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Strengthening Your Faith Community through Organizing

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In speaking around the country in 2001 about how faith-based community organizing influences power in American cities, I was frequently asked by key funders and participants from PICO and other organizing networks what impact organizing has on the diverse faith communities that sponsor it. During 2002-2004, I worked with Interfaith Funders to answer this question, through a research project called the Congregational Development Research Study (CDRS, with major funding from the Ford Foundation). I here briefly describe the findings of that study as they relate to the PICO National Network.

Congregational development here means the growth of congregation members as leaders within their faith communities, and the strengthening of congregations as institutions. For individual congregational members, this development includes gaining leadership skills, deepening engagement in congregational life, and strengthening their understanding of the connections between their faith tradition's call to social justice. We were particularly interested in how these orientations were useful *both* in serving the faith community and in the work of organizing. For congregations, such development includes strengthening relationships within the congregation, creating connections to other congregations and organizations, building deeper links between worship life and the wider social world, transforming congregational culture to be more relational and accountable, and increasing membership.

The study drew 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 brought together a majority of Latino, African-American, white/European, or black Caribbean congregants. Researchers gathered data through observation, written surveys, and hour-long interviews with lay leaders, clergy, and professional organizers from congregations belonging to thirteen faith-based community organizing federations, including three from the PICO National Network.

In this way, we were able to determine and compare patterns within three groupings of congregations: those showing "strong," "moderate," and "weak" congregational development driven by their organizing experience. We drew on both interviews and surveys to examine four categories of congregational development: relationships (social capital); leadership development (democratic skills and other forms of human capital); faith links (connections between religious commitment and public life understood in spiritual terms); and members' understanding of how congregations can project a powerful public presence.

The study shows that organizing work *can* increase the quantity and quality of the relationships embedded in congregations. Many participants reported experiencing new levels of personal and congregational *relationality* as a result of this work, including social ties both within and beyond the congregation. The latter – often called “bridging social capital” – is especially important in American life, since such ties bring together people from diverse

economic, racial, ethnic, and religious groups, different immigration status, and neighborhood-based experience into shared projects of social change. But achieving real congregational development requires systematic attention from lay leaders, clergy, and organizers seeking to transfer organizing skills and practices back into congregational life – and to reflect *spiritually* on the community experience gained through organizing. In particular, two factors were crucial in generating congregational development: a strong clergy-organizer partnership and mutual support among clergy seeking to use organizing to strengthen their congregations. Otherwise, the gains of organizing tended not to penetrate into the daily experience of faith communities.

Second, leadership development through organizing occurs in several forms, including both broad personal development and gaining 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. 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 organizing work.

A third kind of congregational development we examined is what we termed "faith links." Here, we looked for evidence of participants' deepening engagement with their faith community, their experiential relationship to the divine, and their commitment to the denomination's teachings regarding social justice (as a result of their organizing experience). Many leaders reported extensive new faith links, often in quite evocative terms. But respondents varied considerably in this regard, depending on the extent to which their congregations and/or their local federation emphasized such faith links – some organizations seem to help participants make these connections between the spiritual and the political, and others do not. Some of the most impressive congregational development occurred in organizations that made faith links an explicit part of the organizing work.

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. Clergy and lay leaders widely perceived organizing as having heightened the public profile of their congregations, though this varied according to how *successful* they had been in taking political action: success breeds confidence.

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 like that practiced by the PICO National Network can contribute – sometimes powerfully – to strengthening the diverse religious congregations that are its primary institutional base. Such congregational development is not as widespread as 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. The longer reports from the Congregational Development Research Study analyze those dynamics and obstacles, and suggests how congregations can best gain strength from their work with PICO.

For copies of the full reports from the Congregational Development Research Study, email Richard Wood at rlwood@unm.edu or visit sircs.unm.edu