

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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## KEY LEARNINGS IN CONGREGATIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING WORKSHOPS

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### FIRST WORKSHOP

1. A variety of people in the congregation, fully representing its diversity, discover that they share the same concerns and hopes for community life, such as secure neighborhoods, safe schools for their children, affordable housing, a healthy environment, opportunities for all people, jobs with decent income, etc. They come to see that they have similar beliefs about the characteristics of healthy relationships, specifically that they involve honesty, mutual respect, caring, sharing, challenging, and the like.
2. They become aware of the character of relationships within their congregation, discovering that many lack essential qualities. They learn that there is a critical link between (a) the presence or absence of healthy relationships and (b) the quality of family and community life. Since concerns and hopes for family and community life are not shared, the congregation fails to challenge and support faith-based action that addresses the concerns and hopes.
3. They come to see that the bridge connecting the real and ideal worlds is a congregation that nurtures healthy relationships and that acts on the deepest concerns and hopes of its members and their neighbors. The congregation, in turn, joins with other congregations to develop a community organization that can effectively promote their values and common interests in the larger community. The bridge connecting the real and ideal worlds is anchored by a congregational organizing committee. It allows us to join together to struggle from where we are to where we want to be. It is both the struggle and the results that are important. The congregation, then, is the action vehicle for the expression and resolution of the concerns and hopes that are shared in relationships.

### SECOND WORKSHOP

1. By asking three analytic questions, every individual can demonstrate through his or her own experience the connection between so-called community concerns, which are “out there,” and family troubles, which are “in here.” The questions are: How is the concern (traffic, drug-dealing, poor schools, etc.) manifested as a particular problem that is accommodated as a practical matter? For example, “I don’t allow the children to play in the park anymore because of the drug dealers.”
2. What pressure(s) does the practical accommodation create in the life of the family? For example, “the children—three of them—now have to play in our small apartment after school, and they’re always yelling and screaming and breaking things.” What’s “going wrong” in your

family in response to the pressure(s)? For example, “I can’t stand the children’s noise, so lately I’ve been yelling at them and hitting them when I lose my temper.”

3. It becomes apparent that the synagogue (actually the staff), as one of the institutions to which the families turn for assistance, is overwhelmed. The staff is typically overloaded by day-to-day responsibilities and almost entirely unable to resolve these family and community concerns.

4. Through their own sharing and analysis they conclude that “the synagogue” must be thought of not as the staff but the whole congregation—and that that hasn’t happened largely because of a failure of relationships within the congregation.

5. Most workshop participants come to accept that to change the quality of relationships within the synagogue and to lay the foundation for bringing faith into action in the world, it’s necessary for many people in the congregation to talk one-to-one about their deepest concerns and hopes. This is the route to resolve community problems that undermine families. To make that happen effectively, an organizing committee must be formed within the congregation.

### THIRD WORKSHOP

1. Role-play demonstrations establish that the basics of a successful one-to-one visit are as follows:

—An effective credential, both in the initial phone contact and at the outset of the one-to-one;

—Not thinking of the one-to-one as an information-gathering mission but initiating a relationship, which typically begins by making personal contact;

—Asking one or two questions about pressures and hopes, and then listening carefully—not interrupting, giving advice, arguing, or making judgments, talking only when necessary to get the conversation focused on specifics or to follow-up on important points; and

—Based on careful evaluation of the person being visited, extending an invitation for that person to participate in some aspect of the congregational community organization’s life, whether the planning committee, the organizing committee, an upcoming research activity, or an action.

2. The idea is proposed that there are necessary steps to ensure sufficient one-to-ones are accomplished and that they lead to faith in action which changes conditions in the community. It’s essential that the workshop participants vote to form an organizing committee and that each person make an explicit voluntary commitment to do a specific number of one-to-one visits in a set period of time.

3. By the conclusion of the workshop it is understood that everyone will be held accountable for their commitments, beginning at the first regular meeting of the organizing committee, which should take place in about three weeks.

### WORKSHOP CONTEXT

The workshops do not take place as a series of events separate from the organizing process. The planning, content, and conduct of the workshops assume that a number of conditions and understandings are satisfied before, during, and after the workshops.

For example, the idea that it’s appropriate and accepted that members of the congregation should put their faith into action. Or the idea that, members of the congregation, acting with the blessing of rabbi, should confront decision-makers, holding them accountable. These are “assumed” in the workshop, although often mentioned in passing as part of the general discussion, because they have been covered in detail in pre-workshop one-to-one visits.