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# Congregational Development Research Study Executive Summary

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Congregational Development Research Study (CDRS) examines the impact of faith-based community organizing on organizational development in its primary institutional sponsors— religious congregations. That is, we study whether and how “congregational development” results from the particular form of civic engagement sometimes known as congregation-based, institutional, or broad-based organizing, and termed here “faith-based community organizing.”

Faith-based community organizing (FBCO) represents a widespread movement to advance the interests of low-income and middle-income neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States (and recently in other countries). Most FBCO organizations belong to one of four national or several regional training networks. According to the only national study of the field, FBCO represents the broadest community-based movement for socio-economic justice in the country today.<sup>1</sup> When Interfaith Funders sponsored a series of events in 2000-2001 to disseminate the results of that study, key FBCO funders, sponsors, and participants repeatedly asked what impact this form of civic engagement has had on the diverse faith communities that form its institutional core. At the time, anything other than a purely anecdotal answer to that question was impossible. The CDRS, undertaken by Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico with major funding from the Ford Foundation, represents the first national effort to answer it rigorously and systematically.

Congregational development here means the growth of members as multi-faceted leaders within their congregations, and the strengthening of congregations as institutions. For individual congregational members, this development includes gaining leadership skills, deepening engagement in congregational life, and strengthening understanding of the connections between the faith tradition’s call to social justice and the work of faith-based community organizing. For congregations, such development includes strengthening relationships within the congregation, creating connections to other congregations and organizations, deepening linkages between worship life and the wider social world, transforming congregational culture to be more relational and accountable, and increasing membership. The logic model underlying the current project (Figure 1, page 14), represents schematically an initial understanding of how the standard elements of the faith-based organizing process might plausibly lead to specific congregational development outcomes, and what measurable impacts might offer evidence for such outcomes (or their absence). Note that we study *one strategy* for strengthening faith communities— involvement with faith-based community organizing— of particular interest due to its basis in the social ethics of diverse faith communities and its commitment to promoting the interests of poor and middle-income constituents. We make no claims regarding other approaches to congregational development.

The study draws on fieldwork in 45 religious congregations, including Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian/Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical. A few congregations were highly multiracial, while the others constituted a rich mix of majority Latino, African-American, black Caribbean, or white/European congregants. Between June 2002 and May 2003, researchers gathered data through observation, written surveys, and hour-long interviews with lay leaders, clergy, and professional organizers from congregations belonging to thirteen FBCO groups. These groups were chosen through a combination of random and targeted selection in order to achieve appropriate representation across organizing networks, geographic regions, race and ethnicity,

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<sup>1</sup> On the national reach and infrastructure of faith-based community organizing, see the results of a major national study sponsored by Interfaith Funders: Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood (2001), *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field, 2001*. Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders; see also Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren (2003).

size of organization, length of organizational existence, and political efficacy. Fieldwork was conducted in Boston, Camden (NJ), Chicago, Columbus (OH), Detroit, Los Angeles (two organizations), Miami, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New Orleans, Portland (OR), San Diego, and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interpretively; surveys were analyzed statistically (descriptive statistics). Overall, respondents represent quite well the broad field of faith-based community organizing, with the following caveats: 1) for research purposes, we intentionally over sampled some religious traditions, including Jewish, evangelical/Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Muslim congregations; 2) we under sampled Latinos due to unexpected developments during the research fieldwork, for which we compensate analytically to some extent; 3) we had a low response rate from organizers to the written survey (but not the interviews). Otherwise, our data closely reflects the national profile of faith-based community organizing.

### **Evidence of FBCO-driven Congregational Development**

The study was designed primarily to capture data on the *dynamics* through which faith-based community organizing generates congregational development, and the obstacles to this; it is here that the CDRS offers the most insight. In order to assess the facilitating and hindering dynamics, we rated, by interpretive analysis, the 36 congregations for which we had sufficient data. In this way, we were able to determine and compare patterns within each grouping of congregations: “strong” FBCO-led congregational development, “medium,” and “weak” development (the clergy and professional organizers who work in these congregations ranked them somewhat more strongly on congregational development).

We draw on both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (surveys) evidence to examine four categories of evidence for FBCO-driven congregational development: relationships (social capital), leadership development (democratic skills and other forms of human capital), faith links (cultural connections between religious commitment and public life), and power and public presence.

The study shows that FBCO work can increase the quantity and quality of the relationships embedded in congregations. Many participants reported experiencing new levels of relationality themselves or in their congregations as a result of this work, often including both “bonding social capital” (social ties within the congregation) and “bridging social capital” (social ties beyond the congregation). The evidence for increased bonding social capital largely comes from qualitative interview data, in that the CDRS could not track and quantify this aspect of congregational life before and after engagement in FBCO. We report both qualitative and quantitative evidence for increased bridging social capital, at least in participants’ perception, including increased ties to political officials, community organizations, and faith communities beyond respondents’ own denominations. Both clergy and lay leaders reported increases in all these categories, and credit their FBCO work for those increases.

Leadership development through FBCO work occurs in several forms, including both broad personal development and the acquisition of particular skills and orientations. Many interviewees reported experiencing compelling personal growth as a result of being connected to “something bigger” than individualized faith. Many also reported a new sense of identity as a result of this work—new confidence, a new “voice” in the world, a rekindled sense of themselves as promoters of social justice, and a new hopefulness in their lives. They said that fellow congregation members perceived them more as leaders, which

affirmed their perceptions of themselves as capable of influencing people and contributing to congregational life. With a greater sense of capability, focus and discipline, leaders were willing to accept more responsibility, speak more assertively, and question the status quo in constructive ways. Likewise, both clergy and lay leaders reported gaining specific democratic skills (such as public speaking, leading meetings, and relational organizing) and greater confidence in exercising those skills, and traced this increased “leadership capital” to the FBCO work. Notably, qualitative evidence revealed that increased leadership capital was regularly transferred to multiple aspects of congregational work beyond the FBCO effort—*if* other key factors were in place. Finally, some leaders spoke of understanding concepts such as relational power, self-interest, and accountability in new ways—and of putting these concepts into practice in their congregations. We note, however, that participants struggle especially with the concept and practice of accountability, and suggest this may be one reason more congregations are not benefiting more substantially from their FBCO engagement.

A third kind of congregational development we examined is what we termed “faith links.” Here, we looked for evidence of FBCO-driven deepening of participants’ engagement with their faith community, their experiential relationship to the divine, or their commitment to the denomination’s teachings regarding social justice. Many leaders reported extensive new faith links, often in quite evocative terms, but respondents varied considerably in this regard, depending particularly on the extent to which their congregations and/or their local FBCO organization emphasized such faith links. We also asked whether participants experienced their congregations’ worship services helping to integrate the spiritual and political dimensions of their lives. Overall, leaders reported their political and spiritual commitments as being rather strongly integrated, but that worship in their congregation was only “fairly successful” in integrating the spiritual and political dimensions of community life.

The final dimension of congregational development that we examined concerned “power and public presence.” We considered whether participants perceived their congregations as having a significant profile in the wider community, and how comfortable and confident they felt in representing their faith tradition in the political arena. Increases in these factors represent congregational development in the sense that they allow congregations to more effectively contribute a religiously grounded commitment to social justice – itself a central ethical theme in these faith traditions. Clergy and lay leaders widely perceived the public profile of their congregations as having been heightened through the organizing work, though this varied according to how successful they had been in taking political action. Clergy reported feeling quite confident when interacting with high-ranking city officials, and traced that confidence partly to their experience in faith-based community organizing. Lay leaders reported slightly lower levels of confidence in this regard. Both groups offered eloquent testimony to the difference this kind of heightened confidence can make, both for participants’ individual lives and for their congregations.

By improving the fabric of congregation-based relationships, building new leadership capital, forging stronger faith links, and reshaping the congregation’s public presence and members’ understanding of power and politics, faith-based community organizing can contribute—sometimes powerfully—to strengthening the diverse religious congregations that are its primary institutional base. Such congregational development is not as widespread as FBCO proponents sometimes claim and would like it to be, but it is significant and might be multiplied if we can better understand both the dynamics that generate it and the obstacles that hinder it.

## **Generating Stronger Congregations**

Successfully generating strong FBCO-driven congregational development is not simple. Instead, participants wishing to strengthen their congregations through this kind of civic engagement must strive to align a “constellation of factors” that are listed below:

- a comprehensive approach to congregational development by the FBCO group which engages the complementary skills and orientations of leaders, clergy and organizers, and honors each congregation’s distinctive vision and mission;
- systematic and ongoing implementation of the FBCO principles and practices, with a disciplined focus on transforming congregational culture and creatively adapting these practices in ways appropriate within a particular faith community;
- strong relationships between organizers and clergy, in which sufficient trust develops to undergird real collaboration and the constructive give-and-take of mutual challenge;
- construction of meaningful connections between the particular congregational faith tradition and the FBCO process;
- active participation by clergy, in which they place FBCO-driven congregational development at the heart of their ministry, while leaving to lay leaders much of the concrete organizing work and recognizing that their ministerial role transcends the organizing process.

Congregations in the CDRS that pursued any single factor sometimes showed minimal evidence of one or another element of congregational development (most often increased leadership skills), but never the more substantial and impressive congregational development of the strong cases. The latter only developed where clergy, lay leaders, and professional organizers aligned a constellation of factors to produce a dynamism between the spiritual and organizational life of the congregation internally and its civic experience externally. This dynamic interplay lay at the foundation of sustained FBCO-linked congregational thriving.

### **Three key roles**

1. Lay leaders play a particularly vital role in generating congregational development; they are trained to implement the FBCO principles and practices—particularly relational organizing and accountability—that catalyze changes in congregational culture. Lay leaders working in “core teams” initiate the “one-to-one meetings” by which congregational members cultivate the new and deeper relationships described above. This increased relationality generates more trust and engagement, thus strengthening the capacity of the congregation to fulfill its mission. Two factors, in particular, appear to help promote wide adoption of these principles and practices: 1) leader participation in FBCO training, where the principles underlying this work are presented comprehensively, and 2) active participation in the organizing work, where these principles are systematically put into practice. The study found a statistically significant positive correlation between the proportion of leaders sent to national FBCO training and the level of congregational development. Many participants emphasized the importance of periodically including in the organizing work local political action, in which more congregational leaders play an active role than in larger-scale actions. Together, training and widespread active participation in organizing appear to generate new leadership capital that can significantly strengthen congregations.

2. Clergy members, too, are central to the success of FBCO-driven congregational development. We examine their contribution from the standpoint of clergy members themselves, professional organizers, and the patterns we see nationally. Clergy active in the organizing work emphasized their role in four broad areas:

- *Generating the broad vision that animates faith-based community organizing:* Clergy often bring to this work particular gifts for articulating the spiritual commitments, social ethics, and religious vision that animate it.
- *Infusing a sense of spiritual and religious meaning into the work:* Sustaining long-term congregational commitment to FBCO requires that participants find that engagement meaningful. Among the most powerful tools for infusing meaning into this work are the symbols, stories, and rituals of the sponsoring faith communities—especially when clergy work to actively link their preaching and worship to members’ wider social world, including their FBCO experience.
- *Sustaining the network of relationships that underlie the organizing work:* The long-term foundation for FBCO work typically lies in the network of clergy relationships linking the sponsoring faith communities. Clergy (often in collaboration with organizers) are crucial in building this network and sustaining its vitality as the FBCO organization matures.
- *Serving as a counterweight to the influence of organizers:* Some of the strongest organizing work and congregational development occur where the complementary orientations of clergy and organizers are allowed to create a healthy tension within the dual congregational-FBCO structure. Clergy then promote the embrace of congregations as more than simply mediating institutions for civic life and assure that the organizing effort maintains a balanced focus and some local emphasis.

In all these ways, clergy help generate a dynamic interplay between the worship lives of faith communities and members’ engagement in the broader world via the FBCO organization. Such dynamism was evident in all the strongest exemplars of FBCO-driven congregational development in the study. The professional organizers we interviewed often greatly valued the contributions of clergy to the organizing process, but also noted that clergy members’ unwillingness to prioritize their time, narrow view of their own power, and lack of confidence too often undermine that contribution. A key tool for sustaining strong clergy engagement was the “clergy caucus”—a regular gathering often sponsored by local FBCO organizations. Seven of our eight strongest examples of FBCO-driven congregational development are closely linked to strong clergy caucuses. Yet most FBCO groups, amidst the many pressures of political organizing, do not find it easy to maintain a strong clergy caucus, which therefore vary greatly in quality.

3. Professional organizers are also key contributors to FBCO-linked congregational development. Indeed, as the key artisans of the FBCO process, how organizers do their work and the approaches they adopt in relating to congregations greatly influence this work’s impact on its sponsoring faith communities. The most positive such impact occurs where clergy and organizers come to view themselves as partners or “co-conspirators” in the work of organizing *and* its associated congregational development. Clergy identified two crucial qualities in organizers that are necessary for the FBCO/congregation partnership to thrive:

- trustworthiness: in particular, respect for the congregation’s vision and faith tradition, and affirmation of the value of congregational life *beyond* its usefulness for political engagement;
- competence: organizers who are skilled artisans in training leaders to successfully practice relational organizing, accountability, and other leadership skills are simply more valuable to clergy as partners in ministry than are less capable organizers.

Beyond this, clergy spoke of the great value of organizers who have developed sufficient maturity and professionalism to function as their peers. Many clergy interviewees—including all who had most successfully parlayed FBCO engagement into building stronger congregations—reported that experienced organizers were among their most valuable collaborators in ministry. In contrast, inexperienced organiz-

ers were often reported to lack the confidence and to be too easily intimidated by clerical authority to enter into the dynamic and mutually challenging clergy-organizer relationships associated with strong congregational development. These organizers, in turn, rarely reported having such charged, mutually accountable relationships with clergy.

In general, the organizers most successful at congregational development saw their roles as fully embracing *both* the “external” and “internal” dimensions of congregational organizing. That is, they were fully committed to helping move congregations toward political action on issues of concern to their communities *and* to crafting an organizing process designed explicitly to strengthen congregations as institutions. In two strong cases, congregations had hired organizers as internal staff focused primarily on congregational development, but even in this arrangement organizers saw political action as part of their work.

Finally, we identified six broad approaches to congregational development among the organizers and organizations studied; these crosscut the various organizing networks and occur in various combinations within particular FBCO organizations:

- Approaches emphasizing internal organizing “campaigns”: the strategic use of time to create a more focused organizing effort within the congregation, often linked to the rhythms of its particular faith tradition.
- Approaches emphasizing small groups: the use of congregationally-linked small groups such as faith reflection groups, Bible studies, justice affinity groups, *comunidades eclesiales de base*, or prayer groups as an enduring foundation for the organizing effort.
- Approaches emphasizing local action: regular engagement in political action sponsored at the most local level—by individual or small clusters of congregations—in order to maximize the breadth of leadership development.
- Culturally based approaches: the creation of linkages between the organizing effort and salient cultural themes to which constituents are committed. Most common are strongly faith-focused strategies linked explicitly to the faith traditions of sponsoring congregations, especially through worship, scripture, and denominational social teachings. But we also encountered approaches based in strongly Afro-centric cultural themes.
- Approaches emphasizing agitation: the use of particularly strong practices of challenge and accountability among participating clergy or within clergy-organizer relationships.
- Approaches that assume that “just doing the organizing” will benefit congregations: reliance on an assumption among some practitioners that the standard practices of community organizing will automatically benefit congregations.

While some degree of leadership development does appear to occur under the last approach, a striking finding of the study is that such development rarely aggregates into significant congregational development, much less catalyzes the impressive congregational transformations reported under the strongest exemplars. The latter resulted from explicit pursuit of congregational development, often including some combination of the first five approaches along with other elements of the constellation of factors reported above.

## **Obstacles to Successful Congregational Development**

The FBCO/congregation relationship is a deeply challenging and complex endeavor that is not always successful at generating congregational development. Hindrances to greater success include:

- Factors within congregations: resistance to core principles and practices of faith-based community organizing within the religious culture of congregations undermines congregational development linked to FBCO work. Such resistance commonly arises from several conditions: a presumption that building a stronger congregation is necessarily divorced from work for social justice; the over-spiritualization of societal problems; cultural norms that distort religious teachings by emphasizing “niceness at all costs;” a sense that holding one another accountable for commitments vaguely violates religious values; and particular common weaknesses among lay leaders and clergy.
- Factors within FBCO organizations: a commonly cited obstacle to congregational development under this model was a shortage of organizers with the requisite skills and a clear commitment to congregational development and professional growth. This sometimes 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 development. This is sometimes exacerbated when FBCO groups focus on exerting power in broader geographical areas or higher political arenas, if they do not simultaneously cultivate strong local work in congregations. In our view, this is not an argument against larger-scale organizing, but for doing so with concomitant attention to strong local organizing in congregations. Also cited was a common imbalance between external issue work and internal relational organizing.
- Factors that bridge congregations and FBCO organizations: some new leaders become so enamored of political action that they fail to apply newly-acquired skills to organizing within their congregations. Conversely, some new leaders fully embrace relational organizing but keep it within the sheltered confines of familiar social ties within their congregation. If maximal congregational development is to occur, both types need to be challenged to engage in “public work” both within and beyond their congregations; that challenge can come from organizers, clergy, or experienced lay leaders – or ideally from all three. A second commonly cited “bridging” obstacle to fuller congregational development was the weakness of the organizer-clergy relationship; this too can and should be addressed from both sides of the congregation-FBCO partnership.

Through both the political and congregational faces of organizing, clergy and lay leaders are discovering that not only is it possible, it can be personally enlivening and organizationally effective to fulfill their faith traditions’ social justice mandates through FBCO work. Both congregations and local FBCO organizations, in turn, benefit from the national and regional organizing networks, denominational leaders, and foundation staff who sustain this work from the background. Our hope is that the findings reported here will stimulate further interest and 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.