

Getting organized: Faith-based alliances make a difference

by [Stephen Hart](#) in the [November 7, 2001](#) issue

Aurora Solis is typical of the people involved in faith-based organizing. Solis, a Mexican immigrant who grew up in a low-income home, works in a staff position at a high school in San Jose, California. She has been a U.S. citizen for only four years. But she was recruited by her pastor to serve on the parish “local organizing committee” and bring together parishioners and others living in the church’s neighborhood. She became a leader in neighborhood struggles and by 1997 was president of People Acting in Community Together (PACT). Today she speaks with poise and humor to large audiences, and negotiates with the mayor of San Jose.

Across the country faith-based community organizing is enabling people to confront issues of economic justice. A recent survey by Interfaith Funders shows how large and diverse this movement has become. Unlike almost every other justice movement, it is strongly multiethnic, injecting moral passion and religious tradition into public debate, but in a way that respects the nation’s cultural diversity. It allows congregations to become active on political issues without the divisions sometimes engendered by church social action in the 1960s and ’70s.

In its current form this is a relatively young movement. It was pioneered in the 1970s by the Industrial Areas Foundation, after IAF founder Saul Alinsky died and Ed Chambers took over. Ernie Cortes’s work in Texas was the first practical expression of the new approach, which departed significantly from Alinsky’s style, not least in taking seriously religious issues and the well-being of congregations. By now the movement has grown far beyond the bounds of the IAF, with which only about one-third of the local projects are affiliated. The rest work with one of three other organizing “networks”: the Pacific Institute for Community Organization (PICO), the Gamaliel Foundation, and Direct Action and Research Training (DART). Nonetheless, the movement remains coherent, following a common philosophy and organizational strategy.

Organizing is a form of politics, broadly understood. Faith-based community organizations do not usually provide direct services. Rather, they address issues, pressuring governments or corporations to bring more resources into modest-income neighborhoods or to adopt policies that better meet their needs. Organizing also distinguishes itself from “advocacy,” the kind of work done by church lobbying offices in Washington and state capitals. Advocacy is typically carried on by privileged people on behalf of those less privileged. The idea behind faith-based organizing is that the agents and beneficiaries of change should be the same people—ordinary people empowered to become effective and articulate actors on the public stage.

The campaigns undertaken by local projects address issues important to the congregations. An example is the work of VOICE, a Gamaliel affiliate in Buffalo. The city’s West Side is an ethnically diverse neighborhood plagued by falling property values and drugs, often dealt from abandoned houses. In 1997 Our Lady of Loretto Catholic Church, a VOICE congregation in this part of the city, identified a “dirty dozen” drug houses near the church and started efforts to persuade the city to demolish them. At first city officials were not very responsive. When a police representative failed to show up for a meeting, VOICE people descended on the police station, getting pepper-sprayed for their trouble. In 1998, after this event had generated publicity as well as meetings with the mayor and other officials, the houses were demolished.

Then the question became, “Where do we go from here?” Parish members decided on a “community walk” in which they interviewed people living near the church about their concerns and needs. They found that people were especially concerned about the rats infesting the neighborhood, and formed a VOICE issue committee (commonly dubbed the “rat pack”). When the committee realized that Buffalo had no real plan for dealing with rodents, it researched what was being done in cities such as Rochester and New York. Buffalo was experimenting on a small scale with “tipper totes”—large, rat-proof garbage containers designed for easy loading by trucks—but only in one of the city’s most affluent neighborhoods and with no plan for wider use. Confronted by VOICE activists, the city agreed to try the containers on the West Side and later offered a four-year citywide phase-in. VOICE persuaded the city to do it in two years.

The rat pack has gotten good press coverage, plus strong support from people in West Side neighborhoods who are not members of VOICE congregations. The

victories won by this campaign—increased public responsiveness to the needs of one of its poorer neighborhoods—are important practically. While rats may not seem like a huge menace, they have a terrible effect on neighborhood morale and the quality of everyday life. Furthermore, the experience of being able to exercise power and hold city officials accountable is important for the development of future local politics. VOICE congregations on the West Side have conducted another round of neighborhood interviewing and are now working on issues such as housing, economic development and recreational facilities for youth and seniors. Other VOICE campaigns, such as efforts to improve the schools, deal with the city as a whole.

Approximately 3,500 congregations nationwide are actively involved in organizations like PACT and VOICE. These congregations have a combined membership of about 3 million. Parishioners hear regularly about current projects, and many attend events related to those projects. Some parishioners deepen their involvement. The organizations report an average of 179 active volunteer leaders. This means that nearly 24,000 Americans from these congregations are organizing activists.

Clearly, this isn't a movement ready to elect the next president, since these numbers amount to only 1 percent of Americans. But if we compare it with other movements, the numbers are impressive. Socialist activists in the U.S., for instance, number fewer than 1,000. Religious activist groups such as the Sojourners Community are tiny, as are the denominational peace fellowships. Even the Religious Right may not have more people actively and personally involved in political work. Mail-order advocacy groups with professional staff have huge mailing lists, but their adherents have no voice in setting the direction of the organizations they support and do little beyond sending in money. Faith-based organizing does much more to encourage active citizenship and enrich civil society.

There are 133 congregation-based projects located in 112 cities spread across 33 states and the District of Columbia. All but one of the 25 largest cities in the U.S., and two-thirds of the next 25, host these projects. While weak in rural areas, the movement is not confined to inner-city neighborhoods. Many of the projects are suburban and others span cities or regions. The number of local projects has increased by 48 percent since 1994, and the number of congregations involved has almost doubled.

Local groups generally tackle local economic problems and pursue local solutions. But the movement is beginning to develop broader strategies. In states where there

are numerous local organizations, statewide work is under way. For example, PICO's California Project has brought together about 20 local groups for joint action on state-policy issues. The work is directed by a statewide steering committee consisting of representatives from local organizations.

Recently PICO's focus has been on health insurance. In many congregations belonging to PICO affiliates, more than half the families have no health insurance. The statewide campaign has had two main goals. The first, accomplished last year, was to convince the state to use \$50 million out of \$1 billion in annual tobacco settlement receipts for augmenting community health clinics. Such clinics are central to the health of the uninsured, since they are the only places other than emergency rooms where care does not depend on ability to pay.

The second goal was to improve the federally funded program that provides insurance for children in families with modest incomes that nevertheless exceed the limits for Medicaid. The California project seeks to extend this coverage to the entire family, to include undocumented people and to help with the sometimes unaffordable premiums that the program charges. During the campaign to implement these proposals, local organizations lobbied state legislators, in one case holding 11 press conferences on the same day. Since there are member congregations in more than half of the state legislative districts, they can have a considerable impact.

Meanwhile, the statewide project office in Sacramento worked with advocacy groups to pressure legislators. The proposal seemed sure to pass, but on the hectic final day of the legislative session it never came up for a vote. Fortunately, media attention to the issue revived the campaign, and the proposed new state budget funds the proposal.

The ethnic and racial diversity achieved by faith-based organizing is striking. Somewhat more than a third of the congregations involved are African-American, a similar proportion European-American and one fifth are Hispanic. Two percent are Asian or Native American, and 6 percent are interracial. Though local organizing projects vary in their ethnic makeup, only 15 percent of them are monocultural. In the rest, there is significant representation of at least two ethnic groups, and over a quarter are highly diverse, with no single group in the majority.

Therefore participants work together across racial or ethnic lines. In the projects I have observed, racial differences do not cause much tension. This achievement comes from the strong racial universalism of most religions and from the tactic of framing issues in ways that are independent of race.

For example, Milwaukee Innercity Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH), part of the Gamaliel network, pushed in the early '90s for an ordinance establishing hiring guidelines for city and county contracts. The proposal, which was eventually adopted in a weakened form, spoke not of jobs allocated to minority groups but of the percentage of workers to be drawn from unemployed residents of Milwaukee's inner city. Most of these, to be sure, are African-American. But the race-neutral approach was not a smokescreen, since all of Milwaukee's inner-city churches and their members, regardless of race, have a practical stake in the economic condition of the core city.

Organizing is also religiously diverse. The overwhelming majority of participants are Christians of various denominations, but 2 percent are Jewish, 2 percent Unitarian-Universalist, a number are Muslim and a scattering belong to other groups—Baha'i, Buddhist and so on. This is fairly representative of America's religious mosaic, although Muslims are underrepresented and Unitarian-Universalists are dramatically overrepresented.

There is, however, a major difference between Christians involved in organizing and Christianity at large: white, theologically traditionalist denominations, to which about 30 percent of American Christians belong, make up only about 3 percent of the congregations involved in organizing. Several projects are under way to try to involve evangelical churches in the movement, but so far these efforts have not been very successful.

The obstacle is not theology. Many black churches are religiously traditional, but the theological disagreements they have with mainline denominations rarely cause problems within community organizations. Nor is the absence of white evangelicals and fundamentalists due to the political views of the members of these churches on the issues that organizing addresses. Opinion polls show that these members are as liberal on economic issues as members of mainline denominations, even when social class and race are taken into account.

Organizing is mostly but not exclusively rooted in congregations. Some 400 school groups, labor unions and neighborhood associations also take part in local projects. Some organizers have gone further in creating more enduring and integral connections. A prime example is the “living wage” approach pioneered by Baltimoreans United in Leadership Development (BUILD), an IAF affiliate. Leaders Arnie Graff and Jonathan Lange were convinced that though the organization had achieved important victories during the ’80s, it had not confronted “fundamental economic questions.” Baltimore’s inner harbor and downtown development projects were prospering, but they did not benefit most of the city’s people.

BUILD congregations found that 40 percent of the people using their soup kitchens were employed at least part-time. Many of their own members were steadily employed but making only poverty wages. From this experience came the idea of addressing the issue of low wages. For a project of this kind to make sense, however, it needed to involve labor unions. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) entered into a long-term relationship with BUILD and assigned an organizer, Kim Keller, to work on the project. Graff, Lange and Keller decided to center their effort on the idea of the living wage: any person who works full-time, year-round should make enough money to live decently, if modestly. After pressure from BUILD congregations and AFSCME, several members of the city council and then-Mayor Kurt Schmoke supported the campaign.

In December 1994 Baltimore’s living-wage ordinance became law. Companies with significant city contracts would have to pay wages starting (in fiscal year 1996) at \$6.10 per hour, increasing to \$7.70 by 1999 and keeping pace with inflation thereafter. Gradually schools and other public agencies were included. Businesses receiving subsidies such as tax abatements from the city may eventually be covered.

These developments ignited parallel initiatives in other cities. A conservative thinktank, the Employment Policy Institute (EPI), keeps close tabs on living-wage initiatives around the country. By January 2001—only six years after the Baltimore campaign succeeded—155 living-wage initiatives had been put forward; 59 of these had been enacted and 12 defeated, 17 were actively pending and 67 were dormant. Only seven states did not have at least some city or county proposals, and at least two were considering statewide living-wage plans.

These victories have had an important impact on low-wage workers in dozens of cities around the country. A woman working for a janitorial firm servicing the Baltimore World Trade Center says she now can buy clothes from a regular store instead of Goodwill and pay for the basic repairs on her house rather than watch it deteriorate. Equally important, living-wage work has shifted the terms of public debate. In Baltimore even conservative politicians and advocates have adopted the living-wage framework. Developers pitch their plans partly in terms of the number of “living wage” jobs that they will create. The beginnings of statewide initiatives are a sign of the political impact this model is having, and there is talk of launching federal initiatives.

Some social critics fear that any connection between faith and politics is liable to undermine democracy. The projects I have observed, however, are no more likely than secular groups to be strident, intolerant or sectarian. Organizing activists are deeply committed to democratic values. They want to give all Americans the chance to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. They have no interest in using politics to impose a narrow religious or moral agenda on others. Furthermore, organizers generally take care to translate their proposals into the secular political language of American democracy or of human rights.

The strong Catholic influence on organizing probably helps. Catholic social thought’s conception of human rights is similar to the secular world’s. Contemporary church teachings on economic issues are close to those of European social democrats—most of whom are ardent secularists. The tradition of natural theology so central to Catholicism means that conclusions based on revelation and those stemming from secular reason and empirical evidence are expected to converge.

Organizing activism also responds to and even enhances religious commitments. The churchpeople who work in local organizing projects are more committed to their faith and congregations than to organizing. If they found that organizing “used” the churches or put a religious fig leaf over a secular political agenda, they would desert the organizing projects. Instead, the stories they tell about their experiences in organizing emphasize that their spiritual lives deepen as they become more politically engaged.

One of the key leaders of PACT told me that she chose to work in the organization as a form of prayer, a thanksgiving to God for the return to wholeness of her daughter after a three-year crisis. She reports that she has learned how to fight

constructively, and become an effective actor in public life. But she adds, “I got responded to because of my praying. Whereas I was doing religion before, to me it’s now faith, it’s a more personal thing with God.”

Within the religious community, contemporary organizing has seldom been divisive. Issues that would set denominations against each other, such as abortion, are studiously avoided. The issues that local groups tackle and the positions they take are determined by a deliberate, participatory process. Even those who disagree with the outcome respect it. The experience of MICAH shows the result: even though the organization has adopted controversial positions, not a single congregation has dropped out.

Although one sometimes hears shrill rhetoric, organizing leaders work to avoid polarization and to build community. “No permanent allies, no permanent enemies” is a basic organizing precept. Some organizers even banish the term “enemy,” speaking only of “targets.” Organizing activism aspires to strengthen the web of voluntary associations that support families and communities. It emphasizes building public relationships that broaden the possibilities for cooperation even in the face of political disagreements, cultural differences and divergent interests.

At a time when political developments in Washington are generally discouraging to advocates for economic justice, faith-based organizing shows the enormous potentials found in grass-roots America and particularly in the rich web of religious communities. Organizing contributes to the formation of public policy and the development of an engaged citizenry. When done well—which it is most of the time—it links religious and political commitments in a way that enhances democracy, social justice and American religious life.