

12-1-2003

Up from the Parishes: Reclaiming the Public Voice of Catholicism

Richard L. Wood

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp

Recommended Citation

Wood, Richard L.. "Up from the Parishes: Reclaiming the Public Voice of Catholicism." *American Catholic Studies* (December 2003) University of Notre Dame Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism (2003). https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/soc_fsp/20

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly Communication - Departments at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Faculty and Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Up from the Parishes:
Reclaiming the Public Voice of Catholicism

Richard L. Wood¹
University of New Mexico
Department of Sociology
Director, Religious Studies Program

Published in:
American Catholic Studies
(December 2003)
University of Notre Dame
Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism

An important story is being told in the land, of the unrecognized but powerful role of faith communities in challenging American political and economic institutions to live up to their democratic promise. That story involves Catholic, historic black Protestant, liberal and moderate Protestant, Jewish, Unitarian, and evangelical congregations working to influence local and state-level public policy through “faith-based community organizing” (FBCO) models. Those congregations include strong representation of African-American, Latino/Hispanic, white, and multiracial worshiping communities. Through organizations bridging these religious and racial divides — divides that often mute the public voices of faith communities in American public life — FBCO efforts have built a track record of shaping public policy to benefit low- and middle-income communities on such issues as public education, economic development, housing, healthcare, and policing. Sponsoring most of this work are several national FBCO networks (see list at end) and some 4,000 member institutions — 87% of which are religious congregations, a third of them Catholic parishes. Membership in those congregations is estimated at around 2 million, mostly from low- to middle-income families, making FBCO perhaps the broadest movement for social justice in America today (depending on how one assesses the current state of the labor movement). When well-implemented, the FBCO model empowers lay leadership precisely reflective of Vatican II’s emphasis on the laity’s mission “in the world” — in contrast to episcopal-led national lobbying efforts.

FBCO work on issues has often reflected the public policy priorities embodied in Catholic social teaching as articulated in papal and American episcopal statements. That is no coincidence: for 30 years, the bishops’ Catholic Campaign for Human Development has been the most consistent source of funding for faith-based community organizing efforts throughout the country, and many religious orders also fund this work. Catholic sources often provide the start-up funding that has helped the field to grow from a scattering of struggling organizations in the early 1980s to some 150 organizations in nearly all major metropolitan areas, many smaller cities, and some towns and rural areas throughout the country. Rare indeed is the FBCO

¹ [sidebar or footnote]: Richard L. Wood the author of *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), recently named the 2002 Best Book in the sociology of religion. Wood has written extensively on the cultural and institutional foundations of democratic life, particularly on faith-based community organizing.

organization that has not benefitted from CCHD funding or sponsorship from the local Catholic diocese.

For the first time, scholarly work on faith-based community organizing has emerged in recent years (see list at end). Yet little attention has been paid to the specifically *Roman Catholic* side of the story, either in terms of the central Catholic presence in FBCO efforts or the ways Catholic parishes may benefit from their participation in faith-based community organizing. Instead, this and other forms of public Catholicism have been nearly entirely overshadowed by the recent scandals involving sexual abuse and episcopal authority, as well as undermined by the bishops' struggles to speak with one voice on social issues since the late 1980s (see Peter Steinfels' *A People Adrift*). This article seeks to cast light on faith-based community organizing as a form of public Catholicism worthy of greater attention in its own right, but especially crucial as the Church seeks to regain an influential role of moral authority in the public sphere. Drawing on data from the Congregational Development Research Study (see sidebar), I argue that faith-based community organizing represents one way that the Church can re-establish its moral voice on issues of social justice: through this work, Catholics are reclaiming public authority city by city, from the parishes upward — and not just for Catholics, but for the voices of all faith communities in the public realm.

Sidebar:

The Congregational Development Research Study

Previous research has documented the democratic impact of faith-based community organizing, and how it draws on the strengths of religious congregations to achieve that impact (see resource list at end). But scholars have known little about whether this kind of public engagement *strengthens, undermines, or leaves unaffected* the sponsoring faith communities. That is, when faith communities get involved in FBCO work, under what conditions does that engagement contribute to congregational development? In asking that question, the CDRS study understands “congregational development” in Catholic settings as: 1) the generation of leadership skills that contribute to the parish; 2) the strengthening of parishes as organizations; and 3) the forging of stronger links between liturgical life, social action, and Catholic social teaching.

The CDRS is a major national study of the relationship between faith communities and FBCO organizations. Researchers interviewed clergy, lay leaders, and professional organizers in 13 cities throughout the country, in projects sponsored by all the major FBCO networks. Congregational development through faith-based community organizing was analyzed in 45 faith communities, including Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Unitarian/Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical congregations. Some were highly multiracial, while the others constituted a rich mix of majority Latino, African American, or white/European congregations.

The study was sponsored and carried out by researchers from the University of New Mexico and Interfaith Funders, with major funding from the Ford Foundation. Interfaith Funders, based in New York, is a network of nine religious and three secular grantmakers interested in faith-based community organizing; through the CCHD and several religious orders, the Catholic Church is a major participant and sponsor. Mary Ann Flaherty of IF and Richard Wood from UNM directed the study.

Reclaiming Public Catholicism: Five Parishes in Faith-Based Community Organizing

1. Strengthening Parishes through Relational Organizing

St. Luke Catholic Church is a thriving suburban parish, with large numbers of upper-middle class professional families plus some mobile, college-educated young adults and some working-class families and individuals. The vast majority are white. Among a wide variety of active, lay-led ministries, St. Luke was a founding member of ISALAH, the local FBCO effort to influence public policy on housing, economic development, and other issues. By linking Catholic and Protestant congregations from throughout the greater Twin Cities area, involvement in ISALAH has enabled St. Luke to work in solidarity with less well-off faith communities to forge greater democratic accountability from local political and economic decision-makers. As parish member Mary Garcia noted in our interview, “part of being Catholic is being involved in social transformation.”

ISALAH has had some notable success in influencing public policy, but the social justice organizing process *also* strengthened the parish. The fundamental FBCO approach involves short meetings between individuals; these “one-to-ones” strive to build strong relationships rooted in participants’ fundamental commitments, and to extend a network of such relationships throughout an institution. St. Luke strove to instill this approach throughout the parish through an “in-reach” campaign. Garcia noted:

We had 100 people trained to do one-to-ones, and we did about 500, over a five-week period....So it was very exciting, it was a parish-wide thing, it wasn’t a Social Justice [Committee] deal.... Then the Parish Council was trained, and encouraged to do their one-to-ones. What happened out of the in-reach was that we tried to move [relational organizing] to be a consistent part of the parish and how we operated as a parish.

The strengthened parish fabric that emerged from this process became evident when a potential crisis occurred: the pastor suddenly left the priesthood in order to marry. Such a pastoral break — which would throw many parishes into a tailspin — has largely been taken in stride by this mature faith community. Under an interim associate pastor, lay leaders have kept parish worship and ministry functioning smoothly, in part using leadership skills honed through ISALAH’s engagement in democratic public life. By strengthening the organizational fabric of the congregation and training leaders for parish life, the faith-based organizing effort has contributed

to keeping St. Luke moving forward through difficult pastoral times.

2. Overcoming Ethnic Mistrust: From Irish to Multicultural Public Catholicism

St. Mark's Catholic Church in Dorchester, Massachusetts had for decades been a central pillar of Irish-American influence on public life in Boston. The parish was quintessential American Irish Catholic and a source of priests for the Church for decades. But by the 1990s, the community around it changed dramatically. It is now a center of immigrant life, with a remarkable diversity of recent immigrants making it their home: Irish, Cape Verdean, Vietnamese, Haitian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Mexican, and others from a host of African countries. As that transformation occurred, St. Mark's lost its place of public influence and became balkanized into separate language groups with little contact with – or trust in – one another.

To build inter-ethnic ties within the parish and to re-establish a public presence, the pastor, Fr. Dan Finn, brought in organizers utilizing the FBCO model. The parish has worked extensively with GBIO, the local FBCO organization, but also directly hired a part-time, parish-based organizer. Andrea Shepherd's organizing work and Fr. Finn's pastoral leadership have transformed the parish, using a model of FBCO-led parish development articulated by Shepherd (now with the InterValley Project) — a model which strives to incorporate the organizing process within the timing and rhythm of the liturgical calendar. The parish sponsored a series of post-worship meetings in which participants from across the parish's ethnic divides read and acted out the Lenten readings and, as Fr. Finn noted, "applied them to what we were doing in the organizing campaign...It gives a whole other dimension and meaning to why we do what we do."

In building ties of trust between its diverse ethnic groups, St. Mark has thus avoided the fate of many urban parishes in transitional poor neighborhoods, which have often been closed in the face of priest shortages or diocesan financial crises. Fr. Finn suggests that might well have been St. Mark's fate:

If it were not for the parish development campaigns and hiring a parish development organizer on our staff, our church would probably be closing its doors today. We were struggling to relate to the community around us and connect with the parishioners within the church.

But more than a parish has been salvaged: through this work, St. Mark's has regained a public voice in the city of Boston as a central player within GBIO. When such efforts thrive, participants sometimes speak of a "spirituality of organizing" that links their public engagement, worship life, and spiritual journey in an integrated whole that is paradigmatic of the Catholic ethos in the world. Extending it more widely may become a key part of reclaiming the wider influence of public Catholicism in America.

3. Empowering the Laity for Action in the World

Notre Dame d'Haiti Catholic Church is a large parish in Miami primarily serving recent immigrants from Haiti. The pastor and associate pastor, Monsignor Darbouze and Fr. Reginald, have been committed to the work of PACT, the local community organizing effort – but in a

huge impoverished parish, cannot possibly provide the primary leadership for the organizing process. Instead, they have made a concerted effort to empower lay leaders by linking the “Renew” faith reflection movement to the PACT organizing effort. In principle, the Renew model includes explicit attention to the Catholic call to social action. But in the context of American therapeutic culture, reflection on the social dimensions of the faith often gets lost amidst the assumption that such small groups exist to provide mutual support – or simply gets put off indefinitely, in the belief that the group will eventually “mature” into social action. But at Notre Dame d’Haiti, the Renew movement asserted prominently that participants were called to societal transformation — and were linked directly to social action by making them the basic reflection settings for PACT organizing in the parish.

The resulting empowerment of lay leaders reflects precisely the Vatican II call for lay witness in “the world” — that is, the laity, while called fully as pastoral agents within the church, are the *primary* agents of the Church’s permanent mission of fostering social reform *in the world*, in light of God’s will for humanity. As Jean Souffrant, a 32 year old male lay leader noted:

[need to edit following quotes dramatically – much shorter]

Before I got involved with PACT, I was just like your regular parishioner: go to church, attend masses on Sunday, and then go home, not knowing exactly what was going on. The business of the church wasn’t anything. As I got involved with PACT, started seeing what it was doing in terms of fighting for social justice, representing the voice of not one but the entire community, it started opening my eyes just to see exactly what was missing in our community, at Notre Dame. I mean it has really changed my life.

Personally I truly believe that in me there has always been a leader. But if the leadership that you possess does not get trained, there’s no results. But after having been to PACT’s training, I just basically became a forefront leader for the church. I mean everything, every activity that’s taking place, I’ve somehow taken part in. Everything – the anniversary of the church, youth programs – everything that’s happening I play a key role in terms of taking leadership and making sure that things go the way they are supposed to go. So the trainings have definitely played a major role in terms of me becoming a better leader.

There’s something called the prophetic call. I think we are all, in a way, called to take action, I mean the bible says, page after page after page, that we cannot allow injustice to keep us from [acting]... if someone at church is not aware of what’s happening, they may not care as much. But the church itself, being a part of PACT, is more aware of what’s going on in the outside world, of the injustice, of what needs to be done, and what actual steps need to be taken....And how we can use that to live as people of God and still be able to shed some light into the lives of those who can’t fight for themselves.

“It has made a great difference in my life”

I would have never been able to [speak publicly about faith] before, but after seeing people do it, after having experience it through the trainings of PACT, it just made it easier for me. I remember right after September 11th, when the whole thing happened, with the World Trade Center, no one was talking about it in my congregation... So I decided to get a group of people together and we sat down, had pizza, and everybody was like in tears because it was bothering them, yet it was never talked about. And when I'm able to do things like that, it's only because of PACT. And the more I do it, the easier it becomes for me, to able to stand up and talk to people.

[what can the parish learn from experience with PACT]: Working together as a group versus as an individual. Learning to lend a hand to one another. I mean my congregation has a lot of difference projects, in terms of building a bigger church, establishing more programs that help people within the congregation. What can come from PACT is just a sense of organizing, how to get people involved to do the work that needs to be done to make the congregation a better place, and also creating better leaders. Personally, I came out of nowhere, because I was just coming to church... And just sort of like that I was picked out [as a leader], and there are lots of other leaders that the church is creating.

This kind of lay empowerment is simply vital for the future of Catholicism in America: though the role of vowed-and-ordained priests will remain central in the Catholic tradition (and we can hope that vocations will swell in the future), prudent leadership must assume that their numbers will continue to decline for the foreseeable future. Only through vigorous and effective lay leadership will the Catholic voice in the United States gain the vitality to which it aspires – and which our society so desperately needs.

4. Embracing the Hispanic Future: Claiming Latino Energy for the Church

St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in McAllen, Texas serves one of the poorest regions in the United States, the Rio Grande Valley along the border with Mexico. When pastor Fr. Bart Flaar (now retired) arrived ten years ago, the parish was moribund and in danger of closing. But he had previously served as a missionary in Guatemala, where he had been exposed to Latin American pastoral models and social priorities rooted in *comunidades eclesiales de base* (usually translated as “base Christian communities”). So when he witnessed the poverty of long-time Hispanic residents and recent Mexican immigrants in sprawling shantytowns throughout the valley, he was determined to put those pastoral models to work, properly adopted to the U.S. context. At the same time, he was deeply rooted in the spiritual, sacramental, and liturgical legacies of the Catholic tradition and was determined to address the worldly concerns of residents in ways consonant with that tradition

The local FBCO organization, Valley Interfaith, became the primary vehicle for doing so — but with a particular approach reflecting Fr. Flaar’s priorities. He reinvigorated the parish’s engagement in faith-based community organizing by linking it directly with an extensive

network of more than 30 newly-founded base Christian communities that he made a primary pastoral tool in the parish. He reinvigorated the liturgy well, making St. Joseph more reflective of the religious forms of Mexican and Mexican-American Catholics. Since then, the parish has boomed: 3,000 families are members today; the base Christian communities remain one of the key pastoral bases of the parish and serve as fora for scriptural reflection, faith formation, and mutual support for members *and* as house meetings for the organizing effort; and St. Joseph the Worker provides some of the driving energy and leadership behind Valley Interfaith's significant presence in the political life of the Rio Grande Valley. St. Joseph has in turn benefitted from VI's model for "institutional development," through which organizers work to strengthen the internal structure of parishes. Fr. Flaata noted that *linking* faith reflection and social action has been crucial to St. Joseph's thriving ministry:

I think the combination of Interfaith and *comunidades de base* [has been crucial].

If there are no *comunidades de base* that do the constant reflection and the constant keeping their finger on the pulse of the neighborhood, Valley Interfaith only comes together around actions... If there's no reflection on a constant basis, then after a while, people are, "otra vez?," "one more time, and here we go again?"... If there's a constant reflection on the Gospel message and on the reality of the neighborhood, then doing things together, the action, makes a lot more sense... and the two feed on each other. The two nurture each other. I've met some leaders from congregations from up north, who do have the small faith group, but then don't know what to do with all the energy, and say "how do we do action?" [The combination of] Valley Interfaith and our *comunidades* is a gift, because there's constant action available, and an organized way to do it.

That combination — and, no doubt, creative and dedicated pastoral direction from Fr. Flaata — has reinvigorated the parish with the passion, commitment, and energy of a booming Latino population. In the process, it has helped create an influential public voice for Catholicism and a powerful Latino presence in the Valley, finally breaking a decades-old Anglo stranglehold on political power there. If public Catholicism nationally is to be likewise reinvigorated, it must surely draw deeply on Hispanic energy and leadership as well.

5. Inculturating the Gospel in African-American Experience

St. Peter Claver Catholic Church, near downtown New Orleans, serves a deeply impoverished, mostly African-American neighborhood battered in recent decades by economic restructuring and the drug epidemic. To build the parish, Fr. Michael Jacques has used African and African-American cultural forms— music, drums, religious imagery, *kente* cloth for drapings and altar decorations, statuary, etc.— as primary tools for inculturating the gospel in this community. But to truly incarnate the gospel within black America, with its history and experience of racism and oppression, Fr. Jacques knew that cultural forms were not enough: he *also* had to confront the social devastation of the community. So the parish became a key leader within All Congregations Together, the local FBCO group — and the results so impressed Fr. Jacques that he adopted the practices of faith-based community organizing as tools for ministry.

As he described that pastoral direction:

The [FBCO] model — interviewing people and building relationships and doing one-to-one relationships — has been a way that I've chosen to do church work. So when we meet in any other kind of meetings, we first do all of the philosophical training that we learned at PICO. We use that same model to do the church work. So before we do any project or any kind of study, we always do one-to-ones, and build on relationships and find out what needs are in the community, and begin to empower people to speak for themselves.

Thus, even the parish ministry to young people operates as what Fr. Jacques calls “a junior ACT group”: when the parish wanted to set up a youth ministry, lay leaders did one-to-ones with young people, asked about their needs and interests, and got them to organize together to address those needs.

Since focusing on African-American inculturation and adopting FBCO practices for ministry, the parish has grown from 800 to 2700 families — more than two-thirds from the surrounding neighborhoods, but also with large numbers of more middle-class and upper-middle-class black singles and professionals commuting in from other areas of the city. St. Peter Claver has become a key institutional presence and an anchor of stability in a hard-hit urban neighborhood facing crime, disinvestment problems, and a stunning poverty rate. Fr. Jacques says that in 15 years, Sunday collections have risen from \$1,200/week to \$21,000/week. Leaders there can mobilize more than 1,000 people at a time for political actions sponsored by the parish *or* when effectively addressing an issue requires citywide or statewide action sponsored by ACT.

Thus, the tools of organizing have both built public power *and* served as pastoral aids for more effectively embodying the gospel within local culture. Also central to this effort has been the pastor’s ability and willingness to clearly articulate the central themes of Catholic social teaching: shared responsibility for societal well-being, the well-being of the poor as a central criterion of social ethics, the value of political participation, etc. None of this has been achieved alone, of course. As in the other parishes described here, the talents of organizers from the local FBCO organization have been crucial in shaping these achievements.

What can the Church learn?

These parishes are not “typical” of the congregations in the Congregational Development Research Study. Rather, they are exemplars of specific aspects of faith-based community organizing in Catholic settings. In particular, engaging in this work does not automatically benefit a congregation; such results require focused work and creative leadership to align a constellation of factors that facilitate congregational development (for those factors and for the broader, less sanguine, findings, see the full report available from Interfaith Funders). But the study does document the viability of faith-based community organizing as one strategy for strengthening Catholic parishes *and* advancing the Catholic vision of a good society.

More broadly, these brief vignettes and the wider scholarship in this field offer some insights important for Catholic scholars and leaders seeking to understand the current moment in

American Catholic experience. First, there appear to be no good grounds for assuming that vigorous public engagement for social justice must necessarily come at the cost of strengthening the Church as an institution. Done with judgment and dedication, public engagement can strengthen parishes and the universal Church. Second, neither the broad therapeutic turn of American religion in recent decades nor the bishops' recent troubles have silenced the public voice of Catholicism: in local parishes throughout the nation, lay Catholics and local clergy are working with professional organizers and other faith communities to assert a vigorous public voice reflective of Catholic social teaching regarding inequality, social policy, and democratic participation. Third, that work bridges racial and ethnic divisions that have long plagued American public life; the Church has not only denounced those divisions morally, it has also been a primary supporter of at least one very significant model for overcoming them in practice. That should be a source of pride for Catholics of all stripes. At a time when Catholic leaders seem uncertain about their public voice, they may be heartened to reflect that one way it has been articulated — the Catholic investment in funding community organizing for 30 years — has hardly been in vain. In a period during which broad economic trends and public policy have dramatically deepened the gap between rich and poor in America, funding from CCHD and other Catholic sources has incubated models of public engagement that give the lower half of American society — in this case especially immigrant, African-American, and Hispanic communities — some effective voice in public life.

Together, these findings suggest more general themes that demand attention from Catholic scholars and leaders. One is a crucial strategic question: what can the Church more effectively prod American society beyond *ameliorating* economic polarization? That is, how do we help generate the moral conviction and political will to reverse deepening inequality, in the name of a Catholic, humanistic, and democratic vision of a good society? More broadly, the recent work on faith-based community organizing suggests one way that the future remains open to strong societal influence for the Church: despite recent travails of the episcopal leadership, as the public voice of Catholics moves up from the parishes and from local politics to higher levels of church and society, it may well open new opportunities for the moral authority of bishops to reclaim public attention in American society. Achieving such an outcome will require episcopal leadership in consistent dialogue with Catholic intellectuals, grassroots clergy, and parish-based lay leaders from across the rich Catholic spectrum. It would allow us all to reaffirm the “American proposition” to the Church less than half a century ago: that pluralism and democracy can create an environment in which the Catholic Church can thrive, both internally and in its public role. We might all pray and work for such an outcome.

— Richard L. Wood

Contact Information for the FBCO Networks:

Direct Action Research and Training Center (DART), 137 N.E. 19th St., Miami, FL 33132, 305-576-8020.

Gamaliel Foundation, 203 N. Wabash Ave., Chicago, IL 60601, 312-357-2639.

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

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

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

Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO), 11100 South Western Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90047, 323-242-6770

Interfaith Funders Publications:

Renewing Congregations: The Contribution of Faith-Based Community Organizing. By Interfaith Funders, 2003.

Faith based Community Organizing: The State of the Field. By Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood. Interfaith Funders, 2001

FBCO: Building Democracy for the Next Millennium. By Interfaith Funders, 2001

FBCO: Five Stories of Community Change. By Interfaith Funders. 2001

To order IF publications, please email Mary Ann Flaherty at maflahertyif@yahoo.com.

Recent Books on Faith-Based Community Organizing:

Gecan, Michael. 2002. *Going Public*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Hart, Stephen. 2001. *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of engagement among grassroots activists*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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

Warren, Mark. 2001. *Dry Bones Rattling*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Wood, Richard L. 2002. *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America*, Morality and Society series edited by Alan Wolfe. Chicago: University of

Chicago Press.