

# Renewing Congregations

*The Contribution  
of Faith-Based  
Community  
Organizing*

A resource publication based on the  
Congregational Development Research Study

Conducted by  
Interfaith Funders and  
the University of New Mexico

**2002–2003**

# Acknowledgements

Staff, committee members, and researchers from Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico wish to express their gratitude to Linetta Gilbert and the Ford Foundation for funding this project.

The Congregational Development Research Study (CDRS) would not have been possible without the cooperation and openness of lay leaders, clergy, and organizers from the congregations and local faith-based community organizing sites studied. We deeply appreciate their willingness to open their congregations, organizations, and lives, so that we might learn from their experience.

To Mary Ann Flaherty, Director of the CDRS and primary co-author of this publication, we appreciate the many talents she brought to the project, in particular a strong work ethic, inspired leadership in all phases of the project, and her analytical, writing, and editing skills. Her contributions to this project were instrumental to its success.

To Rich Wood, Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico, Director of Research for the CDRS, and primary co-author, we express our deep admiration and gratitude for his accomplished scholarship, insightful leadership and steadfast work ethic. His skillful navigation through the waterways of field research kept us on course. Research associates, Mo Banihashemi and Lora Stone, from the University of New Mexico, spent long hours traveling, interviewing and reporting. For their dedication and essential contributions we are grateful. Transcribers Dana Bell, Jean Blomquist, and Gia Scarpetta produced excellent work with infinite patience.

To Rev. Terry Boggs, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Chair of the CDRS committee, we are thankful for his wise leadership and unwavering commitment to the project and to the work of social justice in faith communities.

To the CDRS committee: Randy Keesler, Catholic Campaign for Human Development; Lee Winkelman, Jewish Fund for Justice; Linetta Gilbert, Ford Foundation; Rev. Phil Tom and Rev. Trey Hammond, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); and Jeannie Appleman, Executive Director, Interfaith Funders, we are grateful for their diligent and ongoing feedback and invaluable wisdom borne of decades of collective experience working for social justice. And to Doug Lawson, in memoriam, we miss you.

We also want to thank the CDRS Advisory Group members for their valuable insight and guidance on the project: Bishop George McKinney, St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ; Rev. Trey Hammond, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Rabbi Leonard Beerman, Leo Baeck Temple; Rabbi Mark Raphael, Kehilat Shalom; Rev. Timothy Tseng, American Baptist Seminary of the West; Dr. Rev. Jesse Miranda, Vanguard University and the Alianza de Ministerios Evangelicos Nacionales (Alliance of National Evangelical Ministries); Dr. Fredrick Seidl, Unitarian Universalist Association; Rev. Bishop Stephen Bouman, Metropolitan New York Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America; Rev. Dwight Webster, Christian Unity Baptist Church; Rev. Robert Vitillo, Catholic Campaign for Human Development; Ms. Linetta Gilbert, Ford Foundation; and Rev. Janet Wolf, Religious Leaders for Justice and Compassion.

We wish to also thank the following contributing authors: Terry Boggs, Madeline Lee, Jeannie Appleman, Lee Winkelman, and Julie Weill.

# Table of Contents

4	<b>The Socio-Economic Context</b>
5	<b>Introduction</b>
7	<b>The Relationship between Faith-Based Community Organizing and Communities of Faith</b>
9	<b>The Congregational Development Research Study Findings</b>
12	<b>Discussion of the Findings</b>
13	<b>Three Overall Findings</b>
15	<i>A Tent of Justice: The Story of Temple Israel Synagogue in Boston</i>
19	<i>A Ministry of their Own: The Story of Faith Chapel (Church of God in Christ) in San Diego</i>
22	<b>The Role of Leaders</b>
27	<i>Justice in the Valley: The Story of St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas</i>
29	<b>The Role of Clergy</b>
31	<i>Rebirth of a Mainline Protestant Congregation: The Story of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota</i>
34	<b>The Role of Organizers</b>
36	<b>Obstacles to Successful Congregational Development</b>
38	<b>Conclusion</b>
39	<b>Resources for Further Exploration</b>

## *The Socio-Economic Context*

Congregations of faith seek to live out the call of their faith traditions in a culture experiencing enormous change. One of the key shifts continuing to occur is the pressure experienced by families and communities in a culture of rising individualism and global economics. The emerging market-driven economy is expanding to influence more than just the acquisition of things. Relationships and communities are now being seen as commodities that are bought and sold. The question raised more often than “How are things going for the family...the community?” is “How is it with the economy?” According to a market analysis, one of the roles of communities of faith is to offer compassion and service, tending to the casualties left by this increasingly global economy and individualized culture. But communities of faith feel the pressure to focus only narrowly on the private, to avoid raising the difficult public issues or tensions that come from life in the larger community—to “go with what the market will bear,” even if it means silence in the face of social injustice.

However, some people of faith in America are choosing to find their voices in the public arena through engagement in faith-based community organizing. These congregants are reaching out to other religious communities across class, race, ethnic, geographic, economic, and political distinctions. They are building intentional public relationships, sharing common stories, and discovering commonly held values and vision. They are learning to express their pain publicly and to critique the prevailing norms of their communities and the larger culture. They are imagining new possibilities of life together in community. The results are impressive, including creation of public policies to meet the expressed concerns of local residents; expansion of health care options and affordable housing; renewal of schools; and development of jobs for the people who need them the most. But more profoundly, done well, this work transforms the faith communities themselves, renewing their health, hope and vigor. Faith-based community organizing demands that congregations train and develop leaders with power within the congregation; those leaders in turn offer unexpected new energy and commitment for congregational and public life.

Congregational participants in faith-based community organizing are invited to find their own powerful voices and to act, not as individuals, but as citizens in the largest sense of the word. This citizenship is not narrowly defined by any permits or cards, but by collaborative participation in public life. Insisting that the nation belongs to them and that the institutions that are intended to serve them must do just that, people of faith find that their sacred texts come to life in a new way through public action, healing the artificial separation between the life of a true citizen and the life of the spirit.

## Introduction

*At St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas, Lupita Mendiola and fellow lay leaders have, with support from pastor Fr. Bart Flaas, grown a struggling congregation into a thriving church that is an economic, political, and spiritual force in the poverty-stricken Rio Grande Valley.*

*In less than two years, Rabbi Jonah Pesner and leaders Fran Godine and Steve Silverman, at Reform synagogue Temple Israel in Boston, revitalized relationships among members and brought new depth, energy and effectiveness to their long tradition of fulfilling the Jewish obligation to work for social justice.*


*In St. Paul, Minnesota, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America is undertaking a bold experiment. They called a pastor newly trained in community organizing to a church that was in danger of closing, hoping that he and lay leaders like Diane Breanan and Ronald Stamper could use what he had learned to save, and even grow the small congregation.*

*Bishop Roy Dixon and lay leaders like Cookie Hassan and Duret Gray, of Faith Chapel Church of God in Christ congregation in San Diego increased the membership of their church from six to 1500 over the past twelve years.*

What brought about such transformations?

All of these congregations, among others discussed later, were strengthened through their participation in one of the approximately 160 faith-based community organizing (FBCO) groups in the United States. FBCO is a model of community organizing based on networks of relationships that people create primarily through their religious congregations, but also through their unions, community organizations and children's schools. Faith-based community organizing groups believe that their primary role is to develop participants' leadership skills, build strong networks of relationships grounded in shared values and concerns, and channel those relationships into a civic power capable of making change for the public good. Most FBCO groups belong to one of the national or regional organizing and training networks (Pacific Institute for Community Organization–PICO; Industrial Areas Foundation–IAF; Gamaliel Foundation; Direct Action, Research and Training Center–DART; Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center–RCNO; InterValley Project–IVP; and Organizing Leadership and Training Center–OLTC). While FBCO groups have a notable list of achievements on many public issues (see Resources for Further Exploration), this study examined a different matter. That is, “*Congregational Development*,” or how congregations are strengthened and sometimes transformed by their participation in faith-based community organizing.

More specifically, for the purposes of the study, “*Congregational Development*” (CD) means the growth of members as multi-faceted leaders within their congregations and the strengthening of congregations as institutions. For individuals this includes gaining leadership skills useful in congregational life and the public arena, deepening engagement in congregational life, and strengthening their understanding of the con-



nections between their faith tradition's call to social justice and the work of faith-based community organizing. For congregations, this includes the strengthening of relationships between groups and individuals within the congregation, the creation of connections to other congregations and community/government organizations, a deepening of linkages between worship life and the congregation's presence in the wider social world, a transforming of congregational culture to be more relational and accountable, and potential growth in membership.

The two-year Congregational Development Research Study evolved from conversations with faith-based community organizing stakeholders who were convinced of the democratic significance of FBCO but unsure about its impact on congregations. To address this question, researchers led by Dr. Richard L. Wood studied congregational development (CD) through faith-based community organizing in forty-five religious congregations, including Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian/Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical congregations. Some were highly multiracial, while the others constituted a rich mix of majority Latino, African American, black Caribbean, or white/European congregations. In the field, researchers observed congregations in action and conducted hour-long interviews with leaders, clergy, and organizers from congregations belonging to thirteen faith-based community organizing groups at sites around the country: Los Angeles (RCNO); San Diego; Texas' Rio Grande Valley; Miami; Minneapolis/St. Paul; Portland, Oregon; Columbus, Ohio; New Orleans; Camden, New Jersey; Chicago; Detroit; Boston; and Los Angeles (IAF).

# The Relationship between FBCO and Communities of Faith

All versions of faith-based community organizing depend heavily on the leaders, legitimacy, resources, and relationships found in religious congregations. When undertaken skillfully, this work is complex, important for the democratic future of our society, and often quite rewarding for its participants. Of greater import for this study, however, is the fact that FBCO can also exist in a rich, mutually beneficial relationship with its sponsoring communities of faith.

## **The Benefits of Engagement**

Findings from the Congregational Development Research Study on the relationship between congregational development and faith-based community organizing indicate that engagement in this work can strongly benefit a variety of congregations. As reported by participating lay leaders and clergy in interviews, potential benefits include:

1. More relationships among congregants and with members of other faith traditions;
2. Transfer of leadership skills learned by congregational lay leaders and clergy at FBCO and network-sponsored trainings that are applicable to many different arenas, e.g. congregational, organizational, professional, and personal;
3. An increased number of leaders who participate in the congregation's programs and work, and who engage in public action for the whole community;
4. Heightened visibility and influence of the congregation within the community;
5. A deeper understanding of the faith tradition's call for social justice; and
6. An increase in congregational membership where FBCO was part of a broader membership outreach strategy.

## **The Key Factors**

A congregation does not automatically benefit by virtue of joining a local FBCO group. It requires hard work on the part of the congregational lay leaders, clergy, and the local organizer. Where certain factors are in place, congregations are much more likely to reap the kinds of benefits listed above. A full list of the "Key Factors" follows on page 9, but, in summary, the *most important factors* to have in place are: integration of FBCO principles and practices in congregational life and in external public action; the intentional work and central role of clergy, lay leaders and highly skilled organizers in prioritizing congregational development; a comprehensive approach to CD by the FBCO group; the establishment of linkages between the stories, symbols and rituals of the faith tradition and organizing practices; and involvement of clergy in regular clergy caucuses sponsored by FBCO groups.

As will be evident throughout this document, the level of integration of the above "Key Factors" helps determine the level of congregational development that can occur. Of particular influence is the degree to which the following FBCO principles and practices are implemented.

## ***The FBCO “Principles and Practices” (P’s & P’s) in Congregations***

- 1. *One-to-one meetings*:** short, open-ended, face-to-face meetings in which two people explore their concerns, hopes, and dreams for themselves, their families, congregation and/or community. Ongoing participation in “*one-to-ones*” creates the critical relationships of trust that allow clergy, leaders, and organizers to continually clarify mutual self-interest and hold each other accountable. One-to-one meetings are also the primary vehicles for discovering new leaders.
- 2. *Accountability and the related practice of agitation*:** holding people responsible for what they said they would do and challenging, or agitating people to act on their word, goals, and dreams. People in relationship are much more likely to hold each other accountable and to agitate them, but many congregations find these practices to be the most challenging to implement, for mainly religious cultural reasons, to be discussed later.
- 3. *Leadership development*:** the growth of lay leaders through FBCO/network training and experience. Lay leaders often apply newly acquired skills to congregational work, for example, initiating more effective, focused council meetings or building relationships with community decision-makers.
- 4. *Power in numbers*:** understanding “power” as a way to influence people that hold public positions of power and the decisions that determine people’s quality of life. Seeing power as something they can exercise in a beneficial way represents a major shift in thinking for leaders and clergy of many religious traditions. As leaders are trained they often come to understand, as a leader expressed, “*We can accomplish with many of us together, what we can’t by ourselves.*”
- 5. *Issue selection*:** the process of choosing which concerns or “*solvable problems*” to address through the FBCO work. In the strongest congregations, this happens partly as leaders and congregants hold one-to-ones and *house meetings* where they listen to each other’s stories and concerns. As one clergyperson described it, “[*issues come*] *from the bottom up...not from the top down.*”
- 6. *The action-reflection cycle*:** Many FBCO groups describe the work of CD in terms of cycles. While the details vary, within the basic cycle there is a season for acting in the public arena, then a season for evaluating and learning, or “*reflection*,” followed by another season for acting, etc. In congregations, the first season often involves internal work such as a “*one-to-one campaign*” that might last several weeks or months, followed by action, then “*reflection*,” followed by another campaign, etc.



# The Congregational Development Research Study Findings

## Finding # 1 Constellation of Factors

**A constellation of factors is required to generate the strongest congregational development.** Where only one or a few of the following factors are present, congregational development is thinner, typically limited to developing new leadership skills in some members. The most important factors are:

- a. Systematic and ongoing implementation of FBCO principles and practices in ways consistent with the congregation's faith tradition and vision, especially the one-to-one meeting and holding people accountable;
- b. A comprehensive approach to CD by the FBCO group that addresses the identification and training of leaders, the application of leadership skills to public action on issues and to the internal life of the congregation; and ongoing relationship-building with leaders, clergy and congregants. Organizers implement the approach with flexibility, creativity, and a rich understanding of the congregation's vision;
- c. Ongoing relationships of trust, collaboration, and challenge between organizers and clergy;
- d. A focus on building meaningful connections between a congregation's faith tradition and the faith-based community organizing process; and
- e. Active participation by clergy, including mutual support and challenge among peer clergy, typically through clergy caucuses.

## Finding # 2 Benefits to Congregations

**Clergy and leaders from nearly all congregations reported some benefits from the relationship with FBCO.** As stated earlier, the most common benefits are: more and deeper relationships, leadership development, increased lay leader involvement in congregational work and public action, heightened public profile, stronger connections between the faith tradition and social justice, and, in some cases, increased membership. These benefits are not easy to achieve and many congregations only experience them in a limited way, e.g. leadership development for several leaders. Three factors hinder the achievement of benefits: the difficulties of adequately aligning the constellation of factors described above; the fact that faith-based community organizing has often been implemented at the margins, rather than the core, of congregational life; and the fact that talented organizers are often spread thin. While almost all of the congregations studied experienced some benefits from their involvement in FBCO, as a result of these factors, only a minority of congregations has experienced these benefits *to the profound degree* reflected in the accompanying stories.

### **Finding # 3      Cross-diversity Impact**

**FBCO is capable of generating significant development in congregations across a wide variety of faith traditions, racial/ethnic identities and income levels.** We have examples of significant congregational development through faith-based community organizing in Catholic, Presbyterian, Unitarian-Universalist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Jewish, Baptist, Unity, and urban evangelical congregations—as well as in congregations rooted in a remarkable variety of racial and ethnic communities and with socio-economic profiles from desperately poor to upper middle-class.

### **Finding # 4      Leadership Development**

**Leadership development is one of the most significant and consistent benefits of congregational development.** Leaders from many congregations attested to the development of leadership skills such as public speaking, holding a one-to-one meeting, selecting a “winnable” issue, and running an effective meeting, and to an enlivening of their faith and its connection to social justice through training and involvement with FBCO.

### **Finding # 5      Role of Leaders: Implementation of FBCO Principles and Practices**

**When leaders implement the FBCO principles and practices in the congregation in a systematic and ongoing manner, congregational development is greatly increased.** The most important practices and principles for congregational development are the one-to-one meeting and holding people accountable to their commitments and values. If clergy and leaders can creatively link the principles and practices to a congregation’s culture, vision and faith tradition, congregational development is further enhanced.

### **Finding # 6      Role of Clergy**

**Five concrete roles for clergy are crucial in sustaining strong FBCO and parlaying it into congregational development:**

- a. Providing entree to their congregations and legitimating the organizing effort;
- b. Generating the broad societal vision that animates faith-based community organizing in a particular local setting;
- c. Infusing a sense of spiritual meaning into the work of organizing;

- d. Fostering dynamism within the organizing effort by providing a counterweight to the influence of organizers; and
- e. Sustaining the network of relationships (particularly among clergy) that undergird the FBCO effort.

## **Finding # 7      The Role of Organizers**

**When organizers exhibit the following two factors, strong congregational development is more likely to occur:**

- a. They are experienced and well-trained, and they cultivate strong relationships with clergy based on trust and mutual self-interest; and
- b. They systematically and creatively carry out a comprehensive, tailored approach to congregational development that includes leadership development, relationship-building with lay leaders, and application of leadership skills to congregational life and public action.

## **Finding # 8      Obstacles to the FBCO/congregation relationship**

**The process of congregational development through participation in FBCO is complex and faces many obstacles.** Following are those most frequently named by leaders, clergy and organizers:

- a. Religious cultural resistance, including the belief by some clergy in a dichotomy between social justice work and effective congregational work, and a norm of “niceness at all costs” that springs from a particular interpretation of “kindness” or “love;”
- b. Weaknesses in contemporary congregations, including the lack of a clear sense of mission, overburdened or distracted clergy, and excessive demands on families;
- c. Weak relationships between clergy and organizers;
- d. A shortage of qualified, well-trained organizers; and
- e. Organizations that neglect local work in congregations as they seek to exert power in broader geographical areas or larger political arenas—rather than seeing these as complementary emphases.

## Discussion of the Findings

Previous research has documented quite convincingly the democratic significance of faith-based community organizing. However, when Interfaith Funders has discussed that research with clergy, denominational staff, foundation personnel, and organizers, they often asked: “But what about FBCO’s impact on congregations? When does it really contribute to building stronger congregations, and when does it leave them unchanged or undermined?” The question is particularly significant in the current cultural context in which materialism and individualism prevail and a one-dimensional emphasis on “church growth” is a trend and, in some denominations, a mandate. Congregations in many faith traditions are struggling to make community worship meaningful and sometimes, to survive. So for some of our interlocutors, these questions seemed driven by their commitment to the long-term success of faith-based community organizing that depends on strong congregations as its base. Others asked because, though they were interested in FBCO, their *primary* concern was to make sure their congregations were served well by engagement in this work. Thus, for one group, these questions flowed from a desire for democratic efficacy, for the other group, from a desire for thriving faith communities.

We approached this research believing that these are not contradictory desires. We share the view of both groups that faith-based community organizing must steward the health of its primary base of institutional support—both for the long-term strategic health of organizing and out of respect for the integrity of congregations. In striving to answer these questions, we framed them within the rubric of “*Congregational Development*,” i.e. under what conditions does FBCO most powerfully foster congregational development? As mentioned on page 5, we looked specifically at the following elements of CD:

For individuals:

- a. gaining leadership skills useful in congregational life and the public arena;
- b. deepening engagement in congregational life; and
- c. strengthening understanding of the connections between the faith tradition’s call to social justice and FBCO work.

For congregations:

- a. strengthening of relationships between groups and individuals within the congregation;
- b. the creation of connections to other congregations and community/government organizations;
- c. a deepening of linkages between worship life and the congregation’s presence in the wider social world;

- d. a transforming of congregational culture to be more relational and accountable; and
- e. potential growth in membership.

We had enough data on thirty-six congregations to rank them according to the strength of the FBCO-driven congregational development we could document (we lacked sufficient evidence to confidently rank ten congregations). We considered evidence for improvement in each of the areas noted above, and rated eight of the thirty-six congregations as “strong,” seventeen congregations as “medium,” and eleven congregations as “weak” on congregational development. Three important caveats must be noted here. First, the threshold for the “strong” category was high; thus a number of congregations that had experienced fairly significant CD are included in the “medium” category. Second, the particular “spread” of strong/medium/weak CD is a product of our research design using a combination of intentional and random sampling; we do not know the ratio of “weak” to “medium” to “strong” congregational development for all member congregations in the field. Among the findings of this study, however, the “*key dynamics*” through which CD occurs are more important than the “spread” among congregations—it was those key dynamics that our research was designed to capture. Third, due to our interest in the connections between faith traditions and social justice, we focus on FBCO-driven congregational development, but we recognize that this represents one approach among many to strengthen congregations, and do not suggest that congregations should pay attention only to this approach.

### ***Three Overall Findings***

#### **Dismantling the Dichotomy**

Overall, this study demonstrates the powerful contribution that faith-based community organizing—when done well by leaders, clergy and organizers—can make to the development of congregations. This is crucial at a time when popular “church growth” advocates emphasize internally focused programs and therapeutic ministries as the keys to congregational growth. Such an emphasis can create a dichotomy for religious leaders in which they feel forced to *choose between* building strong congregations and living out their religion’s call to work for justice. *Organizer Paul Marincel from the FBCO group ISAIAH in the Twin Cities explained: “I think there is a very profound and powerful structural division between [strengthening congregations and engaging in social justice work in the world] that the denominations, seminaries, clergy reinforce that is false. Part of what I see ISAIAH doing is...erasing, eradicating [that] dichotomy.”* If FBCO can offer viable tools for building thriving congregations in ways *linked to* social justice, then religious leaders do not face such a no-win choice. This is perhaps the best news to emerge from the study.

## Reaching Broadly

Second, we found that significant FBCO-linked congregational development is occurring in congregations across a variety of faith traditions, across diverse racial

*Significant FBCO-linked congregational development is occurring in congregations across a variety of faith traditions, across diverse racial and ethnic settings, and across socio-economic contexts ranging from very poor immigrant to upper middle-class suburban.*

and ethnic settings, and across socio-economic contexts ranging from very poor immigrant to upper middle-class suburban.

Although the particular faith tradition or ethnic makeup of a congregation influences the form that congregational development takes and the particular challenges it faces, neither factor determines whether it will occur. We have examples of significant congregational development through faith-based community organizing in Catholic, Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalist, Pentecostal, Lutheran, Jewish, Baptist and urban evangelical congregations.

Likewise, we have examples of strong congregational development in congregations whose membership is African-American, Hispanic, Caribbean, Scandinavian and other white ethnicities; in congregations made up of various mixtures of these groups (for example a mixed Irish, Vietnamese, and Cambodian congregation); and in both immigrant

and native-born congregations. Indeed, in some cities and congregations, FBCO has broken new ground in building bridges across racial, economic and ethnic divides.

The study also revealed patterns related to socio-economic status (SES). The work of organizing seems to translate most directly into congregational development in congregations of relatively low or very moderate income and in those located in or near impoverished, working class, or lower-middle class communities. In those cases, members have a clear self-interest in the kinds of issues typically addressed by FBCO. Congregations made up of high SES individuals generally have to work harder to generate congregational development through organizing. However, practiced with regular and ongoing implementation of the FBCO principles and practices by well-trained leaders, under the guidance of committed clergy, and with the support of particularly talented organizers, some higher-income congregations have successfully made faith-based community organizing a central element of their congregational work. Crucial to this outcome has been a systematic effort to link the organizing work to the social justice tradition of the congregation and, through the local FBCO group, to more impoverished congregations.

# *A Tent of Justice*

## **Temple Israel's Ohel Tzedek Campaign**

Reform synagogue Temple Israel of Boston, New England's largest synagogue with 1500 mostly middle to upper-income member families, prided itself on its long social action tradition: supporting the civil rights movement and the struggle for Soviet Jewry, reaching out to gay and lesbian Jews, helping to resettle refugees, and working on a range of other issues. Yet when Rabbi Jonah Pesner and synagogue members evaluated Temple Israel's current social action in 2000, they found the reality did not live up to the self-image, involving isolated Rabbinical calls for action and small but important direct service programs, like soup kitchens, that 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."*

### **Slow to Begin**

Rabbi Pesner and lay leader Fran Godine worked with Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO, a member of the Industrial Areas Foundation, and the regional Organizing Leadership and Training Center) to help revitalize the Temple's social action work. Temple Israel was already a member of GBIO, but its actual participation was neither strong nor widespread. After consulting with GBIO staff, Godine and Pesner drew up plans to conduct a campaign of intentional one-to-one meetings that would build relationships, uncover members' passions for social justice, and lead the way for broader involvement in new Temple social justice efforts. Despite having a solid plan, the one-to-one campaign never took off. As Godine described, they recruited *"thirty people, and we did 45 one-to-ones, and I didn't know what to do or where to go next. Our assigned organizer from GBIO then was helpful, but until there's somebody in a congregation who's either got those skills or has experienced it, I think it is hard."*

### **Pitching the Tent**

The turning point came in January 2000 when Temple Israel decided to hire an experienced, part-time organizer. With the organizer's coaching and the continued support of GBIO, Temple Israel finally implemented the plan they had previously developed with GBIO staff. Leaders began an eight-week community-building campaign focused on social justice that they called *"Ohel Tzedek"* (Tent of Justice). Utilizing the principles and practices they learned from GBIO, congregation members participated in more than 800 individual and group relational meetings. The goal of these meetings was to identify and develop the social justice stories of Temple Israel's membership, and through those stories, to discover Temple Israel's shared social justice concerns and values.

The campaign culminated with a Passover seder where several hundred members gathered to tell the Passover story of the Jewish people's liberation from slavery in Egypt and recount the social justice stories that emerged from the first stages of the Ohel Tzedek 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.

### **Moving toward Action**

After Passover, members with common concerns joined together into small groups called "*action hevres*" (friendship groups). Pesner explained that members of a *hevre*:

share stories of concern about issues such as housing, health care, public education, and equal rights for the gay and lesbian community in Boston. Each time an action *hevre* gets together, they ask each other the questions, 'What do we care about?' and 'What do we want to do together?' When they lose their common story, the *hevre* disappears. *Hevres* are different than committees. People in committees aren't necessarily in relationship. They have a shared task, not a shared story.

Since then, hundreds of people have participated in the *hevres* by either attending planning meetings and trainings or by participating in larger-scale actions.

The *hevres* have helped win significant victories, including the defeat of local anti-gay legislation, the creation of a job bank for unemployed Temple members, and the raising of half a million dollars from Temple members for GBIO's plan to develop affordable housing. The affordable housing *hevre* worked closely with GBIO to organize a significant action in May 2003 in response to the elimination of the Massachusetts Affordable Housing Trust Fund from the state budget. A core group of 30 Temple Israel leaders worked to bring together 300 temple members and other GBIO leaders at a public meeting in the synagogue with seven state legislators and town officials. Temple leaders presented testimony on the urgent need for more affordable housing in Greater Boston. All the government officials publicly affirmed their support for the Trust Fund, including one state senator who committed to co-sponsor a bill to fully restore funding for the next three years.



## **A Synagogue Transformed**

The impact of Ohel Tzedek on Temple Israel has gone beyond its social justice work, strengthening the Temple as a whole. According to Pesner, Ohel Tzedek is not only about:

healing the world, but also bringing together this congregation and making people feel like they're part of something. No one should show up to synagogue and feel like they don't belong or have a part. So every time someone participates in an action hevre, they have another place to locate themselves and feel like Temple Israel is a small community.

Godine adds, *"the leaders that 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!"*

## **Widening the Tent**

Temple Israel plans to further broaden member participation. Ohel Tzedek hopes to conduct 1500 one-to-one conversations and double in size in anticipation of the upcoming 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the congregation. Continued participation in GBIO is now as expected as religious school and Sabbath services. In the words of Temple member Steve Silverman, *"I feel like we are doing something revolutionary in terms of Jewish congregations. I really feel like we are a model. That we will become the model to transform the way other congregations, not just around Boston, but maybe around the country, do this type of organizing. It's powerful. It's fun and it deepens relationships."*

### **Aligning a Constellation**

The third overall finding is that generating strong congregational development through faith-based community organizing requires a *constellation of factors*. Where only one or a few of these factors are present, congregational development tends to be thinner. The key factors as listed on page 9 are: a comprehensive approach to CD by the FBCO group that engages the complementary skills and orientations of lead-

*Lay leaders can bring their networks of relationships, their grounding in worship communities, their passionate commitment to improving their families' quality of life, and newly acquired skills to implement the principles and practices of FBCO.*

ers, clergy and organizers; implementation of the FBCO principles and practices; strong, trusting relationships between organizers and clergy; meaningful connections between faith traditions and the FBCO process; and active participation by clergy. Shepherding a congregation through an FBCO-linked congregational development effort involves critical contributions from leaders, clergy, and organizers who can align these factors so that they reinforce each other.

Clergy members can lead their congregations into the organizing process and help link it to the wellsprings of spiritual meaning and ethical reflection.

Lay leaders can bring their networks of relationships, their grounding in worship communities, their passionate commitment to improving their families' quality of life, and newly acquired skills to implement the principles and practices of FBCO. Skilled professional organizers can bring important tools, insights, and skills for building powerful institutions, and an orientation to congregational development.

Where leaders, clergy, and organizers have aligned such a constellation of factors, they have generated stronger faith communities that combine rich engagement in the congregation's faith tradition and effective work for justice. Below, we address the particular roles of leaders, clergy, and organizers in the FBCO-congregation relationship. While we talk as if these roles are distinct, in reality, there is significant overlap and unique integration of factors in each congregation's relationship. In the following sections, we identify and discuss common patterns in this complex interplay of dynamics.

# *A Ministry of Their Own*

## **The Story of Faith Chapel in San Diego**

Bishop Roy Dixon used to own Taco Bells. Now he and his congregation at Faith Chapel own the “Faith Chapel Organizing Ministry” that, in partnership with San Diego Organizing Project (SDOP, a member of the Pacific Institute for Community Organization–PICO) is growing the church membership rolls and addressing social injustices in the community. This is not a typical “congregation meets faith-based community organizing” story—but it is a powerful one that highlights the capacity of a clergy-centered faith tradition to fully embrace its relationship with a faith-based community organizing group, align a constellation of factors, and reap remarkable results.

Bishop Dixon, so titled because he is the overseer of 30 Pentecostal congregations in the San Diego area, started Faith Chapel in 1985 in the boardroom of his business, with six people. Now 1500 people, mostly African-American, call Faith Chapel their faith home. Located in a low-income neighborhood of whites, blacks and Hispanics, this Church of God in Christ or COGIC church owns a large but modest sanctuary and has bought land jointly with a neighboring Presbyterian church to build a space for their collaborative charter school. How did this “miracle” of church growth happen?

### **An Unexpected Conversion**

In 1986, Bishop Dixon was converted—not to the good news of the gospel (that had already happened)—but to the radical news that it is possible for a congregation of faith to grow in membership and participate powerfully in community life at the same time. He met a faith-based community organizer. At the organizer’s suggestion Bishop Dixon attended PICO’s national training where he learned organizing principles and practices, like using power to influence public officials, the benefits of relationship-building, and the need for accountability to strengthen those relationships. He expanded his understanding of ministry to include “*crying out*” to protest the injustices that pervade community life. As a powerful businessman and pastor, Bishop Dixon broadened his role in San Diego’s political life. And people started coming to Faith Chapel. He preached that, “...*the Bible tells me to cry, cry aloud, and spare not.*” And more people came. As a staunch, outspoken Republican with a commitment to the poor, Bishop Dixon was in the enviable but delicate position of having substantial influence, at the same time that he was learning about the need to develop leaders. He was convinced that in order to accomplish real congregational development and community change he needed to develop people from his congregation to lead the organizing work. This, however required a leap of faith—a paradigm shift—for in the Pentecostal tradition, pastors often assume an autonomous role in congregational life, with accountability, not to congregants, but to a Board of Trustees that has the power to hire and fire them. But Bishop Dixon was so moved by what he had learned, and so convinced of its truth, that he made the leap and began sending potential leaders to national training.

### **A Leap for Leaders**

The leap was an investment that paid off. All four Faith Chapel leaders who were interviewed for the congregational development research study attended national training and returned to their congregation empowered to hold one-to-one meetings, to speak in public, and to hold each other and the pastor accountable. Which they did, and the “*local organizing committee*” or LOC, took on the powers that be and won their first local victory—the construction of a sidewalk for the children to use to safely walk to school. The proverbial stone had been thrown into the pond setting in motion a ripple that continues today. Congregants who were not on the LOC, but participated in the public actions to obtain the sidewalk, caught a glimpse of the power and politics of change, and the power in numbers. The LOC leaders grew in confidence and political savvy and began to participate in SDOP’s citywide actions and the PICO California Project’s statewide actions. Stephanie Gut, the lead organizer for SDOP, said of leader Cookie Hassan’s transformation, “*She has found her voice as a result of organizing. She has stood up at major city council meetings and at a large citywide action that we recently had on housing, and gave testimony ...she’s renewed both her faith commitment and her understanding of her value as a person participating in public life.*” This is true in Ms. Hassan’s congregational life as well, as she approaches all her roles at church with this newfound power and commitment.

### **A Remarkable Re-Christening**

Bishop Dixon and organizer Gut forged a strong and trusting relationship. Influenced by Gut and SDOP’s integrative approach in which organizers see clergy as the spiritual leaders of their congregations and of the organizing ministry, the LOC at Faith Chapel was re-christened the “Faith Chapel Organizing Ministry.” It is now fully integrated with all the ministries, or auxiliaries, as they are called, of the church. But even beyond the renaming, and the re-structuring, as significant as they are, something more remarkable has happened. Bishop Dixon and his congregation have embraced a new faith orientation that he sums up this way: “*Let’s not be so heavenly minded that we’re no earthly good.*” Leaders and clergy attribute this dramatic shift to SDOP, and SDOP accepts responsibility while noting the crucial role of clergy and leaders. Gut explained the change in Bishop Dixon: “*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.*”

### ***The Reward***

Nowadays, leaders in the Faith Chapel Organizing Ministry continue to do one-to-ones in the congregation to build relationships, to discover the issues of concern, and because, as Bishop Dixon says, *“One-to-ones just cause things to go off!”* They go out into the community to evangelize and to *“repair the breach.”* There is no separation between organizing and ministry. As leader Duret Gray said, *“...doing this kind of work **is** the ministry.”* Bishop Dixon expressed the indisputable benefits of this integration when he said, *“...the more we reach out in the community in faith-based organizing, the more people come to our church.”* Leaders, the clergyperson, and the organizer have aligned a constellation of factors: one-to-one meetings, holding people accountable, a comprehensive approach to CD by SDOP, a strong relationship between clergyperson and organizer, an integration of organizing and faith, and active participation by the pastor—and they are reaping the rewards. Faith Chapel is now a larger and stronger congregation that has public influence at the neighborhood, city, and statewide levels.

Unfortunately, Faith Chapel’s story is not typical—yet—as there are relatively few Pentecostal congregations that currently participate in faith-based community organizing. But it is an inspiring story, which other clergy and congregations may be able to replicate. Faith meets organizing that spawns growth that leads to action, which generates excitement and more growth. It’s a beautiful cycle that this congregation plans to keep on owning for years to come.

## ***The Role of Leaders***

### **The Development of Leaders**

Leadership development through training and experience represents the most common benefit to congregations arising from their engagement in faith-based community organizing. Almost every congregation, whether “strong,” “medium,” or “weak” on CD, reported some leadership development and many described congregational changes catalyzed by newly empowered leaders.

*At New Faith Baptist Church—a primarily African-American congregation in Columbus, Ohio—leaders talked about gaining new confidence and the skills to carry out a one-to-one campaign that led to a re-visioning of the mission of the church and a re-naming to “New Faith.” Leaders and congregants then claimed greater ownership of the mission—as Pastor Kee said, “What we’re aspiring to do now through the vehicle of one-to-ones is to be more accountable to that which we feel God has called us to do [social justice].” Leaders are now heading up this effort to change the congregational culture from primarily individualistic and charity oriented to relational and justice oriented. Grounded in their faith tradition’s history of community involvement, these and other leaders are creating a larger public role and more accountability for their congregation.*

Numerous interviewees talked about making new connections inside and outside the place of worship as one of the most significant effects of their involvement in FBCO. We heard: “I’m becoming aware of the community outside the walls of the church.” And “[I’m] being transformed by the relationships that I’ve made with the people on the organizing team at Temple.” Rev. Robinson from Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in New Orleans said that his leaders now see the need to “expand the boundaries of ministry.” The most significant CD usually occurred in congregations in which a broad cross-section of congregational members was brought into the process of training and participation, and where some of those leaders were in positions of influence near the core of congregational life.

### ***Newfound Power***

Leaders reported varying levels of personal transformation and leadership skills development as a result of their FBCO experience. People who would never speak up have discovered their voices and power and now are leading public actions in front of hundreds or even thousands. Others reported increased skills, such as learning to do one-to-ones to uncover self-interest. Unsurprisingly, the most dramatic transformations were reported by those who started with the least skills and formal education. For some of these individuals, their FBCO experience represented the first time anyone had recognized them as potential leaders or challenged them to speak and act assertively in the public realm. Interviewees from more comfortable backgrounds—

though they often told less dramatic stories—also generally identified ways in which they had developed as leaders. Both groups reported increased confidence in themselves; newfound self-respect as a result of acting in the public arena and being taken seriously by elected officials; acquisition of the hard skills of organizing, such as running effective meetings and holding people accountable; and a belief that the relational practices learned through organizing made them more effective in working with others.

*People who would never speak up have discovered their voices and power and now are leading public actions in front of hundreds or even thousands.*

*Clergywoman Bernadette Anderson from Sword of the Spirit Christian Church in Camden, New Jersey spoke of her leaders' increased skills to build 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 recovery in Camden).*

Furthermore, clergy and fellow congregational members often testified eloquently to powerful changes in some leaders' personal lives, leadership skills, and willingness to lead. *Rev. Grant Stevenson from St. Matthew's Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, said about the impact of the FBCO work on one of his members: "She was somebody going from just sort of being in a bubble, to living her faith in a really meaningful way. She's clearly a leader in this congregation now."* This leader applied her new skills to call the council (governing body of the church) to accountability and volunteered to make a list of the commitments to action that council members made.

### ***Enlivened Faith Commitments***

Another kind of leadership development is perhaps more surprising; a number of leaders attested to the enlivening of their faith commitment in community and to their increased involvement in the congregation.

*Leader Cookie Hassan from Faith Chapel in San Diego described the dramatic changes in her faith life: "I would think about...what does this stuff [FBCO work] have to do with me? You know, I'm just going to church. Leave church and go home. You know, wait till next Sunday. But since my involvement here at Faith Chapel, I have worshiped differently than I've ever worshiped before. I have become not just a hearer, but a doer of God's Word. And if I, you know, came on Sunday, that's fine. I got what I needed and go home and do whatever else. But since my involvement here at Faith Chapel, I've become involved in a lot of different auxiliaries, which has afforded me to be in with SDOP. Which has taken me outside of the church walls. Which has even affected me on my present job, to where I had someone come and ask me, because of the things they've seen me do, to be a part of their outreach group at my job. So it's afforded and opened up a lot of doors for me, that I never went through before."*

Many leaders discovered new connections between their faith and social justice through their experience in FBCO. Some attributed this to the excitement of connecting public engagement and worship. Others described a profound sense of calling that expanded their faith from a highly privatized to a publicly relevant one.

*Leader Roselle Lebreton from Notre Dame Catholic Church in Miami said of such a shift: "[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."*

### ***The Effectiveness of Training and Experience***

Several factors contribute to the development of leaders. Most obviously, training provided by the national networks and by local organizers helps instill the skills, habits, and principles that make leaders more effective. But leaders internalize these principles and practices, like one-to-ones, holding people accountable, agitation, power, etc. much more profoundly through actual engagement in public life. It is often the sense of public efficacy arising from "moving an issue" and taking political action that most powerfully transforms participants from seeing themselves as relatively powerless and marginalized to seeing themselves as active leaders in the world.



*Leader José Hinojosa from Holy Spirit Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas has realized that the “elites” don’t always know everything. Sometimes they “need to be educated by us, especially about root causes.” He and fellow leaders from Valley Interfaith have applied this knowledge to win a new public library and recreation center for McAllen, and to create the largest living-wage campaign in the country.*

Lastly, leadership development occurs most readily where faith and the public work of organizing are well integrated. This is not surprising because faith commitment is a central motivation for so many leaders *and* because the excitement and skills gained in the public work of organizing transfer more readily to the congregation when faith and organizing are well integrated.

### **The Contribution of Leaders**

For congregational development to occur broadly, lay leaders must have significant responsibility in *all aspects* of the organizing, including relationship-building, power analysis, issue research, finances, and FBCO governance. Their skillful participation is especially critical in systematically implementing the principles and practices of organizing within congregations, particularly the one-to-one meeting and accountability. But *how* this implementation occurs also matters greatly. CD was the strongest where implementation was systematic and creative—systematic in the sense of regularly adopting these practices within the organizing effort and, as appropriate, in the broader life of the congregation. Creative in the sense that leaders and clergy can link these practices to the congregation’s culture, faith tradition, and particular vision, thus integrating organizing with faith life. This can be done in a variety of ways, from tying extended “one-to-one campaigns” to a congregation’s religious calendar (e.g. Lent, the Passover season, Advent, or Ramadan); to publicly anointing a group of leaders as representatives of the congregation before high-profile political actions; to using small faith reflection groups alongside one-to-one meetings as the foundation for an integrated effort; to hosting workshops on scriptural or social justice teachings of a faith tradition and how they can be applied in the world through FBCO; to bringing members’ FBCO experience into the preaching, prayer, and worship life of the congregation.

*Leaders at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Portland, Oregon, carried out a six-week Lenten Listening Series in congregants’ homes in which they studied Lenten scriptures and held one-to-one meetings. After each weekly session, the core team gathered to reflect on it and to strategize about next steps for the organizing effort.*

### **Three Guiding Principles**

The strongest cases of congregational development occurred when leaders, clergy, and organizers undertook creative integration of faith and organizing practices with three guiding principles:

- a. The goal of the work was to impact the overall organizational culture and social fabric of the sponsoring congregations;
- b. The implementation was afforded enough importance in congregational life to be practiced regularly by a sizeable cross-section of the members; and
- c. FBCO practices were sustained over a period of at least a few years.

*Congregational development occurred most impressively where a team of lay leaders worked with clergy and organizers to pursue both internal congregational work and external public action.*

Furthermore, congregational development occurred most impressively where a team of lay leaders worked with clergy and organizers to pursue both internal congregational work and external public action. In such a situation, the excitement of public engagement for social justice flows back into the life of the congregation, the relationships fostered in a congregation are extended outward into the public arena, and the practices of relationality, accountability, agitation, reflection, and evaluation are infused into both the internal and external experience of the congregation.

*At Fourth Presbyterian Church in Boston leaders participate in a rhythmic cycle of in-reach, public action and reflection. Leaders carry out congregation-wide, one-to-one meetings, sometimes done as ice cream socials, and then hold house meetings to discuss what they've learned and to select an issue. They have hosted accountability sessions with political leaders and participated in actions on affordable housing with GBIO. Rev. Burns Stanfield said about the benefits of these experiences for his leaders, some of whom are illiterate: "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." Through subsequent reflection, or discussion about the action, the energy and learning generated provide momentum for the next cycle.*

Such work requires disciplined and sustained effort from leaders, with significant guidance and support from clergy and organizers. While it may take time for leaders to become capable of taking on such roles, if movement is not occurring in this direction then clergy or organizers are usurping these roles and the skills of organizing will not diffuse into the congregation. Each of the stories of successful CD highlighted in this document was built on the implementation of these practices.

# *Justice in the Valley*

## **Growth and Leadership Development at St. Joseph the Worker**

When Father Bart Flaas arrived at St. Joseph the Worker, a Catholic church serving Mexican immigrants in McAllen, Texas, the pews were nearly empty. Today, nine years later, the parish boasts 3,000 families ranging from migrant farmworkers and the working poor to public school teachers, middle-income service and managerial workers, and health care professionals. Publicly acting out the Catholic call to justice, St. Joseph is also playing a role in changing the political and economic landscape of the Rio Grande Valley.

### **Reviving the Faith**

The transformation at St. Joseph began with the organizing principles Father Flaas had learned from the Industrial Areas Foundation that sponsors Valley Interfaith, a 66-member organization of congregations (including St. Joseph) and schools. Working with Valley Interfaith organizers, Flaas and his parishioners began to create “*small faith communities*” modeled after the Latin American “*comunidades de base*,” or “*base communities*.” These base communities function at the heart of the congregation: building relationships among congregants, involving them in decision-making at all levels, and challenging them to become active leaders. They also formed the basis for a broad outreach campaign of one-on-one meetings with a large number of congregants. After several months of reflection and training, house meetings were held to unearth issues for possible action, mobilize for actions, and identify additional leaders. Along with leaders from other Valley Interfaith member churches and schools, St. Joseph congregants began advocating for changes in local laws and policies.

### **Faith in Action**

Interweaving the Catholic faith tradition with the struggles faced by its low-income and immigrant members, St. Joseph connected its organizing work to religious stories, symbols, and rituals. As part of the annual observance of Lent, parishioners carry a cross through the neighborhood in commemoration of the “stations of the cross” where Jesus stopped on his way to Calvary. During a living-wage campaign, unemployed workers were invited to come forward to touch the cross at one of the stations.

Biblical references also help frame the relationship between faith and social justice. In reflecting on a campaign to change McAllen's city council structure from the at-large system that kept whites in power for decades, to a district-based system that would make it easier to elect Hispanics, one leader commented *"We came out of the Red Sea...from slavery to the beginning of the Promised Land."* Despite having *"the whole desert to cross,"* Valley Interfaith prevailed in overturning the system against well-financed business and political interests—a truly David versus Goliath victory.

Organizing based in faith is used in turn to reinforce congregational development. As Valley Interfaith organizer Andrés Ibarría explained, *"...the heart of congregational development is our own faith, our religious stories,...like Jethro and Moses, that everybody knows. And then we read that to teach relational power...which helps us, because all of our congregation leaders know the Bible so well."*

### **Leaders at Church and in Public Life**

Skills learned in faith-based community organizing translate to leadership in the church and increased civic engagement. Yolanda Álvarez, a leader in the Valley Interfaith living-wage campaign, decided to use her newfound skills within the St. Joseph congregation as a communion minister, leader of a base community, and choir member. Lupita Mendiola led the rosary at the funerals of St. Joseph members and then realized she could do more. After her fifth rosary for a young member killed in a gang fight, she 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 IAF's national ten-day training. Once afraid to approach even the priest, now she has the confidence to speak with anyone and to hold politicians accountable for preventing youth violence.

### **Continued Growth**

Today, St. Joseph continues to develop leaders through its base communities and integration of spirituality and public action. Congregants conduct house meetings every two years, where members and non-members talk about the issues affecting their families, *"constantly keep[ing] a finger on the pulse of the neighborhood,"* according to Father Flaas. 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.

## ***The Role of Clergy***

### **The Motivation for Involvement**

Clergy dedicate themselves to faith-based community organizing because their faith traditions teach an ethical obligation to help build a just society and/or because they see a crying need for improvements in the quality of life in their communities. Beyond this, some clergy sustain a long-term commitment to FBCO because they value the relationships with organizers and other clergy that FBCO facilitates or because they have found their enthusiasm for ministry renewed by public engagement. As important as these incentives are, in the final analysis, most clergy ultimately want to use their position to build strong and faithful congregations. Rather than competing with or distracting clergy from this task, FBCO can serve them in it, if well integrated with balanced congregational work.

### **Five Essential Roles**

Motivated clergy, like leaders, play a critical role in sustaining strong faith-based community organizing and parlaying it into congregational development. The study revealed five particular patterns regarding the role of clergy. First, clergy at strong congregations publicly endorsed organizing as part of their own faith work. On the other hand, clergy who passively “allow” FBCO work to occur in their congregations virtually assure it will not generate deep congregational development. Clergy who cannot be deeply involved can facilitate the organizing effort by legitimating it within their faith tradition, and actively engaging in it as appropriate within their overall work. Such clergy involvement makes organizing more attractive to active congregational leaders, who can connect it to the mainstream life of the congregation and keep it embedded within the faith tradition.

Second, clergy can generate the broad societal vision that animates FBCO in a local setting. With their gift for articulating a public message, their grounding in rich scriptural and theological resources for social justice, and their ability to draw on religious symbols and stories, clergy are strongly positioned to shape the vision that guides the organizing work in each congregation.

Third, clergy infuse a sense of spiritual meaning into the work of organizing. Though participants may initially get involved in order to address particular issues, sustaining commitment over the long term requires that they find the engagement meaningful. In the most impressive instances of CD we saw in our case studies, clergy built links between their faith tradition and the organizing effort during the congregation’s

*With their gift for articulating a public message, their grounding in rich scriptural and theological resources for social justice, and their ability to draw on religious symbols and stories, clergy are strongly positioned to shape the vision that guides the organizing work in each congregation.*

regular worship services, thus linking organizing to the core of congregational life. As discussed earlier, some clergy go even further by creating specific structures for linking organizing and members' faith commitments.

*Fr. Dan Finn of St. Mark's Catholic Church in Boston worked with organizer Andrea Sheppard to sponsor a series of post-worship meetings in which participants read and acted out the Lenten readings and "applied them to what we were doing in the organizing campaign." Fr. Finn noted, "It gives a whole other dimension and meaning to why we do what we do." When such efforts thrive, participants sometimes speak of a "spirituality of organizing" that links their public engagement, worship life, and spiritual journey in an integrated whole.*

Fourth, clergy foster a dynamism within the organizing effort by providing a counterweight to the influence of organizers. Congregational development is only one facet of the work of organizers, who are primarily staff people for civic organizations. In contrast, clergy are focused on and deeply invested in the health of their congregations, and highly motivated to hold organizers and leaders accountable for the congregational impact of FBCO work. Some of the strongest relationships between the FBCO group and the congregation occurred where these complementary orientations of clergy and organizers are not suppressed but are allowed to create a healthy tension. In such an arrangement, clergy provide a counterweight to professional organizers—not in order to "check" their influence, but to build a more dynamic effort by challenging organizers to live up to the full promise of the FBCO model.

*To organizer Judy Donovan from Valley Interfaith, this dynamic tension almost defines a healthy clergy-organizer relationship. She described the kind of clergyperson with whom she likes to relate: "Someone who wants to build something. Who's got an ego, so who can go after me, who can critique and challenge me. But someone who can also take challenge and critique. Someone who's not afraid to think about some hard questions. Somebody who takes their tradition very seriously and is willing and able to teach me as well. Ultimately, as it evolves—because these relationships take time—someone who really becomes a co-conspirator...in the sense of strategizing together [about congregational development and social justice work.]"*

Fifth, clergy sustain the network of relationships (particularly among clergy) that underlie the FBCO organization. Many FBCO groups facilitate a regular forum for clergy. At the best of these, clergy support and challenge one another to more faithfully approach the difficult task of linking congregational work to organizing for justice. Whether regularly or sporadically held, these "clergy caucuses" differed greatly in format and content from site to site. But one striking pattern emerged: of the eight examples of strong CD, all but one clergyperson reported that the clergy caucus had helped inspire and focus their use of FBCO to strengthen the congregation.

# *Rebirth of a Mainline Protestant Congregation*

## **The Story of St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church**

Two years ago, the question was 'do we kind of sit back for the ride, [stick with it] as long as we can do this, and then close? Or what will be the future?' No one's thinking that way now.

– Pastor Grant Stevenson

St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church serves a comfortable working-class neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota. In 1999, its membership had fallen low enough that it was in danger of closing—reflecting the retrenchment common in mainline urban Protestant churches nationwide. But at St. Matthew's, something has changed since 1999—membership has stabilized at about 200 and attendance at worship services has increased 20%. More importantly, the congregation now works and worships with a new vitality. Ron Stamper is a machinist at a local manufacturing plant; his involvement in faith-based community organizing took him from being a disenchanted, disengaged believer to an active participant at St. Matthew's. He said:

We're a growing congregation. I mean, we're growing out of near death. But the passion that's involved now! Somebody put it into words earlier this summer—I think it was the president of church [congregation] council. [He] was sayin' that for ten years our eyes were just focused on how the hell do we keep the doors open and the heat on in the wintertime. All the energy was going into that only. The last year and a half, we've just seen a blossoming—just this growth in the church. Not just in numbers, [but] in the passion!

### **A Denominational Vision**

By all accounts, this rebirth of St. Matthew's began with the arrival of a new pastor, Pastor Grant Stevenson. But the story is richer than that, involving not just a gifted pastor but also support from his denomination, collaboration with talented organizers, willingness of lay leaders, and creative use of FBCO within ministry. As Stamper noted when asked whether the church's work with ISAIAH, the local faith-based community organizing group, had changed the pastor's relationship to the congregation:

I really think it has made a big difference in the relationship... Who [Pastor Stevenson] is has a lot to do with where he's been at with ISAIAH and how they've influenced him. He has a great rapport with a lot of different levels of the congregation. Part of it is his charisma, but a lot of it is also the tools he's learned through the organization.

Before he began at St. Matthew's, Pastor Stevenson knew that he wanted to make justice work an essential element in his ministry. But how to do so was less clear, and it was here that denominational support became crucial. Two synod staff members for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America denomination, Pastors Ralph Baumgartner and David Wangaard, had previously served as congregational pastors and worked extensively with FBCO. They articulated a vision for using the tools of organizing not only for the justice work of St. Matthew's, but also for the whole work of the congregation. At their suggestion, before beginning his ministry at St. Matthew's, Pastor Stevenson attended the week-long training sponsored by the Gamaliel Foundation, the national network with which ISAIAH is affiliated. As a result, Pastor Stevenson arrived at St. Matthew's prepared to redefine church ministry so that the principles and practices he learned at training—relationship-building, accountability, and mutual challenge—would form the basis of congregational life.

### **Leadership Development Begins**

First, organizers from ISAIAH met one-to-one with several congregation members, and then trained them in how to do one-to-ones with other congregants. Pastor Stevenson and these leaders then launched an “in-reach” within the congregation, to build relationships and identify potential new leaders. Leader Diane Breanan reported on this experience:

We went through the membership list and each of us took maybe three, four, some of them maybe five. And then we had another tier of people that we talked to... Part of the point with the one-on-one conversations, is to get beyond the “Hi? How are you? Lovely weather we're having, isn't it?” [laughs] to actually get to know one another and to really get a little bit deeper into people's lives.

As Ron Stamper phrased it, the in-reach also served *“to deepen those relationships and to start ultimately using them as tools for connecting people to their passions instead of just connecting people to tasks. That's something that personally was really enriching for me.”*

### **Organizing as Ministry**

New leaders assumed roles within the ISAIAH work as well as within various other St. Matthew's ministries, such as vacation Bible school. Over the past year and a half, the core team has worked with Pastor Stevenson and ISAIAH organizers for two purposes: to extend their work to address issues in the surrounding community, and to deepen their work internally to change the organizational culture of the congregation. Through the community work, they reached out to low-income neighborhood residents to address quality-of-life issues, and brought new ethnic diversity into the congregation by inviting those residents to attend St. Matthew's. Through the internal work, they built a new emphasis on relationships, accountability, mutual challenge, and reflective evaluation within many aspects of congregational life.

32 Leader Breanan spoke of the accountability she now brings to all church meetings—



that they should start and end on time, be well-focused and be followed by an evaluation. Other leaders noted that they are much more connected with other congregants through the one-to-one meetings and the Lenten Listening Series, in which small groups met in congregants' homes throughout Lent to study the Lenten scriptures and share hopes and concerns.

Clergy commitment has been a crucial element in the core team's success at building a culture of engagement and accountability within the congregation. ISAIAH organizer and co-director Paul Marincel suggests that clergy should *"see the organization as their organization and [a] vehicle to do their ministry. And focus on the obstacles to being more effective pastoral leaders and on what the organization can do to help them overcome their obstacles."*

### **A Congregational Rebirth**

Marincel, Baumgartner, and a handful of clergy leaders within ISAIAH have been vital collaborators with Pastor Stevenson as he has acted as a midwife in the rebirthing of St. Matthew's. All are convinced that the new vitality at St. Matthew's is the product of bringing faith-based community organizing into the heart of the congregation—not despite the difficult work of changing congregational culture, but in order to do that work more effectively. As Pastor Baumgartner notes, *"Accountability also creates energy. I think a lot of people, when they first think about that, think it's a heavy hand. It almost sounds like an oppressor. On the contrary, I think it creates energy and frees people up, knowing that everybody is in there doing their best."*

At the heart of the St. Matthew's-ISAIAH relationship lie strong *"public friendships"* among the pastor, the organizer, denominational leaders, and congregation members in which they constantly challenge one another to act on their commitments and vision. In the process, they have resurrected a dying congregation and are building it as a dynamic and engaged community institution.

## ***The Role of Organizers***

Organizers are no less crucial to building successful FBCO-congregation partnerships than leaders and clergy. The study showed that certain qualities and skills in organizers contribute greatly to transferring successful organizing into congregational development. For one, because the relationship between organizer and clergy person lies at the heart of the FBCO-congregation link, clergy need to trust the organizer before they will allow them to “get their hands on” a congregation for the intensive work of organizing. The strongest CD occurs where clergy also see organizers as committed to their own personal and professional development, familiar with the faith traditions of their congregations, and good communicators, thus making them valuable as partners, collaborators or consultants in the work of the congregation.

### **Essential Skills and a Caution**

Because FBCO-led congregational development is built upon the fundamental principles and practices of organizing, it requires organizers who are effective as teachers and mentors of lay leaders. Experienced, sophisticated organizers adept at teaching the FBCO principles and practices are thus most effective at generating CD. On the other hand, we found that where new organizers were assigned to the complex work of congregational organizing, CD was weaker, unless they had active supervision and mentoring from sophisticated senior organizers. Even with this supervision, most new organizers need significant time to be trained in the skills needed for congregational development, and to gain the necessary experience and confidence to be seen as valuable by clergy. Interviewees reported substantial inconsistencies in how FBCO groups are undertaking this preparation of organizers. Clergy hold high expectations of organizers—to help them see the bigger picture, to connect them with congregations and institutions of shared concern, to co-strategize about congregational vision or problems, and to know and respect the particularities of their congregations. Inadequate preparation of organizers, therefore, can seriously undermine congregational development and the work of faith-based community organizing.

### **The Orientation of Organizers**

The basic orientation that organizers—new or experienced—bring to congregations also matters. Organizers who fundamentally value faith communities, learn about and respect the faith tradition of each congregation, and value the broad role of clergy in the work of social justice are far more likely to foster congregational development than those who simply see congregations as useful for the organizing work. When grounded in the former orientation, FBCO groups are more likely to implement effective approaches with congregations.

*In San Diego, for example, experienced organizer Kevin Malone has earned the trust of Rev. Frank Lechner at Holy Spirit Catholic Church through his commitment to the congregation and his deep respect for the faith tradition. With Rev. Lechner's support, Malone has been working for the past year to "infuse himself into the congregation." Because Holy Spirit had "an old organizing ministry" that was at the fringe of congregational life, one of the first goals Malone had was to move the organizing effort to the heart of the congregation. He launched a one-to-one campaign and taught an eight-week training on Catholic social teaching that helped people see that "[organizing] was faith first, then action." For this congregation, making strong faith connections was the first step in increasing the centrality of the organizing work.*

Organizers can take a great deal of responsibility—individually and in dialogue with trusted clergy and fellow organizers—for self-development and professional development. But given the fact that organizers' career trajectories increasingly fall within the national FBCO networks, the organizational cultures of the networks probably shape these dynamics more powerfully than any other factor. The networks contribute greatly to the long-term strength of sponsoring congregations when they encourage organizers to learn about those faith traditions, the civic role of congregations and the place of faith and worship in the lives of leaders. Organizers will better link public engagement and congregational development if they have the tools for effective work with clergy in one-to-one meetings and in clergy caucuses, if they know how to foster the creative and critical integration of faith and organizing, and if the networks reward them for their congregational development efforts.

### **The Organizer's Approach to Congregational Development**

When an organizer (or clergyperson) simply encourages a few congregation members to participate in faith-based community organizing, it produces weak congregational development at best. But when an organizer's approach includes a disciplined focus on the following elements, it greatly increases the likelihood that substantial CD will occur:

- a. developing leaders and implementing the principles and practices;
- b. constantly expanding the base of leadership;
- c. applying leadership skills to the internal life of the congregation as well as the public arena;
- d. continuously working to link organizing to faith traditions;
- e. focusing equally, over time, on issue work and relationship-building; and
- f. working with creativity and a rich understanding of the congregation's faith tradition and vision.

Clergy can foster these approaches, but since organizers control much of the flow of organizing within the FBCO model, their role in encouraging these approaches is critical.

We have discussed the essential contributions that leaders, clergy, and organizers make to successful FBCO–congregation partnerships. Since not all congregations involved in organizing work are experiencing strong CD, we also identified and discuss below the most common hindrances to these efforts.

## ***Obstacles to Successful Congregational Development***

### **Congregational Hindrances**

Given the complexity of organizing work and of congregations as institutions, it is not surprising that organizers and clergy identified several obstacles to effective congregational development. Organizers (and sometimes clergy) tended to emphasize short-


*FBCO-linked congregational development is most vibrant where sponsoring clergy and professional organizers forge a partnership for long-term public efficacy through strengthened faith communities.*

comings in sponsoring congregations as among the primary obstacles to effective organizing and FBCO-linked congregational development. Specifically, they noted religious cultural resistance to organizing, especially the belief by some clergy in a dichotomy between social justice work and effective congregational work, and a congregational norm of “niceness at all costs” that springs from a particular interpretation of “kindness” or “love.” Clergy and organizers from middle-class congregations, in particular, talked about the challenge of showing congruity between religious precepts and FBCO principles and practices like agitation and accountability in a culture with these norms. Organizers also attributed difficulties

in building the FBCO-congregation relationship to profound weaknesses in contemporary congregations, including the lack of a clear sense of mission, overburdened or distracted clergy, and congregants pressured by family and professional demands.

### **FBCO-Based Hindrances**

Clergy, on the other hand (and some organizers) saw the primary obstacle to broader and deeper FBCO-linked congregational development as a shortage of organizers with two key qualifications: 1) a strong commitment to faith communities, and 2) a dedication to self-development. In the view of clergy, this shortfall sometimes leads to an imbalance of attention between intensive mobilization around external issue campaigns and the slow work of deep CD. In other settings, it leads to such a high ratio of congregations to organizers that even the best organizers cannot focus sufficient attention on individual congregations to parlay the tools of organizing into effective



congregational development. The latter factor is exacerbated when FBCO groups focus on exerting power in broader geographical areas or larger political arenas, without sustaining strong local work in congregations. In our view, this is not an argument against expanding, but an argument for doing so with concomitant attention to congregational development and strong local organizing. With sufficient funding, organizing skill, and prioritization, larger-scale political engagement can complement and strengthen local organizing and congregational development, rather than undermining them.

### **Relational Hindrances**

Both organizers and clergy members spoke of the importance of having strong relationships with each other if they are to advance the FBCO-congregation partnership. According to interviewees, weak relationships commonly result from excessive professional demands; clergy or organizers without the discipline, self-development, or professional skills to make them engaging partners to one another; distrust or lack of understanding of the other's role; and other factors. But one thing was clear in our interviews: FBCO-linked congregational development is most vibrant where sponsoring clergy and professional organizers forge a partnership for long-term public efficacy through strengthened faith communities.

## Conclusion

When the contribution of leaders, the participation of clergy, and the work of organizers complement each other, a dynamism is created through which FBCO generates both democratic power and congregational development. Where leadership development is thriving, once-silent leaders are finding their voices and using them to put their faith into action for the betterment of the community. Where clergy participate in the FBCO effort, they are discovering that the dichotomy between social justice and faith is a false one. Where well-trained organizers infuse themselves into congregations, these institutions are acting to make political and economic elites more

*Clergy and leaders are discovering that not only is it possible, it is personally enlivening and organizationally effective to fulfill their faith tradition's social justice mandate through the work of the congregation.*

accountable to the wider community. This is the public face of organizing. At the same time, in some places, leaders and clergy are acting in their congregations to make them more effective and truer to their own ideals; to weave tighter relationships within the congregation and between its various ministries, committees, racial-ethnic groups, or attendees at different worship services; to move work for justice closer to the heart of congregational life; and to produce a more disciplined congregational culture, where meetings are more focused and members are challenged to greater responsibility.

Through both the public and congregational faces of organizing, clergy and leaders are discovering that not only is it possible, it is personally enlivening and organizationally effective to fulfill their faith tradition's social justice mandate through the work of the congregation.

With the help of organizers, clergy and leaders are becoming "fluent" in the craft of organizing—that is, practiced in the principles and skills that enable powerful participation in the FBCO-congregation relationship—and building stronger congregations as a result.

All three, in turn, benefit from the national organizing networks, denominational leaders, and foundation staff that sustain this work from the background. We hope that the findings reported here and documented more extensively in other publications will catalyze discussion among all the stakeholders regarding how congregations, faith traditions, and FBCO groups can flourish through their engagement in the democratic work so desperately needed by American society.

# Resources for Further Exploration

## **Books**

Brueggemann, Walter, *Hope Within History*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1987.

Gecan, Michael, *Going Public: An Inside Story of Disrupting Politics as Usual*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

Hart, Stephen, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement Among Grassroots Activists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Jacobsen, Dennis A., *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003.

Olson, Mark, *Moving Beyond Church Growth: An Alternative Vision for Congregations*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2003.

Osterman, Paul, *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2003.

Pierce, Gregory F.A., *Activism That Makes Sense: Congregations and Community Organization*. Chicago: ACTA Publications, 1984, 1997.

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.

## **Articles and Other Publications**

Coleman, John A. "Under the Cross and the Flag: Reflections on Discipleship and Citizenship in America." *America* 174, no. 16 (11 May 1995): 9–11.

Garland, The Most Rev. James H. "Congregation-Based Organizations: A Church Model for the 90's." *America* (13 November 1993).

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 FBCO Networks***

Direct Action Research and Training Center: 314 N.E. 26<sup>th</sup> Terrace, Miami, FL 33137.  
(305) 576-8020.

Gamaliel Foundation: 203 N. Wabash Ave., Ste. 808, Chicago, IL 60601. (312) 357-2639.

Industrial Areas Foundation: 220 West Kinzie, Fifth Floor, Chicago, IL 60610.  
(312) 245-9211.

InterValley Project: 95 Fair Oaks Avenue, Newton, MA 02460-1143. (617) 796-8836.

Pacific Institute for Community Organization: 171 Santa Rosa Ave., Oakland, CA 99610.  
(510) 655-2801.

Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center:  
738 East 92<sup>nd</sup> Street, Los Angeles, CA 90002. (323) 755-RCNO.

## ***IF Publications***

*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 Interfaith Funders publications, please email Mary Ann Flaherty at [maflahertyif@yahoo.com](mailto:maflahertyif@yahoo.com).

For more information on Interfaith Funders, email Jeannie Appleman at [interfaithfunders@yahoo.com](mailto:interfaithfunders@yahoo.com), call her at (516) 364-8922, or email Mary Ann Flaherty as above.

To order copies of this publication, call Augsburg Fortress Order Center at (800) 328-4648. Ask for ISBN 6-0001-7670-8.





***Notes:***



***Notes:***

## What is Interfaith Funders?

Interfaith Funders (IF) is a network of nine faith-based and three secular grant makers 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 launched an initiative to support and advance the field of Faith-Based Community Organizing that has taken the following forms:

- \* **Collaborative grant making:** over the last five years, IF has awarded nearly \$1.8 million in grants to faith-based community organizing groups and networks, that have enacted some of the most innovative organizing strategies nationally to promote living wages, school and welfare reform, and economic development for impoverished communities;
- \* **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 study on congregational development—the focus of this publication—IF seeks to increase support for and engagement in FBCO among congregations and faith traditions;
- \* **Strategic convening** of stakeholders in the field: organizers, leaders in faith traditions, funders, and scholars—who typically don't have the opportunity to develop relationships, 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 and workshops on FBCO at funder conferences and briefings, and gatherings of religious communities, as well as individual meetings.

Current members of Interfaith Funders include: 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, the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and the Claretian Social Development Fund. The Mott Foundation, Needmor Fund, the New York Foundation, and the Marianist Sharing Fund are Associate Members. 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.



**Interfaith Funders**  
1 Dover Lane, Syosset, NY 11791  
[interfaithfunders@yahoo.com](mailto:interfaithfunders@yahoo.com)

Printed on recycled paper 

ISBN: 6-0001-7670-8