

## ***Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing*** ***By Rev. Louise Green***

*Louise is a minister in the United Church of Christ who has served congregations in New York City and Washington, D.C., and worked for 10 years as a community organizer with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a congregation-based, multi-issue power network with over 60 affiliates around the country. The ideas below come from her IAF experience and training, particularly through Michael Gecan, National Staff for the Metro IAF in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. For an in-depth look at this method of community organizing, read Gecan's *Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action*, published by Anchor Press.*

We owe it to our congregants and colleagues in social justice action to create a culture in the church or organization that is dynamic, life-giving, and fulfilling for all participants. Voluntary groups are an elective choice that people make in order to add something positive to their lives. Many people eventually elect out as they become tired and de-energized working in repetitive ways. This article is about another approach to organizational life, a way that seeks to find new leadership and encourage new campaigns: relational organizing.

Relational organizing is working with and beyond the bureaucratic culture of a congregation or organization. The word "bureaucracy" comes from the idea of a chest of drawers, where everybody has a proper compartment and place. This kind of organization is necessary in a large group or gathered body, but often works against close relationships between people. Very often, there is little communication between or within the drawers and no change in the overall structure for very long periods of time.

Organizing relationally does not preclude the standard mechanisms we need to function in large groups--rather, it adds a dimension that can transform the culture of bureaucracy. Instead of a bureaucratic culture dominated by fixed activities that endlessly repeat, a relational culture is flexible, dynamic, and responsive to growing or changing needs. It shifts over time, and does not burn people out. It is life-giving, not draining.

In most congregations and organizations, static bureaucracy reigns. We are so accustomed to group meetings, collective agendas, and task-oriented activities that it is easy to perpetuate a system that creates only very minimal relationships between people. Communication happens via worship bulletins, newsletters, email, and rarely phone calls, and we even more rarely meet with someone individually unless we have a job to do or crisis to address. Talented leaders are recruited for many tasks, and attend multiple group meetings until they risk burnout and loss of interest. Congregants may meet for months or even years, and never have a conversation about anything but what is on the agenda page for their committee night.

How can congregations and organizations break out of this constraining, de-energizing, and often depressing situation? The solution is to create a culture of relationships that is served by the bureaucratic apparatus rather than dominated by it.

The primary tool of relational organizing is the **individual meeting**, an encounter with a person that is rare in our culture. Individual, or 1-to-1, meetings are critical to create bonds between existing teams, find new talent, identify new issues, or develop a new constituency. There is no short-cut around them, and they produce results that nothing else can. *Very simply, doing individual meetings is the strategy that is essential in order to create a relational culture over time.*

What are the hazards of operating in a bureaucracy that has no relationship-building initiative? The same people do the same things in an unexamined way. New talent and energy is not discovered or engaged. Group meetings get certain tasks done, but only use the skills of folks which apply to the set agenda. Leaders and followers grow fatigued over time and echo the perennial complaint heard in almost every congregation and organization: why do the same people do everything around here?

### ***What is a 1-to-1 meeting?***

- A 30-45 minute meeting of face-to-face conversation with one person.
- Getting to know the other person and being known
- An inquiry into what matters to a person and why.
- A chance to go outside of the repeating tasks and small group activities that dominate congregational and organizational life.
- An opportunity to know the private motivations each person has for doing public action such as congregational volunteerism or social justice work.
- A search for leaders and participants with the talent, motivation, initiative, energy, or anger to change a situation.
- A way to identify issues that need to be addressed and are not on the current action plan.

### ***What is not an individual meeting for relational organizing purposes?***

- An interview of non-stop questions or survey.
- Going through the whole life story or resume of an individual.
- A recruitment device that fits someone into a set agenda or committee.
- An intellectual conversation about policy or strategy on issues in the congregation, neighborhood or city.
- Search for personal friendship or a social encounter.

### ***What do you need to do individual meetings?***

- A firm decision that you will make the time to engage in this important leadership task. You must invest time and energy for this to succeed. Commit.
- A clear context for your introduction on the phone and in person, and a reason for doing this that you can explain to others simply.
- Regular phone call time set aside to ask for and schedule meetings.
- Patience and persistence to work with people's availability and possible resistance.
- Curiosity about other people and an ability to listen.
- Willingness to practice this skill over and over again, in multiple settings.

### ***How do you do an individual meeting?***

- Have a clear introduction and ending: the middle is improvisation that is particular to the person with whom you are talking.
- Talk more deeply about a few things instead of covering 20 topics.
- Ask "why?" much more often than "what?"
- Ask the person to tell stories and personal history, talk about important incidents, time periods, or mentors—not just recite facts and dates.
- Offer back conversation and dialogue: it's not just for the purpose of the other person answering your questions.
- Close by asking the person who else they think you should be meeting with, and what questions they have for you.

### ***How do you use individual meetings?***

When you decide to do an individual meeting campaign, it is important to establish a context: Are you the only one doing meetings, and for what reason (i.e. committee chair, task force/study leader, leading on developing a new project)? Is a team going to agree to do them with a particular list (i.e. new members, youth,

seniors, religious education teachers)? Is staff preparing to do them with a certain constituency (i.e. people of color in the congregation, young adults, worship leaders)?

Keep track of each meeting by making notes on each individual, deciding ahead of time what kinds of things you want to remember. Just write down important items, not everything you heard. However, don't ever take notes while you are having the meeting itself: this makes you a survey-taker or interviewer, which is not the right purpose or tone for the conversation.

Create a process for evaluating what you learn once you have a significant number accumulated. This may be your individual work, or involve a meeting with the team that is working on the campaign. It's important to go into the meetings with an open mind: you can test for certain interests or issues, but if you have one specific purpose in mind (need to recruit teachers, for example) you won't be finding out what you need to know. Your goal is to ask questions and listen, without fitting the person into any fixed spot. Individual meetings are an exchange about what is important to each of you, not a session where you work to get the person to do something.

After you have met your goal for a certain number of meetings, either individually or as part of a team, evaluate what you learned. This may lead to various choices:

- additional individual meetings with new people,
- some kind of different group action,
- second meetings with especially interesting or strong leaders,
- a new project or event,
- revising how you have been operating based on what you heard,
- ask people to take some sort of new initiative based on what you discovered about them.

The entire process is improvised, and created out of what you actually hear and how you and others decide to respond. You can't plan this response until you have a number of individual meetings. You must be open to what emerges, and dance accordingly.

### ***What are the benefits of building a relational culture of organizing?***

- Leaders who come to know each other beyond a task-oriented agenda and can do new things in new ways.
- New people who can be engaged around their own interests, not an existing plan.
- The capability to do a new project or campaign based on people's real energy and motivation, not an annual or monthly repetition of activity.
- A network of people who know and trust each other, able to take action in a variety of ways over time.
- A stronger, more dynamic, more creative congregational or organizational life.

When we inadvertently create perpetual bureaucracy instead of letting our structures serve a greater goal of relationship, when we are not deeply committed to innovation and dynamism in our congregations and organizations, we are not affirming the inherent leadership potential in each person. We limit the many rich ways that talent can flourish and congregations thrive.

Building a relational organizing culture over time is the best way to build our congregational strength, our leaders' potential, and our full participation in all the possibilities of life. May we have the courage and the wisdom to explore all the great and varied talent within the congregation, organization, and our gifts as people.

# Community Organizing Bibliography



**ACTA Publications** <http://www.actapublications.com/communityorganizing/>

A publisher of community organizing resources.

Their series of pamphlets is especially helpful for training congregational leaders:

“Effective Organizing for Congregational Renewal” by Michael Gecan

“The Power of Relational Action,” by Ed Chambers

“Reflecting with Scripture on Community Organizing,” by Rev. Jeffrey K. Krehbiel

## Books About the Church and Community Organizing:

### **Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx, Heidi Neumark, 2003**

A stellar memoir and book on pastoral-ministry-as-organizing. Should be required reading for American seminarians.

### **Upon This Rock. The Miracles of a Black Church, Samuel G. Freedman, 1994**

An admiring biography of the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood and the St. Paul's Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. Good introduction to a church powerfully grounded in its African heritage.

## Books by the IAF:

### **Going Public: An Organizer's Guide to Citizen Action, Mike Gecan, 2004**

The best beginning book on the principals and practices of community organizing. Filled with anecdotes particularly of organizing in New York City.

### **Roots for Radicals: Organizing for Power, Action, and Justice, Ed Chambers, 2003.**

Summarizes the theories of community organizing, as inspired by Saul Alinsky.

### **Stoking the Fire of Democracy: Our Generation's Introduction to Grassroots Organizing, Stephen N. Smith, 2009**

An honest memoir of a young adult's journey into community organizing along with guidance for organizing

## Books About the IAF:

### **Blessed Are the Organized: Grassroots Democracy in America, Jeffrey Stout, 2010**

Excellent answer to intellectual critics of organizing and compelling current analysis of America's political life, including thoughts on the current presidency. “Gathering Power” is the precursor book to this.

### **Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics, Mary Beth Rogers, 1990**

Compelling story of Ernie Cortes and organizing the (largely Latino) communities of the southwest.

### **Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America, Paul Osterman 2003.**

Brilliant analysis of American patterns of political engagement while examining Ernie Cortes' organizing work in Texas. “Blessed are the Organized” updates the findings of this book.

**For More Resources, see Industrial Areas Foundation <http://www.industrialareasfoundation.org/>**

Information, training, and finding local contacts in community organizing in the faith community and beyond.