

EFFECTIVE ORGANISING for Congregational Renewal

by Michael Gecan

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FOR
CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL**

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CONGREGATIONAL RENEWAL

by Michael Gecan

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PART I: THE TOOLS

ALL ORGANISING IS DIS-ORGANISING AND RE-ORGANISING

Michael Gecan

Metro Industrial Areas Foundation

Your congregation – be it Catholic or Protestant, Jewish or Muslim, Buddhist or Bahá'í – has been around a while. You may have had only one or two clergy leaders, or you may have had many. Like all organisations, you have fallen into certain patterns of operation, some good and some not. Again like all organisations, you have two choices: to continue to do what you always have done (because that's the way you do things) or to reorganize (and thereby re-energize) the way you do business.

If you want to reorganize, the tools used for over fifty years by the organizations under the umbrella of the Industrial Areas Foundation, can help.

Years ago, we were conducting a training session for a group of leaders in one of our most effective and successful citizens' organisations. The training focused on one of the most basic skills of any kind of organising: how to organise and conduct a productive meeting in one hour

or less. Running good meetings has long been the practice within our organisations, but it became a hallmark of our organisations because we kept teaching and re-teaching people how to do it until it finally became second nature to them.

In the course of the session, one of the leaders asked why the same people who conducted and participated in interesting, useful, and productive meetings in the context of citizens' organising tolerated other meetings back in their congregations that often lasted three or more hours, were not well-planned, and often led to little action or progress.

We began to get more requests from rabbis, imams, pastors and lay leadership groups in congregations to teach them how to use the same tools that worked in citizens' organisations within the context of their congregations. So, approximately 20 years ago in the United States and more recently in the United Kingdom, we started to develop training programs that were directly aimed at congregational development. We began with how to run more effective meetings and broadened our work from there. Today, we spend a significant amount of our time – in congregations of all faiths and denominations and in several seminaries – describing what we believe are the four universal tools of all effective organising and how the understanding of those tools and use of those tools can contribute to the daily life of congregations.

We will describe each of these tools and suggest how they can be used by leaders of local mosques, synagogues, congregations, parishes and other local religious institutions. Then we include several short examples – case studies, if you will – from our work about how these methods worked in specific congregations from different faiths.

The four tools are:

I Individual Meetings

These are by far the most important, effective, and least used organisational tool in congregational life today.

II Power (Relational) Analysis

Power analysis both of the institution and the broader community in which congregations find themselves.

III Teaching and Training

These are used sometimes and somewhat in some congregations, but too narrowly and ineffectively.

IV Action and Evaluation

These are also used in congregations, for example in liturgy training, but again too narrowly and without a commitment to the development of congregational leaders.

I Individual Meetings

An individual meeting is a face-to-face, one-to-one meeting in someone's home, apartment, workplace or local coffee shop which takes about 30 minutes. The purpose of the meeting is not chitchat, whining, selling, gossip, sports talk, data collection, or therapy. The aim of the meeting is to initiate a public relationship with another person. This may seem so basic and old-fashioned that many of you are wondering what we are talking about here. We are suggesting an approach to others that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great Lutheran theologian, described in this way: "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them... Those who cannot listen long and patiently will always be talking past others, and finally will no longer even notice it... The death of the spiritual life starts here... Brotherly pastoral care is distinguished from preaching... by the obligation of listening."

If the death of the spiritual life starts in "talking past others" so frequently that you "finally will no longer even notice it," then the birth of the spiritual life starts in the individual, one-on-one meeting – in listening to the other person.

Face-to-face meetings are the truly radical acts of effective organising. They are not a slogan or a demonstration; not an email blitz or power point presentation. The commitment to listening to others means that the leaders who initiate them operate on the basis of several important assumptions.

The first assumption is that the other person is worth listening to. The late British philosopher, Bernard Crick, described this as having a belief in the affirmative individual – that most people, most of the time, will do the right thing, if given the opportunity. So the very act of calling someone up and setting up an individual meeting with them, of going to their home or meeting them at a coffee shop and listening to them, of asking them what they think about the community or congregation or country, understanding how they see the future, hearing what hopes and dreams they have, learning where they've come from and how they see themselves five years in the future, is an act of *recognition*. You are saying to the other person: you have values, ideas, dreams, plans, lessons, insights that are well worth listening to.

Recognition is the pre-condition for any ongoing reciprocal working relationship with others. When August Gecan (the late father of one of the authors) arrived in the United States in the 1930's, a teenager from the coast of Croatia, the local parish priest in the Croatian parish in Chicago went to his apartment and did an individual meeting with him. Then, every year, for 60 years, that priest and his successors paid a yearly visit to the Gecan home, to visit with him and to bless the house. This was a banner day in August Gecan's year. The priest was recognising him, listening to him, and bringing the incense and holy water from the church to him. Those priests demonstrated that they believed that he – bartender, plasterer, security guard, working man – was worth visiting and hearing out. In

Christian language, this is how the priests demonstrated that they believed that he was made in the image and likeness of God.

The second assumption is that the person initiating the individual meeting – organiser, pastor, veteran leader – understands that the time devoted to individual meetings is more important than time spent in more conventional activities. “All real living,” said theologian Martin Buber, “is meeting.” The initiator knows that the new dynamic created by meeting and relating to another person is rich with opportunity and possibility. The congregation isn’t mostly in the building or staff or programs already in place. The congregation isn’t in the head of the leader or in the mannerisms of the hierarchy. The congregation lives and grows in the interaction between existing and new leaders and members – in the very act of doing the individual meeting.

When a young assistant rabbi arrived in his new congregation, he started his ministry by doing nearly 100 individual meetings. He also sat in on many other meetings and activities. But the action that told him the most about the congregation – and told the congregation the most about him – was the fact that he had spent 100 evenings in their homes and apartments, meeting face to face and one to one. He knew his congregants, and they knew him, much better after three months than many congregations know their new staff after several years. His sermons were spoken

to people's specific struggles and concerns, not to some generic congregation in some generic place. It's not that he used anyone's name in his talks. He didn't need to. People heard him talking directly to them, based on what he had absorbed in his initial round of individual meetings. He wasn't talking past others. He was talking to them and with them.

The third assumption, hinted at in the act of doing individual meetings but only proven over time, is that the corporate identity of the congregation remains in formation; that the newest member, the most recent arrival, is invited to join in the ongoing creation of the evolving local community. The relationship is not one-way, unilateral, provider-to-consumer, but two-way, reciprocal, and mutual. This assumption is easier to convey when the congregation is relatively new, when it is in the first 30 or more years of its existence. The explosion of new evangelical churches in the past three decades is in part a product of the burst of energy that sometimes occurs when an institution is born and begins to grow at a rapid rate. More than 1,200 such churches, some as large as small American cities, have formed and developed during this period. The challenge to them now will be to maintain the sense of experimentation and outreach that characterized their early years. The tendency to *mature* – that is, to become more bureaucratic and programmatic, to become formed, fixed, and no longer in need of large numbers of new members– will tempt these congregations as it has more mainline religious bodies over the centuries.

Several years ago, leaders working in a soup kitchen in a Long Island parish incorporated into their mission the habit of doing individual meetings with their clients. Instead of simply handing a sandwich to the men who came to the kitchen, they sat down with them and asked them who they were, where they were from, what line of work they had been in, and why they were there. They listened, long and patiently, day after day, and they heard a story, repeated by many men, that they had never heard before. Many of these men lived in small group homes called "sober houses." They were supposed to be places where people in recovery from substance abuse could reside, so that they could receive daily outpatient services from area treatment centres. In reality, many of these sober houses were poorly run, riddled with drugs, and exploited by the companies that managed them. One was run by a company that had preyed on other vulnerable populations in other states and had been exposed in those states, but had simply moved to Long Island and exploited a new group. Another sober house was run by an operator with mob connections. The food in many of these places was terrible; hence the trip to the church's soup kitchen. These were middle class men, mostly white, who had been professionals and skilled workers before becoming addicted to alcohol or drugs. In the process of organizing, the volunteers in this soup kitchen, one paid community organizer named Michael Stanley, and other interested volunteer leaders in the parish did more than 600 individual meetings. A team of leaders, most in recovery themselves, formed. In-depth research led to an effort to expose the bad sober house operators and clean up

conditions in them. This successful social justice effort started in the act of listening, person to person, in a parish basement, by volunteers who valued the opportunity to develop new public relationships as much as the chance to deliver a healthy meal to hungry and isolated men.

These three assumptions are what ideologues, advocates, and program directors have long forgotten, if they ever considered them. The *ideologue*, left or right, knows all the answers and wants the rest of the world to fall in line, to swallow whole the “correct” analysis or platform or doctrine, and to parrot back the party line. The *advocate* knows all the answers too, and wants to speak for others, rather than listen to others and wait for others to develop the ability and skill to voice their own concerns. And the *program director* wants to deliver the service or food or clothing or housing voucher without getting to know the person who is seeking help, without asking what other aspects of that person’s life are working or have worked, without challenging that person to do as much for himself or herself as humanly possible.

II Power (relational) analysis

Many leaders of congregations operate without a clear and honest picture of the relational terrain in which they function – both inside the congregation and with the surrounding community. A basic understanding of which leaders have followings and influence, how they relate to

one another, who determines what decisions are made and how money is spent is what we call a power or relational analysis. At bottom, a power analysis is a relational map of the way an institution really functions and how that institution actually interacts with other institutions in the real world.

Not to have this map – objective, visible, changing as relationships change – is an invitation to get lost and stay lost. For example, in some mosques, the Imam is both the spiritual and operational leader. There may be a board, and the Imam may relate to it in various ways, but he's clearly in charge. If you want to work well with this particular mosque, you had better understand this and figure out how to respect the Imam and relate to and through him. In another mosque, however, while the Imam may be the spiritual leader, the lay president of the board may be the operational leader, and three or four key members of the board may be the key supporters of the president. In that case, obviously, a relationship with the president is critical to any effort to operate within the mosque, even though showing respect for the spiritual role of the Imam would still be important.

In black church settings, some congregations are what we call “pastors’ churches,” some are “deacons’ churches,” while still others are steered by several lay families with deep followings in the community. If you don't know which is which, whether you are a member of that particular congregation or an outsider trying to work with it, you are doomed to failure.

In some places, the local Episcopal or Anglican diocese is considered quite progressive. In other regions, the stance of the diocese may be quite conservative or traditional. In yet other places, there is a mix of these orientations – either a healthy respect for differing views or a simmering tension and tone of hostility.

Very similar analyses of all churches, synagogues, mosques, temples, and other religious institutions can and must be made if you are going to try to work with them – either internally or externally.

Instead of doing such power analysis, however, many would-be agents of change operate on the basis of their own preconceptions of how institutions *should* function. Or they engage in wishful thinking. Or they accept the stereotypes or abstractions peddled by others, including the leaders of the very congregations they are trying to organize. In our parlance, these people remain in the world as they think it should be, rather than taking the time and investing the energy to decipher how a congregation operates at this particular time, in this particular place, in the world as it is right now.

In New York City, residents had long been told that the way to get things done was to take concerns to local community boards. There were about 100 of these, and they were dominated by local city council people and borough presidents and funded by the city. Metro IAF leaders in New York did an analysis of the city's political structure and

budget process, and it quickly became clear that the mayor controlled about 96% of the city budget, leaving only about 4% in the hands of the city council and their hand-picked community boards. That meant each community board had, at best, some influence over 1/100th of 4% of the budget – about \$24 million each out of a total budget of \$60 billion, a relative pittance. So the leaders refused to focus on the community boards or city council people. In fact, the seven local leaders of community boards who were members of local Metro IAF congregations publicly resigned. They announced that they would now be doing public business in a different way. And that way was to relate directly with the mayor, who was extremely strong in the New York political culture, who appointed the commissioners who managed billion-dollar agencies, and who controlled approximately \$57 of the \$60 billion spent each year by the city. This analysis and subsequent action, of course, agitated the community-board types, the foundation officers who had urged countless community groups to follow this dead-end approach, and every local elected official. The less power these individuals actually had, the more desperate they were to convince others that they were important. They positioned themselves as gatekeepers to the power brokers. They pretended to be frantically busy. They sent junior aides out to meet with local community groups because they were “tied up at City Hall.” (Years later, in a local community school board office, Metro IAF leaders found their desks packed with important papers – menus from local restaurants and little else.) The power analysis also put a new form of pressure on local congregations and congregationally-based organisations.

The challenge was clear: how to get into a productive, public, working relationship with the mayor and his key appointees. This is not a simple or easy matter in a city of eight million people with scores of powerful interests – real estate, finance, union, development, advertising, legal and others. But at least that challenge, if met, leads to real reaction, real response, and real results.

How does such a power or relational analysis get done by a congregation? The first answer is: very carefully. There are egos to be assuaged, ancient grievances and hurts to be understood and either buried or ignored, and tons of spin to be un-spun.

The first rule is that the analysis is done with and by the leaders of the congregation themselves. It is not an outside critique as much as an inside admission of the way things operate, both inside the congregation and *vis-à-vis* the “outside” world.

Second, a power analysis of a congregation can only be done after a serious and sustained series of individual meetings. Until trust is developed between and among members of the congregation, no one is going to open up about how the congregation really operates. In fact, everyone will claim that it functions exactly the way it says it functions in the congregational by-laws or literature. (This is almost *never* the case, but it is a myth that many congregations try to peddle to outsiders and even to their own members.) So, a power analysis of a

congregation is based on trust relationships that have been developed over a period of time through a systematic series of one-on-one interviews.

If you are working in the Chicago area, it's important to know that the relationship between the mayor and local aldermen is different from the one in New York and other cities. In Chicago, the mayor has enormous power. But the Daley Dynasty (pater et filis) has an unwritten agreement with the city's aldermen: the mayor gets to control all downtown and other major development (like O'Hare Airport, the convention centre, Navy Pier, sports arenas, etc.) while the aldermen get veto power over all local development in their wards (at least those that the mayor doesn't care about). The aldermen, in effect, are mini-mayors in their wards. In New York, four successive mayors have used their power to rebuild neighbourhoods with local not-for-profit groups, even when these changes were opposed by local politicians. In Chicago, however, the unwritten agreement between mayor and aldermen prohibits that. The mini-mayors control all contracts and pay-offs in their wards, and as a result they have let their communities crumble while lining their own pockets. Frequently, they have ended up indicted, convicted, and in jail. The mayor then appoints another alderman, and the cycle starts all over again. This is not a rationale for the people of Chicago to accept this arrangement, but it is critical that they understand it. Only then can they contend with, confront, or alter it.

In the United Kingdom, the City and Corporation of London (often called the Square Mile) has its own political culture and dynamics quite different from the historic and vibrant London, which is the official capital of London. The thousands of tourist and most of the 8m residents of the greater London area, in their 33 local authorities are mostly oblivious to the power and roots of the smallest (8,000 residents) but most powerful local authority in the land – the City and Corporation of London, the historic founder of modern day capitalism. The City of London can trace its roots back to the Romans in 47AD and developed as the commercial and financial centre of the world in 1066. Its boundaries within London have not changed or been threatened since then. CITIZENS UK helped built the UK's first broad based organization – The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) in 1996. Ten years later with the use of the core organising tools described in this book, TELCO had grown into London Citizens and had 120 member communities in 16 London Boroughs. In 1998 an elected Mayor of London was introduced by the new Labour Government providing a focus for well organised communities to relate to, meet with and do business. London Citizens focused much of their cross London interest on cementing a working relationship with whoever was the elected Mayor, holding Accountability Assemblies for the main candidates in 2000, 2004 and 2008 (when the Conservative Boris Johnson defeated the seating Labour candidate, Ken Livingston). The world financial crisis of 2008 encouraged Citizens to do a fresh and broader power analysis of not just the machinery of government but the

role of the banks and finance houses as well. We turned to some of the academics in our membership and were helped considerably by Drs Luke Bretherton and Maurice Glasman to focus on the power and pervasiveness of organised money – epitomised by the City and Corporation of London. We held regular walking tours of the Square Mile, visited the ancient parliament of the City – The Guildhall; studied the Guilds and understood more about the link between the global banks located in the Square Mile and the Corporation's own feudal system of governance. As the UK government ploughed £1.2 trillion into saving the Banking System from collapse London Citizens appealed to the formal head of the Corporation, Lord Mayor, Alderman Nick Anstee for the one thing we believed we needed above all others – a working relationship. At a time of crisis in May 2009, 30 key leaders from London Citizens met for a relational summit in The Mansion House (Lord Mayor's Official Residence) with the Lord Mayor, the Sheriff and another 20 heads of Banks and Finance Houses to start the slow and patient process of trying to understand each other's interest. Simultaneously Citizens member communities were holding house meetings and one to ones on the theme of 'How has the financial crisis affected you and your family?' On November 25th of that year this process of power analysis, relational one to ones and building power led to London Citizens leaders booking the Corporation's own Assembly Hall, in the heart of the Square Mile to hold an Assembly of 2,000 citizens with Mayor Johnson, major bankers and politicians and key representatives of The City and Corporation of London – to Launch The Citizens 5 Point Response to the Economic

Crisis – calling for Living Wage, Cap on Credit, Transparency in Banking, Investment in Community Banking and a new relationship between organised people (Citizens) and organised money.

Third, a power analysis of a congregation is not written in ink, not plastered on a wall for permanent viewing, not put into a power point presentation for the world to see. It is sketched in pencil, revisited regularly, and edited on an ongoing basis. There are good reasons for this. A power analysis is a very fluid thing, changing month to month, week to week, even day to day at times. To try to freeze it in time is not only impossible but also counterproductive, because a frozen power analysis is almost worse than no power analysis at all. Relationships change, both inside the congregation and with the outer world. The key is to keep observing, refining, and adding to an ongoing understanding of how the congregation really works. A power analysis of a congregation is primarily a tool for the leaders of the congregation and for others whose judgment and advice is sought and respected by those leaders. It is a tool for “disorganising and reorganising” the congregation by its own leaders and friends and colleagues – nothing more, nothing less.

III Teaching and Training

Almost every religious institution takes seriously the task of teaching its members about doctrines and traditions. But very few congregations take the time to instruct its

members about how to master the basic tools of leadership in the institution itself. In the Roman Catholic setting, for example, there is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), which prepares someone seeking to join the church with an understanding of basic tenets and beliefs. But there is no Rite of Leadership Initiation of Adults (RLIA).

What skills does a potential adult leader need to learn to operate as effectively as possible in a congregation? In almost every congregation, we organisers hear people express concern about the lack of growth or the persistent loss of members, but in those congregations no one is being taught how to initiate and create meaningful public relationships with existing and potential congregational members.

In many congregations, we hear worries about too few leaders doing too much work, but in the vast majority of those congregations, no one is taught how to mentor, support, and challenge new leaders. There is no clear recruitment or training process for new leaders. And little or no money is budgeted for this teaching and training. It is all left to chance, or often ignored completely.

In other congregations, there is anxiety about how to engage younger people. But in those congregations, there is no systematic outreach to specific young people. No one sits down with them one to one. No one listens to them person to person. No one challenges them to operate like the adults they already are, or soon will be, inside the institution or in the world. Instead, we try to guess what

young adults might enjoy – going to a ballgame, listening to music, playing basketball in the gym? – and then design events we hope will appeal to them. (This strategy, by the way, almost always fails miserably.)

In a stable and active Presbyterian church in central Queens, the pastor, Reverend Patrick O'Connor, asked lead organizer Ojeda Hall-Phillips and me to do a session with about 20 of the main leaders there. The church is solid. The pastor is talented and focused. The staff works hard. The activities are well run. Although it is one of the best-attended Presbyterian churches in the area, the congregation is not growing. We began the session with a simple question: "How many people, outside of your family, has each leader brought to the church and how many of them have become members?" The room became quiet. Then the rounds began. Of the 20, many had brought guests or visitors. But only one of those guests or visitors had ended up joining. As each person spoke, the leaders began to see the pattern. And we began to see at least one place where targeted training and experimentation might benefit one congregation as it sought to attract and retain the next generation of membership.

What would a curriculum of leadership initiation and development in a congregation look like? It would look something like this:

- ✓ The art and craft of the individual meeting
- ✓ How to run effective public meetings

- ✓ How to design actions and reduce creating new “groups” or “structures”
- ✓ How to create a set of focused campaigns and avoid scores of de-energising tasks
- ✓ How to do a power analysis of a social or institutional environment before trying to act
- ✓ How to identify and align with new allies
- ✓ How to create and sustain a relational organization and limit bureaucratic demands on leaders

All of these themes are learned by our leaders within the current context of our citizens’ organising. They can also be learned by the vast majority of leaders and members of any institution with the support and guidance of veteran leaders or an able organiser from the citizens’ organisations that the congregations may already belong to.

The time and energy of leaders are the most precious commodity a voluntary organisation has. And most congregations don’t equip their leaders to use their time and energy most effectively. Many savvy leaders sense this and either stop leading or limit their leadership time after awhile. It is no small miracle that many people have remained as engaged in congregations as they have, but with some basic and early preparation and development, they could – and will – become much more effective and satisfied leaders. And their institutions will begin to reap the full benefit of the insights and initiative that they are already bringing to the public arena.

IV Acting and Evaluating

While there may be a great deal of activity in a congregation – many committees or ministries with full schedules of meetings, events, and the like – there is often very little focused action. The weekly liturgy may be the exception – perhaps the only exception – in a large majority of institutions. But even that action of worship may take place at two or three or even more times each weekend, so that the members of the congregation do not even do that action together.

As a result, most congregations never become more than the sum of their parts. Or, in the worst-case scenario, the parts of the congregation become more important than the whole. The committee, the clique, the service that you and your friends attend becomes the first priority. Any threat to that from other segments of the congregation can be met with fierce resistance and create huge resentment. The challenge for all institutions is how to act in unison at times, so that all leaders and staff are focused on the same goal, pulling in the same direction, experiencing the same results, and evaluating together their successes and failures.

One example of a congregation acting and evaluating as one is the MAAFA experience created by Reverend Johnny Ray Youngblood and the staff and lay leaders of St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. MAAFA is the Swahili word for the trans-Atlantic passage of

Africans who were kidnapped in their native countries and brought in bondage to the Americas. For a period of 10 days each year, the entire St. Paul congregation revisits that historical moment, with the theme being “the way out is back through.” Going “back through” means literally performing, on stage, parts of the history of the slave trade. Carpenters and other craft workers turn the sanctuary into the belly of a slave ship. Dramatic, Broadway-quality productions are performed to audiences that stand in line for the better part of a day to get in and get a seat. The congregation invites experts from many fields – historians, psychologists, social scientists, and authors – to give talks and classes on this topic. Every available slave-era artefact is brought to the church. For the ten-day period, the church becomes a remarkable museum. At the end of the period, a ceremony and service are conducted at the beach. For this period, the entire congregation – from kindergarten children to the most senior member – participates in some way. The church acts as a unit. Old lines separating committees and programmatic groups break down. And then the congregation evaluates and celebrates at the end.

A second example is the extraordinary role played by the congregational and other leaders of Citizens UK during the recent election of new leadership in the UK on May 6th 2010. CITIZENS UK was founded in 1989 and has benefited immensely from a mutually respectful working alliance with the IAF throughout the last 21 years. We have run and reflected together, picked each other up when down, learned the craft of organising from each other and always tried to focus on our shared constituency of civil society –

and the development of leaders in the context of their associational life and in their membership of a unique civic alliance where power is the objective. In this we owe a tremendous debt to many leaders and members of institutions that joined CITIZENS but our greatest debt is to Eric Adams, now the 'Godfather' of community organising in the UK, our founding Chair, funder and friend. Eric is a Member of The Society of Friends (Quakers) and has supported CITIZENS UK throughout because his experience has shown him that we try to fulfil the core Quaker imperative which is to seek out and support 'that of God in everyone'. This came to a head on May 3rd 2010 when 2,500 organised CITIZENS leaders met with the three party leaders of the UK's main political party for what has become known as The Fourth Debate. Although CITIZENS UK's main affiliate member is London Citizens (now with over 200 member communities) there is also interest in building a CITIZENS alliance in Milton Keynes, Leeds, Nottingham, Cardiff, Glasgow and several other locations. Three of the campaigns that have grown out of London Citizens organising work have also developed into 'national' campaigns where the national government is the target – Living Wage; Strangers into Citizens (a call for a one off earned regularization for long term undocumented migrants) and Citizens for Sanctuary. For well organised citizens a General Election is an opportunity to test the maturity of the relationship between the governed and the government – indeed it is often the only opportunity! This gave the Organising Team of our Citizens for Sanctuary an incentive to build small teams of organised people across the UK whose main interest was in trying to improve

Britain's asylum system and our treatment of refugees and those who seek political sanctuary here. They did their power analyses and identified that the most winnable aspect of the much maligned 'Asylum System' was to call for no more children and families to be locked up in detention centres (semi-prisons for migrants) whilst waiting for their papers to be checked and/or their deportation. In September 2009, nine months before the expected date of the Election, we launched 'The Sanctuary Pledge' calling for a fairer system and also the ending of families being held in detention centres. This was taken to people standing for election in 150 different constituencies across the UK and they were invited to sign and add their support – if elected. Meanwhile a team of 35 veteran leaders from London Citizens started to meet fortnightly to focus on how to get their Citizens proposals in response to the Financial Crisis taken seriously by the main parties as they prepared to write their Manifestos and build their respective platforms for power. Small teams of leaders and organisers met with key people in the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties to hear their plans and share Citizens'. It was clear from all of these meetings that cuts in public expenditure were likely by whoever was the next government so some lateral thinking was necessary. Another opportunity presented itself in the New Year of 2010 when the Conservative Party (which was tipped to be the next government) came up with what David Cameron, their leader called his only Big Idea – the Big Society. He said, 'There is such a thing as Society, and it's not the State.' This encouraged Citizens leaders to redouble their efforts to not only try and get the proposals written into the various

manifestos (in the end the Labour Party's manifesto included all Citizens proposals) to begin to think about the possibility of strategically inserting an ambitious public action into the last key stages of the Election Campaign – with an offer that we thought Mr Cameron and Mr Brown (Labour Prime Minister) would have difficulty refusing or at least would have to have a very good reason to reject. Further meetings were held with the three camps of the Party Leaders and invites included for each to attend a major Accountability Assembly with Citizens – as evidence of how seriously each Party Leader took civil society. All said they were too busy 'electioneering' to meet Citizens, but it was decided nevertheless to check if and when the major Assembly Hall in London was available in the three weeks before the Election date of May 6th. In March, David Cameron visited CitizensUK base in East London on the same day as he launched the Conservative Party's policy to build a 'Big Society' if elected – and they called for the training of 5,000 'community organisers' to revive civic life. When Mr Cameron challenged Rev Adam Atkinson why his evangelical Anglican congregation was in membership Rev Atkinson replied that they were because they believed in loving their neighbour but first they had to know their neighbour. Citizens leaders reached out to all who they knew in and around the various camps, a media team was appointed to brief key journalists, and articles placed strategically in the broadsheets calling for a less 'controlled and spun Election'. The polls were changing against the Conservatives – three weeks to go and there was seemingly everything to play for. CitizensUK still had no commitments to attend any event by any one of the three party leaders –

but voted to go ahead and book the Great Hall of Methodist Central Hall for Monday, May 3rd – a public holiday in Election Week. Further efforts were made to appeal to the self interest of each of the two leading parties. The three TV ‘debates’ were deemed to have been a failure with civil society acting as wall paper and the three Party Leaders looking uncomfortable in the glare of the studio lights and a skeptical and bored general public. CitizensUK printed 2,800 tickets ready for distribution across London and the Citizens for Sanctuary Network in the event of a positive response to the invitation to attend an Assembly of Citizens on May 3rd. On April 19th (two weeks before the proposed Assembly date) David Cameron’s office phoned CitizensUK to say he had changed his mind and would attend – a few days later so did Nick Clegg’s office for the Liberal Democrats. The event was confirmed, tickets distributed no press involved - we still needed the Prime Minister and Leader of the Labour Party, Gordon Brown to add his name to the event. This happened a few days before the Assembly so our satisfaction was complete, although the challenge of pulling off the largest event of the UK Election Campaign in 2010 remained. Rules and a framework of fair behaviour was agreed between CitizensUK and each camp – with all being given 20 minutes to respond to the Citizens Agenda – six very specific asks – and to have a political conversation with our leaders in the Great Hall, in front of 2,500 organised and relating citizens and the world’s press. It was as if we had spent 21 years preparing for this opportunity and so we were ready – a cast of 55 diverse, experienced Citizens leaders dominated the stage and the whole drama included the very best that civil society can deliver – a roll

call of thousands, music, testimony, passion, and an engaged and informed assembly which demanded respect and recognition. In the event the CitizensUK Assembly was the highlight of the whole campaign – and the ‘asks’ which we won were substantial. However the primary commitments were missed by the pundits wondering at what had just happened and how such a dignified, yet electric Assembly was possible in such a nation as the UK where it was felt apathy and cynicism ruled. The Election Day was May 6th and the result was inconclusive – it took several days for David Cameron’s Conservative Party to reach out and settle a coalition with Nick Clegg’s Liberal Democrat Party – leading to Gordon Brown’s resignation as Labour Leader. Only then with Mr Cameron as Prime Minister and Mr Clegg as Deputy Prime Minister did Citizens leaders realise the historic nature of the public deals struck on May 3rd. Not only had both men agreed to work with CitizensUK and meet with us at least once a year during their five years in office – but even more significantly they had both agreed to attend at least two CitizensUK national Assemblies during their five years. By patient and thoughtful organising, building relationships, doing one to ones, training and teaching thousands of civil society leaders on the importance of their institution for building civic power with others CitizensUK had successfully reestablished the tradition of popular Assembly in the UK as part of the accountability of those who seek to govern us. On May 16th the new Coalition Government also announced that they had abolished the detention of children and families in immigration centres – and Mr Cameron said that building a ‘Living Wage into government

contracts was an idea whose time had come'. The story continues...

One of the obvious joint actions a congregation can take is through its local CitizensUK organisation. In fact, being part of a wider body is another direct benefit to the congregation of its membership in that organisation. The nature of citizen organizing is that it culminates two or three times a year in large “actions” that include hundreds, thousands, even tens of thousands of people. A congregation that is looking for an action that members can take together may use these opportunities not only for external power but for internal organizing as well.

In July of 2008, a growing Episcopal congregation that is a member of Lake County United demonstrated how a church of moderate size can make a monumental impact. On a sultry Sunday, more than 350 members of that congregation boarded buses and crossed the town of Waukegan to attend an assembly at Holy Family Roman Catholic Church. That delegation of 350 (about 90% of the entire congregation) represented more than one-third of the attendees at the action that day. A lay leader of the church, Ms. Olivia Lopez, helped organise this turnout. It was truly an action by the entire congregation. The members of Nuestra Señora Episcopal Church participated in an event focused on the creation of a new public charter school in a city desperate for higher-quality educational options for its young people. In the lone public high school

in the city, packed to overflowing with 4,200 students, there is only one college counsellor (who does not even speak Spanish, the first language of more than half of the students). Two days after the event and the evaluations that followed it, Ms. Lopez began to push for intensive leadership training, in Spanish, for the eight most effective leaders of Nuestra Señora – training that is now in the planning stages. That training will build on the unified action the congregation took in participating in the broader citizens' organisation action. In this case, the vision of what a large, broad-based organising effort can do for a community is leading to the training and development of a new core team of leaders in a 21st-century Latino Episcopal congregation.

United action and evaluation by a congregation requires a serious commitment of time, energy, and money. More importantly, it entails a risk on the part of the congregational leadership to push the entire membership of a congregation to function as a unit for a time. This risk, however, will pay enormous dividends for any congregation willing to invest seriously in it. Leaders and organisers from citizens' organisations, who do this sort of action all the time, can teach a congregation how to do it successfully.

Getting Started

While we have described each of these four tools – individual meetings, power (relational) analysis, teaching

and training, and acting and evaluating – in a sequence, this is not necessarily the way they are applied in reality.

Most often, the initial step is a decision to do a series of individual meetings – either by an organiser and a key clergy person, or by a team of core staff members, or by a team of lay leaders with some staff support. In preparing people to do these individual meetings, the congregation would host training for those leaders.

The initial group activity, then, is the training session. As people learn the skills of how to do effective individual meetings, they “practice” with one another. They often hear, for the very first time, about what motivates fellow leaders they have known and worked with for 20 years. They experience, first hand, what has been missed because leaders have not taken the time to sit down face-to-face and one to one. When these training sessions work well, the team begins to build a spirit within itself and tends to see the next action – the going out and doing 100 or even more individual meetings with others – as a joint action.

In deciding who to see in the congregation or community, the team must begin to sketch a power, or relational, analysis of the institution. Who is connected to whom? Which groups of people, formal and informal, should we be sure to reach out to? Who are the real leaders in each grouping? Who in the congregation is very likely to be resistant to this process – and therefore very important to try to relate to, rather than avoid, as is often the tendency in most congregations?

Finally, the team conducts the action of executing 100 or more individual meetings and then evaluates and digests what has been heard. The most important learning is not a list of issues, but a list of leaders and potential leaders.

It's important to note that there is no predictable and formulaic way for this process to unfold. In fact, if it is too predictable, *then the team is not really listening*. For example, if, after 30 individual meetings, your leaders hear story after story of people truly at risk – African Americans still in pain and struggling with the legacy of slavery, people in recovery being exposed to drugs and alcohol, families living in a complex where armed thugs threaten them, a suburban development located near a toxic dump site where many of the people visited are visibly ill, then the team would have to meet and decide how to respond to this input.

Instead of going on and finishing the 100 individual meetings, as would be more normal, the team might put together an ad hoc research team that would explore this feedback and meet with a group of the people involved and at risk right away. The point is that the mix of individual meetings, teaching and training, power analysis and research, and action and evaluation is *not sequential*. They fold back on one another. They lead in different directions at times. They uncover a reality that defies our rage for predictability and order and demands flexibility and creativity. An experienced organiser, or an experienced clergy or lay leader who has seen and participated in several of these efforts, is critical to the

ongoing evaluation and adjustment required to make this process work most effectively.

The second half of this book contains five examples from five different faith traditions of how applying the tools of effective organizing can enhance congregational life. Each is different, and each clearly shows the need for flexibility, ongoing evaluation, and continued work. If your institution is in the United Kingdom and interested in this approach, please check www.citizensuk.org.uk web site for contact details or write to CITIZENS UK, 112, Cavell Street, London E1 2JA, tel. 020 7043 9875.

If your congregation is in the United States and is interested in exploring this method of congregational development, contact your local I.A.F. organisation or contact Metro Industrial Areas Foundation at 718-898-4194 or email qco@nyct.net.

PART II: THE EXAMPLES

A CATHOLIC ORGANISING STORY

Fr Sean Connolly

Parish Priest, St. Stephen & St. Nicholas, Manor Park

When asked, the default position for any Catholic priest appears to be “I’m busy”. Given that in many places like London Catholic congregations have retained their numbers and remain relatively large, such a position is understandable. Nevertheless, busyness is a relative concept: what fills the schedule for one priest might easily be done in half the time by another. But what our activity inevitably means is that we are not organized, we do not have a plan. When weeks fly by dealing with the stuff that needs to be dealt with there and then, how could it be otherwise?

When I first moved to East London I moved from a parish that had six children preparing for first communion to one that had one hundred and six. For two years I retreated to my office, desperately trying to keep ahead of the game, organizing the parish but sensing that I was sinking beneath the weight of it all. What made it worse was that the consequence of all this activity was that it kept me apart from the community I was meant to be serving. The only reason I spoke to anyone was to ask them to do something. It is no way to run a parish.

I made a deliberate decision to get out and start meeting people on a one to one basis in their homes. Catholic priests have had a long tradition of visiting people at home, but over the past forty years it has largely died out as priests have succumbed to delivering programmes and the task-orientated culture that has consumed us, even as our numbers have dwindled. Ten years previously I served in the same parish as a deacon. My main tasks included preaching each week and visiting, but it took me until my second time around to appreciate the connection. Two or three times a week I would walk to the other end of the parish and begin cold calling at homes registered with the parish. Most people were not in. Those who were at home stared at me blankly, whilst even regular parishioners were quite astonished to find me on their doorstep.

My recent one to one visits were quite different. For a start they were planned in advance. This means that there will always be an answer at the door, and I am not able to allow that time to be squeezed out of my schedule. The visit is focussed. I often need to get over the usual responses to a priest's visit that seek to lead it back to a task or turn it into a social occasion. In thirty minutes or so the subject of the conversation is ourselves, as I try to listen to the person in front of me, work out what their passions are, and establish a connection. Very early on I saw how it worked. I visited a man who worked helping the elderly return to their homes after a spell in hospital. We had recently tried to get a campaign going to support the elderly in the community. I had written about it in the newsletter and spoken several times at mass about it.

This man, despite attending church each week, knew nothing about it. Following our conversation I knew that it would be different in future: he would no longer be just another parishioner whose face I might recognize and whose name I might possibly remember; and I would no longer be to him a priest he knew at a distance, speaking stuff irrelevant to his life.

After having had a significant number of conversations with a wide variety of parishioners, randomly selected and who were often able to suggest others to visit, I was able to hold a parish meeting. Unlike some attempts to get people together, this already had a strong foundation based on those I had visited. Over a period of five years I had nearly three hundred one to one conversations, as well as countless shorter informal ones. When I left the parish we were working on the establishment of smaller neighbourhood groups. The church was too big to be one community. Such groups allowed the possibility of a greater sense of belonging, a more relational way of doing what parishes do, and keeping an eye on what is happening on the ground.

One crucial development involved spreading the relational culture. I was conscious that when I left the parish those conversations, those relationships, would leave with me. It is vital that the congregation be encouraged to talk to one another. The strength of the community depends on the quantity and quality of those conversations. Unfortunately Catholic parishes are not places where people have been used to talking to each other. In times past that all happened outside the church

leaving the sacred space free for prayer. We can no longer rely on that. The community building has to take place in the church alongside the prayer. Twice a year we held a Listening Campaign. These were a series of opportunities for parishioners to talk to one another, during the mass, after mass, in house groups, or house masses. Then I gathered people together to share the fruits of those conversations. Sometimes the focus was on ourselves and how we were to grow: other times we were able to link with London Citizens campaigns.

The strength of the Listening Campaigns that are regularly conducted among London Citizens' member institutions like our own is that we know what's going on; we know the challenges that face the people filling our church. Over the years a lot of people took part in the campaigns for a living wage, to make our streets safer and less fearful, and ensure that the 2012 Olympic Games provide a positive and long lasting legacy to benefit our communities. In particular, I became conscious of the chronic overcrowding for many of our families, and the pressure this put on them. One or two people were able to take the lead and tell their stories, and negotiate with those who had the power to make a difference. As a result we were able to secure a commitment to real and ongoing affordable housing on the Olympic Site and elsewhere from the London Mayor. The involvement of so many in these campaigns gave them the confidence to lead and to take those skills put into practice into their life of their church community.

Shortly after I arrived in the parish my TELCO organizer asked me to compile a list of a dozen leaders he could visit. I struggled after six. When I left the parish I could easily have put together a list of fifty or more. The fruit of the organizing that we engaged in was to be seen in the people, who felt recognized by the institution. This gave them a sense of belonging and participation in the life of the community. In our meetings there was a pride in and a passion for their church, and an increasing confidence to speak out and to act together for what they believed in. It was the best payment I could have received.

MUSLIM ORGANISING STORY

Lina Jamoul

Telco Lead Organiser, Waltham Forest

The Mosque Foundation, which some say is the largest mosque in the Midwest, is in the middle of an old industrial area in Chicago's southwest suburb of Bridgeview. When you talk to any member of the mosque, they will proudly tell you that when it was first built approximately 30 years ago, there was nothing of significance in the neighbourhood. Whatever industry had been there had long moved on. There was no real "neighbourhood" to speak of, and home values were low. The only reason the founders of the mosque decided to build there was because the land was cheap.

Today, Bridgeview is a distinct neighbourhood of mostly Muslim Americans. The area surrounding the mosque has become a bustling residential neighbourhood with robust home values. Two successful Islamic schools have been built. Three thousand worshippers come through the doors for Friday prayers. Ten thousand gather for the yearly Eid festival. The mosque is in the middle of an expansion project to accommodate its growing membership.

Muslim institutions in the US face many of the same challenges as other immigrant communities. There are also added challenges, specific to Muslim communities in

this particular juncture of history. In recent years, Muslims have been thrown in the public light in an unprecedented way. Now, after 30 years of institution-building and in light of the current political context, the Mosque Foundation is confronted with tough questions of how to operate in public life.

For the last ten years, the Mosque Foundation has played a central role in United Power for Action and Justice. One of my jobs as an organiser with United Power has been to be more deliberate about developing and training local leaders in the Mosque Foundation to strengthen the mosque itself. The experience of the Mosque Foundation with this process offers both universal lessons in effective organising and a very particular institutional context of those lessons.

A Local Issue

Through initial individual meetings with over 60 leaders from the Mosque Foundation, an idea began to emerge for a local campaign. Veteran leaders from the mosque, who had been involved with United Power on wider-scale issues like healthcare and immigration reform, wanted to expose more of the mosque's members to that kind of public experience. Leaders who had taken part in state-wide issues, who had been involved in power analysis, in action and evaluation, in having a successful impact, and had ultimately grown as leaders and learned valuable lessons in public life, wanted others to have similar opportunities to learn.

This effort was valuable to me as an organiser because it offered me an opportunity to work intensively with one of the most important Muslim institutions in Chicagoland.

Conversations / Listening Sessions

Our starting point had to be not a specific issue but a commitment to engage, relate to, and hear the stories of hundreds of members of the mosque. Some leaders wanted to jump straight to the specific issue we would work on. A number of leaders, including the influential and dynamic Imam, Sheik Jamal Said, said, 'We already know our community well and have a sense of what our issues are.' In many ways, they were right. It's not that leaders don't already listen or relate to their people. They wouldn't be leaders if they didn't. But all too often, even the most sensitive local leaders begin to assume that they know all there is to know about their members' needs. Even they need to take some time out from their task-oriented routines to do a new round of individual meetings, to ask basic questions of people they see on a regular basis, and to relate more intentionally to their followers. When they do, they often are surprised by what they learn.

Out of the 60 leaders we initially met with, the most talented ones and those who had the highest interest were identified and approached again with the idea of hosting a "listening evening" at the Mosque Foundation, run by leaders who would be trained by United Power. Many of the leaders we built this action around knew that

they needed training to listen, to ask the right questions, and to agitate. Fourteen leaders were trained to run the listening session. They coined the phrase “town hall meeting” for the event, arranged the logistics, and worked on the turnout.

The town hall meeting itself was actually not one big meeting, but about 10 smaller meetings with 150 people, each with the same agenda: to engage the people who came out in a conversation about what was important to them; about what things they were most worried about in their community; about what changes they wanted to see happen; and about how they saw themselves getting more involved in the problems they were concerned about.

The ten table meetings were facilitated by one or two leaders who were responsible for asking good questions and getting everyone to respond. Halfway through the meetings, one of the leaders who was co-facilitating a discussion with a group of women exclaimed, “I’ve never seen anything like this in our mosque. I’m going to get my camera!” Leaders and organizers at this kind of action have to really be able to communicate, not just talk at people. They have to listen, ask good follow-up questions, discern and make judgments as they run the discussions. These listening sessions are not unlike individual meetings, except they are happening with 10 people, or in this case with 150 people, simultaneously. Part of the action was equipping leaders on how to run these listening sessions. There is a chaotic element to these meetings, and they come with a certain amount of unpredictability. Leaders and organisers need to be comfortable with that.

The action was partly about training leaders in the Mosque Foundation how to be deliberate about these conversations. Many of the best leaders have this ability almost naturally; they ask the best questions because they listen well. We weren't teaching leaders anything they didn't already know. We were just getting them to be more intentional about creating a space inside the mosque for these kinds of public conversations to take place – not as an adjunct to a larger meeting, but as the meeting itself. The conversations weren't part of a larger agenda. For that evening, they were the agenda.

Impact

We had a number of follow-up evaluations after the town hall events to digest what we heard and to discuss potential leaders we had identified. The issue of offering Arabic as a second language in the local public schools emerged as something specific that a good amount of energetic and talented leaders wanted to work on. Enough research has now been done that enabled us to narrow our efforts down to two school districts and align all the elements necessary to make this happen (signing up students for the class; finding qualified teachers; identifying funding streams and technical support). Within six months to a year, we believe that at least one school district in the southwest suburbs of Chicago will start to offer Arabic classes, with more school districts to follow.

A PROTESTANT ORGANISING STORY

Amy Lawless

Lead Organiser, DuPage United

Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church is a large, middle-class congregation located in the heart of DuPage County, Illinois. As members of DuPage United, Pastor Jim Honig and key lay leader Debbie Fulks attended an intensive Industrial Areas Foundation training session held several years ago. When they returned, they began to use some of the tools they learned to begin building a more relational culture at Faith Lutheran.

The first tool that the pastor and lay leader used was the individual meeting. They initiated scores of individual meetings with the church council, church staff, and other ministry leaders. From these meetings, the pastor invited 35 people to attend a three-day leadership training session where they could begin to learn the tools of organising for use inside the congregation as well. The goal was to see if the habit of relating could become part of the culture of the congregation – not just an intriguing experiment conducted by and for a few leaders.

First Steps

For relational work to become part of the culture of the congregation, it had to be tested in a number of ways. First, both the head pastor and his associate made

individual meetings a major part of their days, with the annual goal of meeting 150 members of the congregation one on one.

Second, the Director of Family Ministry began meeting individually with participants and volunteers of this ministry in the church. This listening process produced for her a form of feedback – constructive and useful – that she had never received before. As a result, she modified her core curriculum. The fact that she listened and then made changes based on what she had heard encouraged people to participate more, so the ministry experienced an increase in volunteers.

Third, the stewardship team agreed to include listening sessions with all church members as an essential part of the whole process of stewardship. The leadership was very intentional about creating a mix of old, young, new, and long-term members in the listening sessions, which were geared toward building new relationships and discussing future directions for ministry at Faith Lutheran.

A Relational Stewardship Campaign

The following year a six-week stewardship effort began called Generations of Generosity that was based on church members hosting small meetings in their homes. At these listening sessions members were asked to share what motivated them to give – particularly how their parents and grandparents shaped their commitment to

the life of the church. The purpose was to share stories of generosity in personal life and to get to know one another and each person's individual stories.

As a result, the members are better connected and more motivated to support each other and the church both relationally and financially. The church leadership has a better understanding of the needs and interests of the whole church, which helps them plan how and where to invest the contributions. In addition, there is deeper and broader ownership of the stewardship process.

Other Contexts

Next, small group listening sessions and individual meetings were introduced into a number of other settings. Church council and staff meetings often include individual meetings or small group reflections. Congregational gatherings such as Lenten potlucks often are structured so that participants do individual meetings with one another, or small group meetings are begun with specific questions selected to provoke discussion and debate among congregants. There is still time for chit-chat or to quietly enjoy a well-prepared meal at Faith Lutheran, but there is a higher priority on urging people to get to know one another well beyond the superficial level of a friendly wave or a quick hello. If you are going to this church, you are now going to a place where people, in various ways, in different contexts, are actively engaging one another, relating to one another, and working together in more meaningful ways.

Taking Relational Meetings Outside the Congregation

Finally, this relational culture has begun to extend both into the broader community and to the people the church meets through its social service ministries. The congregation has forged a partnership with a local mosque, as well as with refugees of many faith traditions who live in an apartment complex across the street from the church. In just six weeks, leaders from Faith Lutheran, the mosque, and the refugee community created a Monday-night English tutoring class and resolved several crime issues in the apartment complex. The refugees became full partners with older members of the community, not just anonymous clients of the service programs. The Muslim residents became fellow leaders and valued partners, not just representatives of a very different religious tradition who would appear for the occasional interfaith Thanksgiving service and then disappear again for another year.

The integrating of relational tools – individual meetings, ad hoc small group meetings, joint training, and joint action – has opened the leaders of Faith Lutheran to a new world of possibilities and opportunities in a county that is becoming increasingly diverse and more complex.

A JEWISH ORGANISING STORY

Matt McDermott

Senior Organiser, United Power for Action & Justice

Congregation B'nai Jehoshua Beth Elohim (BJBE) is a Reform Jewish congregation of approximately 850 families in Glenview, Illinois. Though BJBE is in the wealthy North Shore suburbs of Chicago, it is largely a middle-class congregation and, as its Executive Direction once put it, it's a haimish place – a Yiddish word meaning friendly, down-to-earth, or unpretentious.

In the middle of 2003, a new Rabbinic team arrived at BJBE – senior Rabbi Karyn Kedar and associate Rabbi John Linder. Rabbi Kedar quickly began to focus on a long-term strategy for congregational strength and growth. With more and newer members living in the suburbs farther north, a decision was reached to move to Deerfield and buy and revamp an existing building. The synagogue launched a capital campaign to raise the funds to buy and revamp another Deerfield building as its new place of worship. In the meantime, the congregation began using rooms in a Deerfield middle school for a weekend religious school and some other meetings.

As these major internal plans were being made, Rabbi John Linder began to engage in United Power for Action and Justice, the Industrial Areas Foundation affiliate in Cook County. Linder had gone to rabbinical school in mid-

career and, at age 45, BJBE was his first congregational post. He had previously done union and community organising work. In September 2005, he delivered a sermon during the Rosh Hashanah service focusing on the idea of building relationships within the congregation as a way to build community, identify new leadership, and engage in tikkun olam, the Jewish commandment to “repair the world.”

Panim El Panim

Rabbi Linder’s sermon planted the seeds of what BJBE would come to call Panim El Panim. *Panim El Panim* is Hebrew for “face to face.” The name refers to Genesis 32, where Jacob wrestles with the divine in a dream. He is said to be “*panim el panim*,” literally face to face, with God.

The September sermon, however, did not lead to immediate action. Internal concerns about potential conflict or distraction from the capital campaign had to be navigated. Additionally, the social action leadership was busy that fall putting together a congregational response to Hurricane Katrina.

The Panim El Panim project began in earnest in January 2006 when 37 leaders from the congregation attended half-day training on relational one-to-one meetings. At the end of the training, several lay leaders asked their peers to take a list of 10 names of fellow congregants. Each was asked to commit to doing at least 5 relational meetings and turn in simple report forms afterwards.

By March, the team had completed 113 meetings. After Passover, in May, the emerging leadership team organised what they called a “celebration to action” assembly. More than 60 congregants attended and 15 leaders from neighboring United Power member institutions were guests. Three social action themes emerged from the initial one to ones:

- Healthcare.
- Education.
- Diversity/Tolerance.

Action Steps

During the summer, the leadership team identified leaders for two of the three themes and Health and Education Teams were formed. Soon after a third team was formed to continue further one-to-one conversations.

By the fall of 2006, the two new issue teams conducted 10 house meetings, involving 100 leaders, to hone in on what health or education issues they might act on.

Already, even at this early stage, the results of this deepening work began to show:

35 BJBE leaders turned out to the United Power’s county-wide assembly in October 2006 with the governor. At a similar assembly a year earlier, just two attended.

By April 2007, BJBE hosted a regional assembly of over 350 people on healthcare issues, delivering their local legislators and 95 people. Rabbi Linder, Lynn Wax, Judith Gethner, Julie Webb, the Taitel family, and other synagogue leaders played key roles in the assembly. Representatives from eight other congregations and a sister IAF organization, Lake County United, attended.

To date more than 220 relational meetings have taken place, dozens of house meetings, and nearly 50 people are regularly involved in the broader effort.

Recently, the BJBE's Education Team, which has focused in on Early Childhood Education, won a victory in getting the local community college to offer ESL classes to local immigrant families at the synagogue. The team members built relationships with immigrant families in investigating the needs for early childhood education and also found a need for ESL. In its main effort to expand opportunity for early childhood education in the local schools, the team is in a productive alliance with the local school district and other local political leaders.

In addition, the congregation has recently decided to expand its use of the relational Panim El Panim model. One-to-one relational meetings will now be initiated with new members of the synagogue as a way to welcome them and build an even larger and stronger congregational community.

Ripple Effect

BJBE's Panim El Panim congregational organizing has become a model for other Reform Jewish congregations around the region and nationally. The Union for Reform Judaism honored the congregation with its Fain Social Action Award in 2007. BJBE has also become a "mentor congregation" to other local congregations through the Union's *Just Congregations* program.

Also, the congregation's membership in United Power for Action and Justice has led to a new relationship with Third Baptist Church in Chicago. Over 150 members of Third Baptist traveled to BJBE. There the Third Baptist choir sang in a synagogue for the first time and Reverend Al Ragland shared a pulpit with the rabbi, a first for him and a first for BJBE. Some months later, members of BJBE traveled to Third Baptist Church for a reciprocal joint service.

AN ANGLICAN ORGANISING STORY

Angus Ritchie

St Peter's Church, Bethnal Green

In 1996, the Parish of the Divine Compassion, was one of TELCO's (The East London Communities Organisation) Founder members. I was ordained to a curacy there two years later. As its name suggests, the Parish had deep roots in the Anglo-Catholic tradition of worship, pastoral care and social action. Colleagues gave generously of time and energy in one of the most economically deprived, and ethnically diverse, neighbourhoods in the land.

There is a special place in Anglo-Catholic folklore for charismatic, dynamic individuals. My parish covered two East London neighbourhoods, Plaistow and Canning Town. In Plaistow, older parishioners remembered Father Andrew; in Canning Town it was Father Goose. Other neighbourhoods of inner-city London have their local 'saints,' such as Father Groser in Limehouse and Father Jellicoe in Somers Town.

In many ways, this is a wonderful heritage. But it has some perils. Too much focus on the heroic deeds of holy priests of yesteryear can trap today's laity in a passive role. These stories can subtly cast inner-city congregations as mere recipients of others' saintly actions.

Community Organising offered lay Christians a very different role. I was attracted by its 'iron rule': Don't do for others what they can do for themselves. It took my inner-city congregation seriously as agents. In Organising, people used to being ignored (or, at best, patronised) were placed centre stage in the transformation of their neighbourhoods. Here was a vision of mutuality, not one-way dependency – the mutuality Christians believe is at the heart of the Triune God.

Beginning with relationships

Organising begins with relationships. So the first thing TELCO taught me to do was lots and lots of 'one-to-ones'. These relational meetings were foundational to the development of lay leadership in the Parish. Today, visiting is often seen as a dispensable part of the clergy role. Community Organising encouraged and trained me to meet people in their own homes. The agenda of these meetings was to listen to my parishioners' stories and share something of my own.

Another aim of the one-to-one – in terminology I found initially jarring – was to discern my parishioners' 'self-interest'. This term needs to be handled with some care. Like much of Saul Alinsky's terminology, it is designed to agitate and provoke. I came to understand, and to respect, his point. I would put his challenge this way: "Don't build ministry around your passions and preoccupations. Learn what is on the hearts of your

people, what makes them move from words to action. To start there is to take them seriously. If you believe the Holy Spirit was at work long before you arrived in the parish, you must start with your people's passions –not just your own. For only then will you be focused on God's business, rather than your own."

Organising taught me the difference between the urgent and the important. Like prayer and study, one-to-ones are all too easily squeezed out by the clamour of louder demands upon the priest's time. I began to see that the volume and 'urgency' of people's demands was not always a good indicator of their genuine importance. Unless I made one-to-ones a priority – blocking out time to get to know the lives and passions of my people – I would soon be running on an empty tank. Again, just like prayer and study, one-to-ones are an essential fuel for ministry.

Over time, this investment in doing one-to-ones led to changes in the congregation's life. It enabled me to identify potential leaders thus far marginalised or overlooked. I could then mentor (and sometimes agitate) them into new roles and experiences. It meant that I knew in more depth the people to whom I preached week by week. With the help of TELCO's paid organisers, it was also part of a wider process of making congregational life more relational. On Trinity Sunday, a short sermon on relationships human and divine allowed more time for the Peace – so we could extend it into a period in which everyone engaged in 'one-to-ones with someone they didn't yet know. Coffee after Mass was from time to time

used for a more structured discussion of the neighbourhood's needs.

Moving into action

In every one-to-one, I was sure to ask what people liked about living in the area, and what they would like to see changed. Many answers to the latter question focused on our local hospital (Newham General). It had an appalling reputation. People spoke of its bewildering signposting; its dirtiness and bad food, and the way patients' records kept getting lost.

TELCO focuses on winnable campaigns. The aim of is to mobilise people who are usually excluded from the political process. If your usual experience is exclusion, you become disheartened and apathetic, and you become even less included, even less powerful. TELCO seeks to reverse this vicious circle. Its campaigns give people an experience of action leading to change. It starts small, but as people get more engaged this builds their capacity and power to act on bigger issues.

For this reason, our campaigning began with modest things: signposting, catering and cleaning. On those sorts of issue, we could make a small but tangible change. Of course, Newham General's problems went far deeper than this. The low pay of contracted-out staff had worn down morale and productivity. Also, there was a huge gap between the number of people on the census (which determined hospital funding) and number actually living

in the borough and using Newham General. At this stage, those issues were too big for us to tackle. We had to start with action on something specific and winnable.

Relationship-building and action are the two legs with which organised congregations must walk. They need to be kept in balance. Act too soon, and you fail to build trust and commitment. But the action is a crucial part of what develops leaders. They experience engagement in public life as something which can yield real change. Sharing in the creative, redemptive work of God, they discover more deeply their dignity as his disciples and his children. TELCO's 'Dignity in Healthcare' developed new lay leaders, who themselves began to do one-to-ones; built relationships across denominations and faiths which went beyond the clergy, and led to more people taking part in the wider life of the church. This last point is a crucial one. There's a temptation to put off engaging in Community Organising because of a lack of congregational capacity. Our experience in the Parish was that we developed more capacity than we had initially invested.

Building power

Power, like self-interest, is a word which makes Christians uncomfortable. The kind of power we build through Community Organising is not power over others, but power with them. This kind of power enables human beings to grow in fellowship and creativity. The 'Dignity in Healthcare' campaign gave us more of that power.

People's experience of success on a specific, small-scale issue generated the confidence and commitment for further action.

This had an effect on the internal life of the congregation I led (St Martin's, one of four churches in the Parish). The congregation grew, and new office holders, worship leaders and choir members came forward – some as a result of involvement in the action around Newham General, and others through the wider programme of 'one-to-ones'.

As well as building power within the congregation, the action had made TELCO a stronger and more effective broad-based alliance. We are addressing the root causes of Newham General's problems, through two major campaigns. The Living Wage campaign aims to have the same effects on morale and productivity in hospitals as it has had in the banks of Canary Wharf – where once-sceptical employers now admit that decent pay brings improvements in performance and retention which far outweigh the costs. The Strangers into Citizens campaign seeks to address the mismatch between the official and real populations of a borough like Newham – by urging a one-off earned amnesty for undocumented migrants. With these more strategic campaigns, we are getting to the heart of the hospital's inadequacies. But we had to get there with smaller, winnable steps. Relationship-building and action had move forward in sync. They are helping us build a better local hospital – and they have transformed lives and relationships with the congregation.