



North American Association of Christians in Social Work
A Vital Christian Presence in Social Work

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**REVISITING TRADITIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZING FOR BUILDING
STRONGER FAITH-BASED PROGRAMS**

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Abstract

Traditional community organizing strategies can be powerful in building faith-based organizations. This paper presents an organizing strategy used effectively by Adventist Community Services in building a national disaster program and a network of community-based organizations. Discussion includes a description of the value base for the model along with key concepts and skills related to each component.

Revisiting Traditional Community Organizing for Building Stronger Faith-based Programs

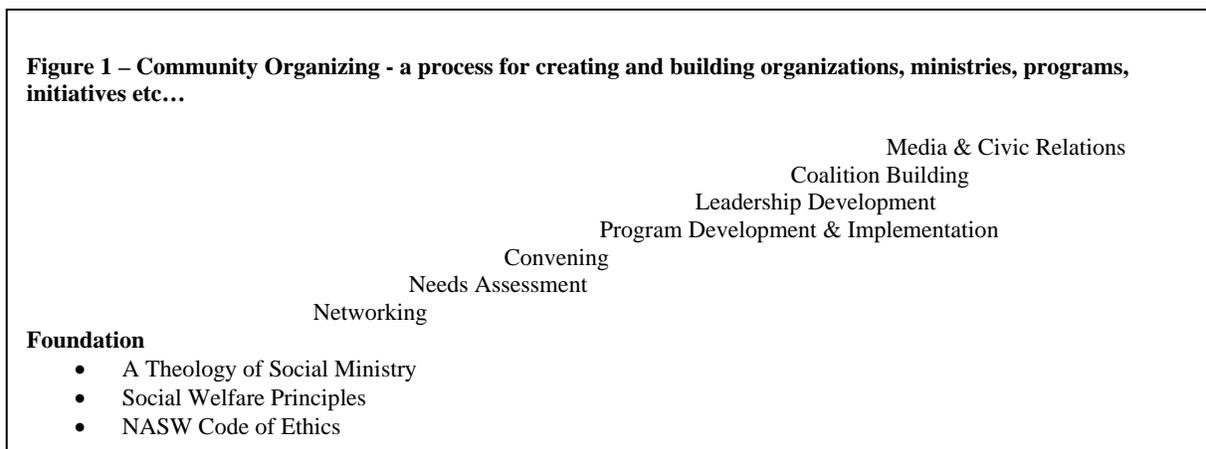
Traditional community organizing processes typically focus on issue-organizing within specific communities or regions and often include tactics for the re-distribution of power and resources. Faith-based organizations have embraced and employed these processes in varying degrees. Too often they have avoided their use because of their focus on confrontive tactics or because the strategies lack a related faith component or foundation. Faith-based organizations have used program development approaches effectively in building programs that provide a wide range of services and meet far-reaching needs. Traditional organizing strategies offer ways to strengthen the approach of faith-based organizations and the potential to involve many more people, thus building stronger organizations and greater collaboration. Between 1986 and 2000 Adventist Community Services, a faith-based organization sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist church, employed a community organizing strategy across the U.S., Canada and Bermuda in developing recognized national disaster response programs, a network of community-based programs, and a series of community health initiatives. Additionally, this strategy was used nationally to strengthen the response of the major voluntary organizations active in disasters, leading to better service for survivors, enhanced mitigation, and solving some of the largest problems facing organizations. The leaders of this effort were trained in the organizing strategy of Industrial Areas Foundation (founded by Saul Alinsky considered by many as the father of community organizing) and paired the strategy with a faith perspective; making it useful for many other areas of church work including developing congregations, reclaiming members, ministries to families, ministry to prisoners, educating ministry leaders, and developing college and university community service initiatives. In 2008 the model was successfully implemented by the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) in Chengdu, China for building a regional disaster response program.

This organizing model is firmly based on a well developed theology of social ministry, a set of guiding principles for social welfare and the NASW Code of Ethics. The model builds organizations and momentum through a series of layered activities of networking, needs assessment, convening, program development,

leadership development, coalition building and media & civic relations. Central to each activity are key concepts, values, and skill sets important for their effective use.

A Community Organizing Model – See Figure 1

Each activity in the model builds on the previous activity continuing upward much like a staircase. These activities are not phases or steps, but a continued process with new activities added to the previous one, all the while building an organization, ministry, program or initiative. Much as a fine piece of woodwork is finished with layer after layer of a finishing product each activity is applied on top of the previous layer.



A Theology of Social Ministry

The entire organizing process is based on a theology of Social Ministry. Sometimes called a theology of social justice, a theology of compassion, or Biblical principles for serving others. Entire books have been devoted to this subject so no attempt will be made to cover the topic here. Whatever one's faith, religion, or spirituality and whatever their beliefs about the existence of God or a higher power and their beliefs about the purpose and nature of humankind – these beliefs form a foundation that guides the work of organizing people toward a common cause. Much like one's own ideology each person develops their own set of beliefs that make up their theology. This theology gives the often frustrating and difficult work of community organizing

purpose, importance, an overall context, guidance, and encouragement. Ultimately, success of an organizing endeavor is dependent on the degree that the process has been in harmony with this theology.

Social Welfare Principles

Most organizations, ministries, and programs created through the community organizing process exist as part of the social welfare system. “Social Welfare, by definition, refers to our nation’s system of programs, benefits, and services that help people meet those social, economic, educational, and health needs that are fundamental to the maintenance of society.” (Marx, 2011 p. 4) There are many diverse views about how robust a social welfare system should be and how it should be paid for, how it should be administered, and what form the benefits should take. However, there is consensus among social workers that our work is based on the values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. These values, while not discussed further here, are also foundational to the work of community organizing.

NASW Code of Ethics

Social Workers are committed professionally to follow the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999). Based on the above values this code delineates the following set of responsibilities:

- To clients
- To colleagues
- In Practice Settings
- As professionals
- To the Social Work profession
- To the broader society

Other professions have similar codes, yet social workers who are functioning as community organizers follow the NASW Code of Ethics. This code then is important to the foundation of the community organizing model.

Layer One – Networking

The key concept of networking is that everyone you meet is a potential participant in your organization, ministry, or program. This activity begins with a clear and detailed outline of all the roles within your organization. These can include steering committee members, financial supporters, staff roles, volunteer assignments, prayer partners and many others. Each person with whom you have a meaningful encounter can potentially fill one of these roles. Community organizers actively seek these meaningful encounters and conduct countless “interviews” with people to see where they fit into their organizing effort.

Key skills for interviewing are active listening and note-taking. Active listening includes the use of open ended questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing. Note-taking captures the person’s identifying and contact information along with their thoughts, experiences, qualifications, and skills which can later be related to one of your organizing projects.

People are the lifeblood of any organization. Therefore it is essential that the activity of networking continue so that more people and new ideas are added regularly to the organization. Community organizers must set aside significant blocks of time to devote to networking.

Layer Two - Needs Assessment

Programs and services are always based on the actual and perceived needs of the intended beneficiaries. This layer of activity involves a small group of participants that gather as much information as possible about the target beneficiaries, geographic area, community, or about the social issue to be addressed. Key concepts and skills related to this layer of activity are drawn from sociology, social research, community planning, and issue oriented activism.

Once a quantity of information of a wide range assembled one or two individuals or a small group can organize the information into some logical format for review. The review involves the following questions: What does this information tell us about characteristics of the target group or area? What specific needs are

revealed? What relationship do these needs have to the mission or purpose of the organization, ministry or program? How do these needs fit with the resources (money, time, and effort) available? The answer to these questions will determine the direction your efforts will take and the needs that will be addressed.

Layer Three – Convening

Active networking will reveal to the organizer the areas of interest, need, or ability that potential participants have in common. Once several people are identified with such commonalities they should be convened so that their interests and ideas can be combined. The activity of convening is important in that people don't often realize how much they have in common with others or feel they have "permission" to meet. Convening is an activity of empowerment resulting in great deal of positive energy that can be focused toward meeting the goals of your organization, ministry of program.

There are many kinds of meetings that can be convened. They fall into two categories. First is core-group or steering committee. Often this is the group that "staffs" the beginning effort of the organization. This group should meet often to share individually on assigned tasks, problem solve, and plan future tasks or tactics related to the effort. Second are public meetings such as forums, town hall meetings, press conferences, and rallies. Essential skills for convening include meeting planning, promotion, chairmanship, and public speaking.

Layer Four – Program Development & Implementation

Once there is a focus on a clear set of needs and people have been convened to give oversight to the effort, specific programs and services need to be developed. Program development involves setting goals, objectives, action steps, timelines and budgets. Goals indicate a future desired outcome such as a lower infant mortality rate in a community, higher test scores or retention rates, or greater involvement in community events. Objectives are specific and measurable outcomes that when achieved they accomplish the overall goal. An example of an objective is the availability of a resource directory for residents or participation in safe-driver training. Action steps are those tasks that need to be completed to achieve the objectives. Timelines give urgency to the organizing effort and ensures that progress is made. A related budget will indicate

approximately what will be needed in terms of financial resources to accomplish the organization's goals. Fundraising activities such as direct mail, special events, and grant-writing take place as part of program development and implementation

Program development leads to an understanding of what specific activities will be undertaken to fulfill the mission of the organization, ministry or program whether it is a website and downloadable documents that encourage participants to take some specific action or a service to be rendered such as feeding the homeless. When conducted properly program planning paves the way for the effective implementation of services.

Layer Five - Leadership Development

Every organization needs leadership that can guide and develop its programs and services. Leaders expand the networking activities and bring increasingly more people into the organization to meet objectives and expand the overall mission. Leaders are those who influence others to positive action. Potential leaders can be identified and developed. There are key ways to develop leaders to ensure that they have opportunities to practice leading out. They can chair committees, lead out in projects, and take on larger roles within the organization. In developing leaders it is important to empower them with responsibility and the authority to carry it out. In developing leaders it is important to review with them prior to an event or activity and debrief with them afterward. This is where learning takes place.

Investment in the current and future leadership includes opportunity for training, positive and constructive feedback and increasing leadership responsibility. Community organizers should work themselves out of their leadership role over time, handing over the leadership to others so that they can begin the process anew focusing on new projects.

Layer Six - Coalition Building

Once an organization is mature enough to have on-going programs and services that meet meaningful needs or address issues in a significant way other organizations with complimentary missions will be

encountered. These encounters will lead to partnership opportunities whereby a greater impact can be made on an issue or need. A partnership may be possible to pool the resources of several church organizations to operate a food pantry, homeless shelter, or awareness events about cancer or drug addiction.

Working in coalition with other organizations with similar or complimentary missions can be powerful and rewarding. Such coalition building should be explored carefully. Organizations that have too great a mismatch in size and resources could cause one organization to carry most of the work in terms of people and finance or cause one organization to “swallow-up” another. Similarly, coalitions may attempt to lead your organization away from its mission or purpose. Coalitions are best maintained when organizations are clear about their purpose, what role they assume, what resources are invested, and how the partnership can be dissolved if necessary. Often it is best for an organization to operate its own programs and only occasionally work in coalition with other organizations.

Layer Seven - Media and Civic Relations

Once an organization, ministry or program makes a significant contribution, alleviates significant need, or addresses an important social issue it will likely capture the attention of civic leaders and the media. Some organizations, due to the nature of their mission, involve relationships with civic leaders and media representatives right away. Often such relationships are established during the networking and needs assessment activities. Sometimes an organization can “get lucky” or arrange a media stunt that gets attention before any significant work is done. Such media stunts by organizations that have not “paid their dues” is often perceived negatively by those who have been working on the issues a lot longer.

Working with civic leaders and media representatives involves skills in letter writing, phone calling, news writing, organizing media events, talking “on air” or on video. These skills can be learned and perfected over time and should involve experts in each area who can serve as consultants. These are the kinds of people community organizers look for in their networking activities.

Based on a Theology of Social Ministry, social welfare principles, and the NASW Code of Ethics these community organizing activities will create dynamic and powerful organizations that can make significant contributions towards the greater welfare of others. This will be especially true if the organizer is diligent and they are continuous in the activities. Because the concepts and general skills of this community organizing model are broad, they can be applied with success to many different types of organizations, ministries, programs, and projects.

References

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