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Finding and Making Leaders

Seeding the Vision—The Faith Link in Community Organizing

Suburban Organizing: The New Frontier?

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Seeding the Vision:

The “faith link” in community organizing

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Recently I attended a five-day training conference for leaders from congregationally-based community organizing projects. Nearly a hundred lay leaders and pastors from every section of the country came together to learn more about community organizing. Although some participants were experienced and had an understanding of the work, for many the goals and methods of organizing were new.

During the first few days especially, I heard questions raised that community organizers often fail to answer adequately. These questions revealed doubt, confusion, and concern about the connections between personal faith, congregational mission, and community organizing, particularly in the context of building and exercising power. In most instances, admittedly, the questions suggested an apparent bias toward organizing as both right and rewarding for the individual, the congregation, and the larger community. Notwithstanding this positive bias, however, many of those present revealed a discernible inability to engage wholeheartedly in the training material, although most were enthusiastic participants in the training process—a distinction that is not insignificant.

Some questioners were implicitly asking how community organizing is related to the main mission of the congregation. Some questions touched on how one can be sure in any particular instance that confrontation is justified morally. Some questions were raised as statements that attempted to clarify the connection between personal faith and organizing work.

None of this was new to me. I frequently hear these questions from pastors as they consider their interest in supporting the development of a community organizing project. The questions are certainly typical and useful. But hearing them concentrated in a relatively short time led me to a new conclusion about their implications and about what is often missing in our leadership training.

The Biblical base

If we want community organizing to be central in the life of the faith community and to the faith life of the individual congregant, then we must establish a

“faith link” as a formal, integral, and systematic part of our leadership development work: At the outset of leadership training we must at least briefly identify, explore, and reinforce our essential common foundation in faith life—the Biblical base—for corporately bringing our faith into action.

At the Organize Training Center, San Francisco, Calif., where I work, throw-away prayers and benedictions at the start and end of training sessions are not sufficient. And it is not enough that we all have some vague or individual sense that organizing is the right thing to do, or that our pastoral or denominational leaders have established or endorsed the justification or rationale for it. Together we must find in scripture the character of the vision that challenges each of us as individual children of God, as members of our respective and disparate faith communities, and as leaders in our larger federations—notwithstanding our differences, which, too, must be respected.

When we fail to cover this ground carefully and consistently, we run the commonly realized risk of reinforcing the idea that organizing is a “program,” one of many to be attached to the faith community. In contrast, it can become a fundamental and permanent change in the belief system and action life of the faith community.

Reflection and discussion

As a practical matter, such leadership training might be in the form of a front-end small group or workshop for scriptural reflection and discussion.

Although I favor using a wide range of study materials, including the New Testament, the examples suggested here are all drawn from the Hebrew Bible. This is because of my unfamiliarity with the New Testament and because so many others have already taken up that task with excellent results (Linthicum 1991). The Hebrew Bible for me has the advantage of being shared by Christians and Jews, and its richness provides almost limitless fertile soil for raising questions, the answers to which feed faith-based visions, strategies, and tactics to satisfy our contemporary hunger for meaning and a more wholesome way of life.

Shemot, the Book of Exodus, is a primary source of material for reflection and discussion to establish the faith link. The Exodus experience created a “paradigm shift” in the ancient world (Walzer, 1985), a revolutionary break in both understanding and action. Before that time, social and political life were regarded as set in fixed orbits. One remained for a lifetime in the station of one’s birth, regardless of the pain and demoralization which that entailed. But

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after the Exodus it was no longer possible to regard oppression and corruption as inevitable or the inescapable burden of the “accursed”—those with a physical disability, character flaw, or born into lesser social status. Injustice, slavery, and degradation of every type were revealed to all the world as the results of “particular choices by particular people.” (Walzer, 1985:14)

In the Exodus story God took the side of the oppressed. This God, whose name, יהוה (Yod Hay Vav Hay), was only about to become known, invited human participation in making history. All was not preordained but subject to the malleable will of the Almighty in a covenantal relationship with a people. The story is remarkable too because a whole people was enslaved and a whole people was delivered; the oppression was collective and the remedy was collective. This was not a slavery to be remedied by manumission but by liberation.

The Exodus story, relived in thousands of Passover celebrations, has generated at least as many questions as the number of years that separates us from the experience, although we too—all who trace our religious or biological lineage to the events at Sinai—gained our freedom in that liberation.

- What was the beginning event in the Exodus?
- In what ways was the Exodus not only a rejection of Egyptian bondage but Egyptian culture too?
- Why did Pharaoh not voluntarily accede to the

demands of Moses and Aaron?

- To what lengths did God go to liberate the Hebrews?
- Under what circumstances did God resort to violence?
- How did God feel about the downfall of the wicked?
- What did God require of the Hebrews in order to assure them that they could influence their future history as a people?
- What did the people do to ensure their own liberation?
- What was the nature of the freedom achieved through the Exodus?
- Who achieved that freedom?
- What was Moses’ role—warrior, statesman, prophet?
- What were his main objectives and what means did he use to achieve them?
- How did he view the link between belief and action?

Is the Exodus a one-time event, forever liberating future generations from all “narrow places?” (The Hebrew word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*, which means narrow place, as in birth canal.) What are the narrow places of our own time that we experience collectively as a community or a nation? Can we escape them individually or will it be essential that we achieve a collective “liberation?” Another major source for reflection and discussion is the prophetic literature of Israel. For example, we have in Jeremiah (22:13-15) the unequivocal teaching that God demands justice. And it is affirmed with the rhetorical question, “Is not that what it means to know Me?—it is יהוה who speaks” (22: 16). Amos teaches that without justice, worship is less than meaningless—it is an affront, an outrage to the Lord. He says, “I despise your feasts . . . but let justice well up as waters and righteousness as mighty streams (5: 21, 24). Amos knew also that the religious establishment and the majority of the population of his time would not acknowledge and respond to the call for justice and righteousness, but that those who did would be a saving “remnant” for the nation (5:15). Isaiah (58) also connects the idea of empty worship—fasting that occurs in the midst of profit-seeking and oppression—with the failure to live righteously and to do justice. To do God’s will, he says, shall produce a “light in the darkness,” the “Presence of the Lord,” the rebuilding of ancient ruins and the repairing of fallen walls.

We might ask:

- How did Amos view the corruption of public officials?
- What was the character of Israel's idolatry in Isaiah's eyes?
- What did Amos and Isaiah think of religious rituals in the absence of righteousness and justice?
- Who were they calling to account?
- What did they think about acting for the right at the expense of position, popularity, or privilege?
- What did they imagine were the consequences of failure to act?

Needless to say, similar questions could be centered around a number of passages from the other great prophets. The study of Nehemiah offers good possibilities for reflection and discussion because the book goes far beyond expressing values and a vision, although it certainly includes those dimensions. Its additional utility for congregation-based organizing is that it offers general insight and specific explication of the purposes and processes of community organizing. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem after learning that the city's walls and gates are in ruins and the populace demoralized. He researches the situation and then begins organizing people to deal with the immediate, deeply-felt issue of their security—rebuilding the walls and gates, which allows him to begin building organization and renewing the confidence of the people in themselves and their God. He knows that the walls and gates are not “the problem.” The deeper problem is one of faith—renewal of the character, competence, and commitment of the people—to rebuild Jerusalem as a city of God, which of course is our own challenge, wherever we live. The story suggests a number of discussion questions that can be used to better understand Nehemiah's organizing and its relationship to our own efforts:

- What part did Nehemiah's grief play in his work?
- What was Nehemiah's attitude and approach to the powerful institutional systems of the city?
- What social classes did he target?
- What was the connection in his work between spiritual and social transformation?
- What did he identify as the most pressing issue and what did he identify as the most critical overarching issue?
- What was the relationship between these issues and how were they linked?

- How were reflection and action connected in his work?
- What parts did confession and celebration play?

I have chosen only a few examples from the Hebrew Bible—there are many others—and suggested only a relatively small number of discussion questions. It should nonetheless be clear from these brief examples that there is a substantial Biblical foundation for congregation-based community organizing, one that can serve not only to enlighten and guide but also reduce doubt and distrust by answering earnest questions that are being raised by leaders and pastors in our faith communities.

As a rabbi, I commend to Christian, Moslem, Buddhist and clergy colleagues of other faiths a search of your own sources for teachings that illuminate the scriptural connection between your tradition's deepest values and visions and the work of community organizing. Specifically, I suggest looking for teachings on the following: poverty, power and powerlessness, confrontation and conflict, social justice, and the role of laity in bringing faith to life in action in the world.

Actualizing God's power

To move in this direction requires explicit recognition—also part of leadership training on the faith link—that our vision and purpose are not to build our

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power but to actualize God's power through our actions in the world—which of course makes us powerful in the process. The distinction is more than rhetorical. Actualizing God's power requires that we regularly reflect on our power-building work and its Biblical foundations to ensure that our corporate action is faith-driven and consciously seeking to be in the image of God. Only in this way do we have power that both actively nurtures our spirit and transforms

the world. The dangers of including substantive scriptural reflection and discussion into leadership training, even if only a minor part of the total curriculum, are not inconsequential. There may be a tendency to push the organizing toward narrow sectarianism, doctrinal exclusivity or, worse, do-nothing Bible study. Although the benefits justify the risks, there are some precautions that should be taken. The choice of scriptural materials that tie faith to action, the preparation of those who lead the reflection and discussion, the role of the organizer and the character of the training that follows are all essential to ensuring that faith is translated into corporate congregational action that aims to transform the world. Such scriptural materials must not be the exclusive property of one particular religion or denomination; they must be broadly based or at least not in conflict with any of our faith traditions.

The organizer's role

More than once when raising this subject I've heard trainers and organizers say, leave the religious teaching to pastors and lay leaders—they are best qualified to develop the link between their religious faith and community organizing. But that link does not develop in a vacuum. When as organizers we avoid, for whatever reasons, conversations about the faith link, two things happen:

First, pastors are not likely to take organizing or their own involvement in it as seriously because we have failed to make clear the most pivotal reason for their involvement—that is, their often long-forgotten personal faith and passion for the Biblical vision. That passion is their greatest source of excitement and energy, notwithstanding the importance of more immediate institutional self-interest. Moreover, that passion is connected to their institutional self-interest, because often they are facing an institutional life that is also enervated. Personal self-interest and institutional self-interest both call out for energizing the faith life of the congregation in a way that is relevant to the daily pain and hopes of its members.

Second, organizers who avoid this conversation put themselves in the position of selling a program to someone who already has a plate full of programs. Many of us have had this experience. Pastors are inundated with requests to buy and implement programs. We as organizers must distinguish ourselves from these sales promotions.

Although pastors and lay religious leaders, as a rule, certainly do know scripture better than organizers, they often do not know how to live it corporately

beyond the four walls of the church, and they are searching for ways to do that. Organizers must play a leadership role in activating the search for the Biblical vision: They must initiate conversations about that vision with pastors and continue them with lay leaders. These individual discussions should eventually in the congregation coming together to struggle as a body with the Biblical vision and its imperatives. That reflection and discussion, however, always must be immediately connected to social analysis and action.

Before we arrive on the scene, congregations typically are not bringing faith to life in action in the larger world; we challenge them to make the faith community not a sanctuary but a seminary. The church or temple is not meant to be an escape hatch from the problems of the world but rather a place in which the full range of human capacities are developed; and given that development, the faith community can act effectively in the world to bring the Kingdom closer. When we fail to engage pastors and leaders in reflection and discussion on this Biblical vision, we fail critically; our leadership is essential to vitalize not only the organizing process but the scripture underpinning the process.

If thinking about this subject has made anything clear to me, it is that organizers often lack the confidence or competence to have these kinds of conversations with pastors and leaders and to incorporate them in workshops. Those of us responsible for the education, training, and supervision of organizers should be asking ourselves what changes are necessary—in our curriculums and classes, workshops, and supervision sessions—to remedy this shortcoming.

Integration of faith and organizing

To fully benefit from and give benefit to its developing religious institutional foundations of the past two decades, community organizing must be integrated in the life of the faith community—and thus faith life must be integrated in it.

To the degree that we avoid this challenge we fail to deal with the resistance and reticence of pastors and leaders who are asking, "Why does community organizing belong centrally in the life of the congregation and how will it feed the spiritual life of individual congregants?" We need to recognize and respond to this question, more often than not, as one that will be satisfied only by an answer grounded in Biblical rather than organizing visions and principles—although the answer certainly should encompass and integrate the two.

The early rabbis taught that the *Sefer Torah*, the Torah scroll containing the Five Books of Moses, is a tree of life—not a theology, not a conceptual framework, but an ancient living tree that sustains life in all its hopes and possibilities. At the conclusion of reading each week’s portion of the Torah, which is part of our regular worship service, the liturgy borrows from Proverbs (3:18) and Lamentations (5: 21) to describe the relationship between the living Torah and those who live it:

You flower on, ancient tree
Shading paths beyond those we know
And your strength renews all life
Binding heaven to earth and sea.

*(This is my own interpretive translation
of the original Hebrew.)*

To the extent that we are comfortable and competent to lead others into these Biblical underpinnings of the faith and the work that we have in common, which I call the “faith link,” we move toward fundamentally changing faith communities by making community organizing central to their mission; we improve the prospect of them joining in effective federations; and we seed the vision of those

federations acting together to transform the world in the image of God.

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Suggested reading

- Cohn-Sherbok, Dan. *On Earth as it is in Heaven* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, © 1987)
Linthicum, Robert. *City of God, City of Satan* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, © 1991)
Linthicum, Robert. *Empowering the Poor* (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, © 1991)
Walzer, Michael. *Exodus and Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, © 1985)

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