

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Community organizing— What is it? Why do it?



Community organizing has been in the news a lot lately. Hillary Clinton wrote her college thesis on community organizing. Barack Obama worked as a community organizer in Chicago. He uses community organizing principles in his campaign, and some political observers believe these principles would influence how he functioned as U.S. president if he were elected.

Besides hearing this news, lately I've met several Christians who do community organizing, especially what they call faith-based community organizing. Thus I've tried to learn more about it.

The status quo needs some changes

My upbringing gave me the impression that causing conflict and trying to change the status quo were bad. I knew that community organizing caused conflict and tried to achieve change, so I assumed it was bad. In more recent years, however, I've realized that the status quo includes injustices that following Jesus requires working to eliminate. As a result, I've come to admire community organizing.

Also, I now believe churches need to make their members more aware of the value of community organizing. It can help reduce poverty and abuse and promote health and education, so it could help in following Jesus more closely. Community organizing principles could even help church members achieve needed internal change in their churches.



People working for what they need most

Community organizing is based on the belief that, by working together, people can help to change harmful conditions that directly affect them. The change

Century-long development



What is now known as community organizing started with Brooklyn-born Dorothy Day, a journalist who became a Catholic social activist in the early 1900s. She led social-justice campaigns on behalf of the poor, hungry, and homeless in New York City. A cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement, she advocated nonviolence, practiced civil disobedience at times, and helped to provide hospitality for the downtrodden.

Helping the powerless to have a voice

The main roots of today's community organizing, however, are in the work of Saul Alinsky. His activities centered in working-class neighborhoods in the stockyards area of Chicago in the 1930s and 1940s. He was committed to motivating and helping the poor working people of these neighborhoods.



Alinsky helped these people who had been excluded from power to acquire a voice in the institutional policies that directly affected their lives. He helped them become active participants in the policy-making of the local governments, school systems, and labor unions that affected them. From his start in Chicago, Alinsky went on to train community organizers and help establish community organizing networks throughout the U.S.

Opponents tended to see Alinsky as brash, abrasive, and overly self-promoting. Many considered his tactics unacceptably militant and his style unacceptably irreverent. However, he was apparently brilliant and perceptive. He saw what caused harmful conditions and how to accomplish needed change.

King's values plus Alinsky's methods

What is now called faith-based community organizing combines principles of the civil-rights movement, especially those that Martin Luther King, Jr. emphasized, with the methods that Saul Alinsky developed. This combination emphasizes the "kingdom values" of Jesus. It combats oppression by pairing passionate prayer with civil disobedience.



they want may be local, like stop signs in their neighborhood, or national, like immigration reform.



Community organizing is based on mobilizing volunteers. It is quite different, however, from the charitable volunteer efforts many of us see most often in our churches and civic organizations. Those efforts usually involve doing things *for* people whom we see as unable to do those things for themselves. In contrast, community organizing teaches suffering people to work effectively together themselves, to get the concrete, basic benefits they feel they need most. Such benefits typically include jobs, education, public services, or better living conditions.

Recognizing the differences

The usual first step in community organizing is for a concerned group such as a church congregation, charitable foundation board, or civic organization to recognize harmful conditions that need changing. These concerned people identify specific harmful features of “the world as it is.”

For Christians, this might mean recognizing how our society resembles the Roman Empire in which Jesus lived. The recognition could include seeing how economic policies create inescapable poverty.

It could include seeing how the poor, homosexuals, or women in our culture are treated as outcasts or second-class citizens, just as lepers, Samaritans, and women were in Jesus’s culture.



The concerned group also considers what they see as “the world as it should be.” Its inhabitants, like those of what the New Testament calls “the kingdom of God,” would welcome society’s outcasts. They would practice compassion, not violence. They would actively combat poverty instead of helping to perpetuate it.

Deciding to work for change

Seeing how these two worlds differ, the group decides to do what it can to help make the world as it is more like the world as it should be. They decide to help promote one of the needed changes. They may start by enlisting or supporting one or more trained community organizers. Some group members may even become organizers themselves.

Conversing one-to-one

The organizer or staff of organizers starts work by having one-to-one conversations with local community members who are directly affected by the harmful conditions. These members may be parents whose children’s schools are inadequate. They may be jobless or homeless people. Through these conversations, the organizer learns what changes the suffering community members feel are most needed.

Community organizers see these one-to-one meetings as the foundation of organizing. These conversations reveal community members’ deepest passions and concerns.



Many such meetings happen before any organized effort is launched or even planned. They show which concerns the most community members share and feel most strongly about, and which change might have the earliest visible impact. The conversations also reveal some community members’ potential leadership qualities and willingness to work for change.

Choosing an issue to work on

Next come meetings at which community members share their experiences and feelings. From hearing these, the organizer helps the community members choose one specific change to work for. It might be getting a dilapidated building demolished to deprive drug dealers of their hangout, or getting a stop sign at a corner where school children cross.

The chosen change isn’t one that only outsiders think is needed. Rather, it is one that community members see would directly benefit them—that would affect their own lives in a way that matters strongly to them and would serve their self-interest.

Seeing where the power is

The next step is figuring out who has the power to make the desired change happen. Who owns the dilapidated building, and what would motivate the owner to tear it down? If the only effective motivation would be an official edict from the city, who would have to authorize it? If authorization has to come from the city council, who are its members? To get a building

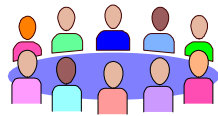


condemned for demolition, how many council members would have to vote for it? Which ones are most likely to be persuadable, and what would persuade them? The necessary persuasion might come from showing them that many residents of their districts would oppose them next time they ran for office, if they didn't help to get the building torn down.

The organizer's role in this kind of analysis is mainly to help community members see the need for it and see how to do it. Rather than doing the steps himself or herself, the organizer teaches community members how to figure out what the needed steps are and how do them most effectively.

Planning and acting

After the necessary analysis, the community members plan and then carry out the needed action. The first step might be to make an appointment for carefully selected community members to meet with the building owner to ask him or her to tear down or remodel the building. If the owner refused, their next step might be to get on the city council's meeting agenda and present their case.



For each of these steps, the organizer helps the community members plan in advance which members will speak and what each will say. They also plan how they will respond to each possible response from the building owner or council. At each step they will ask for a clear and specific commitment—either an agreement to make the requested change within a specific time, or a refusal to make it.



Celebrating, growing, continuing

If the community members succeed in accomplishing the desired change, it's important for them

to celebrate by having an enjoyable and visible event within the community. The event reminds community members that they brought about change by working together. It may also motivate some who weren't part of the present effort to be part of the next one.



Whether or not the effort succeeds, it's important to analyze what worked and what didn't, or at least what would have worked better if it had been done differently. Then it's time to restart the process and begin working toward another change, maybe one that's slightly harder to accomplish.

An unavoidable result

The community organizing process involves pushing for change, and people who are enjoying or benefitting from the status quo aren't likely to want change. Community organizing involves trying to get powerful people to give up some of their power, and few people with power want to give up any of it. Consequently, community organizing usually causes some conflict, or at least tension.

According to the gospels, however, Jesus often pushed for change and caused conflict. He violated social customs and religious traditions. He worked to increase the power of the powerless, just as community organizing does. He often confronted religious and government leaders.



We therefore can't follow him without occasionally doing such things ourselves.

What could a congregation do?

If a church congregation wanted to use community organizing to promote change, what steps would it take? Congregation members would have to start by becoming more aware of what the gospels show

This issue, many back issues, a list of the books I've written about, and more information about *Connections* are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, mailing address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. If you want me to mail you paper copies of any of the 15 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues you want.



I'm a United Methodist lay woman, and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

as top priorities for Jesus. In church classes and meetings, members would have to talk openly about how the world as it is differs from the world as the gospels say it should be. In sermons, the pastor would have to speak explicitly about these differences.



From what congregation members learned through these studies, sermons, and discussions, they would choose a particular harmful local situation they wanted to help change. They would then establish a task force and enlist a community organizer to guide it in working for the desired change.

If the congregation was not part of the suffering community, as many of today's mainline congregations are not, it could provide the necessary funds for paying the organizer. It could provide a place for the gatherings at which the community members did their planning. Congregation members could also be advocates in their social and civic groups. They could attend city council or school board meetings to show support when community spokespersons presented requests to these groups.



A congregation could use community organizing to help change the church and the world.

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Could community organizing methods promote change within the church?



Community organizing is a way to mobilize suffering people to work together to bring about changes that reduce their suffering. This method is used especially for helping the poor improve their living conditions. But could lay church members also use community organizing principles to help make the internal operation of their churches reflect more of the compassion and justice that Jesus taught? I suspect they could.

Lay members could get their Sunday School classes and other groups to talk about how the church as it is differs from the church as it should be. Members could form an unofficial task force and have one-to-one conversations with other members to learn what their greatest concerns and deepest passions were, with regard to the church.



When widely held concerns were found, groups could be formed to start addressing them. The first step would be for the concerned lay members to find out not only what the gospels say but also how their church system works and where its power is. That means what positions and bodies have official authority, but also what individuals currently exert the power that prevents change or could promote it.

Would this cause some conflict? Yes. Would it upset some pastors and other church leaders? Undoubtedly. But Jesus often caused conflict and upset religious leaders. Shouldn't his followers expect to do the same?