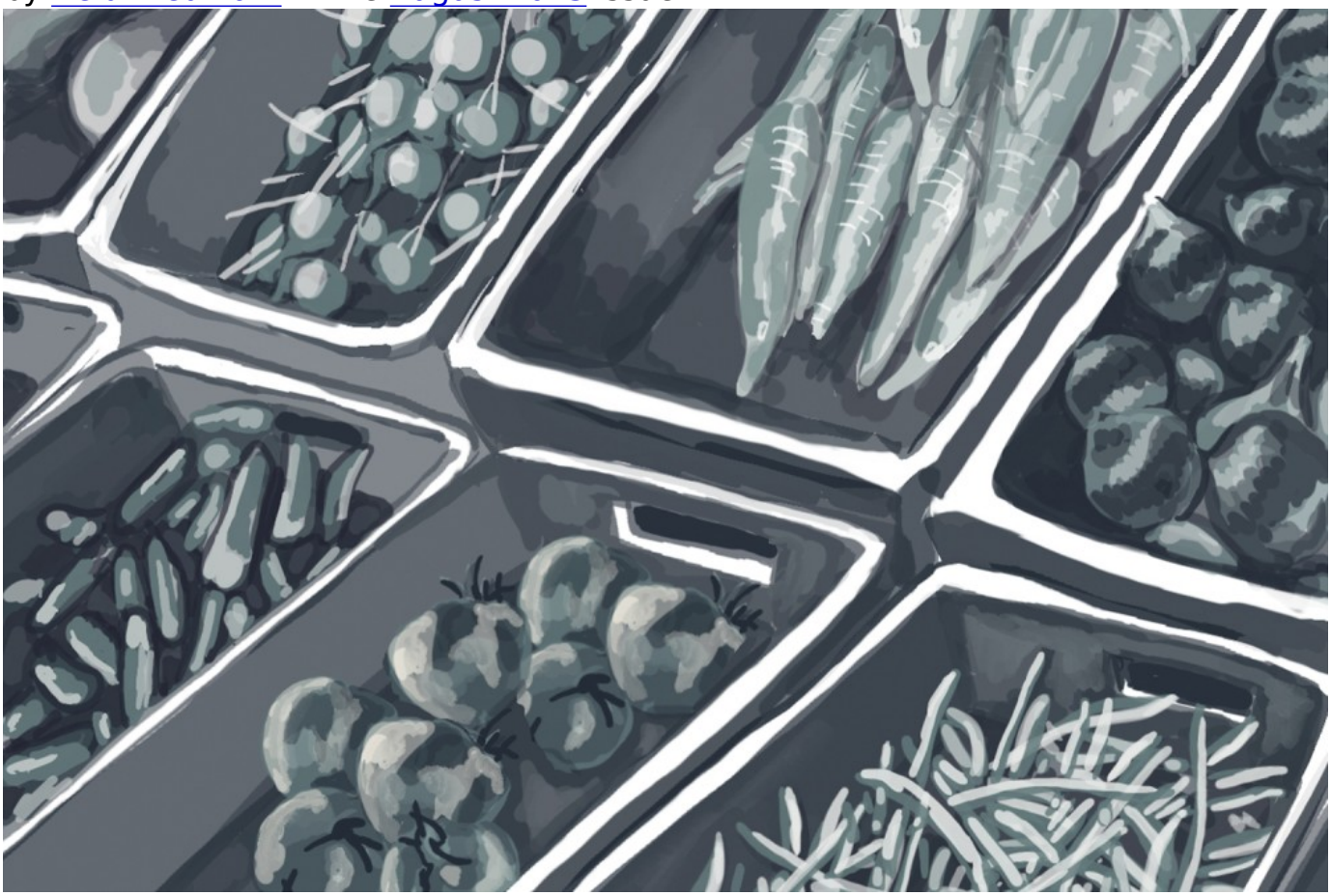
Organizing is about people’s agency

Unlike social services and advocacy, which are all about being helpers

by Heidi Neumark in the August 2023 issue



(Illustration by Martha Park)

My granddaughter Ruby just turned two. After practicing for a few days, she blew out the two candles on her Moana cake all by herself. Her big sister stood by, eager to help, but Ruby wanted none of that. We went out to a diner the other day, and Ruby insisted on using the available fork, an adult-sized one. Manipulating it was quite challenging for her tiny hands. When she had trouble stabbing a piece of potato or cantaloupe and my husband moved in to assist, she would loudly say, “No, Papa!” She picked the food up with her fingers, placed it on the fork, and carefully

guided it to her mouth.

Continuing to help Ruby with these things would not be helping her at all. We recognize that her healthy development and sense of agency—in a world all too eager to strip it away from a child of color with two moms—depend on her feeling empowered to do more and more things for herself.

Ruby also has the awareness and confidence to ask for help when she needs it. She works on a puzzle by herself, but when one piece just won't fit in after many tries she looks up and says simply, "help," and we do. What's important is that she is the one who determines when she wants our help.

Ruby could be a poster child for the iron rule of organizing: never do for others what they can do for themselves.

We in the church excel at being helpers, and there is much to celebrate about this. Jesus taught his followers to engage in works of mercy: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger. In the case of feeding the hungry, this often means a church pantry or a soup kitchen, ministries welcomed by many on the edge. Such social service alleviates suffering as it addresses symptoms of injustice and their impact on people's lives. But this help does not address the injustice that creates suffering in the first place.

Advocacy goes a step further. Sometimes advocacy is called "being a voice for the voiceless." In our churches, advocacy is often more controversial than social service because it is seen as too political. Nonetheless, more and more congregations and denominations understand the importance of advocacy alongside social service.

Yet in advocating for others, we are still being the helpers. I'm afraid that Ruby would not be impressed. She likes to use her own voice.

And this is what brings me to my experience with working for social change through community organizing. One church I served joined with 25 others to hire a community organizer who led us to begin with what seemed like small, winnable actions among the issues raised in community meetings. The women I met with in weekly Bible study were frustrated by the offerings in local food markets and chose to engage in a grocery store action.

Most of the food entering New York City comes through the Bronx Hunts Point Market, just blocks from the church—but virtually none of the fresh produce *stays* there. Much of the food the women found stocked in local markets was wilted, spoiled, even rancid. The chain stores made sure the best food went to affluent suburbs, where consumers would never accept the food dumped in poor neighborhoods. For years, this was business as usual, and no one challenged it. No one believed they had the capacity or power to challenge it.

The community organizer offered something brilliantly simple. She gave the women white jackets and buttons with the word *inspector* on them. The women marched into the market wearing their jackets and buttons. They began dumping rotten food into their shopping baskets. Soon there was a flurry of concern. “Who sent you? What kind of inspectors are you?”

The women had practiced what they would say. “My family sent me! I’m inspecting the quality of food here for my family. By the way, would you want to serve this rotten food to *your* family?”

The idea that mothers would rise up and challenge the unjust practices of these local markets was unheard of. They made it clear that the manager would be hearing a lot more from them if nothing was done. So something was done. The local markets they targeted cleaned up their act. Local children and adults were able to eat higher-quality food because of it, but the grocery store actions weren’t just about the taste of food. It was a taste of dignity, agency, and power. Of raising one’s voice and making it heard. These actions led to bigger ones and larger urban transformations, including the building of 1,000 low-income homes and a top-ranked public high school.

In an imperfect world, we need to use all the tools available. A food pantry has its place. (The church in the Bronx maintained one during the grocery store actions.) Advocacy can create real change. But both social service and advocacy have limitations.

I could have used my pastoral leadership in advocacy, writing a letter to the supermarket decision makers and following up with a phone call or a visit. It’s possible that by myself or with other clergy, we could have gotten these markets to do the right thing—which seems wonderful, except that the dehumanizing power dynamics would have remained unchanged. Advocacy would make me feel good

that I had done something useful while at the same time leaving others to feel dependent on me. In a neighborhood where the only White people were police, firefighters, teachers, social workers, and clergy, my advocacy would have bolstered the status quo of White supremacy. Community organizing is one tool that allows churches to work on changing this.

Ruby wants to feed herself. She wants to speak for herself. Why would churches infantilize adults who deserve the same agency in their lives? A feast with everyone at the table awaits.