



FOCUS MINNESOTA: One State, Twin Cities, Multiple Perspectives

An Interfaith Funders' Report

What brings Interfaith Funders to Minnesota?

While there was national attention on Minnesota during the past electoral season, it wasn't just the Republican National Convention hubbub or the post-Senate race vote counting that caught our attention. The more we heard from grantees and colleagues, the clearer we were that there was something big going on in the upper Midwest. The rapid growth of people of color, especially immigrants, is creating shifts in the demographic and political make-up of Minnesota, a relatively prosperous state. Racial disparities continue to underscore many challenges to Minnesotans but have sparked considerable energy and creativity from the organizing community as organizers forge new alliances across more than racial boundaries. The work called to us and we wanted to know more.

Interfaith Funders (IF) is a network of faith-based and secular funders working to advance the field of congregation-based community organizing with the aim of strengthening democracy and justice. In 2007, after a strategic planning process, we decided we could add value to the field by focusing on some targeted regional initiatives. We look for regions where at least two Interfaith Funders members make a case that there is an appetite to do something "bigger," something that will build ties between organizing groups, networks, other community-based partners, advocacy and research organizations, and funders. As funders, we look at how our sector can participate in the journey to move issues along and strengthen groups so that they will have significant impact, and we commit to working for a critical mass of support among funders.

Three IF members made the initial case about Minnesota – the **McKnight Foundation**, the **Domestic Hunger Program of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELCA)**, and the **Unitarian Universalist (UU) Veatch Program at Shelter Rock**. McKnight is locally based in Minneapolis and works to promote connected and comprehensive responses to place-

based community issues in Minnesota. Program Officer Eric Muschler says, "We believe that there is some special work going on in the Twin Cities worth looking at, reflecting on, and sharing more broadly." The UU Veatch Program and ELCA are national funders well invested in Minnesota, bringing their national perspective and learning to the mix.

Focus MN: the Funder Briefing

Our conversations lead to an interesting query: How does the intersection of faith, race, and immigration in Minnesota redefine place-based development, regional equity, and civic participation? To explore this more deeply, Interfaith Funders and our partners organized an October, 2008 funder briefing, in order to create a space for Minnesota funders and organizations as well as other national funder affinity groups. We felt that by applying a shared lens of equity, we could find common principles across the barriers of our issue and geographic funding "silos." Co-sponsoring the event were the **Minnesota Council on Foundations, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, Funders' Committee for Civic Participation, and the Funders' Network for Smart Growth and Livable Communities**.

Objectives for the Focus Minnesota funder briefing were:

- Highlighting organizing collaborations that demonstrate organizing work that crosses multiple boundaries of issues, race, place, and faiths.
- Calling attention to the active and intentional work organizing groups are doing around integrating a racial analysis into their organizing.
- Exploring the relationship between immigrant communities and historic communities of color, and
- Creating clarity about the value of sustained or increased investment in organizing and the ways that well integrated faith-based organizing adds power and potential to the field.

Our day and a half of meetings, speakers and site visits only allowed time to illustrate and illuminate examples of the organizing in Minnesota – not speak with or meet every worthwhile organization. What the forty funders who met together with key organizers did accomplish was to explore some interesting developments in organizing and organizer collaboration, including several models of faith-community involvement that appear to us to be nationally significant.

Greater Minnesota: Forging Statewide Reach with New Communities

While our time at the briefing was short, the depth of the work out in Greater Minnesota, or beyond the Twin Cities metro area, was clear.

We learned: Organizing is expanding in reach and density beyond the core Twin Cities into suburban communities and across the state through a powerful movement to secure and exercise the basic rights of citizenship.

We were treated to a Minnesota 101 on statewide demographic and political trends by the **Organizer Apprenticeship Project**, which has trained and developed organizers and brought together justice organizations strategically for more than fifteen years. OAP's scope of experience with groups from the Iron Range to the Iowa border positions them to comprehensively map the reach of community organizing in the state.

The first map was creatively drawn out on a shower curtain but now is available via digital mapping. Through the growth and statewide expansion of community organizations, primarily among immigrants, the power centers for progressive change have shifted beyond the conventional urban areas, creating new opportunities and arenas for broader change at the state level.

We learned: Community-based work in Minnesota is layered and interconnected across diverse communities, simultaneously fostering new civic participation, integrated voter engagement, and immigrant integration.

"Community involvement for newcomers doesn't just happen," states Molly Schultz Hafid, Program Officer with the UU Veatch Program at Shelter Rock. "Sustainable immigrant integration requires skilled and well-resourced organizations to engage new residents in community agenda setting, developing leadership skills and embracing the best in democratic practices and values. Civic engagement efforts, particularly integrated voter engagement, build the impact and effectiveness of immigrant community organizations."

A growing number of immigrant community groups are incorporating civic participation into their strategy to increase their membership base and begin to exercise political power within the state of Minnesota. The **Main Street Project Latino Leadership Project**, with a strong base among Spanish-speaking immigrants, has engaged in a spectrum of civic activities, building upon their important voter registration and Get Out the Vote (GOTV) activities.

Many families and communities have people of diverse citizenship status, so this group explores ways people can be involved and take on leadership, even if they can't vote.

The **Somali Action Alliance** (SAA) was started by OAP apprentice organizers in 2002, campaigning first to save a Somali language school and to train other Somali leaders. SAA has moved from addressing the social issues of this large refugee community into holding public officials accountable. They are using sophisticated strategies for voter registration, drawing out leadership among a population that did not experience democratic practice in their country of origin. Muslim community leaders and mosques have been tapped for leadership roles in supporting increased civic participation and immigrant integration.

Progressive power would elude these communities if they weren't able to unite beyond their own constituency. One organization, **Take Action Minnesota**, has a broad membership of organizations representing the geographic and demographic scope of the state, forming common ground between long-time community and labor leaders and the newcomers. It works to engage these organizations beyond one-time campaign mobilizations by increasing their capacity for effective statewide policy work. Another group, **The Progressive Technology Project**, trains the organizations in the use of the most sophisticated voter registration and mobilization.

We learned: Financial resources available for organizing in the Twin Cities, though limited, far exceed those available in Greater Minnesota.

The mis-match of resources is understandable given guidelines of urban Twin Cities foundations to fund specifically within the metro area, and this status quo inhibits the development of strong organizations in Greater Minnesota. With more adequate funding, there would be great potential to build a broader, more connected statewide organizing infrastructure across key smaller cities and rural areas where immigrant and minority populations are located. Tying together their overlapping interests in racial and economic justice would yield a powerfully coordinated statewide movement.

The Twin Cities: The Role of Place, Faith, and the Racial Justice Lens

The richness of urban organizing came through during two site visits in Minneapolis and St. Paul where creativity is knocking down geographic, racial, and issue boundaries.

We learned: Key anchor organizations in the Twin Cities are addressing place-based development issues through a careful analysis of issues in the metropolitan region and a racial justice lens.

The McKnight Foundation has been working in the Twin Cities with the **Alliance for Metropolitan Stability**, a coalition of social justice, environmental, faith-based, affordable housing, transit, and other organizations dedicated to eliminating racial and economic disparities in regional

growth and development patterns. The Alliance and three of their 25 partner organizations - **Jewish Community Action**, **MICAH**, and **ISALAH (Gamaliel)** - worked with Interfaith Funders as a host committee to plan a full day of site visits. These groups were key in identifying stories and struggles which shed light on their linked efforts to create and sustain more equitable development in the Twin Cities region.

The Alliance notes that the significant amount of energy for organizing that exists is not just due to the growth of people of color (110% population increase from 1990 – 2000) but to the need to address stubborn racial inequities. For example, the average Black and Latino families in the Twin Cities respectively made 52% and 69% of white household average income. People of color are more likely to be victims of crime, and to live in poverty or homelessness, and overall, low income Minnesotans lag in school achievement and health indicators. (Statistics, Alliance for Metro Stability)

The racial lens is key in the analysis of the region, according to Alliance Director Russ Adams, "In Minnesota, not talking about race and not talking about racial justice was clearly hurting communities of color and also the progressive movement as a whole. We know that decisions relating to how growth and development happens in this country, and in our region, have too often reinforced racial, environmental and economic disparities and divisions between people. As the population of people of color continues to increase, Minnesota must adopt a proactive racial equity agenda to match the growing concerns of residents of color."

These racial and income gaps are reflected in the huge disparities across suburban communities and the core cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul – the second worst such inequality among the forty major U.S. metro areas. Over two-thirds of new entry-level jobs are in the suburbs, but nearly one in five inner city households lack an automobile – in a metro region with a grossly underdeveloped transit system. (Statistics, Alliance for Metro Stability)

Organizing across the changing demographics of suburban and urban areas is essential for low-income and minority communities to have a more powerful voice in regional decisions to distribute public resources, guide growth, and direct investments. Who decides, and who benefits, from publicly supported development? Exploration of this question has fueled a whole array of coalition organizing efforts around regionally significant, mega-development projects throughout the Twin Cities.

We learned: Building trust relationships and multiple-issue principles can shape effective action.

Over nearly six years, key organizations addressing housing, transportation, environmental, labor, and community development have developed a set of common principles and relationships to enhance their work. There is a growing recognition that achieving wins in isolation does not always result in better outcomes for low-income communities. In fact, comprehensively addressing place-based community needs can weave together more positive and permanent outcomes. Organizations have learned to either partner and

share power across these fields or become more adept as multi-issue organizations. Thus unified, grassroots groups can collectively pursue integrated and equitable policies that promote sustainability, economic justice, and social responsibility.

We learned: The long-standing central role of strong, metro-wide faith-based organizing groups is creating new partnerships and tools.

In the Twin Cities, metro-wide faith-based organizations – Jewish Community Action, MICAH, and ISALAH, an affiliate of the Gamaliel national network - anchor the movement for racial and economic justice. These groups draw on their core values, traditions and justice principles, as well as the tenets of congregation based community organizing, to connect specific local campaigns for wise public/private investments and equitable redevelopment policies for the strength of the whole. "We were seeing capacity in this new and creative partnership between faith organizations and the place based efforts, which is leading to stronger relationships and creating new tools," says Kathy Partridge, IF director.

Minnesota in Focus: Pro-active Organizing is Shaping Outcomes

The organizing in Greater Minnesota, neighborhoods like Harrison, and along the Central Corridor are examples of a common and growing statewide phenomenon of proactive work that shapes expectations about civic engagement and future development in every community. Organizations press to establish ground rules by which the public and private sector must interact with low-income communities and provide added benefits beyond physical infrastructure. Community Benefit Agreements, racial analysis impact statements, comprehensive plans and basic zoning regulations all can build the expectation of higher returns from growth than just the financial bottom line. Susan Eng of the ELCA comments, "it shows foresight and perspective when these organizations work for comp plans or to fight exclusionary zoning in the suburbs, because by targeting these policies as tools for change, they win at a larger scale than single-issue local campaigns can."

Want to know more?

Please visit our website for updates on campaigns, background documents, event photos and links to the organizations referenced: www.interfaithfunders.org

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Interfaith Funders is a network of faith-based and secular grantmakers working to advance the field of congregation-based community organizing (CBCO), to strengthen democracy and justice.

Organizing through Place and Faith: Two Twin Cities Examples

Cross-sector organizing for equitable development in the Twin Cities is widespread, and we were able to visit only two campaigns – the Historic Harrison Neighborhood in Minneapolis, and the planned Central Corridor light rail line connecting downtown Minneapolis and St. Paul. In these cases, as in other campaigns throughout the metro area, faith-based organizations are partnered with place-based groups for powerful organizing – building widening relationships and surfacing concerns, then taking action in the pursuit of collective demands for policies that benefit all the members of the community. The two campaigns have in common their explicit place-based orientation, which means a diverse range of local people are affected and must be brought together. Both areas are historic African-American communities, and are now also home to many recent immigrants and their organizations. They share the “community benefits agreement” strategy, a framework that states that publicly subsidized development should help people impacted by the development, and that there should be legal means to ensure that promises made are promises kept. The work in each community is unique, because it is driven by the specific community and focused on engaging at the local, grassroots level, yet shares a common fundamental question: “who decides and who benefits from growth and development?”

Historic Harrison Neighborhood: A congregation anchors the development and organizing there as demographics change

This diverse urban neighborhood has been a gateway for generations of newcomers, but also a dumping ground by industry. Facing pressures from clear development opportunities for for-profit developers, the local Redeemer Lutheran church, a member of the metro-wide **ISAIAH** organization, has pulled together a diverse group of neighborhood organizations serving various communities, crossing sectors and language barriers to organize a partnership rooted in relationships that foster trust through shared action. This place-based experience has likewise transformed the ISAIAH network in their ever-deepening journey to apply the racial justice lens. Randy Keesler of the national Catholic Campaign for Human Development noted, “The interplay of an experienced metro wide organizing network and the rootedness of the local congregation have led to an unusual depth in the multi-racial relationships in Harrison.”

Central Corridor Light Rail project: Collaboration impacts transportation infrastructure policy for equity

University Avenue in St. Paul is now home to a thriving string of locally owned, often minority-led businesses that fear they won’t survive a multi-year, \$900 million light rail line construction project to link the sparkling downtowns of the Twin Cities. This is a place where community organizing and community development come together. Tension quickly rises to the surface, given the bitter memories of the historic African American Rondo neighborhood that was literally split in two by a 1950’s interstate highway project. The current light rail alignment and station plans pass by three key intersections where the large minority communities would benefit from proximity and access. This vital urban transit way is home to a complex network of community groups organizing local residents to shape and design the Central Corridor LRT project and future development along the avenue.

Local faith-based organizations – in particular **Jewish Community Action** with support from the **Alliance for Metro Stability** – has facilitated the complex interests involved and the many organizing efforts along the Corridor to build a common table where high stakes decisions are made. The “**Stops 4 Us**” campaign succinctly expresses the communities’ call for transportation equity. They are using creativity, research, and alliance-building to satisfactorily address the questions: How do you balance the promise of new public and private investments with the threats of gentrification and displacement of local businesses and residents? Who will have access to new construction jobs? Will transit-dependent neighborhoods along the corridor have stops or be passed by when the line opens?

Funders in Dialogue: Opportunities for Collaboration

The Oct. 2008 Focus MN briefing concluded with a national/local funder conversation to explore how to better provide resources to these organizing efforts and groups in the Twin Cities and statewide. How can national, regional, and local funders partner together? Can we build more synergy by collaborating cross the “silos” of specific funding interests?

To work as peers, funders need to find the interconnections and move across different strategies, using positive experience rather than focusing on gaps. Cris Doby of the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation notes, “given the current financial environment, it’s critical and timely for funders and organizations to build long-term strategic relationships and address complex issues by better integrating our multiple approaches.” We came away with confirmation of our belief in the value of integrating diverse perspectives, and with enthusiasm for

partnering with organizing collaboratives and between local and national funders.

We hope this will be the beginning of an ongoing effort in Minnesota to:

- Spark broader interest and funding for community organizing efforts.
- Nurture organizing efforts to become effective multiple issue organizations that can share power across a broad range of issues related to equity.
- Create a network of funders willing to cut across funding silos (like immigration, housing, or faith communities alone) to encourage movement across issue, geographic, and other barriers
- Develop new ways for national funders to work with regional and local funders around community organizing with deeper and sustained relationships.

