutional power.

Coming off the success of the BYNC, Alinsky established the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940, which became the base for his national organizing efforts. He expanded the work to other communities and began to train organizers. His unique approach to organizing was collected in a couple of critical books, *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals*. Alinsky's organizations evolved as broad-based, multi-issue power institutions.

Their tactics were sometimes controversial, because, Alinsky argued, conflict and tension were often necessary to create the climate for change and to hold those in power accountable. For example, The Woodlawn Organization in Chicago's Southside once hauled loads of trash from an absentee landlord's apartment complex and dumped it in the owner's front yard in a northern suburb. The action was designed to pressure him to respond to the tenants' demands for more trash bins and pickups and the "shaming" tactic worked.

As the community organizing movement evolved over the decades, its strategy focused increasingly on building relational power for people to act together in public actions and hold those in power accountable. Building power by way of hundreds of individual and small group meetings was one of the movement's distinguishing and sustaining characteristics. Effective organizing campaigns are possible when there are strong social capital and social trust, which emerges out of organizational attention to relationship-building, both at the individual and institutional levels.

In the mid-1960s, leadership at the national office of the Presbyterian Church, spearheaded by Rev. George Todd, began supporting the community organizing movement by providing

grants and training leaders. Todd was one of many national Protestant leaders, including urban ministry staff persons in the Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, and United Church of Christ denominations, who saw the importance of community organizing as a way for urban congregations to reconnect with their communities by working on issues like public education, racially motivated housing discrimination, and fair wages. They were interested in moving beyond charity toward justice, focusing more on public policy efforts to address the root causes of social problems.

Up until this concerted Protestant effort, the Roman Catholic Church was the main religious community significantly involved in and financially supporting of organizing. The Presbyterian Church (USA) and other Protestant churches began earmarking grants for community organizing. However, the Catholic Campaign for Human Development is still the largest source of funding for community organizing and has been for decades. The community organizing movement, which began in a Catholic parish in Chicago, has flourished primarily because of the strong investment and participation of faith institutions over time.

In the eight decades since the establishment of the IAF, broad-based community organizing has emerged as a major social justice movement. Interfaith Funders initiated a survey in 2010, undertaken by sociologists Dr. Richard Wood and Dr. Brad Fulton, to assess “the state of the field.” Some 189 FBCOs were identified across the nation. Of the 4,500 member institutions identified as belonging to FBCOs, about 3,500 (78%) were faith communities. The remaining members were schools (4%), unions (3.4%), neighborhood associations (2.9%), and other non-profit organizations (11.7%). Of the member congregations, traditional Protestant denominations account for 32%, Catholic 27%, African American Protestant 24%, Jewish 5%, Evangelical Protestant 4%, Unitarian/Universalist 4%, Pentecostal 2%, Muslim 1%, and other non-Christian traditions 1%.⁴

The strong Protestant involvement presently reflects the credentialing of community organizing by denominational staff that encouraged local congregations to engage. Also, as new organizing training networks arose in different parts of the country, similar in style to IAF, there was a concerted effort in the South to recruit African American congregations. The movement has been intentional in recent decades to also include faith communities from Jewish, Muslim, Unitarian, and other traditions.

Congregation-based community organizing has been successful in building significant relationships across the faith, racial/ethnic, and economic divisions that often fragment communities. The Interfaith Funders 2010 survey of congregations involved in community organizing identified that 46% were predominately Anglo, 30% were predominately African American, 13% were predominately Hispanic, and 11% identified themselves as “other.”⁵ Note that communities of color tend to be over-represented when compared to the general population.

A community organization’s agenda, its focus for action, emerges from distilling hundreds of conversations among people in its member institutions into consensus issues. As people talk about their concerns and aspirations, in either individual or small group meetings (typically called “house meetings”), what emerges from these conversations is the identification of people’s self-interests.

As community organizations frame it, self-interest is not to be confused with selfish interest; rather, self-interests are the driving concerns in someone’s life—family, health, career, faith, safety, etc. These concerns matter enough to motivate people into public life. Both individual and house meetings seek to solicit stories about people’s lives and values, as well as stories about how an issue, like neighborhood safety, might be playing out in their lives. Knowing another person’s self-interest and life story is the beginning of building a “public relationship.” When leaders intentionally initiate more public relationships with a diverse set of colleagues, they are building relational power to have agency together.

When a sufficient number of people share a set of similar self-interests, that concern has the potential to coalesce into a priority issue for the FBCO's work. Some of the primary issues commonly addressed include public education, local economy and jobs, affordable housing, health care, behavioral health access, police reform, immigrant justice, and neighborhood safety. Because these are broad-based organizations, with numerous member institutions, FBCOs may work on multiple issues concurrently.

FBCOs are committed to being politically non-partisan. Their involvement in electoral politics, then, is typically in holding large "accountability sessions" with potential or current office-holders to determine the public official's stands on the issues identified by the FBCO. These accountability sessions typically have several hundred people in attendance. Candidates running for office are not endorsed or campaigned for, but their responses to the agenda issues of the organization are disseminated. The FBCO secures a commitment from each official to meet after the election and begin work on the issues if they win the vote.

Dr. Katie Day, in the introduction to *Yours The Power: Faith-Based Organizing in the USA*, says of this strategy,

Due to the commitment not to forge permanent alliances ('no permanent allies and no permanent enemies'), FBCOs remain militantly non-partisan, cultivating an organizational discipline to stay focused on a goal and a capacity to reward or punish public officials.⁶

By being non-partisan, and not beholden to any candidate, they maintain their power to critique when necessary. Also, FBCOs will not take any government monies to support their operating budgets, as they would be compromised if they ever needed to hold that funding institution accountable.

Community organizing, over time, has demonstrated its capacity to make a significant difference across the country on important sectors of the society. For example, in the arena of jobs and the economy, FBCOs have had a major impact by organizing numerous "living wage" campaigns across the country.

The first "living wage" ordinance was adopted in Baltimore in 1994 and it required that the businesses doing contract work with the city must pay their employees a living wage, versus a minimum wage that just keeps a family above the poverty level, which at the time was \$8 per hour. BUILD (Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development), an IAF affiliate, was the principal catalyst in the passage of the ordinance. In researching wages, it was clear that the well-paying union jobs of the decreasing industrial base were being replaced by lower-paying service- and tourist-industry jobs. BUILD held several accountability sessions with the mayor to push forward an agenda of livable wages. If the city raised the bar on salaries, then other governmental and business sectors would be forced to follow suit. When the ordinance passed, nearly 2,000 workers immediately realized salary increases that enabled them to live more comfortably.

Since the passage of that campaign, dozens of other cities have adopted "living wage" ordinances. Valley Interfaith, in South Texas, won a first-ever "living wage" policy in a public-school system in McAllen, Texas. More than 400 employees received wage increases of more than \$2 per hour. Several other districts followed suit. Altogether, Valley Interfaith has won raises for 3,400 public employees.⁷

From its beginnings in a Chicago neighborhood in crisis, the community organizing movement continues to evolve, adapt, and grow. The major community organizing training networks include IAF (Industrial Areas Foundation, which is the oldest network), PICO (Pacific Institute for Community Organizing, which is now Faith in Action), DART (Direct Action Research and

Training), the Gamaliel Foundation, IVP (Interfaith Valley Project), RCNO (Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations), and others. Many FBCOs nationally are under ten years old. As these organizations mature, their capacity to exercise the values of their faith and democratic communities in the public square expands.

Central to the success of this style of organizing is the staying power of institutions—faith communities, schools, unions, and non-profits. By focusing on institutions as the locus of an FBCO's power, there is a stability generated by the member institutions being committed for the long haul, even as individual leaders in an institution may move in and out of organizing activity. The human and fiscal resources of the member institutions allow the FBCO to be able to sustain the long engagement necessary to address complex justice issues. Community organizing stresses that there are two types of power—"the power of organized people" and "the power of organized money." The member institutions bring both of these sources of power to the table.

Institutions also bring legitimacy, historical rootedness, and communities of shared values. They have connections, sometimes to national resources. They can provide meeting spaces and infrastructure. Their members, collectively, and the institutions, corporately, have economic power.

By way of concrete examples of how community organizing provides agency for congregations, consider La Mesa Presbyterian Church, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where one of the authors (Trey Hammond) has served as the Senior Pastor for over two decades. The congregation belongs to Albuquerque Interfaith (AI), an affiliate of the IAF network.

Soon after arriving as pastor in 1999, Hammond found that the early childcare program operating at La Mesa Presbyterian Church, run by a non-profit agency, was facing potential closure. The city was planning to drastically curtail early childhood education grants to community-based preschools. There was already a shortage of quality early childhood education and the loss of this center presented a real crisis for the families in the neighborhood. The congregation connected with Albuquerque Interfaith and other agencies whose preschools were also facing serious budget cuts. This coalition conducted "research actions" with city staff to understand the cuts and why these agencies were the ones targeted. It was discovered that the city was addressing a budget shortfall by severely cutting its allocation to the social service budget, as opposed to having all the city departments absorb marginal reductions.

Albuquerque Interfaith organized a campaign to meet with city councilors and city department heads to express concern over the decision to slash the social service budgets and the negative impact it would have on families in neighborhoods across the city. To shape the public narrative, a campaign of articles in the local paper and stories in the local TV news coverage brought the plight of the affected organizations to the public's attention. A large public meeting, an "accountability session," was held and there was compelling public testimony by families that would be adversely impacted by curtailing services. By the end of the meeting, city officials conceded that making small cuts across all the departments would be the better approach to addressing the budget shortfall, rather than a deep cut to the one department that provided the preschool program grants.

Not only was funding restored for the childcare program at La Mesa, but other providers as well. If the La Mesa congregation had attempted to challenge the funding cut decision on its own, it likely would have been a losing effort. However, acting collectively with the community organization and other agencies, the congregation was able to influence the city's budget-cutting strategy and preserve several quality childcare providers in under-served neighborhoods across the city.

The effectiveness of this action led some city councilors to approach Albuquerque Interfaith a couple of years later when a new mayor proposed a layoff of 300 city employees to solve what

he declared to be a budget deficit. Many of the jobs on the chopping block were held by members of congregations that belonged to Albuquerque Interfaith, especially one large Catholic parish. Also, AI had two city employee unions involved whose members were affected.

Albuquerque Interfaith did research actions, including conversations with the city's budget staff. It was discovered that there were monies that the mayor could have used to balance the budget, including a quarter of a cent sales tax that could have been enacted, but the mayor had other purposes in mind for those monies. Albuquerque Interfaith leaders met with city councilors and convinced them to delay acting on the mayor's budget until there had been a public hearing with the mayor and City Council. More than 600 people from AI institutions were in attendance. Several city employees who were facing job loss told their stories, with most speaking for the very first time in a public setting. Clergy spoke about the potential harm the job cuts would have for the families and communities of the churches they served. After heated debate, the city council voted to reject the mayor's proposal and the budget was balanced by re-allocating other budget items, thus saving the jobs.

In the course of these two actions, the leaders of Albuquerque Interfaith came to understand how a city budget is a "moral statement" of what the city values and invests in. When those values stand in contradiction to the interests of a community organization and its member institutions, the FBCO has the capacity and collective power to act.

Soon after that successful campaign, a major school bond election failed because of a scandal involving the previous superintendent. Albuquerque Interfaith was asked by leadership in the Albuquerque Public Schools, following the bond's defeat, to organize a "ground game" for getting out the vote in the next election. They recognized Albuquerque Interfaith's capacity to turn out people for public actions and they needed a grassroots effort to build support for the bond.

Albuquerque Interfaith did its due diligence, by undertaking research actions, to understand the school bond package. The leaders concluded that this Capital Master Plan was one of the most equitable capital investment processes in the country. Every school campus was assessed and ranked by an outside, impartial architectural firm in every bond cycle. Based on the ranking, the bond money was allocated in a "worst to first" strategy, so projects with the greatest capital need moved to the top of the list for rehab to their buildings. This process assured that schools in all the neighborhoods of the city, from affluent to impoverished, were on a level playing field in accessing capital resources. It also took the politics out of the process, so that a powerful principal, school board member, or superintendent could not put their thumb on the scale of prioritizing projects.

Albuquerque Interfaith agreed to work with the school district to increase voter participation, for what was an off-cycle election, where usually less than 8% of registered voters participated. Albuquerque Interfaith held dozens of actions throughout the city to educate constituents, including shaping the larger public conversation in stories and editorials in the paper. AI organized a series of "Get Out the Vote" walks in neighborhoods surrounding our member institutions. The walk from the La Mesa congregation had over 100 participants, including the superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools, several school board members, the La Mesa Elementary School principal, dozens of teachers and parents, and the city councilor. In the course of five walks across several weekends, walkers had conversations with thousands of likely registered voters—sharing information, answering questions, and identifying polling places. Voter turnout jumped significantly, and the bond package passed by a 70% margin.

This bond's passage was particularly good for La Mesa Elementary School, located across the street from the La Mesa church. The school received funding for a much-needed major addition to the campus that alleviated overcrowding and eliminated several overflow portable classrooms, which were less-than-ideal learning spaces.

This kind of grassroots, door-to-door, relational style of politics is not only engaging for participants and builds relationships, but is also politically effective. A great deal of social capital was created and exerted in the campaign. Individuals exercised agency by acting together and alliances were deepened between Albuquerque Interfaith, local schools, and school district leadership.

The common denominator in all these actions is a process whereby people find their common self-interest together and act upon it. Community organizing holds a positive view of “relational power” as agency, understood as “the capacity to make things happen.”

Sometimes people, especially from faith communities, come to organizing and find the use of the word “power” problematic, as power is perceived as corrupting and coercive. Organizing vocabulary differentiates that type of coercive power as “unilateral power.” This top-down power tends to be damaging; so, organizing is often focused on exposing unilateral power and mitigating its consequences. To counter such effects, a community organization is interested in building “relational power.” This is the power of people to act together and create the agency to make a change for the better, not by coercion, but by disciplined collective engagement.

This kind of relational power is built, step by step, in what is referred to as “the organizing cycle.” It begins with “individual meetings” (sometimes called “one-on-ones”). These conversations are aimed at creating common ground and hearing others’ stories and passions. These conversations lead to “public relationships” built on common self-interests. Ernesto Cortez, famous for being the organizer of the powerful COPS organization in San Antonio, TX, and a leader in the IAF training network, believes that a community organization’s agency springs from building relational power through individual meetings. He famously says in training events, “The individual meeting is the most radical thing we do.”

Individual meetings usually lead to “house meeting” campaigns, small group meetings that mix people from different institutions. People begin to identify the issues they can affect and try to break down overwhelming “problems” into actionable “issues.” Next, research actions are held with stakeholders and experts who can help the FBCO’s leaders understand the issue’s complexity and identify which individuals or entities can bring about helpful change.

If a politician is a possible ally or target in the effort, an “accountability session” is often the next step. An accountability session is a large public meeting with a potential or current public office holder, to advocate for changes in policy or funding that emerge from research actions and strategic analysis of an issue. Before the accountability session, the power of the public official is analyzed, by identifying what change they can affect. Each institution makes a “turnout” pledge of how many people they commit to bring to the session. The actual turnout at the action will be compared to projected turnout after the action, as a way of internal accountability.

At the accountability session, leaders of the FBCO tell stories of how their lives are being impacted by the issues on the agenda. These stories emerge from the many individual and house meetings and give people a powerful opportunity to act as “public persons.” From the research actions and the collective analysis of what leaders have learned about the issue, a series of “pin questions” are formulated for the public official/s that address the policy changes desired. The “yes or no” questions are aimed at getting commitments from the public official, essentially public promises, to support the organization’s agenda and to get an agreement for the next meeting.

At the end of each accountability session, members from all the participating institutions gather to evaluate the action, grade the turnout of each institution, reflect on strengths and weaknesses of the action, decide on the next steps, and celebrate the highlights of this demonstration of collective power in public life. These accountability sessions, at their best, are lively public political dramas and help build working relationships with public officials.

Accountability sessions, both for public officials and the gathered group of institutional leaders, provide an interesting learning academy and a public demonstration of how collective power is built. They provide a platform for effective analysis of the FBCO's primary issues, help develop individual leaders to act in public life, and hold public officials and institutions accountable.

This "organizing cycle" of meetings and actions teaches people skills in public life and facilitates the empowerment of the community organization's leaders. This individual power then leads to social power (agency), by joining together with other leaders in a disciplined, multi-institutional manner.

Throughout this process, there are training events to equip people from the member institutions to learn leadership skills and see themselves as "leaders." In truth, the professional organizer is rarely on stage at public actions but works behind the scenes to support the leaders who will moderate the action, tell their stories, analyze the issues, and hold the public officials accountable.

Leadership training happens in academies resourced by the national training networks, as well as in ongoing monthly teachings at local leaders' meetings. Most leaders' meetings include individual meetings, so new public relationships are consistently being forged.

In an essay entitled *Community Organizing: An Ecological Route to Empowerment and Power*, the authors Paul Speer and Joseph Hughey explore the relationship of empowerment (individual agency) and social power (collective agency). They note that

the concept of action-reflection requires individuals to act as a part of an organization. Such action provides a context through which cognitive, emotional, and behavioral components of individual empowerment become manifest. Participation in a community organization provides a collective context through which emotional reaction to that power can be processed or reflected upon.⁸

In community organizing language, relational power or social capital is built through learning the stories, values, self-interests, and histories of others, and then acting together to engage the social concerns that affect both individual lives and communities. Community organizing embodies this action/reflection model in how it structures its organizing cycle.

One of the strengths of community organizing is drawing people together, from different institutions representing the civic sector of society, to get to know each other and act collaboratively on their religious or democratic values. Many social commentators on modern life identify the weakening of "mediating structures" as a reason for much of the breakdown of community.^{9,10} Mediating structures are collective entities—including faith communities, schools, libraries, non-profits, unions, and voluntary associations—that act to buffer the impact of larger social realities on individuals and families. These mediating structures are becoming less influential individually and there are fewer social spaces for them to cooperate and act together. Community organizing is one strategy for re-connecting those sectors of society that can mitigate the effect of large social, political, and economic forces on individuals and communities.

Ernesto Cortez addresses how this works in an essay entitled *Reweaving the Social Fabric*,

To rebuild our society, we must rebuild our civic and political institutions. The rehabilitation of our political and civic culture requires a new politics, with authentically democratic mediating institutions—teaching, mentoring, and building an organized constituency with the power and imagination to initiate change. The work of IAF is to establish a public space in which ordinary people can learn and develop the skills of public life and create the institutions of a new democratic politics. With organized

citizens and strong mediating institutions, our communities can address structural inequalities of the economy for themselves, restore health and integrity to our political process, mitigate the distortions created by organized concentrations of wealth, and, in the end, reclaim the vision and promise of American life.¹¹

As leaders participate in organizing activities they become more deeply engaged in the democratic process, by engaging public officials and political decisions in effective advocacy, participating in a more informed way at the ballot box, and encouraging others to vote. They understand that, after an election, public officials need to be held accountable to act upon their commitments.

Over time, an effective community organization, like Albuquerque Interfaith, not only builds relationships among individuals, but also among institutions. They provide an ongoing platform for people in faith communities, educational communities, and other civic institutions to work together, find common ground, articulate their religious and democratic values, and act effectively together in public life. Connections are made that enhance the vitality of all the institutions involved. There is collective power exerted when these mediating institutions join forces and mobilize their constituencies into a disciplined sustained political engagement.

Relationships are also built over time with the entities that are sometimes allies and sometimes targets of organizing campaigns. One of the mantras of community organizing is that there are “no permanent enemies and no permanent allies.” There are times when an FBCO will work with institutions and politicians that they have organized against before when common ground is found on an important issue. Also, there are times a campaign is aimed at a previous ally when there is disagreement on an issue.

This dynamic is illustrated by another organizing effort in Albuquerque. Because of Albuquerque Interfaith’s effectiveness in helping pass the previous bond package, the school district approached AI to organize “Get Out the Vote” walks in every subsequent bond cycle. AI’s interest in the bond issue had deepened over time because several charter public schools had joined Albuquerque Interfaith. The equitable capital master planning process that had been so effective in rebuilding traditional public schools also made it possible for charter public schools to build their school facilities, instead of renting expensive commercial spaces.

About a decade ago a new superintendent, coming from out of state and unfamiliar with this history of collaboration, was somewhat skeptical of Albuquerque Interfaith’s involvement in the bond issue. However, when he saw AI’s success in turning out likely voters, so that the first bond package of his superintendency passed by another large margin, he became enthusiastic about AI’s role.

However, the superintendent had a vested interest in seeing a couple of new projects get built early in his tenure at the district—a football stadium and a teacher training center. After the election, he pushed these two projects to the top of the list, ahead of the school repair and renovation projects that were important to Albuquerque Interfaith institutions.

The district’s capital master planner, who had guided the school construction process for years and worked with AI in facilitating previous bond walks, was troubled by this re-ordering of priorities. It meant classrooms needing upgrading would be delayed, as the superintendent’s two pet priority projects required a significant investment. The planner was unable to change the superintendent’s mind.

Because of AI’s ongoing work in bond elections and the trust that had built over time, the master planner informed Albuquerque Interfaith leaders of the superintendent’s changed priorities, knowing that AI was committed to the long-standing equitable philosophy that prioritized aging classrooms being renovated first.

Research actions were done and care was taken not to expose the planner who was the informant. AI leaders met with the superintendent, but he remained insistent upon his priorities. Albuquerque Interfaith leaders argued that this action contradicted the “worst to first” prioritization and the superintendent was politicizing the process by imposing his priorities.

When the superintendent refused to reconsider, AI met with other stakeholders, including school board members, the local teacher’s union, and other allies. Through a media campaign, this became quite a public fight.

The superintendent was unhappy with this push-back, as the controversy was hurting his public image, so he offered a compromise of significantly scaling back the stadium cost and delaying the timetable for its completion. He also tabled the teacher training center for several years, a decision endorsed by the teacher’s union.

By achieving this compromise, Albuquerque Interfaith was able to get the “worst to first” funding back on track and the schools AI had publicly walked to renovate were back in the queue. AI did not get everything it sought in the compromise, but crafted a victory that all parties could live with.

Organizing recognizes that effective social change involves disciplined action, negotiation, and navigating strategic compromises with entrenched, resistant governmental structures. A victory is usually an incremental step toward a larger agenda. Institutional reform takes time, persistence, and judgment.

Reflective of the commitment of not having “permanent enemies or allies,” Albuquerque Interfaith stood with the superintendent the following year, as one of the few organizations that publicly supported him when the governor threatened budget cuts to the district. The governor had an agenda of privatizing public education and, as the largest school district in the state, Albuquerque was a favorite target. The governor also threatened to seek legislation to break up the school district, which the superintendent adamantly opposed. Albuquerque Interfaith had successfully fought earlier attempts to divide the district. AI leaders met with the superintendent to craft a coordinated strategy to block the governor’s agenda.

Albuquerque Interfaith advocated vigorously, as an ally of the district, at the state legislative session and the governor’s legislation was effectively thwarted. As a case study of “no permanent enemies, no permanent allies,” the superintendent recognized AI’s power and came to respect it, even when we disagreed. He understood Albuquerque Interfaith was an ally for the long haul, but not to be taken for granted.

As urban clergy, the authors believe that public education is the most just and equitable way to ensure that all children have access to quality learning, and education organizing work reflects the values of most faith traditions. For La Mesa Presbyterian Church, located next door to a grade school, and committed to the well-being of the children and families in the neighborhood, this translates into a commitment that public schools receive adequate financial resources and utilize effective pedagogy to equip children in reaching their fullest potential and learning the critical skills to be engaged citizens in our democracy.

Another arena where FBCO work has had an impact in cities has been in addressing affordable housing. The lack of affordable housing is a national crisis and many FBCOs are addressing this crisis in their cities. Phil Tom, in his capacity as the Director of the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnership Center of the US Labor Department, observed FBCOs working at local and national levels to get just housing policies enacted. Both authors, while working at the national office of the Presbyterian Church, targeted grants to FBCOs working on affordable housing, especially for campaigns in many cities to create Housing Trust Funds, as funding pools for affordable housing. A number of those FBCOs were successful in campaigns to create Housing Trust Funds at the state level. FBCOS were also effective in changing city housing

codes to require percentages of new housing projects to be set aside as “affordable” for lower-income tenants.

One group, affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation, is the Washington Interfaith Network (WIN). One of WIN’s major priorities was to get the City of Washington, DC to increase the number of affordable housing units in the DC Metro area. WIN proposed legislation to the city government that placed requirements for developers to include 20% of affordable housing units with their market-rate development. WIN also lobbied to increased city funding of affordable housing.

As WIN worked at the local level, IAF nationally was also organizing to get the US Housing and Urban Development Office (HUD) to increase its funding at the national level, to reverse two decades of significant federal budget cuts for affordable and public housing. It was clear that local funding would not be enough to meet the demands for the growing number of affordable housing units needed for the city. WIN and its IAF affiliates knew they had to organize, at both the local and national level, if they were going to succeed in securing additional funding to create new affordable housing in the communities they served.

During the past decade, like IAF, several of the other FBCO training networks expanded their work to embrace a national organizing strategy, alongside their local efforts, to affect issues like immigrant justice. Faith in Action (formally known as PICO) and Gamaliel (with whom Barack Obama had organized) expanded their work on immigration reform at both the state and national levels. Faith in Action organized in New York and New Jersey to approve driver’s licenses and state-approved identification cards for undocumented immigrants, so they can receive banking services and other public services. Faith in Action continued to mobilize their state affiliates to lobby their representatives in Washington to pass legislation impacting immigrants, both documented and undocumented.

The White House’s Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnership Center (where Phil Tom worked as Director) reached out to IAF, Faith in Action, Gamaliel, and National People’s Action for their input and support for national legislation aimed at comprehensive immigration reform, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA). The FBCO organizing networks, working in partnership with other immigrant rights advocacy groups, played a significant role in getting the Obama administration to issue an Executive Branch Memo to implement the DACA policy.

In the author’s work with the US Labor Department on workers’ rights, leaders from Gamaliel, Faith in Action, and Interfaith Worker Justice, and other FBCOs met with the Labor Secretary and other top labor officials to address workplace issues. These included increasing the minimum wage, pay stub protections, rights of workers not protected by Federal Labor Standard Act, tip wage law, and other issues impacting low-wage workers.

The capacity of the FBCOs to mobilize their member institutions and congregations across the country to respond quickly on a national policy issue is powerful and can have a significant impact on passing reforming legislation.

All in all, both authors believe that communities of faith that learn the skills and tactics of community organizing function as powerful agents for change in their community. As part of a broad-based community organizations, congregations can help shape public policy and economic investments at the city, county, state, and national levels.

The habits and practices of community organizing, all aimed at building a deep relational culture, also have great benefit inside the life of a local parish. These help a congregation in deepening relationships both within and outside of their faith community, training and empowering individuals in leadership, and opening the door of the church to the diversity of the community around them.

Cities are complex ecologies that impact the well-being of all the entities within them, including churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples. However, the flow of energy goes both ways. Congregations can act with agency, by building the requisite relational power collectively, predicated on religious and democratic values, to shape their urban environment.

Community organizing never settles for “the world as it is” but strives for “the world as it should be.” This overarching vision of community organizing aligns with our faith tradition’s commitment to God’s justice. That is more than enough to keep us as clergy, and our faith communities, doing our “one-on-one” conversations and house meetings, as antidotes to the decline of social capital, and to create enough agency to make our communities more just and equitable. The welfare of our cities is better for that!

Notes

- 1 The authors are both Presbyterian clergy and community organizing leaders in the US. They have served a variety of urban congregations and worked with many local community organizing efforts. They were also on the national church staff of the Presbyterian Church (USA), directing the Urban Ministry Office, and overseeing the denomination’s support of community organizing nationally. In addition, Phil Tom worked as the Director of the Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnership Office of the US Department of Labor during the Obama administration.
- 2 Stanley D. Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 94.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- 4 Mark R. Warren and Richard Wood, *Faith-Based Organizing: The State of the Field* (Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders, 2010), p. 10.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 6 Katie Day, Ester McIntosh, and William Storrar, eds, *Yours The Power: Faith Based Community Organizing* (Brill, 2013), pp. 25–26.
- 7 Mark R. Warren and Richard Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing in Action: Five Stories of Community Change* (Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders, 2001), pp. 22–23.
- 8 Paul W. Speer and Joseph Hughey, Community Organizing: An Ecological Route to Empowerment and Power. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol. 23, No. 5 (1995), pp. 773–74
- 9 Robert D. Putnam, Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital. *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 6 (1995), pp. 64–78.
- 10 Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, *To Empower the People: From State to Civil Society* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 1997).
- 11 Ernesto Cortez, Reweaving the Social Fabric (*Boston Review*, The New War of Poverty, June/September 1994).

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