



Community Organising and Congregating Values

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[Contending Modernities](#) is a global research and education initiative focused on collaboration among secular and religious universities, institutions, and leaders.

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foreword

This is a background paper produced as part of a wider research project which seeks to consider how people of different faith can and do work together for the common good. Written by community organising practitioner Ruhana Ali, the paper provides an important insight into some of the practical challenges created when competing worldviews and values are animated together in the public sphere. Reflecting upon in-depth experience as a community organiser in the borough of Tower Hamlets in London, the author provides a useful contextual analysis of how, in practise, the process of community organising creates a vehicle through which competing worldviews can be recognised and negotiated, in order to achieve positive outcomes for the benefit of society as a whole.

abstract

This paper aims to reflect on some of the shared motivations and values that enable secular and religious leaders from the Muslim and Christian communities in Tower Hamlets to work together, through community organising, for the purpose of the 'common good'. The notion of 'common good' is derived by consensus between these groups because of a shared understanding and experience of what is important to their communities. 'Common good' issues identified through the process of community organising include the need to build better relationships with neighbours, to work together for living wages, and to establish safer streets and affordable housing. In Tower Hamlets there are 23 diverse churches, mosques, unions, education and charitable institutions which have been involved in community organising through The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO), one of the four chapters within the London Citizens alliance.

The paper will outline three key practices that are shared by Muslim and Christian communities; service, mission, and advocacy, using examples to explore how each finds expression through community organising. As well as exploring broad synergies between Christian and Muslim motivations for organising, we will also consider some of the tensions and compromises that arise from being involved in a diverse alliance which includes leaders and institutions that have differing world views.

understanding the importance of institutions

Community Organising focuses on building the power of ordinary communities to act together, in order to bring about change which addresses issues cared about by multiple individuals. In order to be able to do this well, a shared framework and understanding of the world and the nature of power is central. Using Saul Alinsky's¹ methodology of community organising, London Citizens focuses on building relational power by developing alliances between people and institutions, in order to affect change in the world. This is achieved by holding the state to account. This paper shall argue that in order to make change in the world, you need power, and in order to have power you need to be in relationship with others, recognising that there are very few individuals and organisations that have enough power to make change by themselves.

According to the theory behind community organising as defined by Saul Alinsky, power is a neutral term that is constituted in ones 'ability to act'. It is often used in two ways; dominantly or relationally. Based on experience within communities, London Citizens organisers have observed that individuals are often cautious of the word power, nervous of the negative way in which it is used or experienced; often exerted non-consensually and over others. Community organising exists to redress this balance of power by organising institutions to build relationships across civil society. Through this process of horizontal relationship building, power is redistributed and established through an alliance of institutions which stand together in order to work towards achieving shared goals. Community organising seeks to build this relational power in order to deepen the democratic engagement of people across civil space.

The importance of developing this relational power between institutions as opposed to individuals is crucial to building effective alliances. In material terms, institutions often have a building and resources, and relationally, they are often connected to people deeply rooted in communities. Institutions are places where people congregate and participate in civil life. Often established management structures and leadership positions create accountability relationships between individuals within these institutions. Busy and thriving institutions like the church, mosque or school are therefore pockets of power that remain anchored within the community despite the fact

¹ Alinsky, D, Saul: (1971) *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*

that individuals inside the buildings often change. Focusing organising efforts into the growth and sustainability of these well-established institutions provides a solid platform through which relationships across civil society can be built sustainably, in order to enable participation in the wider civic life of the community.

services

The training and development of leaders and individuals is practiced through member institutions. Service in the community is an important element of the work of each of these institutions, whether secular or religious. Whether they are enabling their followers to attend worship, partake in education or training, or simply practise good daily living, London Citizens leaders in Tower Hamlets see providing a service as a crucial part of the work of the institution of which they are a part. It is therefore necessary to break down different understandings of 'service' which motivate faith leaders to become London Citizens leaders.

For religious leaders, opening an institution to enable worship to take place is a priority service. The Muslim community prays 5 times during the day and expects the mosque to be open to accommodate this prayer timetable which includes the Friday lunchtime Jummuah² prayer. 5,000 worshippers regularly attend Friday prayer at The East London Mosque and often over 65,000 worshippers per week will visit in busier periods such as during the month of Ramadan. Similarly, often Catholic churches will hold a number of masses throughout the week. Priests often serve huge numbers of parishioners each week whether it's within the church through mass services, confession, or communion groups, as well as serving externally through activities such as visiting the sick. The provision of these services can be demanding for a Priest or an Imam; the distinction between public and private space is often unclear. For many, the profession establishes a permanent sense of duty to the community. For many of these leaders, the difficult rhythms of a pastoral role make juggling their public lives and private lives a great challenge. The Union leader or teacher on the other hand often conducts the provision of services on a more structured basis, with office hours and a narrower protocol for being contacted.

Experience listening to people in Tower Hamlets has revealed that many people perceive doing good works as necessary alongside a job which does not explicitly benefit those outside of their professional sphere. However, as identified above, for those who are employed professionally in a role which directly contributes to the development of people or a community through an act of service, committing to supporting

² Name of the Muslim congregational prayer that includes a sermon at Friday lunchtime

organisations like London Citizens, a responsibility which can be particularly time-consuming, can seem like a demanding non-professional commitment. To provide a more specific example of how time management becomes a particular challenge for London Citizens leaders who are employed professionally in demanding caring roles, one can look to a Head Teacher. For a Head teacher, the responsibility for ensuring that young people achieve their potential creates a demanding professional life. Some head teachers may feel that they do enough within school hours, as well as various professional meetings outside of school, to negate their need to extend their services any further than their immediate school community. When professional commitments of service are demanding, they can naturally take priority over similar non-professional commitments. The priority 'service' for a head teacher is ensuring that pupils achieve the best possible education and qualifications, and finish their education as well-rounded citizens able to contribute to the good of society. For Christian and Muslim leaders, often the pragmatic institutional priority is to serve the community through worship and devote more time to providing services to their immediate interest groups, for example a congregation, rather than the wider community. When this happens, organising work is often delegated to other enthusiastic members of the congregation or team who are able to devote more time and energy.

While community organising can be understood as good in and of itself, understanding how community organising advances each individuals' motivations and self-interests is also important. Many leaders in Tower Hamlets from secular and religious backgrounds participate in order to build relationships with their neighbours in an act of service, and in order to feel a part of the community and work for the common good.

"It is a requirement of my faith to be involved in the common good and the work of TELCO reminds me of the Covenant of Virtue where you uphold justice in society together with others. I like meeting people of other faiths and backgrounds and building a common understanding. Through this relationship building I can be of benefit to the community and also answer questions and remove any misunderstanding of Muslims and my faith."

Dilowar Khan, Executive Director of East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre

“Being involved in organising is one of the best ways of living my faith – I belong to a faith where everyone is welcome. The Bible tells us to love God and to love your neighbour but you can’t do one without the other.

*Father Tom O’Brien, Catholic Priest at Our Lady of the Assumption
Roman Catholic Church*

“Some of my motivations for being involved in community organising include the fact that it gives me an opportunity to engage in politics through my work and use it as a vehicle to get our student body involved too. I enjoy making relationships and meeting different people in the area and learning through doing.”

Professor Jane Wills, Queen Mary University Geography Department

As a ‘service’, Community Organising enables each leader and institution to serve wider society and achieve change on issues that their communities alone may not have the power to effect; for example, the Living Wage campaign was successful because it was an alliance of many different institutions working together.³ However, there is an inherent tension with how members of each institution feel that time should be spent. For many, the prime responsibility of a leader lies within their own congregation, thus deeming work considered to be beyond the remit of the position to be of a secondary priority.

“In some of our sermons we would talk about the work of citizens and some members of the congregation left because they felt that talking about politics at church was an intrusion on their spiritual life”.

Bethan Lant, Tower Hamlets Borough Co-Chair and Church Warden at St Mary’s Church

“One of the tensions of being involved in community organising work as a leader is time, as I always have too much to do”.

Professor Jane Wills, Queen Mary Geography Department

“Doing this work is a massive commitment, I couldn’t be involved and do this half-heartedly, which means it takes time to make it work and sometimes we look for quick solutions”

Captain Nick Coke, Borough Co-Chair and Captain of Salvation Army Stepney

³ <http://www.livingwage.org.uk/>

“Sometimes coming back and sharing your passion and excitement with your organisation for this work is not taken the same way. Sometimes you have to be patient and carry the organisation with you to recognise the benefits, which can be a challenge. Some people ask ‘is it necessary to do this if we are doing it anyway?’ ‘Do we have to go somewhere else to do it’?

Finding the time to do this on top of other roles is also a challenge especially as a female, balancing other commitments, trying to attend meetings at the weekend and evenings although I have found it difficult at times it has always been worthwhile”.

Mahera Ruby, Former Chair of Muslimate UK

This struggle for time creates tension within communities that have differing understandings of where their individual and institutional priorities should lie. Each person will have a different understanding of which needs are greatest. Many of the religious institutions involved with Citizens take the view that “to serve people is to serve God” and therefore some can see this work as a form of worship and devotion, while others see the same work as a distraction or lesser priority to their prescribed worship styles.

The secular community is often similar in understanding and assessing whether community organising is of benefit or hindrance to their core organisational mission. Often this social justice framework, where helping people is seen as a good and important extension of the belief in promoting basic human rights, provides a reason in and of itself to be engaged in broad based organising, but as identified, this is not always the case.

Experience has identified that the reasons people are motivated to be leaders within London Citizens are diverse, and differ both between people within the same institutions, and also between institutions. The consequence of this diversity of opinion is an inherent difficulty in how these institutions choose to work towards achieving the same goal under one name or platform. This platform has to be neutral in order to include all faiths and none, but inclusive enough to allow each community to express their different faith or values. The ultimate goal is to provide a service which promotes the common good without favouring any one group.

“Faith and secular organisations working together is a wonderful thing and the open nature of the meetings mean that faith doesn't over-dominate the content or tone.”

Professor Jane Wills, Queen Mary Geography Department

It is necessary to draw together the discussion of how organising can create a tension for leaders who have differing understandings of how using their time and target specific issues to best serve their communities. While bringing together people of different faiths to work on common issues is an exciting and unique process, this creates an inevitable tension in terms of identifying which campaigns serve the interests of which individuals or institutions. This is often a challenge of particular significance at the beginning of a process of community organising, before relationships and trust have been built between individuals. A good recent example of this type of tension arose when new education policy stipulated the teaching of sex education in primary schools. Many faith leaders in the Muslim community in Tower Hamlets have expressed real concern regarding the nature, content and style of which sex education is taught in schools. Some parents in the community feel that it should not be spoken about in such an open manner, or taught at such a young age at all, and would favour the choice to opt out. Others argue that if it has to be taught there should be appropriate curriculum boundaries in place and parents should be fully consulted on the content and nature of lessons. Some leaders of the Anglican Church would be more open to the latter argument but be uncomfortable with subscribing to the former. The protocols for teaching the subject are different in Catholic schools and therefore Catholic congregations tend to be less concerned by the policy. For some educators and teachers sex education should be taught, especially as, according to their argument, cultural sensitivities hinder the reality of statistics of teenage pregnancy in the Borough. This is a clear example of an issue that leaders accept that not everyone can agree on, despite a collective desire to serve the community.

“Children's education and morality is an area in which TELCO tends to shy away from as an issue. Sexual and reproductive education in schools is an area of concern for the Muslim community”

Dilowar Khan, Executive Director of East London Mosque & London Muslim Centre

“One of the tensions that arises from working together is sometimes there is a clash of cultures, where you can see an apparent divide and there isn't common ground. Sex education in schools for example is an area where I

think it's positive to have it and so would be something that I don't want to get involved in"

Bethan Lant, Tower Hamlets Borough Co-Chair and Church Warden at St Mary's Church

"Sex Education is pretty divisive and I would certainly be weary of supporting a Telco campaign around it. As a left leaning, liberal atheist, I'm most happy working with faith on issues of social justice and would feel most uncomfortable working on social issues like Sex Education"

Liam Taylor, Citizenship Teacher at Langdon Park Secondary School

mission

Just as people place different emphases on what religion asks of our time and priorities in an act of service, it is also necessary to consider how differing mission statements are played out in an organising sphere. For some religious institutions engaged in organising, particularly Christian and Muslim communities, a strong emphasis is placed upon calling people to evangelise and, in different ways, spread the truth of their religions. In the Muslim community this is called ‘Da’wah’ or ‘invitation’. This evangelism or sense of mission can create problems in an organising context. Secular leaders can often feel that the work is overly religious and alienates their own values whilst undermining what they understand to be meant by being involved in a collective with differing views and opinions. Starting meetings with prayer or reflection, reading passages from Holy books and speaking from the pulpit during assemblies can be problematic for some secular leaders who argue that the preaching is not necessary to get the work done. Conversely, faith leaders often feel that in many public platforms, particularly in politics, religion is side-lined. Frequently asked to ‘leave their religion at the door’, denying the very core of what has brought them to organising in the first place, community organising provides faith leaders with a sought-after counter narrative, enabling people of faith to bring the whole of their values in order to animate their world view.

Organising work enables religious groups to share their beliefs and traditions in a safe space, and with many people beyond their immediate institution. This is often done gently through public action, showing the community the good works and principles that their religion upholds. The reading of Nehemiah, chapter 5, on Usury with leaders from the three Abrahamic faiths at the London Citizens Barbican Assembly in front of 2,000 people provides a good example of how organising allows faith groups to act publically as a way of expressing the values of their religion.

While organising allows institutions to act publicly according to the mission of their faith, an inherent tension in Tower Hamlets occurs when some feel a competition to call people to their way of thinking, in the hope of conversion to either religion. This suspicion can create ill feeling amongst individuals. There are also deeper theological questions and tensions when thinking about whether each can work with the other on common issues when both have a command to call people to their competing version of

the truth and to God. Without flexibility and open mindedness amongst leaders, this can create multiple tensions. It is necessary for leaders to explore the values of another in a safe and curious environment. In Tower Hamlets, the general consensus amongst leaders is that community organising is not the platform for this type of hard evangelism and it does not serve this purpose.

“Although many people believe that different faiths are in competition and some leaders believe and teach this. Those who reflect more deeply believe there is only one truth and that the different faiths understand this truth in a different way but there is also a great deal of common ground.

Some of my community are not happy that the church works so closely with other faiths. When I was promoting attendance at the Interfaith Citizens Iftar I was asked by members of my congregation, ‘how can you join in on a Muslim Iftar?’. I think the truth is the answer and we should never be afraid of the truth so it’s a question of the right thing to do.

Through this work I have learnt more about other faiths, for example Islam, through Action. I have been impressed with the strength and commitment from the whole Muslim community to work for the common good which is an inspiration and challenge for me. I would like to have more dialogue and sharing together on how faith influences the way we live.”

Father Tom O Brien, Our Lady of the Assumption Church

“This work is a mental challenge for me as a Christian Minister to think theologically about working with people of different faiths when we fundamentally disagree on things: how do I justify partnership working? I can, for the common good, but because of the partnerships and relationships, I have friends that ask me, “Why do you spend so much time with the Muslims?”

I have had to have courage to push myself to do things I didn’t want to do: for example, being invited by a Muslim friend to an Iftar in Shandy Park where I could see I was the only one who was different. Even when you don’t feel like it, you should do it as it’s the right thing to do, even if you fear things. When you challenge people’s perceptions, you are the lone voice, and you are made to feel like a traitor or something.”

Captain Nick Coke, Salvation Army Stepney and Tower Hamlets Borough Co – Chair

“Where TELCO works well is when it brings together the church or another institution to work with us where there is a common understanding that we work on issues of social justice for the common good of our communities like the City Safe campaign in Shadwell. We have had meetings here at our Mosque and Centre and over at the Church. It would break down all trust and relationships we have built if this access was used to openly preach and try and convert our congregations”

Nurul Ullah, Project Officer Dawatul Islam UK & Eire

These tensions often play out most clearly in institutional spaces. When faith institutions offer to host community meetings at their church or mosque, questions about the sanctity of the space are brought to the forefront. Experience has found that some leaders consider that allowing ‘non-believers’ to sit or share in holy space undermines the sanctity of the space, and perhaps would also make their counterparts from the congregation feel uncomfortable and compromised in their beliefs. The Tower Hamlets Assembly was held in a Catholic church, and for many Muslims it was the first time they had attended a high Catholic church. The imagery of Jesus and his disciples and the Virgin Mary along the walls was quite difficult for some Muslims. This situation was made more difficult because the Assembly took place during Muslim prayer time. A space at the back of the church had to be created for those wanting to pray the Muslim evening prayer. Similarly, some Catholics who attended felt that the Church was being compromised because the political leaders were sharing the pulpit in front of the Altar reserved for religious service. One Catholic Priest specifically scanned the room to ensure that the cross had not been removed just to accommodate the Muslim community, considering its removal would be a dilution of Catholic values. It is necessary to be aware of these tensions as they can play a role in shaping whether different faith groups feel recognised and able to contribute fully to the process. However experience has shown that with strong relationships and deepened understanding between communities, the emphasis placed on the importance of working for the common good can outweigh these tensions.

“I remember my first one-to-one conversation was with a Priest, I was worried that people might think she is being taken in to dilute her faith. But in Tower Hamlets I think as a community we have moved on from that because of all of the work the mosque has done with other faiths, we are used to faiths working together in a mutual space. ESOL and other classes in churches for example mean that people are more aware of other community institutions, which is positive. That fear of conversion

soon disappears and likewise you appreciate you are not there to convert but on common ground of trust, respect, honour of those faiths and those around you to serve the community.”

Maher Ruby, Former Chair of Muslimate UK

“I don’t see there being an issue with faith and secular leaders coming together in the alliance. I think in many working class areas faith organisations have always been a feature in deprived communities and often worked for change together for example in the 1860’s and the history of the East End.

I think where tensions can occur is when different cultures come together, each with unique ways of operating. For us as a trade union we’ve got our own structure and decision making process and way of doing things which is different to other cultures and ways of working and decision-making processes”

John Mcloughlin, Branch Secretary Tower Hamlets UNISON

advocacy

Advocating and speaking on behalf of the less fortunate or disadvantaged is something that religious and secular leaders both practice. In particular the Union branch UNISON in Tower Hamlets similarly places a lot of emphasis on advocating members who are also part of the alliance. By nature of shared values, organising enables the Union to advocate with a more powerful voice, particularly with regards to the Living Wage.

“We are involved in community organising as it enables us to build a wider relationship with our local community. Our members are a part of the community and will be in faith based and other organisations and this work gives us an opportunity to be more involved”

John Mcloughlin, Branch Secretary Tower Hamlets UNISON

When the community decided that Poplar Harca Housing Association would be the next Living Wage Campaign target in Tower Hamlets it was the Branch Secretary of UNISON that raised the issue. They identified that their members were not being paid a Living Wage. The Captain of the Stepney Salvation Army also discovered that a member of his congregation worked there. The Christian and Muslim communities in Tower Hamlets were approached for their support. Advocacy is a strong part of these faith traditions, motivating them to decide to work on the issue.

“My analysis of State and the Church is that we don’t have much sway – our place has moved to the margins of society. So organising gives the church a voice that matters, and as a small church we are able to influence power and make change and see the Kingdom of God on earth.

The Living Wage campaign was a great example of this, because the issue directly affected a member of my congregation whose daughter is my daughter’s best friend. It was so empowering to connect this family with others from UNISON who had similar circumstances. Members of our church worked with leaders with whom I had been on training, and we were able to build on the good relationships to get an amazing result - backdated payments from Poplar Harca and the organisation’s coming into

membership of TELCO. This is a story I can tell of change: this happened in our church, and I've told the story dozens of times to others."

Captain Nick Coke, Borough Co-Chair and Captain of Salvation Army Stepney

"The Living Wage campaign was useful for us because it meant you could bring the pressure of the community to bear on the employer and hold them to account making them responsible for their actions. We were able to establish the Living Wage on a broader level by showing how it would improve and impact on the lives of people in our community. Had we done this alone we would have been seen simply to be serving a narrower union section of interest.

I found it helpful to work with Nick and other leaders as we learned from each other and you learn different ways of approaching the issue which broadens your perspective."

John Mcloughlin, Branch Secretary Tower Hamlets UNISON

Advocacy is done in different ways throughout the borough. One campaign which the Catholic church raised and took a lead on was the 'Strangers into Citizens' Campaign. Religious and secular leaders felt an obligation to speak up on behalf of undocumented migrants in the community who were unable to raise the challenges of their situations themselves for reasons including vulnerability and the fear of deportation. Many of these so called 'strangers' were members of a London Citizens congregation and being personally supported by their institution. Many Catholic Leaders joined in a Mass for Migrants on consecutive May Bank Holidays for several years which marked a collective commitment to address the social vulnerability of migrants. The ability to advocate on behalf of the community is important from a religious perspective. For Muslims, for example, advocacy is motivated by accountability to God and the belief that those who have the ability to help the less fortunate will be questioned about what they did with those abilities. Both Islamic and Christian scriptures repeatedly state that God is close to those who are less fortunate and oppressed.

Advocacy is also done in the education system by Unions and schools who often advocate on behalf of their students for better standards in the community, for example, advocating the need for quality teaching or school buildings in the Borough. Although this may not have a religious underpinning, experience of organising shows that leaders believe that it is an important civil responsibility of a community institution to be interested in the welfare of the community.

In Community Organising it is important for leaders (who are also members of the congregations) to advocate on behalf of their own communities. The professional Organiser may not be able to relate to all those in the institution. Those individual leaders are stronger politically and publicly when they advocate for each other. In 2010, the English Defence League threatened to march in Tower Hamlets. Catholic and secular leaders advocated on behalf of the Muslim community to show that the far-right extremist group were not welcome.

“I’m glad to live in a borough where I feel safe and I know that there are people in the community looking out for me. They are not pretentious, we believe in what we need to do and we do something about it together. When the EDL threatened to come to our Borough we showed them what it is like to live together with our differences, side by side.”

Mahera Ruby, Former Chair of Muslimaat UK

Advocacy is important but can be problematic when those advocated for are not given the opportunity to make an equal contribution. This can create situations where the same leaders stay in power for long periods of time without training and developing others also to be agents for change. In worst case scenarios, one or two leaders may make all the decisions on behalf of the community, without listening to others and considering the opinions and potential of their congregations. The consequence of this is that of wasted talent and resources, and a barrier created to potential growth through leadership development within a community. The challenge is to enable leaders to understand the need to share the ownership of a campaign, to build power by developing relationships and creating teams to share the responsibility and be part of decision-making processes. In most instances, and with the right training, investment and development, the person being advocated for can often do this best by sharing their own story. Experience within London Citizens suggests that power struggles often arise as a consequence of developing leaders amongst lay people. It is not uncommon for a lay member of a faith community to play the role of a leader within a community organising context, particularly being the leader of a campaign or issue. Developing London Citizens leaders to work alongside others who have institutional roles challenges existing hierarchical structures.

community organising and action

Action is considered oxygen for community organising and many secular and religious leaders would not be involved in the alliance if it did not involve a practical element of change. Up to this point, and based upon practical experience, this paper has reflected on what appear to be some of the key motivations for religious and secular leaders to work together for the common good. It has also identified some of the tensions that can arise when people of competing notions of service, mission and advocacy work together.

Community Organising is becoming increasingly important for Muslim and Christian institutions because it allows them to live out their faith through service, mission and advocacy. The process through which organising allows faith groups to live out these three core values of both religions bears fruit through the strengthening of relationships and the establishment of a permanent alliance from which processes of change can take place. Therefore, regardless of the issue, the process through which leaders take public action together implicitly develops trust and builds relationships between leaders of differing opinions, sustainably culminating in years of shared experience of change. Regardless of certain areas of tension identified above, this is a powerful and positive model for relationships and change.

These relationships enable leaders to reach common ground, to overlook some tensions and work with each other for the common good. London Citizens leaders recognise that they may come at the same issue from different positions. However, it is clear that because there exist three common areas of work, leaders of different faith or none are able work together, for the sake of one another. In this safe and curious space people can develop a better understanding of their neighbours and their community. Community organising allows leaders of different beliefs to develop relationships through the advancement of these congregating values. As these relationships develop, individuals can further understand the self interest and motivations of one another, acknowledging how the different teachings and beliefs of each religion have brought each person to engage in this work, thus increasing the capacity of these institutions to work together to promote a common good.

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