

Choices for churches

by [Carl S. Dudley](#) in the [November 14, 2001](#) issue

Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing. By Dennis A. Jacobsen. Fortress, 128 pp., \$14.00 paperback.

Transforming Charity: Toward a Results-Oriented Social Sector. By Ryan Streeter. Hudson Institute, 168 pp., \$16.95 paperback.

In the tradition of that irascible genius Saul Alinsky, for the past 60 years community organizers have been encouraging churches to join the battle against the forces that sustain poverty, racism, sexism and other oppressive conditions. During the past decade all four major organizing networks (IAF, DART, PECO and the Gamaliel Foundation) have included theologians as leaders in their national training meetings as part of an increasingly aggressive effort to recruit churches for metropolitan organizing. New on the horizon is the equally aggressive and well-funded response of conservative forces recruiting congregations into a network of militant organizations devoted to combating poverty. Because the two camps rest on similar religious values and organizing principles, they may be easily confused. But they are in many ways opposites.

As leaders of their respective movements, Dennis Jacobsen and Ryan Streeter model the choices offered churches. A Lutheran pastor, Jacobsen is the director of the Gamaliel National Clergy Caucus, "a network of over 1,000 clergy that develops national and regional training events to ground the work of congregation-based community organizing in theology and scripture." Streeter is publication editor for the Hudson Institute, which, he writes, "has forged a viewpoint that embodies skepticism about the conventional wisdom, optimism about solving problems, a commitment to free institutions and individual responsibility, an appreciation of the crucial role of technology in achieving progress, and an abiding respect for the importance of values, culture and religion in human life."

Both Jacobsen and Streeter seek to recruit congregations into organizations that redefine charity and attack poverty at its root causes. Both marshal the biblical witness as their warrant for belief and mandate for action. Both are deeply

concerned about economic oppression and view their task as empowering people to escape from the shackles of poverty. And both write with energy and clarity.

But Jacobsen and Streeter differ radically in how they define the problem of poverty and what they urge the church to do in response. Where one sees hope, the other sees disaster; where one sees progress, the other sees seduction; where one sees the Spirit moving, the other sees demonic forces at play, and where one sees enemies, the other finds allies. Their strategies for building a better world are often mutually exclusive.

Working from a liberationist perspective, Jacobsen makes an articulate and persuasive case. "The world as it is, is the enemy of God," he announces in his opening line. Specifically he names its "nationalism, propaganda, racism, civil religion, and class enmity to bolster entrenched systems, corporations and institutions" as "offensive to God and to those who seek to do what is just." Leaders of these institutions may be people of faith in their personal lives, but "in their public life they are constrained to adopt a different ethic."

Theologically, Jacobsen presents the link between love and power as the bridge that brings congregations into community organizations confronting the world's evils. With Martin Luther King Jr. (and Paul Tillich) he reminds us that "power without love is tyranny, but love without power is sentimentality." Jacobson uses biblical and theological resources and the personal experiences of pastors to show the fallacy of attempting to help individuals without transforming oppressive systems. He presents the achievements of the Milwaukee inner-city Congregations Allied for Hope (MICAH) as an example of what community organizing can accomplish. What MICAH has done could be duplicated in metropolitan areas throughout our land, he suggests.

Jacobsen's book is a primer on the basic concepts of congregation-based community organizing. It covers such topics as power, self-interest, one-on-ones, agitation, metropolitan organizing, and community and spirituality. Unfortunately, in his effort to recruit churches the author moves from analyst to advocate, from social critic to program salesman. This is a pity, since an organizer as experienced as Jacobsen could have helped us to understand that even righteous movements must deal with internal controversy, even inspired leaders have flaws, and even organizations dedicated to fighting poverty are subject to the same hubris and greed that he describes in corporate leaders and government officials. Although Jacobsen builds on the organizing tradition that Saul Alinsky developed in Chicago (Alinsky's first

organizing meeting took place in 1939), Jacobsen fails to explain how the movement has changed over the decades, or why the Gamaliel Foundation has become the fastest growing of all four organizing networks he names.

Writing from a radically different perspective, Streeter voices the new politics of devolution, particularly those of the religious activists associated with George W. Bush. Streeter shares Jacobsen's frustration at the ineffective response of churches to the relentless problems of poverty, and he believes with Jacobsen that congregations in particular and communities as a whole can unite to make a difference. More historian than theologian, Streeter grounds his proposals in the beliefs and practices of Protestant Reformers who rejected "the old form of charity [that], while honorable in intentions, actually kept the poor in poverty" in favor of "new welfare programs that would train [the poor] in benefits of virtuous action and economic self-sufficiency."

Antipoverty programs should be measured not by intentions but by outcomes, Streeter argues. He understands "transforming charity" to mean changing individuals by transforming assistance "from an intention-based, process-focused framework to one that is results based." Using market-based language, Streeter contrasts intention- and investment-based charity, urging readers to see recipients as clients for our investment, not objects of our intention. He wants to mobilize community resources to challenge and empower individuals to become self-sufficient.

Unlike Jacobsen, Streeter sees economic institutions as allies, not enemies. In his pragmatic approach to investing in welfare clients, he looks for help wherever he can find it. He sees no need for the great wall between church and state, and he shows how the interests of businesses, schools, government agencies, foundations and, yes, all sorts of religious bodies can overlap. "Academics, policy makers, and community leaders are less inclined today than they were during a large portion of the twentieth century to locate root causes of poverty in institutions and large-scale social structures alone, but in the value-related practices of people as well," Streeter argues. "In today's world of transforming charity, the lines between market place and mission field are blurred."

He presents three case studies and numerous examples of business-and-church-sponsored nonprofit organizations. These not only prepare clients for employment and create job opportunities, but also sometimes spawn new businesses, housing

and opportunities, using an unorthodox mix of private, philanthropic and government money. Streeter strongly advocates for the growing numbers and importance of what he calls "social entrepreneurs" working in the new field of "venture philanthropy."

Although Streeter notes the dissolution of old institutional boundaries, he also believes that churches offer something so unique that they need a special layer of protection through what he calls "local intermediary organizations." Radically different from community advocacy groups like MICAH, Streeter's faith-based organizations (for example, the Front Porch Alliance in Indianapolis) have collective power to negotiate on behalf of several hundred congregations, social agencies and NPOs for program, contracts and Community Development Corporation funding.

Since the intermediary organizations Streeter celebrates are organized with government assistance, they are dangerously close to being "company unions." At their best they can release church gifts for ministry while providing a buffer against administrative red tape, and they can give voice to congregations against such government abuses as ill-defined block grants, self-serving social programs and partisan political pressures.

While Jacobsen provides a litany of MICAH's victories, Streeter offers a tough and humbling discussion of measuring the impact on the individuals participating in the programs he advocates. He mentions but does not get sidetracked into dwelling on the evaluation tools or capacity-building strategies various centers have developed. Rather, he demonstrates the complexity and multidimensionality of the task of evaluating progress for individuals, neighborhoods and communities.

In the new war against poverty, some will join Jacobsen in recognizing the evil of worldly "powers and principalities." They will work to mobilize our righteous anger into campaigns that unmask entrenched racism, poverty and other institutional evils, and to develop an authentic "nation under God, with liberty and justice for all." Others will respond to Streeter's invitation to "active and retired entrepreneurs" to create unorthodox church-education-business-government institutions seeking to make a measurable difference for individuals and their communities. As recruiting for these wars on poverty becomes more intense, perhaps the competition between these opposing approaches will help more churches to decide that they can no longer remain on the sidelines.