

Preface to the Second Edition

Fifteen years after the first publication of this book, I find myself asking a basic question: Why should anyone engage in congregation-based community organizing (CBCO)? After all, participating congregations and leaders commit significant resources and time for a process that is often tedious, contentious, and vulnerable to being ego-driven or lockstep. Hard-won victories at the local or state level are often overturned by the next elected governing politicians. Organizing networks—such as Gamaliel, IAF, PICO, and DART—often compete for the favorable attention of funders and have a tendency to disparage each other’s work. National media is much more interested in covering charismatic leaders, gender politics, movements around the latest hot issue, and organizations with the power to influence elections at the state and national level than the less-dramatic work of organizing. Amid the global crises of climate change, warfare, nuclear threat, terrorism, and millions of refugees, the organizing struggles at the grassroots seem, well, rather small and insignificant.

And yet, here I am still engaged in CBCO and just as hopeful and intrigued by it as when I started out as an organizing novice in Jersey City in 1984. A couple of years ago, research from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (Pawasarat and Quinn) found that the incarceration rates of African American males in Wisconsin were the highest in the nation and that the worst zip code for this mass incarceration was 53206—just where I had been serving as pastor of Incarnation Lutheran Church for the past twenty-six years. Without

CBCO, I could have preached on this ignominy, conducted a relevant Bible study, complained to politicians, and participated in an ineffectual demonstration. But *with* the skills, tactics, and resources available through congregation-based community organizing, I could engage Incarnation in practical organizing strategies, working with MICAH (Milwaukee Inner-City Congregations Allied for Hope) and WISDOM (the statewide organization of Gamaliel affiliates, including MICAH, in ten cities). WISDOM launched the Restoring Our Communities Campaign, an impressive effort of leaders—including formerly incarcerated persons—to reduce the incarceration of nonviolent offenders, ameliorate the conditions of solitary confinement, and challenge the heartless practice of revoking parole or probation for petty reasons and where no new crime has been committed.

MICAH clergy from 53206 and surrounding zip codes formed the 53206 Holy Ground Youth/Young Adult Organizing Project. This project is now forming teams of young people in the neighborhoods of participating congregations that are being trained in organizing skills. These young people will do research, discern winnable issues, and take actions to end the pipeline to prison in their neighborhoods, thus creating a more hopeful future for themselves and their peers. This project is in its infancy, but I am already excited to see young people from tough settings claiming their power and working with congregations to restore their communities and their lives.

My faith as a Christian is central to my life. Congregation-based community organizing serves as a vehicle for me to live out my faith and values in the public arena in ways that otherwise worthy secular efforts cannot. CBCO makes possible an undivided life, a healthy integration of personal faith, communal life, and effective action in the public realm. Prayer and theological reflection offer powerful grounding for the savvy arts and practices of organizing. CBCO offers a rare opportunity for grassroots leaders to form relationships with people of other faith traditions and for religious leaders to be theologically stretched and engaged beyond their narrow comfort

zones. While I am still somewhat afflicted by my dogmatic and fundamentalist upbringing, my interfaith experiences in CBCO have helped me to embrace the beauty of Ibn ‘Arabi’s vision:

My heart can take on
any form:
a meadow for gazelles,
a cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka’ba for the circling pilgrim,
the tables of the Torah,
the scrolls of the Qur’án.
I profess the religion of love;
wherever its caravan turns along the way,
that is the belief,
the faith I keep.¹

Gregory Galluzzo, founding Director of the Gamaliel organizing network, says that organizing is “a commitment to lead an interesting life” and that “issues are just an excuse for building relationships.” There is no interesting life without relationships. CBCO has put me in relationship with remarkable organizers, clergy, and lay leaders across the nation, people of authenticity, courage, and tenacity whose faithful witness makes me proud to be a person of faith. Locally, my engagement in MICAH has helped me to enter into authentic and longstanding relationships across racial lines in one of the more hyper-segregated metropolitan areas in the country. Many clergy feel isolated, unsupported, and bored by humdrum ministries. This has never been my experience in the parish. My involvement with MICAH and my staff role in Gamaliel provided me with countless stimulating experiences in the public arena, strong collegial support, continual challenges to take risks, and many moments of exhilaration when an issue was won or a member of Incarnation enjoyed public affirmation and a bit of a spotlight for their leadership in an issue campaign.

I am convinced that Incarnation Lutheran Church was stronger

1. From Poem 11 of the *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* of Ibn ‘Arabi, translation by Michael A. Sells, in *Mystical Languages of Unsayings* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994); used by permission of the publisher.

because of my efforts to integrate organizing arts and practices into the parish ministry. One-on-one inreach and outreach campaigns deepened relationships in the congregation and its neighborhood. Some members of the congregation were personally transformed by their participation in MICAHA. Others reaped the benefits of various MICAHA campaigns. Within the congregation, a former organizer trained our leaders to apply organizing principles to stewardship. The result was a soaring increase in annual offering plate giving through an engaging and relational campaign. In the community, the Holy Ground efforts of Incarnation resulted in many neighborhood victories pertaining to drug trafficking, housing, neighborhood safety, delivery of city services, and improved police relations. Incarnation, with the support of MICAHA, was instrumental in securing a million dollars in Milwaukee County funding for state-of-the-art renovation of its neighborhood park facilities—after years of neglect had resulted in a locked and shuttered fieldhouse filled with asbestos and mold, no functioning toilets, and an inoperable splash pad with broken plumbing at the public pool. Preaching and prayer connected Sunday worship with weekday public action for justice. I think there was increased clarity of mission, the development of leaders, and a serious commitment to discipleship.

Why engage in congregation-based community organizing? I hope I have offered some credible reasons. However, I also have some concerns about congregation-based community organizing, which I raise as challenging questions.

- Will the national organizing networks overcome ego and concern to protect their “turf” in order to work together, perhaps even collaborate, on issues of common interest to share best practices and shape new paradigms for organizing?
- Will clergy creatively establish the theological and faith basis of organizing? Will they insist that organizing reflects the values and spirituality of people of faith in its trainings and actions? Will they

boldly claim the centrality of congregational vitality for effective organizing?

- Will at least one network declare its clear commitment to nonviolent direct action as a prism for evaluating organizing concepts, tools, and methods?
- Will denominations and judicatory leaders find the courage to act boldly in support of organizing issue campaigns at the local, statewide, and national level?
- Will seminaries utilize the experience, discipline, and practice of organizing to train their students to build strong communities of faith that are actively engaged in the public arena for justice?

I raise such questions not only out of concern but out of hope for the future of organizing. In this book I show the theological basis for community organizing, a basis that the organizing networks may find many of their members share in common. I write so that clergy and congregational leaders can more effectively describe community organizing to their congregations as an authentic and organic expression of the life of faith. I write to show churches that are beginning to think about community organizing that it isn't some alien force, imposed by outsiders for ulterior motives, but arises as a genuine challenge to live out the values of the gospel.

The Study Guide at the end of the first edition of this book was originally written by my colleague in ministry and agitation Rick Deines. Aimed at congregations who were dipping their toes in the organizing waters for the first time, it was organized by chapter on the premise that the Study Guide would be read in a twelve-session sequence. For congregations or groups eager to read, mark, and inwardly digest the book in such a setting, that Study Guide is now available online.

My interest and purpose is to move people of faith to take the risk of forming new and enduring relationships, deepening the connection with their neighbors and their communities, and getting involved in

organized efforts to change the world as it is into the world as it should be. For that purpose and in that spirit, Fortress Press has asked the Rev. Grant Stevensen to interact with this second edition through the form of sidebars scattered through its pages. Grant is an ELCA pastor and the Clergy Organizer for ISAIAH, an interfaith community-based organizing network in Minnesota. Seasoned in the arts and practices of organizing, Grant is a courageous agitator who challenges us to move beyond abstractions into the rough and tumble world where faith is enlivened and put to the test. I'm grateful for his contributions to this second edition.

I am also deeply grateful to Bill Wylie-Kellermann for his poetic, prophetic, and provocative foreword. Bill is widely respected among peacemakers and progressive people of faith for his insight, scholarship, and long-haul activism. Thirty-five years ago, Bill and I spent a night together in a jail cell on felony charges (mercifully dropped) for challenging a reenactment of the bombing of Hiroshima as entertainment for 150,000 people at an air show. It is fitting and speaks well of Bill that he is now facing charges for nonviolently blocking demolition trucks hired to shut off water to thousands of low-income households in Detroit.

I am particularly blessed that Neil Elliott is the editor and progenitor of this second edition. Episcopal priest, biblical scholar, professor, and author, Neil brings both great skill and a deep passion for the liberating message of the gospel to his editorial work. Neil's affirming and collaborative style created a spirit of camaraderie between editor and author.

Finally, I am from time to time reminded of my limited perspective as an older, white, straight, male, mainline Christian. That's why I am considerably encouraged to see the emergence of a younger generation of organizers, clergy, and lay leaders who bring so much diversity, talent, insight, and energy into congregation-based community organizing and whose perspectives are often more interesting than my own. The future of organizing is in their hands, and that fills me with hope.