

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

[www.gatherthepeople.org](http://www.gatherthepeople.org)

## RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING QUESTIONS TO CLERGY IN CONGREGATIONAL (FAITH-BASED) COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

By Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

When working in what has been labeled faith-based or congregationally based community organizing, one quickly learns that relationships with senior clergy are essential to successfully bringing new congregations and parishes into an organizing-project federation. The questions to clergy outlined below—based on our reading, reflection, and organizing, and on discussions by the staff of the PICO Orange County Organizing Project (ca. 1987-1989)—are designed to lay the groundwork for faith-based organizing by developing a collegial relationship between the organizer and a senior clergy-member.

The critical requirement for building a collegial relationship is met through a series of one-to-one meetings aimed to create opportunities for the organizer to pose incisive questions to the clergy-member. The questions are potentially compelling if they dramatically stimulate the clergy-member's thinking about organizational, professional, and personal challenges, and innovative ways of approaching them. The clergy-member's thinking through and answering the organizer's questions incrementally deepens his or her investment in the relationship, which becomes a powerful motivator for continuing to devote valuable time and energy to meetings with the organizer to explore involvement in the organizing project.

The questions also have the effect of incrementally building a relationship of trust and confidence between the clergy-member and the organizer, which is an essential precondition for the clergy-member to approve or endorse an organizing initiative within the congregation or parish, because launching an organizing drive, or even a series of exploratory one-to-ones among congregational or parish leaders or staff, typically entails personal and professional risk for the clergy.

Questions to clergy shown below in larger type are more appropriate for earlier one-to-ones, while those in smaller type are suggested for later use, when relationships have deepened. For a complete description of this process, see our COMM-ORG article, "Community Organizer One-to-One Visits in Faith-Based, Congregational Organizing" (<http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2012/moshe.htm#community>).

1. What was your first year here like? You must have some good stories to tell. How did you approach it? What were the tensions? What visions or changes did you begin to introduce? What help did you receive from your movement, branch, or denomination?

2. Do you believe your leaders understand that, insofar as income and job-security, you're subject to the same pressures that burden other people?

How do your needs for salary and job security affect your performance?

What are the most stressful moments for you as clergy, and how are they linked to limitations on congregational growth and development?

What is the most important unresolved emotion that you bring to the congregation?

How do you see your own ability to handle fear and anxiety? What are examples?

3. How do you see your own leadership style?

Are you "integrative," sharing power, constructively tolerating anxiety, and ensuring that key players are accessible to each other?

Are you "reactive," complying with the congregation's expectations and values, providing a supportive atmosphere, suppressing tension, shielding anxiety, undermining vision, and experiencing feelings of depression, inadequacy, and failure?

Are you "proactive," unilaterally asserting power over others while trying to appear non-manipulative, feeding emotional dependency and distance, weak problem-solving, win-lose fighting, and game-playing?

Are you "inactive," typically disengaged and not leading, ignoring internal questions and community tensions, distancing human and social concerns, producing calm, polite, and unrevealing relationships that are spiritually stagnant?

4. How do you prevent people from becoming dependent on you as the "maximum" leader?

5. How do you see the relationship between organizational development and leaders suppressing or sharing their fears of change and conflict?

What is the most important unresolved emotion that members bring to the congregation?

How do you help people in the congregation become conscious of the meaning(s) of their internal interactions and the links those interactions have with the larger, social world?

How do you understand—and model for your members—the link between leadership, anxiety, and powerlessness?

Have you developed an approach for preserving the stability of the congregation while simultaneously keeping open possibilities for new direction, learning, and growth?

6. What criteria do you have for deciding when to comfort and when to confront, when to control and when to share control, when to encourage healthy dependence and when to stimulate interdependence?

7. Do you have a solid and reasonably wide base of lay people who are able and motivated to talk candidly with you about your shared interactions and common ministry, your priorities and leadership style, on a regular basis?

In areas where you and your congregation have significant differences—say on values or mission, how do you describe your commitment and the congregation's to reconciling those differences? What are those differences, specifically?

8. How do you work out the differences (and tensions) between your visions and values and those of the lay leadership? (Is your position non-negotiable?)

Do you privately try to “tune out” the congregation's needs?

Do you adopt the congregation's needs whole hog, thus aborting any innovation?

Are you often passive, wanting to avoid issues, and abandoning the congregation to discord?

Do you invite core leaders into active reflection on your relationship, acknowledging mutual expectations, disappointments, commitments, and goals?

9. What forms of collegial support are available to you? Which do you use?

10. How do you meet your needs for continuing education? In particular, what are the skills that you believe to be helpful, and do you know where to look for these?

© 2013-2018 Moshe ben Asher & Khulda bat Sarah