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Stacy Keogh

Richard L. Wood

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**The Rebirth of Catholic Collective Action in Central America:  
A new model of church-based political participation**

Stacy Keogh  
and  
Richard L. Wood  
University of New Mexico

Department of Sociology  
MSC 05 3080  
1 University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001  
505-277-1117  
[skeogh@unm.edu](mailto:skeogh@unm.edu)  
[rlwood@unm.edu](mailto:rlwood@unm.edu)

Abstract

We analyze a new effort at collective political mobilization, sponsored by the Catholic Church in Central America following the demobilization of church-linked liberationist movements since the early 1990s. The current effort strives to re-project social Catholicism into the public arena by drawing on traditional Catholic structures, the cultural legacy of liberationist Catholicism, and a model of democratic organizing promoted by the PICO National Network in the United States. Drawing primarily on ethnographic and interview data, we explain the initial success of the effort in light of the literature on resource mobilization, mobilizing structures, and the cultural dynamics of social movements, then assess the ongoing and future challenges that PICO-Central America is likely to face. We argue that despite PICO's challenges in Central America, the

movement represents a rebirth of Catholic activism in the region and holds significant promise as one element in the consolidation of democratic politics in Central America.

**Résumé:**

Nous analysons un nouvel effort de mobilisation politique collective parrainé par l'Église catholique en Amérique centrale après la démobilisation des mouvements libérationnistes liés à l'église depuis le début des années 1990. L'effort actuel s'efforce de réprojeter le Catholicisme social dans l'arène publique en s'appuyant sur les structures traditionnelles catholiques, le patrimoine culturel de Catholicisme libérationniste, et un modèle d'organisation sociale démocratique promue par le Réseau National PICO aux États-Unis. Basé principalement sur des données ethnographiques et entrevues, nous expliquons le succès initial de l'effort à la lumière de la littérature sur la mobilisation des ressources, les structures de mobilisation et la dynamique culturelle des mouvements sociaux. A ce moment là nous évaluons les défis actuels et futurs auxquels PICO-Amérique centrale est susceptible de faire face. Malgré les défis de PICO en Amérique centrale, nous arguons du fait que le mouvement représente une renaissance de l'activisme catholique dans la région et tient une certain promesse d'être un élément dans la consolidation de la politique démocratique en Amérique centrale.

**Key words:** Political sociology, mobilization, collective action, religion, Catholic, Central America, Latin America, social ethics, social movements, religious mobilization, faith-based, community organizing

**Mots clés:** Sociologie politique, mobilisation, action collective, religion, catholique, Amérique centrale, Amérique Latine, éthique sociale, mouvements sociaux, mobilisation religieuse, basée sur foi, organisation communautaire

Stacy Keogh is a doctoral student at the University of New Mexico and an adjunct faculty member in the Department of Sociology at the University of Montana. Her ongoing research agenda includes the utility of religion in political movements in the United States, Latin America, and the Middle East.

Richard L. Wood serves as Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of New Mexico. He is the author of *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press 2002). He is currently writing *Faith and the Fire of Public Life*, on the impact of democratic engagement on faith communities. Wood co-edits a book series at Cambridge University Press, *Cambridge Studies of Social Theory, Religion, and Politics*.

The theology of liberation that emerged from the Catholic Church in Central America in the 1970s left a polarized political and spiritual legacy. As the movement declined in the early 1990s following the end of the region's civil wars, the Church's public voice largely abated. That is, until recently. In 2003, Catholic bishops of Central America launched a new community organizing effort to reconstitute an effective and renewed effort at Catholic political influence in the region. The effort responded to a number of ecclesial challenges, including the rise of Evangelical Protestant influence and the Catholic Church's own weakened public presence and diminishing political influence. Though not abandoning the methods and structures of mobilization utilized by the Church in the past, the bishops chose to incorporate the techniques of the PICO National Network, a forty year old community organizing network based in the United States. This article analyzes PICO-Central America's early experience, paying particular attention to its roots in U.S. community organizing and Central American Catholicism. We analyze the cultural and structural dimensions of this new, transnational model of Catholic social action, and how its attempts at democratic organizing differ from its sister organization in the highly democratized setting of the United States. Utilizing the resource mobilization/political process framework for analyzing social movements, we argue that the organizational tools and cultural resources provided by the Catholic Church are opening new political opportunities for mobilization.

The article proceeds as follows: We begin by outlining the Central American religious and political context, while considering the implications of community organizing culture for democratic consolidation in the region. We then analyze the cultural and structural dimensions of this new, transnational model of Catholic social action, including its implications for the construction of a post-liberationist Catholic collective identity. Finally, we argue that despite

PICO's challenges in Central America, the movement represents a rebirth of Catholic activism in the region and may contribute to the process of democratic consolidation in Central America.

### Background and Context

We propose two important contextual historical factors that have either positively or negatively affected PICO's mobilization in Central America. First, following political polarization in the 1970s and 1980s, Central American societies face a profound and ongoing struggle to effectively consolidate democracy culturally and institutionally in stable ways. Second the Catholic Church, no longer serves as the primary, hegemonic religious force influencing Central American political structures. Rising competition from Evangelical & Pentecostal Christianity has challenged the Catholic monopoly in the region, directly through its own political efforts and indirectly through the influence of a more individualistic and conservative theology (often, not always).

During the 1970s and 1980s in Central America, religious commitments undergirded much of the activism that generated widespread political mobilization. When authoritarian regimes responded to activism with repression and/or violence, such commitments were carried into armed insurrection. Though some of these movements' leaders were driven primarily by ideas of "national liberation" rooted in Marxist social analysis, religious sources of meaning provided much of the movements' broader social appeal. Particularly crucial were grassroots lay communities such as Christian base communities (*comunidades eclesiales de base*, CEBs, the institutional structures that underlay the Church's "*pastoral social*" – the Spanish term for the Church's social ministry in poor communities) and the writings of liberation theologians. These liberationist tendencies drove much of the vitality of the Catholic Church in Latin America in the

late 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, they receded dramatically in the 1990s, in the face of Vatican opposition. Following the defeat of revolutionary political change in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and El Salvador, the Catholic Church gradually turned inward through an emphasis on parish ministry, lay “apostolic” movements, and issues of family and individual morality.

Recent political developments in the region are quite complex. On one hand, political institutions today provide a measure of representation and transparency that have not existed previously in most of Central America. As Guzman and Solís (2005: 5) argue: “While sharing with the rest of Latin America the pain inherent in truncated democratic transitions, [Central America] has undoubtedly advanced significantly in establishing political systems which [are today] much more legitimate and stable than they were in other periods of the region’s history.”

Yet despite these new elements of legitimacy and stability, democracy in most of the region remains stunted (Booth 2000, Seligson and Booth 2010). Economically, vast social inequalities continue to mark Central American societies, exacerbated by policies associated with economic globalization (PNUD/AECI 1998; Proyecto Estado de la Nación 2002). Socially, gang-generated violence, familial breakdown, environmental degradation, drug trafficking, and alcohol abuse continue to generate calls for authoritarian government action that challenge democratic reform.

Religiously, Protestant growth throughout Central America has meant both a declining percentage of members and lost political influence for the Catholic Church (Steigenga and Cleary 2007; Freston 2008). Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity, various expressions of Roman Catholicism, and other alternatives (including gang culture, popular consumer culture, and secular humanitarian worldviews) compete intensely for moral authority in people’s lives (Smilde 2007; Brenneman 2011). Additionally, the significant growth of Central Americans

claiming no religious affiliation has eroded Catholic public influence (IUDOP 2009). According to previous studies on Evangelicalism, whose pneumacentric rituals and conservative theology typically encourage personal morality and individual spiritual growth over wider social concerns (Smilde 2007; Steigenga and Cleary 2007), the growth of such conservative theology may appear to be detrimental to civic engagement. However, scholars have contended that the increasingly pluralistic religious environment may actually promote more community projects and revitalized civic engagement (Froehle 1994; Gaskill 1997; Smith 1994; Stoll 1990). Though the Roman Catholic Church does maintain a lower public profile than in the past, because parish ministry and the *pastoral social* continue to link Catholic institutional leaders to the ongoing realities of poverty, social violence, and the traumas of immigration and drug trafficking, the bishops continue to seek a public voice to address social policy.

### Connecting with the PICO National Network

Whether the Central American Catholic bishops launched the effort to reclaim public presence in response to the rise of religious competition, or as an expression of Catholic demands of social justice (Consejo Pontificio 2005), they chose community organizing as a means to do so – that is, to seek a stronger public voice to address social policy. This aspiration led the regional body of Catholic bishops (the *Secretariado Episcopal de America Central*, or SEDAC) to reconfigure its social teaching and community-oriented programs to more effectively speak to governing authorities, via a partnership with the U.S.-based PICO National Network.

To understand PICO-Central America, one must see it in contrast to the core work of PICO in the U.S. context. The PICO National Network emphasizes ecumenical and interfaith organizing through established religious congregations. Although the network was founded by an



ordained Jesuit priest in 1973, Catholic parishes make up only a minority of its sponsoring institutions, outnumbered by liberal and moderate Protestant and historic African American churches plus smaller contingents from minority religious traditions (Fulton and Wood 2012; Wood, Fulton, and Partridge 2012). The network functions by creating local federations that link 10 to 60 sponsoring congregations to an autonomous organization run by professional staff organizers trained by PICO.

A distinctive element of the congregation-based organizing model lies in its emphasis on the formation of large networks of participants linked to the organizing effort, with sufficient organizational power to keep political officials accountable to constituents (Hart 2001; Speer et al., 2003; Swarts 2008; Warren 2001; Wood 2002). It does so through “relational organizing”, that is, the conscious construction and strengthening of interpersonal networks within civil society, which are then used to project political influence. Participants in this model typically focus on socio-economic issues of interest to low-income communities – typically regarding public education, healthcare, policing or other city services, immigration issues, or housing. PICO uses “one-to-one” meetings with potential participants and “research meetings” between PICO members and political figures or policy experts to construct an organization that can intervene in the political arena. This process generates social capital, political credibility, and democratic skills, fostering a network of leaders that can project sufficient power to influence political figures and institutions. All this leads to a “political action,” whereby a local federation of congregations turns out several hundred to several thousand members before an official holding policy authority over the issue to be addressed. Substantial negotiations between officials and key PICO leaders often precede or follow these events.

Though the efficacy of the PICO National Network and other faith-based community organizing efforts demonstrate the *potential* for this model to empower civil society in the U.S. context, it hardly constitutes evidence that this can work within the less developed civil societies of Central America.

### PICO-Central America: A Transnational Organizing Effort

In the bishops' quest for new strategies, Cardinal Oscar Andrés Rodríguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras, suggested drawing on PICO's organizing experience in the United States (during his seminary studies, Rodríguez had befriended a fellow student who later became a PICO organizer; Rodríguez was thus familiar with the network's track record). The underlying strategy builds upon the Catholic structure of parishes, lay "apostolic" movements, and the *pastoral social* projects that emerged during the dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s; re-orient them toward democratic influence via PICO's organizing methods; and thus create an effective voice of public Catholicism in Central America.

Ulrich Schmitt, a U.S.-based PICO organizer fluent in Spanish, was appointed to lead the effort and spearheaded the initial PICO-Central America effort (2003-2008), in collaboration with the Central American bishops (with bishops Elías Bolaños of Zacatecoluca, El Salvador and Alvaro Ramazzini of San Marcos, Guatemala playing central roles). PICO-Central America was officially launched in late 2003 at the bishops' annual SEDAC meeting. SEDAC members arranged for PICO to assist in the organizing and training of Central American religious clergy and lay leaders, which began in early 2005. Over the next three years, PICO claims to have trained 1,100 Catholic pastoral agents (322 clergy and 761 lay people) in six Central American countries: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama (Schmitt

2007).<sup>i</sup> Beginning in 2009, PICO-Central America was led by a committee of regional bishops, and run by two PICO representatives (Schmitt, based in the U.S., and Alberto Velasquez, based in Central America).

In its literature and training, PICO-Central America presents three core objectives: (1) to develop an infrastructure of local and regional civic faith-based organizations, (2) to increase civic participation from the grassroots and (3) to develop leaders within already existing institutions in civil society (i.e. churches, educational institutions, charities, etc). Additionally, PICO-Central America appears to share the liberationist goals of social reform inspired by a reading of the Christian gospel emphasizing human dignity, shared work toward the common good in society, and economic policy designed to reduce poverty and inequality. However, they clearly diverge from the militant approaches of some liberationist groups that sought social revolution. Reflecting the changed historical context, PICO-Central America strives for gradual social transformation through the accumulation of micro-level change in social policy and political culture.

### Data and Methods

Our analysis is based on participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and archival research on the PICO-Central America effort, primarily from 2004-2009. We visited the region on five separate trips, for a total of fourteen weeks of ethnographic fieldwork in Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador. We conducted a total of thirty interviews and four focus groups in all three countries, and attended two leadership trainings conducted in Honduras and El Salvador in 2006.<sup>ii</sup> The semi-structured interviews focused on the configuration and character of each involved parish; the interviewee's theological orientation and view of liberation theology and

church social teaching; the respondent's perceptions of and relationship to local municipal government; the parish's relationship with surrounding religious institutions; and any experience with previous attempts at community organizing. Furthermore, we collected bulletins, newsletters and diocesan updates from each of the participating parishes and regional Catholic Charities offices. At the leadership trainings, sixty-eight participants representing nineteen different parishes and *Caritas* (a key Catholic social service agency) were taught the basic skills of community organizing and participatory democracy.

Keogh returned to the region in 2007 to witness the first PICO-affiliated political "action" in El Salvador, and in 2008-9 conducted follow-up interviews to assess the impact of the action within these communities. In 2010, Wood attended a training workshop for leaders in San Salvador and another political action. When not in the region, we tracked the effort via phone interviews of the PICO-Central America staff – most recently in early 2013.

#### PICO-Central America in Action

After months of local level organizing and event planning, PICO-Central America's leaders believed they were ready to launch the organization's public profile as an agent of social change. In 2007, the PICO project in El Salvador, which had taken the name COFOA (*Comunidades de Fe Organizando para la Acción* or *Faith Communities Organized for Action*) carried out its initial political action. Due to the strong leadership of Bishop Elías Bolaños in the rural province of La Paz, the site chosen was *Iglesia Santiago Apostol* in Santiago Nonualco, a small town about 70 kilometers from the capital city of that province. By the time the action began, nearly 800 people spilled out of the seats of this humble church in the Salvadoran *campo*. The demographic composition of the audience was widely diverse; men and women, young and

old, lower and middle classes entered the sanctuary as people knelt in prayer, laughed with excitement, and chatted nervously waiting for the action to commence. Their guests included all four mayors invited from regional cities, as well as the president of the *Asociación Nacional de la Empresa Privada* (ANEP, the National Association of Private Industry), a powerful national coordinator of the Salvadoran business class. After an opening procession and the introduction of political officials, Bishop Bolaños delivered an opening talk to frame the action in theological terms:

The Kingdom of God – of faith, fraternity, health, and justice – is revealed here because of our faith; because we have believed in Jesus Christ and the will of God... What our community organizing has come here to say is that active faith, ordained by God, is what we want for this world... [The essence of] Christianity is action and solutions. We are not going to be reduced to mere protesting; we have to construct new methods. This is what they call Christian action. Then, we will bring about the Kingdom of God... El Salvador needs solutions; we want committed people with a pure Christian faith... COFOA is an organization that moves people to necessary action to realize the Christian life; the peace that we have to create, the peace of Christianity through the force of faith. We have to act out our faith in Jesus through relationships with the politicians.

Bolaños thus sought to inspire participants to see their action as part of God's work in the world, and to feel the power of the moment, interpreted simultaneously as the power of God and as the power of democratic life. Following the sermon, a short presentation by lay representatives from each of the five diocesan parishes in attendance presented the list of grievances constructed by

that specific community. Six central issues were brought before the invited politicians: improvement in the upkeep of city streets; improved trash collection; greater accessibility to public health services; better organization of local vendors whose kiosks interfere with the flow of traffic; and a demand to stop the contamination of local river water caused by pollution from the local cheese factory. The first five demands are typically issues in community organizing: concrete, specific problems that matter in people's lives, and on which the organization can deliver victories and thus begin building a powerful organization. The last demand was particularly crucial: the river supplies drinking water to many residents, and the cheese factory was owned by the ANEP president present at the meeting. Thus, this issue represented a conflict between poor folks' immediate issues of life and health and the economic interests of the Salvadoran elite. In the past, such conflicts have led to outbreaks of violence.

After the presentations of details about each issue and the community's desire for change, each politician and the private entrepreneur was asked by a Catholic lay person: "Are you willing to work with our organization for the improvement of our community?" The politician or entrepreneur was then asked to offer a clear yes or no reply, followed by a timed three minute response.<sup>iii</sup> All responded affirmatively. Their subsequent comments included the following:

I want to share this [action] with others in the political system so that they will give the support so that the people can do what they need to do, nationally and internationally.

This is wonderful what you are doing.... I'm not used to talking to the public in this manner.

This type of action is not normal, but it is necessary. I will try my best to grant the people the things they need.

Each political guest agreed to collaborate with COFOA, promised to recruit other regional mayors, and pledged to support programs addressing COFOA's demands. They then signed a large poster publicly announcing their commitment to the resolution of these issues. The bishops, priests and organizers exited in a traditional Catholic procession, officially drawing the action to a close. Meanwhile, the guests and political representatives remained on stage. The audience rose to their feet as animated chatter filled the church, the enthusiasm in the room reminiscent of a religious revival.

Since the success of this first political action, COFOA has remained active in generating public support for community projects and keeping the community engaged in local politics. In 2008, COFOA hosted a forum with the five mayoral candidates to answer questions from the community regarding local policy issues. In early 2009, COFOA directed a community-wide clean up of a highly contaminated creek running through the small town. The creek had allegedly instigated health problems for a number of residents living within that zone, and was cleaned up by approximately five hundred community members. In June 2009, COFOA hosted another political action, this time with three *diputados* (regional representatives to the national legislature). This action focused on two demands: First, gaining government funding for construction of safety measures on the national highway through town, along which several residents had been killed in traffic accidents. Second, getting the *diputados* to commit to working with the organization to eliminate pollution sources from the river and construct a sewage treatment plant. The three national politicians (representing the now-governing FMLN that

emerged from the guerrilla insurgency, as well as two more conservative political parties) agreed to COFOA's demands and publicly signed a Community Agreement stating this commitment. The national legislator (*diputado*) from the FMLN, a local priest who worked in the mountains for years ministering to the guerrillas, endorsed the effort as follows:

Thank you for inviting me. I apologize for arriving late. All three of us congratulate you on your unity, and also because as Christians you are being light and salt for the earth. You are trying to assure that the will of God is done here on earth. Today I am a *diputado* for the governing party, no longer for the opposition, and we are going to do everything possible. I commit to you, before God, that that overpass will be under construction as soon as possible. But I want to say one more thing: Do not make me the sole workhorse on this. You must be [political] workhorses here, be committed to this, so that it is accomplished.<sup>iv</sup>

The other *diputados* made similar comments, incorporating phrases such as “it is right and good that the different political institutions should support actions like what you are doing,” “I congratulate this organization that you have established, taking decisive steps like this one,” “we have no alternative but to accompany you when various communities unite like this,” and “I will introduce laws to incorporate your concerns about pollution in the river.”

### The New Catholic Activism

Several facets of COFOA's work represent a revival of public Catholicism in their local political arenas, and, *if multiplied and scaled up to higher levels*, potentially in the region. To begin, after more than a decade of movement abeyance, the Church again took a *collective* public



stance in favor of the popular classes. On the surface, little is new here: The Catholic Church in Latin America has traditionally claimed to speak for the common good of society (of course with widely varying accuracy to that claim). But traditionally the church has spoken “from on high,” a clerical voice claiming to speak to societal leaders from a position of higher authority. The liberationist movements articulated a “popular” authority that asserted a democratic intent, but lacked clear democratic authority due to the absence of transparent democratic institutions (those that had existed, for example in El Salvador in the early 1970s, had been negated by military repression and coups). As noted above, both clerical and political authority permeated the action, with religious authority used to constitute a public arena in which political dialogue could occur. But the fundamental political dynamics occurred on the terrain of democratic accountability: non-clergy asking political and economic elites to make commitments in front of their constituents, with a significant element of democratic authority brought to bear within the resulting public dialogue.

Second, the elites targeted by the PICO-Central America action – including both political leaders and the often-unreachable economic elite – appeared to accept the norms of accountability presumed in a democratic polity. Note that the elite leaders were required to listen to grassroots demands, were held to a strict timeline of response, and asked to make commitments publicly and in writing. These demands dramaturgically and symbolically represented democratic authority over societal elites – not in the sense of subjugation of authorities, given the respectful tone of the interchanges, but rather in the sense that their authority was treated as legitimate *to the extent* that it was tied to service to the wider society. And the politicians’ willingness to negotiate with organized constituents represents their acceptance of – or at least acquiescence to – democratic accountability. Such relatively small

acts of compliance with democratic political norms, *if repeated regularly*, may gradually give rise to the habit and expectation of political accountability. This again suggests at least the beginnings of democratic consolidation and the formation of a civil society,

Third, in contrast to both the command politics of authoritarian periods and the messianic politics of revolutionary mobilization, COFOA participants carried off the action in a spirit of *reform*, holding political authorities to standards of democratic accountability while recognizing the legitimacy of their political office. This suggests that the political shifts toward democratic institutions that E. Wood (2001) termed “democracy from below” may be undergoing *cultural* institutionalization from below as well – an important aspect of democratic consolidation if it is to be sustained over the long term. Moreover, embedded in the shift of power during the action was the fact that here, power was *negotiated*. In Central American political culture, power has typically been imposed by military and economic elites pursuing their own interests. In contrast, a central element of the COFOA action involved public negotiations regarding subaltern interests.

In sum, these actions represent a break from the political culture of the past in much of the region. In El Salvador – a place of elite imposition of power, quasi-democratic elections manipulated in favor of elite interests, or “revolutionary” mass mobilizations intended and perceived as a threat to political leaders – “the people” collectively denounced social injustice and strove to reform the relationship between the political and civil spheres. Furthermore, religious authority was utilized to convene the public forum in which common people articulated their democratic demands. Of course, a few such events hardly constitute a democratic transformation, but these actions do demonstrate how leaders within PICO-Central America are

working to make government more responsive, change policy, and in the process make their respective communities more democratic.

While the bishops in collaboration with PICO may have found a promising model for renewing participatory democracy in Central America, there are a number of challenges that must be overcome in order to see real change. In the following pages, we analyze the factors that made their initial achievement possible and present several challenges PICO faces as an emerging model for Catholic social action in the Central America context.

### Innovative Strategies: Resources, Structure & Culture

Given the dramatic divergences between the social structures, political institutions, and political cultures of the U.S. and Central America, one might think that the PICO model's strategic capacity (Ganz 2000) and mobilizing culture (Swartz 2008) would be debilitated outside the North American cultural frame. In a sense, this has been true; as they have moved into Central America, PICO organizers have had to adapt their model significantly to fit the new environment, while preserving the model's commitment to religious communities and democratic practices.

The resource mobilization framework argues that the success or failure of social movements is driven by their ability to mobilize resources (McCarthy and Zald 1975). "Resources" here may include a variety of inputs necessary for successful mobilization, but the literature has focused particularly on monetary resources and on parlaying the social capital embedded in "mobilizing structures" into social movement participation (Morris 1984; Tarrow 1994; Warren 2001; Wood 2002). In this section we analyze the ways in which PICO has had to structurally adjust to the resources available in the new social and cultural context.

Economic resources. In its first three years, PICO-Central America gathered its material resources from both PICO's base in the United States and from the Catholic Church in the region. Most *economic capital* came from U.S. institutions. From 2005 through 2007, PICO-Central America garnered approximately \$400,000 in funding, nearly all of it from internal PICO sources or from Catholic organizations in the United States and Europe. This money served to pay training costs plus the salary, travel, and administrative costs of the U.S.-based PICO organizer overseeing the effort. In contrast, the SEDAC bishops planned to provide \$4,000 per year from each participating national bishops' conference, for a total of \$24,000. Only a small fraction of this money was forthcoming (mostly from El Salvador). Participating bishops did provide substantial in-kind resources, mostly in the form of meeting space and lodging.

Institutional Resources. More important than the bishops' contribution to fundraising was the access they facilitated to church-linked *social capital*. The most obvious case is the mass turnout for the political actions described above: the networks of relationships embedded in parishes and linked to the authority of pastors provided large groups of attendees. Thus, as Schmitt built the PICO-Central America organizing structure, he initially reached out along diocesan and parish structures. But as the organization developed, he felt that successfully launching a powerful organization would require mobilizing structures beyond this. In particular, the effort needed to tap into greater organizing skills, more leaders committed to the social dimension of Catholic teaching, and broader relational networks than those centered in local parishes. Thus was born another innovative dimension of PICO-Central America. Schmitt and key collaborators within church-linked institutions decided that such skills, social Catholicism, and relational networks were better developed within the Catholic development organizations *Caritas Internacionalis* and Catholic Relief Services (CRS, linked to Catholic Charities of the

United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, but mostly locally-staffed). *Caritas* and CRS had preserved some of the spirit and commitment of the *pastoral social*, and thus Schmitt looked to them as key mobilizing structures alongside the PICO-involved parishes.

Cultural Resources. While training participants in leadership skills, PICO builds upon meanings and motivations that are religiously rooted – i.e builds upon cultural capital linked to church-based social capital. The combination leads many lay participants to consider their democratic experience a kind of spiritual praxis. One priest from a rural Salvadoran village expressed his spiritual commitment by stating:

We face our ministry in light of the new evangelization;<sup>v</sup> but even more, we must renew ourselves and our surroundings to create a rebirth and rejuvenation in our churches. As the Book of Acts states, we must share with those who are in need so there won't be poverty.

As can be seen by this priest's response, religious conviction often serves as a catalyst for political commitment. Thus, mobilization of economic, institutional, and cultural resources was crucial to PICO-Central America's initial success. Yet as we argue below, this was a necessary but not sufficient condition of success.

### Challenges Facing PICO-Central America

A number of challenges must be overcome before substantial change will come from these efforts:

Financial dependence. The most immediate challenge to the PICO-Central America's viability may be financial. As the resource mobilization literature argues, one fundamental criterion for social movement success lies in attracting sufficient resources to sustain the

movement (McCarthy and Zald 1975). Related to this is the perception that PICO's involvement may represent a case of what Falk (1993) calls "globalization from above": attempts by elite transnational actors to forge changes in subaltern societies, which he argues amounts to a form of cultural imperialism. Clearly, PICO's presence caused reservations in some participants, simply because it stems from a North American organization. Given the history of the United States' intervention in Central America, an organizational structure that seems *norteamericano* may produce more repulsion than attraction for Central American Catholics. One priest refusing to take part in PICO's organizing stated simply that "the U.S. cannot be trusted...we would rather drink from our own wells."<sup>vi</sup>

Cross-cultural Translation. The PICO model of grassroots empowerment is built on organizing processes employed by community organizer Saul Alinsky in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, substantially reworked to adapt to contemporary U.S. political culture and institutions. PICO Central America has had to re-adapt that model to fit in the Central American context. Fundamentally, how well PICO-Central America integrates local and "imported" elements will be a key determinant of its success. Yet perhaps the most significant cultural obstacle facing PICO is the misperception of PICO's general organizing model. Faith-based community organizing represents a complex skill in any setting (Wood 2002; Swarts 2008; Hart 2001; Warren 2001), and appeared even more challenging after having been transplanted cross-culturally. In the early years of PICO, participants often found training sessions difficult to understand, abstract, and nebulous – especially when they were presented in a highly information-based, lecture-style format. More hands-on, concrete pedagogical techniques popularized in grassroots church circles may be required to engage and sustain Central American participants from subaltern communities.

Plurality vs. Exclusivity. PICO-Central America's fundamental cultural strategy closely parallels that of its parent effort in the U.S. In both settings, PICO uses religious culture – symbols, meanings, and narratives of faith communities – to undergird the organizing effort, generate meaning and motivation within it, and sustain it over the long term. As noted above, however, the PICO-Central America effort has retained an exclusively Catholic organizing base, distinguishing it from the multi-faith, multi-ethnic character of the U.S. PICO model (Wood, Fulton & Partridge 2012). The question is whether a solely Catholic identity will be an asset or a liability over the long run.

In Central America, where Catholicism is still the majority religion despite the rapid rise of Protestantism (Steigenga and Cleary 2007), this structural innovation toward Catholic exclusivity *might* allow PICO to generate greater political support and civic participation. In addition, given its access to economic and cultural resources, tight linkage to the Catholic Church might provide structural support and a shield to absorb attacks from counter-movements (Smith 1991, 1994). Moreover it may serve not only to attract new members, but may also provide subaltern classes with access to governing authorities and the institutional support to hold authorities accountable within a democratic polity.

On the other hand, Evangelical and Pentecostal Christianity represent a surging, albeit fragmented, religious force in the region, in private lives and in the public arena (for recent analyses of Pentecostalism in El Salvador, see IUDOP 2009, Aguilar and Rodriguez 2013, and especially the chapter by Carmen Guevara in that volume). Effective political action requires a mix of strong ties to constituents and weak ties to diverse sectors (Chwe 1999; Ganz 2000; Wood 2007). PICO's new mono-religious approach establishes the strong ties the organization needs, but may lead to a lack of the weak ties outside the Church necessary for reaching out to broader

constituencies and increasing civic participation. How PICO balances these needs will shape its future trajectory.

### Collective Action Framing and the Resurrection of Catholic Political Action

PICO-Central America's future is of course difficult to discern. On one hand, historical legacies and the above challenges may overwhelm the fledgling organizing effort. "Activism" in Central America often provokes painful memories of militant attempts at national social reform, massacres of liberation activists and theologians, and widespread political repression. Despite PICO-Central America's peaceful, collaborative approach to organizing, it is nonetheless a social movement organization aimed at democratic accountability within highly unequal societies. As such, it can be perceived by elite actors as a threat to the *status quo* – and could thus provoke repression leading to movement failure.

On the other hand, PICO-Central America might emerge as a locally-grown model of faith-based organizing, integrally combining elements from the Latin American *pastoral social* and from PICO's experience in North America. In the latter case, current evidence clearly suggests PICO-Central America will shed the revolutionary eschatology of past insurgencies in favor of a commitment to societal reform via democratic political institutions. How radical such a reform agenda might be is difficult to predict: the profound social inequalities and historic lack of elite accountability will push the effort in a more radical direction, while the authority of the Catholic bishops over the effort (and their very cautious political instincts) will push in a much more moderate direction. Such an effort might *either* fall into the attenuated horizons of the weaker faith-based community organizing efforts in the U.S., settling for marginal local influence; or might adopt the tone and tenor of the more sophisticated such U.S. efforts,



incorporating their best practices and democratic ethos into Central American church and society.

Beyond these factors, PICO-Central America's advances thus far may be attributed to the organization's "framing" of the collection action process, using transcendent language and imagery drawn partly from liberation theology (Benford and Snow 2000). For example, some of the Catholic churches participating in PICO activities had large murals or paintings of Archbishop Oscar Romero (the Salvadoran Church leader who was assassinated in 1980 for speaking out against political repression); books in the Church libraries or on office shelves included many of the prominent liberationist thinkers of the time, such as Ignacio Ellacuria, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Jon Sobrino. Participants expressed liberationist-tinged language of social equality and the pursuit of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, including by those attending the October 2007 PICO action described above. Other participants were traditionalists, drawing on more historic Catholic and scriptural teachings when describing the reasons for their involvement. Monseñor Bolaños, the bishop of Zacatecoluca, represents a middle position: a traditional man of the church in many ways, the charged sermon he gave before local political officials (quoted above) spoke forcefully the language of Christian social commitment. By drawing on the religious themes of social justice and commitment to God's mission on earth – both rooted in traditional Catholic theology but made prominent by liberation theology in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century – PICO aligned its framing processes with the extant religious culture in the Central American context. Of course, whether this will be enough to overcome the barriers to cross-national organizing and other obstacles facing PICO-Central America remains to be seen.

## Conclusion

Because PICO-Central America is still in the early stages of the social movement life-cycle, it is premature to assess its overall impact on Central American civil society. However, PICO-Central America's initial success suggests that its organizational strategies of structural innovation and religious framing may offer an effective vehicle for promoting social policy change and democratic consolidation in the region. More broadly, it may represent a vehicle through which Catholic hierarchical authority can foster – intentionally or inadvertently – the emergence of a public arena in which political and economic elites can be held democratically accountable. That is, although Catholic hierarchical authority is not itself democratic, PICO-Central America *may* be able to draw on that authority to construct public arenas of democratic deliberation by i) bringing elites into the public arena; and ii) fostering grassroots mobilization to hold those elites accountable to the interests of local communities; and iii) doing so within an organizing effort committed to democratic politics. If Central American participants repeatedly enact such a process over many years, they may successfully confront the democratic challenges of their societies. In the process they will help “deepen democracy” in the region (Roberts 1998).

This article offers initial insight from an ongoing project, which will analyze the emergent success or failure of this transnational organizing effort and seek new insight into the cross-cultural dynamics within such movements. At present, PICO-Central America has the potential to emerge as a powerful political actor for Catholic constituents, and possibly to structure a more democratic public sphere in Central America's political future. Though the effort still faces potentially debilitating limitations, the Church's shift from popular protest to community organizing has given Central American society a glimpse of a different kind of political action. If this occurs, no small irony would be involved: An institution quite non-democratic in its internal structure would have contributed significantly to fostering democratic

consolidation. But such irony is the common stock of history: the early Puritans, the ancient Greeks, and the American founders were never democratic in all their social commitments, yet all contributed significantly to historical projects that others subsequently turned in more fully democratic directions.

#### Epilogue: 2010-2013

Since 2009, PICO-Central America has successfully institutionalized its work in the diocese of Zacatecoluca (the coastal department of La Paz, El Salvador) and maintained initial organizing work in Guatemala (in the vicariate of Sacatepequez, west of Guatemala City). Despite some successes, such as the launch of a La Paz campaign for “United Neighbors, Safe Neighborhoods” via collaboration between neighborhood and government agencies, neither effort can be said to have deeply transformed political life. Rather, the most important outcome may be the gradual reshaping of political culture via work on concrete issues of local importance.

In El Salvador, this involves ongoing work with 70-80 core leaders and 180 secondary leaders from the 12 parishes under Bishop Bolaños’ authority, focused on issues of healthcare and security. In 2011-2012, COFOA engaged some 2,000 people from around the department of La Paz in conversations about domestic violence, diminishing the presence of gangs, and other anti-violence strategies. This led to a “march for peace” with 700 participants, culminating in a meeting with the departmental heads of the police and army, the mayor of Zacatecoluca, and the bishop. In another key initiative, COFOA convinced the national vice minister of health to work with the organization to provide training workshops on getting their health needs met and to address the scarcity of medicines in public hospitals.

In Guatemala, PICO's leadership development work is less advanced, with 35 core leaders from 2 large parishes engaged as of 2013. The effort focuses on security in the area around Pastores, Sacatepequez. In early 2013 the effort is seeking to engage 5,000 local people to work on violence reduction (leading to prevention workshops, a march, and a large public meeting with officials).

PICO's regional organizer Alberto Vasquez sums up the effort's gradual impact on grassroots political culture this way:

People [generally] do not think they have power to change anything, do not really realize democracy is possible. They are realizing now that democracy is possible only if they are involved in public life. Before realizing this, democracy was dead; no one really believed in democracy. Now they are starting to feel their power – had a meeting with vice minister of health, came out realizing that they can gain real power, that they can start to improve their lives. This is the new way to do democracy in Central America<sup>vii</sup>.

The PICO-Central America effort currently runs on a \$153,000 annual budget and employs five organizers. Every two months some 65 core leaders gather for training, and a smaller "Planning and Strategy Committee" meets in alternate months to make key decisions. The effort to diversify PICO's internal structure via collaboration with CRS has thrived, but less so with *Caritas*. In the near future, Vasquez hopes to expand into Honduras in collaboration with Cardinal Rodríguez Maradiaga, and then to address regional issues including the impact of mining on water supplies in the "northern triangle" of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras).

The challenges identified above continue: For example, essentially *all* funding still comes from U.S. and European sources.<sup>viii</sup> Likewise, the tension between emphasizing a Catholic-only public presence or embodying more of the religious diversity that today characterizes Central America remains. One Anglican church in El Salvador has joined the effort – but the far more substantial question of the effort’s relationship to the burgeoning Evangelical/Pentecostal sector remains. More progress has occurred on the issue of cross-cultural translation, with local organizers, leaders, and priests engaged. But the most active priests are often foreign-born, and Vasquez notes that as a Mexican national who spent years in the U.S., much cross-cultural translation is still required.

Overall, the “northern triangle” region may indeed be witnessing the slow re-emergence of Catholic collective action. In no country does PICO-Central America have the scale to forge a truly democratic public sphere at the national level. However, via its impact on political culture at the grassroots and among local elected officials, its work holds promise as one contribution to “the new way to do democracy in Central America”.

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<sup>i</sup> The figures presented by PICO and reported here cannot be independently verified, but appear plausible: The authors were present for three several-day training seminars, and the number of trainees present match accurately

<sup>ii</sup> Respondents other than highly public figures will be given pseudonyms to protect their identities. All interviews were conducted in Spanish by the authors, and subsequently translated into English.

<sup>iii</sup> This interaction reflects a core practice of community organizing in the U.S., the “challenge” and “pin” of targeted officials. These involve using the power of “organized people” within a democratic political process to draw

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officials into the public arena, and there ask them to commit publicly to specific policy proposals or to working with the sponsoring organization to address a specific issue.

<sup>iv</sup> The phrase translated using “workhorse” here is a colloquialism, “no me montan el macho...que ustedes sean los machos aqui.” “Machos” can refer either to masculine men, or to the male horse or other work animal on a farm.

<sup>v</sup> The “new evangelization” or “*nueva evangelizacion*” is a phrase introduced by Pope John Paul II in the mid twentieth century to revitalize the mission work of Catholics worldwide. The concept presents such mission work as dedicated to transforming cultural assumptions and societal institutions that undermine human communities, in addition to spreading the Christian gospel.

<sup>vi</sup> The reference is presumably to liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez’ *We Drink from our Own Wells* (Orbis 1984).

<sup>vii</sup> Author phone interview January 2013.

<sup>viii</sup> 2012-2013 funding comes from U.S.-based CRS, USCCB, the Raskob Family Foundation, the Presbyterian Hunger Program, and the El Salvador Project; and from EU-based Porticus Foundation.