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# Faith and Public Life: Faith-Based Community Organizing and the Development of Congregations

Mary Ann Ford Flaherty

Richard L. Wood

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# Faith and Public Life

*Faith-Based  
Community  
Organizing  
and the  
Development of  
Congregations*

*A Report of the Findings of a Study Conducted by  
Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico*

**By Mary Ann Ford Flaherty and Richard L. Wood**

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Finally, we dedicate this report to the hundreds of lay leaders, clergy and organizers who are committed to the challenging work of social justice and congregational renewal. The Congregational Development Research Study would not have been possible without the cooperation of all those on site who opened up their congregations, organizations, and lives; your generosity allows us all to learn from your experience.

The writing of this report was a fully mutual collaboration throughout, therefore, the authors should be considered fully equal co-authors.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Congregational Development Research Study (CDRS) examines the impact of faith-based community organizing on organizational development in its primary institutional sponsors— religious congregations. That is, we study whether and how “congregational development” results from the particular form of civic engagement sometimes known as congregation-based, institutional, or broad-based organizing, and termed here “faith-based community organizing.”

Faith-based community organizing (FBCO) represents a widespread movement to advance the interests of low-income and middle-income neighborhoods and communities throughout the United States (and recently in other countries). Most FBCO organizations belong to one of four national or several regional training networks. According to the only national study of the field, FBCO represents the broadest community-based movement for socio-economic justice in the country today.<sup>1</sup> When Interfaith Funders sponsored a series of events in 2000-2001 to disseminate the results of that study, key FBCO funders, sponsors, and participants repeatedly asked what impact this form of civic engagement has had on the diverse faith communities that form its institutional core. At the time, anything other than a purely anecdotal answer to that question was impossible. The CDRS, undertaken by Interfaith Funders and the University of New Mexico with major funding from the Ford Foundation, represents the first national effort to answer it rigorously and systematically.

Congregational development here means the growth of members as multi-faceted leaders within their congregations, and the strengthening of congregations as institutions. For individual congregational members, this development includes gaining leadership skills, deepening engagement in congregational life, and strengthening understanding of the connections between the faith tradition’s call to social justice and the work of faith-based community organizing. For congregations, such development includes strengthening relationships within the congregation, creating connections to other congregations and organizations, deepening linkages between worship life and the wider social world, transforming congregational culture to be more relational and accountable, and increasing membership. The logic model underlying the current project (Figure 1, page 14), represents schematically an initial understanding of how the standard elements of the faith-based organizing process might plausibly lead to specific congregational development outcomes, and what measurable impacts might offer evidence for such outcomes (or their absence). Note that we study *one strategy* for strengthening faith communities— involvement with faith-based community organizing— of particular interest due to its basis in the social ethics of diverse faith communities and its commitment to promoting the interests of poor and middle-income constituents. We make no claims regarding other approaches to congregational development.

The study draws on fieldwork in 45 religious congregations, including Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian/Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical. A few congregations were highly multiracial, while the others constituted a rich mix of majority Latino, African-American, black Caribbean, or white/European congregants. Between June 2002 and May 2003, researchers gathered data through observation, written surveys, and hour-long interviews with lay leaders, clergy, and professional organizers from congregations belonging to thirteen FBCO groups. These groups were chosen through a combination of random and targeted selection in order to achieve appropriate representation across organizing networks, geographic regions, race and ethnicity,

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<sup>1</sup> On the national reach and infrastructure of faith-based community organizing, see the results of a major national study sponsored by Interfaith Funders: Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood (2001), *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field, 2001*. Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders; see also Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren (2003).

size of organization, length of organizational existence, and political efficacy. Fieldwork was conducted in Boston, Camden (NJ), Chicago, Columbus (OH), Detroit, Los Angeles (two organizations), Miami, Minneapolis/St. Paul, New Orleans, Portland (OR), San Diego, and the Rio Grande Valley of Texas.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analyzed interpretively; surveys were analyzed statistically (descriptive statistics). Overall, respondents represent quite well the broad field of faith-based community organizing, with the following caveats: 1) for research purposes, we intentionally over sampled some religious traditions, including Jewish, evangelical/Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Muslim congregations; 2) we under sampled Latinos due to unexpected developments during the research fieldwork, for which we compensate analytically to some extent; 3) we had a low response rate from organizers to the written survey (but not the interviews). Otherwise, our data closely reflects the national profile of faith-based community organizing.

### **Evidence of FBCO-driven Congregational Development**

The study was designed primarily to capture data on the *dynamics* through which faith-based community organizing generates congregational development, and the obstacles to this; it is here that the CDRS offers the most insight. In order to assess the facilitating and hindering dynamics, we rated, by interpretive analysis, the 36 congregations for which we had sufficient data. In this way, we were able to determine and compare patterns within each grouping of congregations: “strong” FBCO-led congregational development, “medium,” and “weak” development (the clergy and professional organizers who work in these congregations ranked them somewhat more strongly on congregational development).

We draw on both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (surveys) evidence to examine four categories of evidence for FBCO-driven congregational development: relationships (social capital), leadership development (democratic skills and other forms of human capital), faith links (cultural connections between religious commitment and public life), and power and public presence.

The study shows that FBCO work can increase the quantity and quality of the relationships embedded in congregations. Many participants reported experiencing new levels of relationality themselves or in their congregations as a result of this work, often including both “bonding social capital” (social ties within the congregation) and “bridging social capital” (social ties beyond the congregation). The evidence for increased bonding social capital largely comes from qualitative interview data, in that the CDRS could not track and quantify this aspect of congregational life before and after engagement in FBCO. We report both qualitative and quantitative evidence for increased bridging social capital, at least in participants’ perception, including increased ties to political officials, community organizations, and faith communities beyond respondents’ own denominations. Both clergy and lay leaders reported increases in all these categories, and credit their FBCO work for those increases.

Leadership development through FBCO work occurs in several forms, including both broad personal development and the acquisition of particular skills and orientations. Many interviewees reported experiencing compelling personal growth as a result of being connected to “something bigger” than individualized faith. Many also reported a new sense of identity as a result of this work—new confidence, a new “voice” in the world, a rekindled sense of themselves as promoters of social justice, and a new hopefulness in their lives. They said that fellow congregation members perceived them more as leaders, which

affirmed their perceptions of themselves as capable of influencing people and contributing to congregational life. With a greater sense of capability, focus and discipline, leaders were willing to accept more responsibility, speak more assertively, and question the status quo in constructive ways. Likewise, both clergy and lay leaders reported gaining specific democratic skills (such as public speaking, leading meetings, and relational organizing) and greater confidence in exercising those skills, and traced this increased “leadership capital” to the FBCO work. Notably, qualitative evidence revealed that increased leadership capital was regularly transferred to multiple aspects of congregational work beyond the FBCO effort—*if* other key factors were in place. Finally, some leaders spoke of understanding concepts such as relational power, self-interest, and accountability in new ways—and of putting these concepts into practice in their congregations. We note, however, that participants struggle especially with the concept and practice of accountability, and suggest this may be one reason more congregations are not benefiting more substantially from their FBCO engagement.

A third kind of congregational development we examined is what we termed “faith links.” Here, we looked for evidence of FBCO-driven deepening of participants’ engagement with their faith community, their experiential relationship to the divine, or their commitment to the denomination’s teachings regarding social justice. Many leaders reported extensive new faith links, often in quite evocative terms, but respondents varied considerably in this regard, depending particularly on the extent to which their congregations and/or their local FBCO organization emphasized such faith links. We also asked whether participants experienced their congregations’ worship services helping to integrate the spiritual and political dimensions of their lives. Overall, leaders reported their political and spiritual commitments as being rather strongly integrated, but that worship in their congregation was only “fairly successful” in integrating the spiritual and political dimensions of community life.

The final dimension of congregational development that we examined concerned “power and public presence.” We considered whether participants perceived their congregations as having a significant profile in the wider community, and how comfortable and confident they felt in representing their faith tradition in the political arena. Increases in these factors represent congregational development in the sense that they allow congregations to more effectively contribute a religiously grounded commitment to social justice – itself a central ethical theme in these faith traditions. Clergy and lay leaders widely perceived the public profile of their congregations as having been heightened through the organizing work, though this varied according to how successful they had been in taking political action. Clergy reported feeling quite confident when interacting with high-ranking city officials, and traced that confidence partly to their experience in faith-based community organizing. Lay leaders reported slightly lower levels of confidence in this regard. Both groups offered eloquent testimony to the difference this kind of heightened confidence can make, both for participants’ individual lives and for their congregations.

By improving the fabric of congregation-based relationships, building new leadership capital, forging stronger faith links, and reshaping the congregation’s public presence and members’ understanding of power and politics, faith-based community organizing can contribute—sometimes powerfully—to strengthening the diverse religious congregations that are its primary institutional base. Such congregational development is not as widespread as FBCO proponents sometimes claim and would like it to be, but it is significant and might be multiplied if we can better understand both the dynamics that generate it and the obstacles that hinder it.



## **Generating Stronger Congregations**

Successfully generating strong FBCO-driven congregational development is not simple. Instead, participants wishing to strengthen their congregations through this kind of civic engagement must strive to align a “constellation of factors” that are listed below:

- a comprehensive approach to congregational development by the FBCO group which engages the complementary skills and orientations of leaders, clergy and organizers, and honors each congregation’s distinctive vision and mission;
- systematic and ongoing implementation of the FBCO principles and practices, with a disciplined focus on transforming congregational culture and creatively adapting these practices in ways appropriate within a particular faith community;
- strong relationships between organizers and clergy, in which sufficient trust develops to undergird real collaboration and the constructive give-and-take of mutual challenge;
- construction of meaningful connections between the particular congregational faith tradition and the FBCO process;
- active participation by clergy, in which they place FBCO-driven congregational development at the heart of their ministry, while leaving to lay leaders much of the concrete organizing work and recognizing that their ministerial role transcends the organizing process.

Congregations in the CDRS that pursued any single factor sometimes showed minimal evidence of one or another element of congregational development (most often increased leadership skills), but never the more substantial and impressive congregational development of the strong cases. The latter only developed where clergy, lay leaders, and professional organizers aligned a constellation of factors to produce a dynamism between the spiritual and organizational life of the congregation internally and its civic experience externally. This dynamic interplay lay at the foundation of sustained FBCO-linked congregational thriving.

### **Three key roles**

1. Lay leaders play a particularly vital role in generating congregational development; they are trained to implement the FBCO principles and practices—particularly relational organizing and accountability—that catalyze changes in congregational culture. Lay leaders working in “core teams” initiate the “one-to-one meetings” by which congregational members cultivate the new and deeper relationships described above. This increased relationality generates more trust and engagement, thus strengthening the capacity of the congregation to fulfill its mission. Two factors, in particular, appear to help promote wide adoption of these principles and practices: 1) leader participation in FBCO training, where the principles underlying this work are presented comprehensively, and 2) active participation in the organizing work, where these principles are systematically put into practice. The study found a statistically significant positive correlation between the proportion of leaders sent to national FBCO training and the level of congregational development. Many participants emphasized the importance of periodically including in the organizing work local political action, in which more congregational leaders play an active role than in larger-scale actions. Together, training and widespread active participation in organizing appear to generate new leadership capital that can significantly strengthen congregations.

2. Clergy members, too, are central to the success of FBCO-driven congregational development. We examine their contribution from the standpoint of clergy members themselves, professional organizers, and the patterns we see nationally. Clergy active in the organizing work emphasized their role in four broad areas:

- *Generating the broad vision that animates faith-based community organizing:* Clergy often bring to this work particular gifts for articulating the spiritual commitments, social ethics, and religious vision that animate it.
- *Infusing a sense of spiritual and religious meaning into the work:* Sustaining long-term congregational commitment to FBCO requires that participants find that engagement meaningful. Among the most powerful tools for infusing meaning into this work are the symbols, stories, and rituals of the sponsoring faith communities—especially when clergy work to actively link their preaching and worship to members’ wider social world, including their FBCO experience.
- *Sustaining the network of relationships that underlie the organizing work:* The long-term foundation for FBCO work typically lies in the network of clergy relationships linking the sponsoring faith communities. Clergy (often in collaboration with organizers) are crucial in building this network and sustaining its vitality as the FBCO organization matures.
- *Serving as a counterweight to the influence of organizers:* Some of the strongest organizing work and congregational development occur where the complementary orientations of clergy and organizers are allowed to create a healthy tension within the dual congregational-FBCO structure. Clergy then promote the embrace of congregations as more than simply mediating institutions for civic life and assure that the organizing effort maintains a balanced focus and some local emphasis.

In all these ways, clergy help generate a dynamic interplay between the worship lives of faith communities and members’ engagement in the broader world via the FBCO organization. Such dynamism was evident in all the strongest exemplars of FBCO-driven congregational development in the study. The professional organizers we interviewed often greatly valued the contributions of clergy to the organizing process, but also noted that clergy members’ unwillingness to prioritize their time, narrow view of their own power, and lack of confidence too often undermine that contribution. A key tool for sustaining strong clergy engagement was the “clergy caucus”—a regular gathering often sponsored by local FBCO organizations. Seven of our eight strongest examples of FBCO-driven congregational development are closely linked to strong clergy caucuses. Yet most FBCO groups, amidst the many pressures of political organizing, do not find it easy to maintain a strong clergy caucus, which therefore vary greatly in quality.

3. Professional organizers are also key contributors to FBCO-linked congregational development. Indeed, as the key artisans of the FBCO process, how organizers do their work and the approaches they adopt in relating to congregations greatly influence this work’s impact on its sponsoring faith communities. The most positive such impact occurs where clergy and organizers come to view themselves as partners or “co-conspirators” in the work of organizing *and* its associated congregational development. Clergy identified two crucial qualities in organizers that are necessary for the FBCO/congregation partnership to thrive:

- trustworthiness: in particular, respect for the congregation’s vision and faith tradition, and affirmation of the value of congregational life *beyond* its usefulness for political engagement;
- competence: organizers who are skilled artisans in training leaders to successfully practice relational organizing, accountability, and other leadership skills are simply more valuable to clergy as partners in ministry than are less capable organizers.

Beyond this, clergy spoke of the great value of organizers who have developed sufficient maturity and professionalism to function as their peers. Many clergy interviewees—including all who had most successfully parlayed FBCO engagement into building stronger congregations—reported that experienced organizers were among their most valuable collaborators in ministry. In contrast, inexperienced organiz-

ers were often reported to lack the confidence and to be too easily intimidated by clerical authority to enter into the dynamic and mutually challenging clergy-organizer relationships associated with strong congregational development. These organizers, in turn, rarely reported having such charged, mutually accountable relationships with clergy.

In general, the organizers most successful at congregational development saw their roles as fully embracing *both* the “external” and “internal” dimensions of congregational organizing. That is, they were fully committed to helping move congregations toward political action on issues of concern to their communities *and* to crafting an organizing process designed explicitly to strengthen congregations as institutions. In two strong cases, congregations had hired organizers as internal staff focused primarily on congregational development, but even in this arrangement organizers saw political action as part of their work.

Finally, we identified six broad approaches to congregational development among the organizers and organizations studied; these crosscut the various organizing networks and occur in various combinations within particular FBCO organizations:

- Approaches emphasizing internal organizing “campaigns”: the strategic use of time to create a more focused organizing effort within the congregation, often linked to the rhythms of its particular faith tradition.
- Approaches emphasizing small groups: the use of congregationally-linked small groups such as faith reflection groups, Bible studies, justice affinity groups, *comunidades eclesiales de base*, or prayer groups as an enduring foundation for the organizing effort.
- Approaches emphasizing local action: regular engagement in political action sponsored at the most local level—by individual or small clusters of congregations—in order to maximize the breadth of leadership development.
- Culturally based approaches: the creation of linkages between the organizing effort and salient cultural themes to which constituents are committed. Most common are strongly faith-focused strategies linked explicitly to the faith traditions of sponsoring congregations, especially through worship, scripture, and denominational social teachings. But we also encountered approaches based in strongly Afro-centric cultural themes.
- Approaches emphasizing agitation: the use of particularly strong practices of challenge and accountability among participating clergy or within clergy-organizer relationships.
- Approaches that assume that “just doing the organizing” will benefit congregations: reliance on an assumption among some practitioners that the standard practices of community organizing will automatically benefit congregations.

While some degree of leadership development does appear to occur under the last approach, a striking finding of the study is that such development rarely aggregates into significant congregational development, much less catalyzes the impressive congregational transformations reported under the strongest exemplars. The latter resulted from explicit pursuit of congregational development, often including some combination of the first five approaches along with other elements of the constellation of factors reported above.

## **Obstacles to Successful Congregational Development**

The FBCO/congregation relationship is a deeply challenging and complex endeavor that is not always successful at generating congregational development. Hindrances to greater success include:

- Factors within congregations: resistance to core principles and practices of faith-based community organizing within the religious culture of congregations undermines congregational development linked to FBCO work. Such resistance commonly arises from several conditions: a presumption that building a stronger congregation is necessarily divorced from work for social justice; the over-spiritualization of societal problems; cultural norms that distort religious teachings by emphasizing “niceness at all costs;” a sense that holding one another accountable for commitments vaguely violates religious values; and particular common weaknesses among lay leaders and clergy.
- Factors within FBCO organizations: a commonly cited obstacle to congregational development under this model was a shortage of organizers with the requisite skills and a clear commitment to congregational development and professional growth. This sometimes leads to such a high ratio of congregations to organizers that even the best organizers cannot focus sufficient attention on individual congregations to parlay the tools of organizing into effective development. This is sometimes exacerbated when FBCO groups focus on exerting power in broader geographical areas or higher political arenas, if they do not simultaneously cultivate strong local work in congregations. In our view, this is not an argument against larger-scale organizing, but for doing so with concomitant attention to strong local organizing in congregations. Also cited was a common imbalance between external issue work and internal relational organizing.
- Factors that bridge congregations and FBCO organizations: some new leaders become so enamored of political action that they fail to apply newly-acquired skills to organizing within their congregations. Conversely, some new leaders fully embrace relational organizing but keep it within the sheltered confines of familiar social ties within their congregation. If maximal congregational development is to occur, both types need to be challenged to engage in “public work” both within and beyond their congregations; that challenge can come from organizers, clergy, or experienced lay leaders – or ideally from all three. A second commonly cited “bridging” obstacle to fuller congregational development was the weakness of the organizer-clergy relationship; this too can and should be addressed from both sides of the congregation-FBCO partnership.

Through both the political and congregational faces of organizing, clergy and lay leaders are discovering that not only is it possible, it can be personally enlivening and organizationally effective to fulfill their faith traditions’ social justice mandates through FBCO work. Both congregations and local FBCO organizations, in turn, benefit from the national and regional organizing networks, denominational leaders, and foundation staff who sustain this work from the background. Our hope is that the findings reported here will stimulate further interest and catalyze discussion among all the stakeholders regarding how congregations, faith traditions, and FBCO groups can flourish through their engagement in the democratic work so desperately needed by American society.

# INTRODUCTION

When Fr. Dan Finn arrived at St. Mark the Evangelist Catholic Church in the Dorchester section of Boston in 1993, the parish faced an uncertain future. Once a hub of Irish Catholic power in Boston city politics, the parish had been eviscerated by the white flight out of Boston that followed the introduction of widespread public school busing. The neighborhoods surrounding the parish became a primary point of arrival for new immigrants to the United States, and the parish fragmented into Vietnamese, Cape Verdean, Irish and Irish American, Haitian, West African, and Central American components. Furthermore, neighborhood diversity and changes in American civic life meant that St. Mark's was no longer the hub of the community. Though it still provided worship services and ministry for people's private lives, the parish had lost its place of public influence and had Balkanized into separate language groups with little trust in one another.

With an eye to *“the survival and future growth”* of the parish, Fr. Finn started working with faith-based community organizers Lew Finfer and the late Jim Drake, who were in the process of launching what Finn calls *“a broad-based, faith-based organization”* in the greater Boston area. In Fr. Finn's words, *“I began to see this as something I was waiting for, like a train to come in. So I got on board.”* Through his early organizing experiences, he developed a vision for strengthening the congregation as a whole through the tools he saw in the organizing process. To work with members in cultivating those tools, Fr. Finn brought in an experienced organizer, Julia Greene.<sup>2</sup> With training from Greene and later from organizer Andrea Sheppard, lay leaders began to engage in regular campaigns of “one-on-one meetings” that bridged the ethnic and linguistic boundaries of the congregation. Using an approach that incorporates the “principles and practices” of the faith-based community organizing process within the rhythms of congregational life, Greene and trained lay leaders held a series of post-worship meetings in which participants acted out scripture readings and, as Fr. Finn noted, *“applied them to what we were doing in the organizing campaign...It gives a whole other dimension and meaning to why we do what we do.”* Through this and other strategies, over the course of five years the congregation has brought in “scores” of new members, forged ties of trust between its diverse ethnic groups, and perhaps saved itself from being shut down. As Fr. Finn notes, *“With so many Catholic parishes being consolidated and closed here, we probably would not exist now if it wasn't for our internal organizing work.”* Not only has a congregation been salvaged, but through this work and its ties to GBIO, the local faith-based community organizing group, St. Mark's has regained a central role in community life and a public voice in the city of Boston.

## **Strengthening Congregations through Civic Engagement**

The experience of the St. Mark congregation suggests that faith communities need not choose between growing stronger *as faith communities* or being effectively engaged in American civic life. Working with a model of civic engagement that is consonant with congregational life—as faith-based community organizing is, when done well—it is possible for clergy and lay leaders to contribute simultaneously to democratic life *and* to strengthening their congregations. As we will argue below, it matters less whether a particular congregation is Catholic, Pentecostal, Jewish, Protestant, Unitarian/Universalist, Evangelical, Islamic, or

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<sup>2</sup> Note that Greene and Sheppard had recently finished an intensive and creative organizer-training course run by Dr. Marshall Ganz at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government; the congregational development used at St. Mark's and described later draws important elements from Ganz' work. Greene and Sheppard now work with the Organizing Leadership and Training Center and the InterValley Project, respectively.

one of the other traditions that form the American religious landscape, than that participants adopt practices and promote dynamics that bring the benefits of civic engagement back to the congregation. But doing that successfully is not easy. The Congregational Development Research Study sought to mine the experience of faith communities and community organizations across the United States to understand how civic engagement through faith-based community organizing best contributes to congregational development, and why, in some cases, it fails to do so.

### **Why Focus on Congregational Development Now?**

Through a series of conferences, workshops, and informal conversations in 2000-2001, Interfaith Funders disseminated the results of a previous study of the national profile of faith-based community organizing.<sup>3</sup> At those events, key FBCO funders, sponsors, and participants repeatedly asked about the impact this form of civic engagement has on its sponsoring religious congregations. These questions were difficult to answer: anecdotal reports existed of congregations impressively transformed by their experiences in this work, but also of congregations undermined by it. Little was known about the reliability or representativity of such accounts, since the FBCO-congregation relationship had not been studied systematically.

In undertaking the Congregational Development Research Study, we were also motivated by previous research, which had analyzed the conditions for democratic effectiveness of FBCO work through case studies of particular settings;<sup>4</sup> documented the national reach of the FBCO field;<sup>5</sup> and studied its intersection with race and race-based community organizing.<sup>6</sup> But most of these studies focused on particularly strong exemplars of the field; the “average” political efficacy of a typical FBCO organization is no doubt lower than that portrayed in this literature. Striking to us was the fact that some of the most dynamic organizing appeared to occur where organizers and clergy collaborated to intimately link the political work of organizing to the religious experience of congregational members. Something important seemed to be at stake in that linkage, and we suspected that heightening the democratic impact of faith-based community organizing — both on local public policy and in higher-level arenas at the regional, state-wide, and national levels — required paying careful attention to the relationship between FBCO groups and their sponsoring congregations. The CDRS represents the first rigorous, systematic, and nationwide look at that relationship.

More broadly, we believe that three current trends make it worthwhile for religious leaders, foundation staff, and professional organizers to think deeply about the relationship between congregational development and faith-based community organizing. First, the sharply divided American political parties

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<sup>3</sup> See the national study sponsored by Interfaith Funders: Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood (2001) *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field, 2001*. Jericho, New York, Interfaith Funders.

<sup>4</sup> On the democratic effectiveness of FBCO organizing, see Rob Kleidman (1994) in *Social Problems* 41: 601-620; Stephen Hart (2001) *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics*, University of Chicago Press; Heidi Swartz (2001) in *States, Parties, and Social Movements: Protest and the Dynamics of Institutional Change*, Jack Goldstone, ed., Cambridge University Press; Mark R. Warren (2001) *Dry Bones Rattling*, Princeton University Press; Richard L. Wood (2002) *Faith in Action*, University of Chicago Press; and Paul Osterman (2003) *Gathering Power*, Beacon Press.

<sup>5</sup> On the national reach and infrastructure of faith-based community organizing see Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren (2003) "A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics: Social Capital and Community Organizing in the Public Arena." *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy* 22:11/12, 6-54; see also Interfaith Funders, op cit.

<sup>6</sup> On issues of race and community organizing, see Wood, op cit. and Omar McRoberts (2003). *Streets of Glory*, University of Chicago Press.

continue to search for ways to root their appeal within the fertile soil of American faith communities. Such active civic engagement will be in keeping with the role played by religious congregations of all kinds in American history, but congregational leaders may want to ensure that it contributes to the thriving of their faith communities. Second, recent studies (see footnotes 4 and 5) make clear that the political efficacy of faith-based community organizing is heavily dependent on its sponsoring congregations. Thus, any of us who care about the long-term democratic impact of this work must think not only about building powerful organizations, but also about nurturing the roots of any such power—roots that grow in thriving faith communities. Third, devolution of political authority to states under the “new federalism” has prompted FBCO efforts to strive to shape state-level policy as well as launch new initiatives to “move issues” on the national level. These efforts to project power on a larger scale represent an historic opportunity—impacting social policy at the state and national levels is essential if systemic change is to be accomplished on basic quality-of-life issues such as living wages and health care. At the same time, that opportunity is perhaps the greatest potential challenge FBCO has faced. Faith-based community organizing has from its origins emphasized its “localness,” and it has not been tested at the national scale, especially vis-à-vis its impact on congregations. This study catches some early glimpses of the potential benefits and costs to member congregations as FBCO organizations expand their influence beyond neighborhoods and cities. Future studies should focus on this dynamic, but our initial assessment is that larger-scale projection of power can either enhance *or* diminish the local roots of organizing, depending on *how* it is done. We think that successfully maintaining and building congregational strength *concurrent with* extending FBCO’s reach will require careful attention to the dynamics analyzed here.

# RESEARCH DESIGN

## How We Approached the Research

While the overall theme of the study is “congregational development,” we focus on the strengthening of congregations *via faith-based community organizing*. We recognize that this represents only one approach among many to strengthening congregations, but believe that this approach deserves special attention because many American religious traditions teach that building a more just society is integral to their faith, yet struggle to pursue this mandate in ways that will strengthen them *as faith communities*. Faith-based community organizing holds unique potential in this regard for three reasons. First, because faith-based community organizing lives or dies on the practice of relationship-building it can easily support one of the primary measures of congregational development—increased relationality. A second feature of this approach is the commitment to finding and training grass-roots leadership *within* their institutions. As we will see, lay leaders who become involved and gain skills in the context of their faith communities often contribute new skills to congregational, as well as organizing work—another measure of congregational development. Lastly, the nature of the FBCO process is public; emerging leaders understand and experience from the beginning of the process that one’s self-interest *and* the greater good are best served by unwrapping one’s faith for a broadened public life.<sup>7</sup>

This project is built upon a research orientation that combines elements of the “extended case method,” “action research,” and “analytic ethnography” approaches to social research. This orientation emphasizes generation of new insights into specific societal dynamics and social problems, rather than generalizability to all of society. Thus, although we took significant pains to assure the broad representativity of the congregations we studied ([www.unm.edu/~religion/congregationaldevelopment.html](http://www.unm.edu/~religion/congregationaldevelopment.html)), we did not strive for the kind of “random probability sample” of congregations that would allow us to determine, for example, the precise spread of weak, medium, and strong congregational development nationally. Rather, we wanted to discern the key dynamics that *lead to* strong FBCO-driven congregational development. This necessitated fairly in-depth fieldwork in a relatively small number of congregations. A random probability study would have required collecting more superficial data from a much larger sample of congregations—which in turn would have precluded the fieldwork needed to achieve our objectives.

This has important implications for the kinds of claims we make here. For example, though we did evaluate congregations as strong, medium, or weak for congregational development, the reader will search in vain for an accounting of where particular congregations fell on that ranking; and although we will comment upon the particular “spread” of strong vs. medium vs. weak congregational development we found, this should be interpreted with caution. The “spread” we encountered is only partly a result of what exists among participating congregations. It is also a *product of our research design*. Among the findings of this study, it was the key dynamics through which faith-based community organizing can generate real congregational development that we think the reader will find most illuminating.

Like all research, this project has limitations, in this case reflecting these assumptions and orientations. While we believe the strengths of the approach we adopted—the insight into key dynamics behind the FBCO-congregation relationship, the congregational illustrations and “feel” for organizing and spiritual experience we were able to elicit from participants, and the broad representativity of our interviewees—greatly outweigh its limitations, that judgment ultimately belongs to the reader.

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<sup>7</sup> Throughout the report, the term “leaders” refers to clergy and lay leaders, except where the context makes clear that it refers only to lay leaders.



## The Logic Model

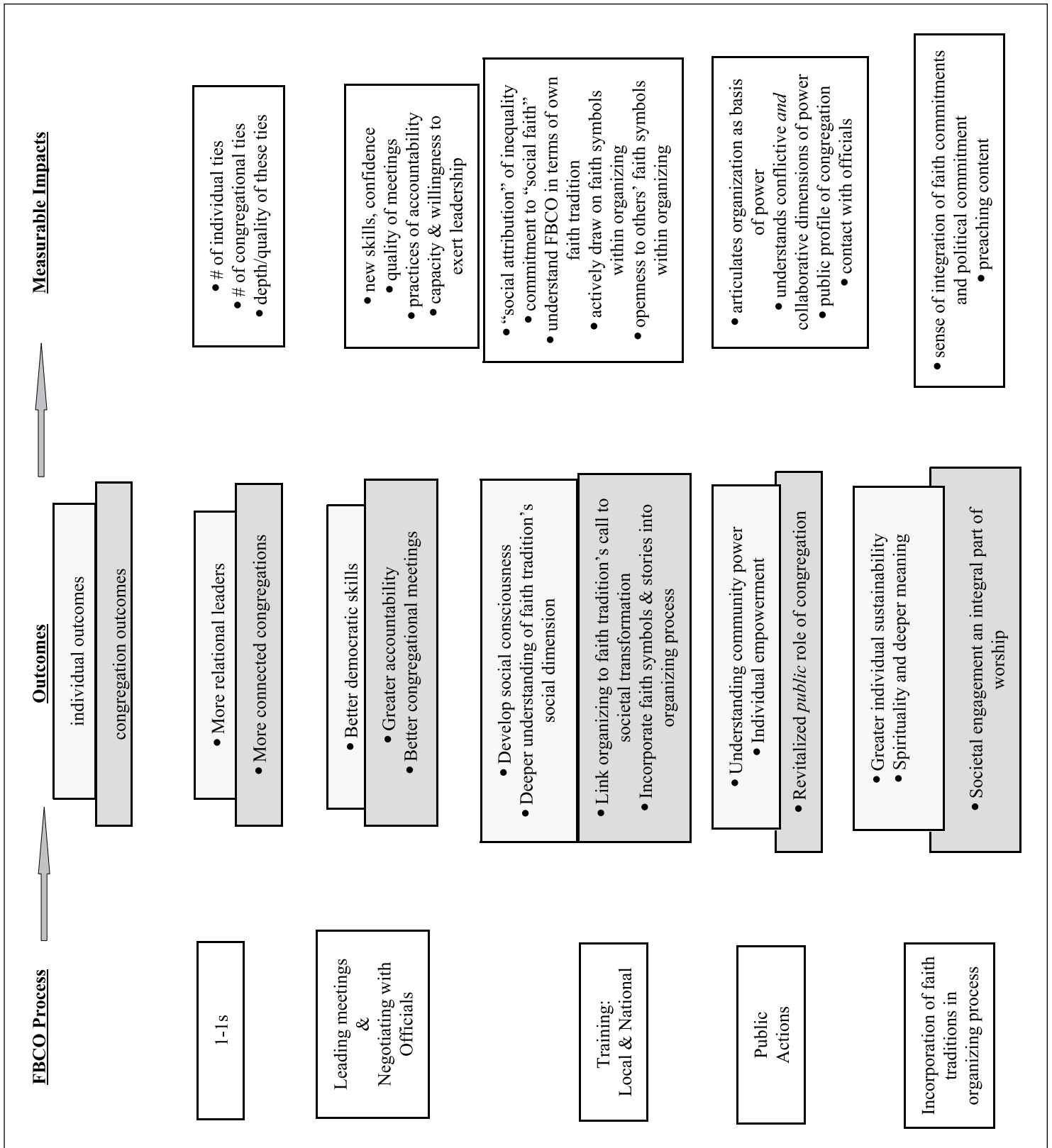


Figure 1

## **Logic Model: How Might FBCO Generate Congregational Development?**

Whether and how faith-based community organizing can contribute significantly to congregational development of course depends a great deal on what one means by “strengthening of congregations” or “congregational development.” For the purposes of the study, “*Congregational Development*” (CD) means the growth of members as multi-faceted leaders within their congregations and the strengthening of congregations as institutions. For individuals this includes gaining leadership skills useful in congregational life and the public arena, deepening engagement in congregational life, and strengthening understanding of the connections between the faith tradition’s call to social justice and the work of faith-based community organizing. For congregations, this includes building relationships between groups and individuals within the congregation, creating connections to other congregations and community/corporate/government organizations, deepening linkages between worship life and the congregation’s presence in the wider social world, transforming congregational culture to be more relational and accountable, and potentially increasing membership.

Figure 1, the Logic Model, represents schematically an initial understanding of how the standard elements of the faith-based community organizing process (left column) *might* plausibly lead to specific outcomes (middle column, divided into individual and congregational-level outcomes), and what measurable impacts (right column) might offer evidence that such outcomes are in fact occurring (or not). Note that “measurable” here sometimes means quantifiable and sometimes means assessable via more qualitative and interpretive means based on interview evidence. In the following sections, we look for the kinds of impacts listed in the right-hand column—keeping in mind that these are intended to “get at” the more fundamental outcomes of interest in the middle column.

## **Research Process and Methodology**

To study congregational development through faith-based community organizing, we did fieldwork in forty-five religious congregations including Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopalian, Jewish, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Unitarian/Universalist, Unity, Muslim, and non-denominational/evangelical (for a complete list see website). A few were highly multiracial, while the others constituted a rich mix of majority Latino, African-American, black Caribbean, or white/European congregants. In the field, researchers observed congregations in action and conducted hour-long interviews with lay leaders, clergy, and organizers from congregations belonging to thirteen faith-based community organizing groups at sites around the country. We used a random-number protocol to select seven sites from an exhaustive list of the 160 FBCO organizations as of 2001. We selected the remaining six sites in order to achieve appropriate representativity across networks, geographic regions, areas of contrasting racial and ethnic demographics, size of organization, length of organizational presence, and political efficacy (see website for fuller details). The sites are:

<b><u>Organization</u></b>	<b><u>Abbreviation</u></b>	<b><u>Location</u></b>	<b><u>Network</u></b>
Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches	LAM	Los Angeles	RCNO
San Diego Organizing Project	SDOP	San Diego	PICO
Valley Interfaith	VI	Texas	IAF
People Acting for Community Together	PACT	Miami	DART
Isaiah	n/a	Minnesota	Gamaliel

Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good	MACG	Portland, OR	IAF
Building Responsibility, Equality and Dignity	BREAD	Columbus, OH	DART
All Congregations Together	ACT	New Orleans	PICO
Camden Churches Organized for People	CCOP	Camden, NJ	PICO
Metropolitan Alliance of Congregations	MAC	Chicago	Gamaliel
Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength	MOSES	Detroit	Gamaliel
Greater Boston Interfaith Organization	GBIO	Boston	IAF
Los Angeles Metropolitan Strategies	LA Metro	Los Angeles	IAF

We contacted the director or lead organizer for each organization, described our research intentions and the joint Interfaith Funders/University of New Mexico/Ford Foundation sponsorship of the project, and requested their facilitation of the research. Using lead organizers to reach our sampling frame ran the risk of getting a skewed sample of congregations, but this approach had the strong advantage of overcoming difficulties of research access; in the end, all thirteen organizations in our sample readily agreed to participate and facilitate our entrée into congregations. We asked the lead organizers to *nominate* two or three congregations from their organizations at *each* of the following levels: congregations showing strong FBCO-led congregational development, more “typical” congregations in which community organizing has taken root but which are not exemplary in this regard, and congregations in which the organizing effort has had only a “weak impact.” To mitigate potential self-interest on the part of organizers in only giving us access to strong examples of their work, we also emphasized our deep familiarity with the field, noted our primary emphasis not on “grading” their work but rather on understanding its internal dynamics, and promised that particularly weak examples would not be identified with a particular locality. As noted below, we believe this strategy largely overcame the potential representativity problems. Researchers then selected one congregation from each of these levels to actually include in the study, seeking a sampling of congregations across the thirteen sites that would be broadly representative of faith-based community organizing as a whole on race-ethnic and denominational lines, but with over sampling of faith traditions of particular strategic or intellectual interest to the researchers. The latter included Jewish, evangelical/Pentecostal, Lutheran, and Muslim congregations.

Between June 2002 and May 2003, a graduate student research associate spent five to six days at each of the thirteen sites. After initial overviews of the research site and organization given by the local organizing staff, researchers spent most of the field research interviewing clergy, lay leaders, and organizers involved in the local FBCO and the selected congregations (see website for semi-structured interview schedules and written surveys). In addition, some time was spent as participant-observers in worship services and/or organizing meetings. In a few sites with longer research visits, we studied more than three congregations, which yielded a total sampling of 45 congregations.

Ultimately, we gathered enough data from 36 congregations to include in the full analysis. We considered evidence for improvement in each of the areas noted above, using evaluative criteria from the logic model and drawing on internal evidence from the interviews. In interpreting individual interviews, we sought to understand the key dynamics that our interviewees—immersed in the work of organizing—considered important in advancing or hindering their work, but also to discern patterns within the organizing effort that might escape any individual respondent. We sought confirmatory information from different interviewees in a particular congregation as well as confirmatory insight across different congregations and sites.

During the research fieldwork, we also asked our three primary categories of interviewees to fill out a written survey following the semi-structured interview. In keeping with our logic model, clergy and lay leaders were asked to: 1) provide details on the organizing effort in their congregation (frequency of meetings, contact with organizers, dues paid, levels of their own participation, etc); 2) provide details on the primary and secondary leaders of the organizing effort in their congregation; 3) describe their contact with institutional leaders *beyond* their own congregation; and 4) assess via Likert scales (ratings of 1-5) their individual leadership capacities, as well as the contribution of the organizing effort to those capacities and the strengthening of their congregations. Organizers were asked similar questions regarding #1 and #2 above, but regarding *each* congregation included in our sample. Ultimately, we gained written data from 25 out of the 34 clergy members we interviewed (73%) and 93 of the 98 lay leaders interviewed (95%). From organizers, we gained written data on 28 congregations (62% of the 45 congregations in the total study; 78% of the 36 congregations on which we ultimately gained sufficient data to reliably assess strength of congregational development). However, this data came from only 13 of the 39 organizers interviewed (33%), a low-enough response rate to raise some concerns regarding interpretation of the written survey data from organizers, which we therefore draw on judiciously.

### **Representativity of Interviewees and Survey Respondents**

Since we draw on both interview quotations and quantitative survey data in this report, and because the profiles of the interviewees and survey respondents differ (not all interviewees filled out written surveys), we analyzed their representativity separately by comparing the respondents with what we know about the national field. Overall, that analysis suggests that both the interviewee and survey respondents represent quite well the broad field of faith-based community organizing, with the following caveats: 1) we intentionally over sampled some particular religious traditions for well-founded research purposes; 2) we inadvertently under sampled Latinos due to unexpected developments during the research fieldwork (for which we will strive to compensate analytically below, with some limitations); and 3) we had a low response rate from organizers to the written survey (but not the interviews), which introduces significant uncertainty to our interpretation of organizer survey responses.

Table 2: Representativity of CDRS Interviewees

	<u>CDRS Interviewees</u>	<u>National Comparison<sup>1</sup></u>
<u>Religious tradition:</u>		
Jewish	7.5%	2.0%
Unitarian/Universalist	2.0	2.0
Muslim	2.0	---
Catholic	34.0	33.0
Episcopalian	1.5	6.5
Lutheran	15.0	8.0
Methodist	4.0	9.0
Presbyterian	6.0	6.0
Pentecostal	7.0	2.0
Baptist	16.0	16.0
Other Christian	2.0	14.0
Other non-Christian	3.5	0.6
<u>Gender:</u>		
Male	49.0%	49.0%
Female	51.0%	51.0
<u>FBCO Network Affiliation:</u>		
DART	17%	8%
Gamaliel Foundation	21	21
IAF	35	35
PICO	21	21
RCNO/other/independent	6	14
<u>Race/ethnicity:<sup>2</sup></u>		
African-American	30.0%	32.0%
Asian-American/SE Asian	2.0	2.0
Hispanic/Latino	11.5	21.0
White	50.0	43.0
Multiracial	6.0	1.0
<u>Role of respondent:</u>		
Clergy	20%	
Leader	55%	
Organizer	23%	
Other	2%	

<sup>1</sup> National data from Wood and Warren 2002, also reported in Warren and Wood 2001. Note that the national comparison data analyzes *congregations* participating in FBCO, not *individuals*. Nevertheless, this is the best comparison data available, as it comes from the only national study of the field.

<sup>2</sup> Race/ethnicity data here are problematic, in that we did not ask respondents to self-identify their race/ethnicity. In many cases, they did so during the course of interviews; in the other cases we list them according to the researchers' assessment. This has obvious limitations. Also, note that the national comparison data for race/ethnicity and gender of FBCO participants are from data reported *by organizers* for the members of their *Boards of Directors*—not for participants as a whole. These data are thus only useful for rough comparison.

# EVIDENCE OF FBCO-DRIVEN CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The CDRS generated two kinds of evidence for congregational development: quantitative evidence as measured in surveys and qualitative evidence as evoked through interviews and participant-observation. In many ways, we regard the qualitative evidence as the most valuable, in that during fieldwork we were better able to elicit participants' insight into the key dynamics shaping the congregation-FBCO relationship as well as assess information within the local context. However, the survey-based data offers advantages of its own, including its more systematic character and consequent ability to characterize the field as a whole. We thus include here both the key survey-based evidence and some qualitative evidence for FBCO-linked congregational development. We group this data in four categories: relationships (social capital), leadership development (democratic skills and other capital), faith links (cultural connections between religious commitment and public life), and power and public presence.

Before examining the key dynamics that can lead to congregational development driven by the faith-based community organizing process, we need to establish whether such development is indeed a possible outcome of this work, and how common it might be. For the latter, we have two kinds of evidence: our own assessment of the strength of FBCO-led development in the 36 congregations for which we have good data and similar self-assessments by organizers and clergy in the study. After considering our evidence, we rated eight of the thirty-six congregations as “strong” on FBCO-led congregational development (22%); seventeen congregations as “medium” (47%); and eleven congregations as “weak” (31%) on congregational development. The organizers and clergy scored their own congregations somewhat higher, though not dramatically so. When asked to rate the “overall contribution of organizing work to congregational development” in congregations on a scale from 1 to 5 (1=no difference, 3=some contribution, 5=powerful contribution), they responded as follows:

**By organizers (median = 3.0):**

Congregations rated 1: 8%  
Congregations rated 2: 16%  
Congregations rated 3: 38%  
Congregations rated 4: 11%  
Congregations rated 5: 27%

**By clergy (median = 4.0):**

Congregations rated 1: 5%  
Congregations rated 2: 0%  
Congregations rated 3: 41%  
Congregations rated 4: 18%  
Congregations rated 5: 36%

Thus, clergy appear to be rather satisfied with the contribution of faith-based community organizing to their congregations—or perhaps overly inclined to report positive outcomes to their own efforts. Organizers are a little less optimistic in this regard, and we as researchers still less so, at least in part because we insisted on seeing concrete evidence of congregational development in order to credit it as such. Still, in all these assessments, only between a fifth and a bit more than a third of congregations are benefiting powerfully from their engagement in this work—and recall that we *requested* that a third of congregations be strong examples of congregational development. We think our research-based assessment and the organizers' assessments are closest to the mark—and even in the most optimistic (in our judgment, overly optimistic) view of clergy, perhaps as many as half of participating congregations are benefiting quite significantly. In any case, very substantial room exists for improving the impact of this work on sponsoring congregations. If properly exploited, that room for improvement could dramatically strengthen participating congregations as worshiping communities and sources of civic renewal *and*, we believe, increase the long-term power of community organizing.

We turn next to examine the detailed evidence of congregational development in the four areas of relationality, leadership development, faith links, and public presence.

## **Relationships as Social Capital**

Social capital refers to the texture of social ties that undergird shared life in any society and includes both the density or quantity of relationships and the quality of those ties. How social capital is best conceptualized, measured, generated within society, and sustained over time are all much debated by scholars; here we will pay particular attention to two aspects of social capital, both of which are generally seen as important contributors to effectiveness in civil society: 1) relationships inside of congregations (bonding social capital); and 2) relationships linking congregational members to individuals and organizations beyond the congregation (bridging social capital).

### **Internal congregational relationships**

In assessing FBCO's contribution to building internal congregational relationships, we draw particularly on the qualitative data, for two reasons: first, the fact that so many people in congregations know one another would have made it difficult to "tease out" any FBCO contribution numerically; second, the fact that we could not study congregations over a long period of time meant we could not assess a congregation's number of internal social ties before and after its engagement in FBCO work. Instead, we examine participants' reports of changes in the internal relationality of their congregations.

In smaller congregations, the lay leaders often knew one another at least superficially apart from the organizing effort; there, the primary contribution from faith-based community organizing lies in strengthening these pre-existing ties through the trust, deeper acquaintance, and shared civic engagement generated through one-to-one meetings (one person to one person meetings used to discover interests and concerns) and political action. In larger congregations, lay leaders often did *not* know one another at all, or only superficially, prior to the organizing work. There, the use of the faith-based community organizing process, particularly systematic one-to-one campaigns, can contribute to congregational development by generating new social ties between previously isolated groups and individuals. As Fr. Paul Vassar, a clergyperson in a prior study noted in urging the organizing effort forward, "*don't underestimate the impact of having eight or ten of you working together around this table, on things that matter in the world...That does not happen that often in this congregation.*"

Rev. Jeffrey Kee of New Faith Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio reported changes typical of congregations rated high and medium for CD. When he was asked, "Has BREAD built or deepened relationships in your congregation?" he responded:

Without a doubt. It's a metamorphosis going on, because we find more people now who are thinking about relationships more, and the importance of a one-to-one...We find some people who have really gravitated to that, and it's helped our church immensely.

Other congregations had used one-to-ones as the cornerstone of an "in-reach" effort (i.e. to reach into the congregation to build relationships and support, as opposed to outreach efforts); leaders from these congregations responded to the same question above by saying, "*Absolutely, relationships have been built and deepened through the in-reach.*" and "*Very much so. That probably has been one of the most valuable aspects of our involvement with Isaiah.*" Many leaders spoke about their experience of one-to-ones as increasing both the number of social ties they draw on inside the congregation, the quality of those ties, and the changes they can lead to in a congregation. One such case was King of Kings Lutheran Church in Portland. One leader from King of Kings didn't know the term "one-to-one," but described whole church committees engaging in them, based on a new church mission statement emphasizing this, which led to

a reorganization of the whole committee structure. Another leader related that it was a good thing for the congregation to have “*one other period in the year where we invite congregation members here and have a topic for discussion and do a lot of one-to-ones and get people to tell their stories.*” Finally, another leader emphasized the intentionality with which members did one-to-ones over two consecutive years, attributed the congregation’s increase in relationships to that intentionality, and noted that the congregation was shocked to find out through the one-to-ones that many of their members were not as “fine”—as in “how are you?” “I’m fine” conversations after worship – as had always been assumed. This led to deep conversations about concerns and community issues, such as homelessness.

All this demonstrates that under the right circumstances, and with an eye toward strengthening its sponsoring institutions – faith-based community organizing can have an important positive impact on the network of relationships within congregations. In the “Role of Lay Leaders” section we examine the dynamics that generate this positive impact, and in the “Obstacles” section we discuss the dynamics that hinder the cultivation of more and deeper internal congregational relationships.

### **Broader relationships beyond the congregation**

Whereas building social ties within a congregation serves to strengthen the internal fabric, building congregational members’ social ties *beyond* the congregation seeks to extend its potential influence, sphere of activity, and public profile to wider constituencies. To prevent any organization from becoming isolated from its wider societal milieu, sociologists consider such ties crucial. Particularly valuable are ties that link a congregation to institutions and institutional leaders in society. At a time of many commuter congregations with little sense of connection to their physical settings, ties that link congregations to the neighborhoods surrounding their buildings may also be important.

In surveying lay leaders in congregations, we asked, “How many leaders from congregations other than your own are you reasonably well acquainted with?” The median respondent identified ten such congregational leaders, and attributed almost all of the new ties to the organizing effort. Likewise, when asked “How many leaders within non-religious institutions (schools, labor unions, community organizations) are you reasonably well-acquainted with?” the median respondent identified five such institutional leaders, and said that nearly half of those relationships were forged through the faith-based organizing effort. In response to a similar question regarding ties to “political officials (elected or appointed),” the median respondent reported knowing five political officials—more than half of them through the organizing effort. This provides initial evidence—to be further assessed via qualitative evidence—that faith-based community organizing sometimes contributes to building bridging social capital that links congregations to other faith communities, civic institutions, and the political sphere.<sup>8</sup>

Clergy also were asked on the written survey, “How many other clergy members from outside your own denomination are you reasonably well acquainted with?” (the caveat “outside your own denomination” seeks to exclude the intra-denominational clergy networks we assume exist independently of any involvement in organizing work.) On average, clergy reported sixteen such clergy acquaintances, with 70% reported as known “primarily through the community organizing effort.” When asked “to what

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<sup>8</sup> Note that in discussing data for average respondents, we report the *median* figures; if we use mean figures – closer to the everyday understanding of “average” – the numbers are much higher: 21 social ties to leaders in other congregations, 22 ties to institutional leaders, and 8 ties to political officials. This results from some respondents – especially those long active as high-profile leaders in FBCOs with significant influence in their cities’ political arenas – reporting very large numbers of social ties to each of these groups.



extent would you say the community organizing effort has helped improve the depth or quality of these clergy relations?,” on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = none, 3=some, 5=a great deal) the mean response was 4.2, suggesting that clergy readily credit the organizing effort for deepening these relationships.

When asked how many “leaders within non-religious institutions (schools, labor unions, community organizations) and how many political officials they were reasonably well acquainted with,” the median clergy respondent reported knowing twenty institutional leaders and twelve political officials reasonably well, and that they knew 65% of each group primarily through the FBCO effort. On one hand, such figures might seem unsurprising; as the key organizational leaders in the religious institutions that often are portrayed as key players in the history of American civil society, we might expect clergy to carry such large numbers of social ties to other institutional and political leaders. On the other hand, the fact that clergy reported two-thirds of their institutional and political ties were forged through the faith-based community organizing effort suggests that this effort may be a key way that clergy are reclaiming this historical role in public life.

We regard all of the above as important evidence, but caution against being too sanguine about the social capital thus generated. Even as we argue for the importance of “bonding” social capital internal to congregations, we and other scholars have noted the importance of linking it to bridging social capital that connects disparate groups.<sup>9</sup> On this, congregations do less well. When we consider individual clergy responses, nearly half of the clergy reported *no* African-American leaders in their congregations, while about 36% reported *only* African-American leaders. Likewise, almost a quarter of clergy reported *only* white leaders, and 45% reported *no* white leaders. Finally, four-fifths of clergy reported *no* Hispanic leaders, while ten percent reported *only* Hispanic leaders. Very similar patterns were reported by lay leaders and by organizers – strengthening our conclusion that within a congregation, much of the social capital does not bridge between racial groups at all, and that FBCO has the potential to generate powerful bridging social capital *only* when congregations work together at the citywide level.

So FBCO organizations must constantly strive to avoid being too beholden to the bonding social capital of individual congregations; although (as we will argue below), taking political action at the most local, congregational level is important for fostering other dimensions of congregational development. American congregations remain places where members mostly gather with others from their own ethnic groups. To build bridging social capital, faith-based community organizing *must* balance such local action with collaboration and action at higher levels, where participants draw on levels of racial and ethnic diversity that are extraordinary in American political life.

Thus, we have good evidence that FBCO work strengthens the social capital embedded in congregations and that, by forging bridging social capital in particular, faith-based community organizing helps its sponsoring religious congregations link up to other interests in the wider civil society and public sphere. But keeping the right balance between vigorous internal work within congregations and building strong linkages outward to other congregations, civic institutions, and the political arena requires discerning leadership from organizers, clergy, and lay leaders.

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<sup>9</sup> For the distinction between bridging and bonding social capital, see Robert D. Putnam (2000) *Bowling Alone*, Simon & Schuster; Mark R. Warren, J. Phillip Thompson, and Susan Saegert (2001) in *Social Capital and Poor Communities*, edited by Saegert, Thompson and Warren, Russell Sage Foundation Press; and Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren (2003), *op cit*. For a critique of the social capital concept, see Michael Foley and Bob Edwards (1997) in *American Behavioral Scientist* 40:5-21. Leaders of the FBCO effort in a particular congregation typically know one another, so we here consider the demographic profiles of participants as constituting social capital.

## **Leadership Development**

A second area of congregational development lies in fostering leadership skills of participants—what sociologists call the “human capital” dimensions of congregational development. In many congregations across the country, clergy and lay leaders are responding to the callings of their communities to exercise leadership both within the faith community and in the larger political arena. When asked in CDRS interviews if their leadership skills had changed through their involvement with FBCO, many interviewees (we group lay leaders and clergy together for this section) talked to us about discovering new connections: “[I’m] being transformed by the relationships that I’ve made with the people on the organizing team at Temple,” and “I got to know people more in the community, and I’ve developed trust in them and they’ve developed trust in me.” This awakening, or re-awakening to community often activated leaders’ instinctive, faith-centered beliefs in the importance of “*expanding the boundaries of ministry*” and grounded their desire to lead other congregants in a similar journey. But how widespread are these experiences of leadership development?

Our exploration of leadership development arose from a basic question—as leaders engage in faith-based community organizing in what specific ways do they change? Furthermore, our underlying assumption that strong leaders and healthy congregations can participate more fully in civic life begged the following additional questions: do changed leaders expand their civic lives and if so, how? Could we say that engagement of leaders with FBCO contributes to communities not just “social capital,” but also “leadership capital,” that is, people trained in the democratic arts and motivated to lead others to act on personal and shared values in the public arena? Or do leaders hold onto new skills primarily for personal benefit? This study allowed us to address these questions in a preliminary way, but further long-range research is needed to provide more definitive answers.

We will begin by chronicling in some detail the changes that leaders reported in two areas:

1) personal development—that is, broad changes in motivation, perspectives, or behaviors that respondents perceived as positive; and 2) acquisition of skills for organizing and civic engagement. The third area of change that leaders reported on—faith deepening—will be addressed in the section on “Faith Links.” The latter half of this discussion will focus on how these changes affected leaders’ levels of participation in the congregation and the community.

### **Personal development**

We asked leaders how they had changed as a result of their involvement with FBCO. Interviewees consistently described positive personal changes that ranged from how the organizing work “*saved my life*” and “*gave me a new life*” to simple statements like, “*I’m a stronger leader*” —though we should remember that many of our interviewees are presumably among the strongest leaders in a congregation. We begin with an interviewee from the Charismatic faith tradition who shared a striking story of reclaiming life:

My experience with CCOP gave me a life. I got into the wrong crowd... I got to be wild. I got out there-some drugs. When I got into [CCOP] and Sword of the Spirit Church they made me believe in myself... The LOC [local organizing committee] listened to me, asked me my opinion. They gave me self-esteem. They gave me purpose-like the job I have now. If I hadn’t had the leadership program in me, I wouldn’t be able to do the job I do now... CCOP taught me how to be a leader.

Two themes of self-development emerged from the interviews: 1) transcendence, i.e. discovering connections to something bigger than individualized faith, and, in some cases, feeling more accountable to that “something bigger,” whether the community, other people, or the divine; and 2) self-identity, i.e. gaining skills, confidence and voice, leading to increased self-perception as a leader.

### Transcendence

. . .it’s probably broadened my feeling of... my place in the world as a Christian. I think my world has gotten larger. In the past, I was a member of this Lutheran church. And maybe if I was thinking more broadly, I was a member of the ELCA [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America]. [Now] I am a Christian among many worship traditions.

Leader Connie Weigel, First Lutheran Church, St. Paul, MN

Leaders reported “*feeling more open to the people,*” “*having more concern for the community,*” and “*becoming more involved in community issues.*” For some leaders, gratitude for this sense of connection to a broader world led directly to a greater sense of accountability to give back. As one noted: “*I appreciate the things I have so much because I’ve [now] seen how people struggle,*” and went on to note his desire to work with others in that struggle. Several leaders talked about “*having more sense of purpose - getting to see the results.*” Rev. Donald Robinson of Mt. Moriah Baptist Church in New Orleans commented: “*[Participation with FBCO] helped to broaden my view of the ministry of the church and its relationship with the community, because traditionally we’ve been just concerned about those that come into our church house.*”

The surprise of this data is not that leaders have experienced such changes, but that the consistency of the comments implies such a low baseline experience of a “broadened view” prior to involvement in this work. Most of these leaders seem to be discovering that there is a world outside the house of worship – or at least connecting their worship to that wider world for the first time. At the risk of over generalizing, we could speculate that either there is a pandemic of parochialism in religious institutions or that many of the people who become leaders in this work have had few opportunities for extending their horizons, or have been the victims of the survival-based, market orientation of inwardly-focused institutions. At any rate, the good news is that leaders’ perspectives are broadening in ways that include explicit calls to action. The resulting experience of transcendence—of being called beyond themselves and their previously narrow world—is transformative for many leaders.

### Self-identity

Some leaders are overcoming shyness and finding new levels of confidence in themselves. Others spoke of discovering their voices, rekindling their desire to do social justice work, and finding more hope for issues that affect them personally. One leader talked about the importance of dealing with anger and how this work has helped him channel his anger into constructive outlets. Many leaders reported that fellow congregation members perceived them more as leaders, which affirmed their perceptions of themselves as capable of influencing people and contributing to congregational life. With a greater sense of capability, focus and discipline, leaders were willing to accept more responsibility, speak more assertively, and to question authority and the status quo in constructive ways. Leader Jess Greenfield from Temple Israel synagogue in Boston spoke about a fellow leader whose transformation she had witnessed:

She was involved in social justice, but is very soft-spoken...and is a little bit shy. And through her experience [with Ohel Tzedek, the FBCO effort in Temple Israel] with the storytelling mode

of organizing, I think [she] has discovered a voice that she didn't know she had before, and has become a real leader in Ohel Tzedek...through the organizing methods that GBIO brought in.

One leader described how she has changed: *"I feel a change in myself...self confidence. Just feeling at ease in a meeting...leading a Bible study."* She went on to note that she would never have led such groups prior to her work in FBCO.

Such stories—labeled “transformations” by some leaders—attest to the potential power of engagement in a process that calls people out of often-insular religious worlds and into a public life based on faith. In many cases, leaders applied newfound skills and attitudes to congregational life beyond the FBCO effort, and sometimes to professional and family life.

### **The acquisition of skills for civic life**

#### Skills for the craft of organizing

Given that implementing the FBCO principles and practices is foundational to a successful FBCO/congregation relationship, we felt it was critical to investigate whether or not leaders felt they gained these skills as a result of their involvement with the organizing effort. Interviewees discussed the value of doing “one-to-ones” as part of building relationships and how that leads to feeling connected; of growing in mutual trust of neighbors through one-to-ones; of learning that a group can accomplish things that an individual can't, and of learning how to act in the public arena. One leader said that her understanding of a leader changed from one who has the ideas and carries them out, to one who has connections and ties to people, some concerns, and skills in bringing people together. Steve Silverman, a leader from Temple Israel said: *"The things that I've learned through GBIO and Ohel Tzedek... opened up a new world for me, in terms of organizational structures, power, and the way that relationships bring power to bear upon campaigns."*

A Catholic priest answered the question “Have your leadership skills changed through your participation with FBCO?” by saying, *"Definitely. Things that you never learned in seminary. About public and private. About power analysis. How to do a relational meeting, a one-to-one."* With a striking new awareness, Frank Sanchez, a leader at St. Joseph the Worker in Texas, spoke of *"being able to [have a sense of power] with whoever I would happen to be with, whether that be local officials, a state official, or a national official, and to recognize that they do not know everything. And that sometimes you are the educator in issues that affect the community that they may not be aware of."*

In addition to the above samples of qualitative data from interviews about skills acquisition, we looked for quantitative information in the surveys. Survey responses yielded broader data on changes in several specific organizing skills, including running meetings and speaking to large public groups. Clergy reported that the FBCO effort had improved the quality of meetings generally within their congregations. On a scale of 1 to 5 (1=worse, 3=no change, 5=improved), the median score reported was a 4 (mean=4.4). They reported feeling a great deal of self-confidence when asked to lead a meeting within their congregations (mean 4.8/median 5, with 5= “very confident”), and that their FBCO work had helped them gain this confidence (mean 3.6/median 4, halfway between “some improvement” and “major improvement”). Lay leaders reported somewhat lower levels of confidence in leading congregational meetings (mean 4.2), but greater impact of FBCO in strengthening their self-confidence in this task.

On similar scales, clergy reported feeling quite confident when asked “to speak publicly at a large civic gathering” (mean 4.4/median 4), and that FBCO had contributed to this confidence (mean 4.4/median 4). Again, lay leaders reported somewhat lower levels of confidence in this leadership task (mean 3.8) but greater positive impact from the organizing effort. The distinctive patterns for clergy and lay leaders are not surprising—even prior to involvement with FBCO work, clergy have many opportunities to develop these skills, while lay leaders (especially those in low-status jobs) often do not. Nevertheless, the fact that both groups report improvements in these areas, and trace that improvement to their FBCO experience, is important evidence that this work can increase the leadership skills of participants. Indeed, several leaders told stories of how they would never speak in public, and now have led public actions in front of thousands.

Finally, our data suggests that this leadership development spreads to groups that often are less exposed to other leadership opportunities in American life. The best study of democratic skills shows that women, African-Americans and Latinos, and low-income individuals have the fewest opportunities to learn these skills at work and in voluntary organizations.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, faith-based community organizing focuses extensively on these constituencies; for example, on average the clergy respondents were able to identify by name eight “primary or secondary” leaders within their congregation’s faith-based organizing effort; of these 40% were male and 60% were female. About half the congregational efforts were predominantly female-led (more than 2/3 female leaders), about a sixth were predominantly male-led, and about a third were evenly divided between male and female leaders. Responses from organizers closely parallel these figures, suggesting that women are being exposed to leadership skills in disproportionate numbers.

Overall, leaders described significant growth in the general skills of organizing including questioning authority and the way things are, gaining the respect of political leaders, and increasing communication skills like listening and public speaking. The most prevalent responses had to do with leaders being more confident and more aware of community issues and how to address them. To what degree this increased leadership capital translates to congregations is a different question—and requires a different set of conditions, including continual opportunities for practice—that will be addressed later.

#### Embracing conflictive concepts

According to interviewees, one of the obstacles to healthy engagement of a congregation in the work of faith-based community organizing is a lack of understanding of several foundational FBCO principles, namely, “relational power,” “self-interest,” and “accountability.” Prior to FBCO training, leaders of many faith traditions often assume that “power” means a domineering model of “power over”—not something they believe their faith tradition calls them to embrace. Similarly, self-interest is often translated to mean “selfishness”—the antithesis of the call to selflessness espoused in some religious traditions. And accountability is often misunderstood as prying into someone else’s business. When done well, FBCO training can give clergy, lay leaders and organizers the keys to unlocking new, constructive interpretations of these concepts that make sense in the congregation’s particular faith framework and that equip leaders to use power as a means to effect social change. An example comes from leader José Hinojosa of Holy Spirit Catholic Church in Brownsville, Texas:

I think one of the important skills that I have learned [from the FBCO work] is the whole sense of power; that each one of us possesses power. And power in a good sense. Being able

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<sup>10</sup> See Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady (1995). *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Harvard University Press.

and capable of doing and moving and changing things. And that's one of the greatest skills that I have learned, is that whole sense of the self worth, of the confidence in self.

This realization opened the door for a leader to embrace power confidently and constructively. Many leaders now experience power as a positive element in their lives and meaningful within their spiritual traditions—a dramatic paradigm shift for many religious folks. They can now identify with a God who embraces power for good. Leader Rosalie Tristan from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church, a member of Valley Interfaith, used a scriptural illustration to describe how she experiences power when she's doing the organizing work:

It's like I'm doing the work of God. Actually, I see myself like Moses, like Moses opened up the waters, and I see myself like all these people, and then there's little old me here, addressing the public, and it's like “wow, I'm actually doing what God has asked us to do.”

A particularly conflictive concept and practice that is key to the FBCO process is “accountability.” The interviews produced highly inconsistent accounts of how accountability is understood and how it is practiced. In spite of the coverage that we know this concept receives in training and its use in relationships between organizers and leaders, it is still a troublesome principle for participants, including some who have attended national training. According to some, the religious cultural framework of their faith tradition posits accountability not as empowering someone, but as an invasive means of “checking up” on them. Others perceive the practice of accountability as showing a lack of trust for the other person. One leader asked why congregations that were already low in membership would “scare people away” by asking them to be accountable. The commonality of these responses suggests that leaders and organizers have a great deal of work to do if they want to promote disciplined and constructive approaches to accountability within their congregations.

However, interviews also provided evidence of accountability in practice in some congregations. Fr. Bart Flaar from St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in Texas described how relationship-building in their “small faith communities” allows for accountability among leaders. His understanding matches one part of the classic FBCO view of accountability: “... *so there's an expectation [that when you say something you will at least try to do it] and I will get after them if they don't.*” Fr. Dan Finn from St. Mark's described in detail the way the organizing teams hold each other (and the pastor as part of a team) responsible. He also noted that accountability was not practiced before their involvement with GBIO, but that now they are starting to integrate it, e.g. by starting and ending meetings on time, and expecting people to be there and to stay until the end. Rev. Grant Steverson at St. Matthew's Lutheran Church related that a new leader, already thinking about the need to change the church's organizational culture, came to him saying that the church council needed to be more accountable. With the pastor's encouragement, this leader created a system of accountability that is now operational in the council. Another leader reported that there was a whole lot more effort to build accountability into things like evaluating meetings. Clergy in Isaiah hold each other accountable through the clergy caucus. Fr. Michael Jacques from St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in New Orleans described a “wider-lens” understanding of accountability when he talked about integrating all the principles and practices into all ministries, “...*building community so it is accountable to itself. Empowerment and accountability go together.*”

Accountability is one of the least understood of the FBCO principles and practices, judging from interviews. This could be an important clue to the puzzle of why more congregations are not experiencing significant development. Some clergy and leaders do understand what accountability is and why it's so

critical to practice, but they face strong religious cultural resistances that make it difficult to implement, even for the convinced. Because of the moral authority they carry within congregational culture, clergy are best positioned to take the lead in creating stronger commitments to the practice of accountability.

### **Deepening congregational and community engagement**

We asked clergy and leaders how fellow leaders' involvement in the congregation and community had changed as a result of their engagement with FBCO. Regarding increased congregational involvement, a leader from Portland described a fellow leader as: *"much more involved, willing to do things, going to tell her story in public meetings. I don't think she would have done that before [involvement with MACG]."* Clergy said of lay leaders that they found their voices; they are more diligent in their leadership and are greater public speakers; they gained hard skills like taking notes and creating meeting agendas; they are better at studying literature regarding social justice; they are gaining community awareness and are more comfortable with social justice. A clergy leader from St. Paul said about a lay leader, *"[She was] somebody going from just sort of being in a bubble, maybe, to living her faith in a really meaningful way. She's clearly a leader in this congregation now."*

Many interviewees gave examples of specific applications of newly gained skills to congregational work. A pastor said of one of his new leaders: *"She's calling the council into accountability; a woman who was invisible is now...central to the life of the congregation."* Referring to the direct benefits to the congregation of his leaders' involvement with the local FBCO, Rev. Al Cooke of Fort Mission Fruits of the Holy Spirit Church in Los Angeles said, *"It allowed people to be more diligent in their leadership. Like in the different auxiliaries in the church, like the mission, the deacon board, and the usher board and the women workers. It got them more organized [with] more accountability of the office."*

And we heard about cases where leaders applied new skills in community settings well beyond the congregation. One lay leader described herself prior to her engagement with FBCO as *"...terribly fearful of public speaking since the '60s."* When she arrived at Boston's Fourth Presbyterian Church, she immediately joined the organizing effort because she wanted to learn *"...to get up in front of people and act more like a leader."* After two and a half years of involvement, she met her goal by successfully moderating an action with an audience of 110, including state representatives and senators. Kairy Walker of Fulford United Methodist Church in Miami described how his mother's skills learned in FBCO work have transferred to larger arenas:

She's a member of the choir and does all these ministries and some of the...people that she works with on a day-to-day basis benefit through the things that PACT is doing as an organization. Because of [my mom's] experience with PACT, she's now the mission person for the district for the United Methodist Church. So now she has a broader arena where the skills she learned from PACT influence and help shape some of what she's doing with social action throughout the district.

We also asked clergy and organizers whether FBCO work was pulling leaders away from congregational involvement. In response, some organizers and clergy expressed their conviction that as lay leaders engage in public work outside of the congregation, they develop self-confidence, skills and a deeper commitment to work for justice, which can strengthen their leadership within the congregation as well. But this doesn't always happen as a matter of course, and some clergy did express strong concern in this regard. At a few sites, organizers hold themselves accountable for continually agitating leaders to return these new skills back to the congregation. Where organizers do not see this as their role, it is important

for clergy to hold themselves, the lay leaders and organizers accountable for a mutually beneficial give-and-take of leadership capital.

As a whole, reports from clergy and fellow leaders confirm a strong positive connection between leadership development and participation of leaders in their congregations and communities. Perhaps because of the relational context of the FBCO process — especially where lay leaders, clergy and organizers are committed to congregational development and have healthy “agitational” relationships—many leaders do appear to contribute leadership capital, i.e. individual growth and new democratic skills, within and outside of the place of worship.

### **Faith Links**

In assessing evidence for congregational development, we also examined changes in what we call “faith links.” Faith links include congregational members’ level of commitment and connection to their broad faith tradition and/or particular worshipping community; members’ understanding and embrace of their faith tradition’s particular teachings regarding social justice and responsibility for societal reform; and, most specifically, connections between the FBCO organizing effort and the worship experience or social teachings of the congregation. If the organizing effort systematically strengthens any of these kinds of faith links, this would constitute another kind of FBCO-driven congregational development.

In their interviews, a multi-faith representation of leaders described significant changes in their faith lives as a result of their involvement in FBCO. The changes reported fell into three broad categories that intersect with the criteria for CD: 1) strengthening the connections to one’s specific faith tradition, 2) deepening one’s encounters with the divine, and 3) gaining awareness of the connections between one’s faith tradition and social justice work.

#### **Strengthening connections to one’s faith tradition**

A common theme among interviewees was that their understanding and appreciation for their faith tradition had increased as they participated in the organizing effort. One leader described how organizing had helped transform his faith life from a Sunday-only affair to something that matters seven days a week:

Many years ago my faith consisted of going to Mass once a week, and that was basically it. I had no involvement with the community, with anyone outside my family, and there were very few people that I knew at church. But since I’ve become involved with Valley Interfaith, and specifically with this parish [and the things they do and teach] it has led me to believe that God asks much more of us than to just sit down every Sunday and sing songs. I truly believe that the transformation of the individual to give back to the community is very central to the teachings of the Bible...

— José Hinojosa, Holy Spirit Catholic Church, Brownsville, Texas

Similarly, another leader talked about her Judaism becoming more meaningful: *“It’s made me notice my Judaism more; to reflect more on the stuff that was automatic before. They [other leaders] are motivated to have their faith not stop at the door.”* Zoraida Gonzales, a leader from St. Joseph’s Pro-Cathedral in Camden, said, *“I have found a deeper meaning for being Catholic.”*



Across the faith traditions represented in the study, many interviewees talked about growing closer to their congregations and experiencing new historical, social, and/or theological dimensions of their faith. Leaders who did not express these sentiments generally were less engaged in the FBCO work, though it would be difficult to say whether the organizing experience or the deepening connections to faith traditions happens first. This appears to be an aspect of the gradually reinforcing and mutually enriching dynamism between religious commitment and civic engagement that characterizes some experiences of faith-based community organizing work, and which will emerge as a key theme of this study.

### **Deepening encounters with the divine**

A similar dynamic sometimes occurred on a more personal level for FBCO participants—that is, regarding their own religious experience or spiritual journey. Leaders often reported changes in their experience of the divine, using whatever language they found meaningful in their own faith tradition. Thus, Ermin Brooks, a leader from Sierra Norwood Calvary Baptist Church (Southern Baptist Convention) expressed a new relevance to her faith using her faith tradition’s evangelical language: *“I now draw closer to the Lord for help working on the issues. I have increased knowledge and understanding that helps me bring people over to the Lord and gives me strength to keep on going.”* Other leaders talked about how the organizing work has brought God closer. For example, Frank Sanchez of St. Joseph’s the Worker Catholic Church in South Texas noted:

I think [the work] has made me more of a believer. I think more now that God is present to us in the now, and not high in the sky, but one that is incarnated in the community. And being able to see God as events evolve. He’s a living God...not foreign, but very much a part of our lives.

In making the connection between personal faith and public engagement, the FBCO process sometimes brings new dynamism to both arenas, generating within participants a new spirituality linked to political engagement. Some interviewees report that as they have placed themselves in challenging public roles, they have sought out the help of a justice-seeking God with whom they feel aligned. So this shift of emphasis to more outward expressions of faith sometimes elicits an acknowledged need and inner motivation to know God, oneself and one’s fellow humans better.

### **Gaining awareness of the connections between one’s faith tradition and social justice work**

Closer relationships with the divine, however, do not automatically produce people motivated to undertake social change. People with maturing faith need pathways for channeling faith into the public arena; but what enables the sizeable leap to an integrative spirituality with private and public expressions in dynamic interplay? The study explored how leaders gain awareness of the faith tradition-social justice connections and the ingredients that contribute to leaders acting on this awareness.

Most faith traditions affirm (in their own language) the call to universal concern for humanity expressed by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, in the phrase “The world is my parish.” The interviews confirmed that leaders from many faiths have discovered this insight through their experience in FBCO work. Nancy Hubbard, a leader from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Boston said, *“It has been a transformation for me to be a leader and cross the line from private to public in terms of both my faith, that is religious beliefs, and [my] political beliefs...”*. Another leader empowered by his exposure to FBCO took the initiative to act on his newfound understanding of faith in community after 9/11. Following the terror attack, he brought his congregation together so they could talk and grieve openly, and reported

this to have been a powerful experience for the congregation. Reflecting on his FBCO experience, he said, “...it’s helping me in terms of living my faith.” Gaining the understanding that social justice and faith go hand in hand, one leader stated, “you have to do both at the same time.” For these leaders, meaningful experiences of faith no longer occur only as private acts.

### **Assessing how broadly these changes occur**

These experiences of deepening faith linkages were common enough in our interviews to convince us that faith-based community organizing sometimes has a powerful impact on participants’ faith lives; indeed, most of our interviewees articulated some such impact. Our survey offers a way to assess the breadth of these kinds of faith links among FBCO participants—recalling that our data come from people selected as being core leaders within the organizing effort, not a random sample of leaders or congregational members.

Two key arenas in which faith links might be built are in participants’ own individual experience and in the worship lives of congregations. To assess the former, we asked respondents, “How integrated would you say that your political commitments are with your spiritual commitments?” with possible responses ranging from “not very integrated” (1) to “fairly integrated” (3) to “highly integrated” (5). The mean leader response was a 4, suggesting that leaders feel reasonably successful in building this kind of integration. However, leaders appear to desire greater such integration in their congregational worship experience. When asked “How successful would you say that worship services in your congregation are at integrating the spiritual and political dimensions of community life?” they ranked the congregation as only “fairly successful” (a 3 on a five-point scale, fairly low given the overall pattern of responses). And when asked, “How important is it to you for worship services to integrate the spiritual and political dimensions of life?” the median score rose to a 4—a significant rise, suggesting that these politically-active congregational leaders hope for more such integration than they currently experience.

Together, leaders’ articulation of the ways the work of faith-based community organizing has influenced their faith experience and their reports on surveys regarding the integration of religious and political commitments provide initial evidence of a significant level of FBCO contribution to strengthening faith links—at least among the active, core participants in the organizing process. Less clear is the extent to which such integration transfers over to the broader congregational membership. Such a transfer might occur in two ways: through explicit changes in the way worship within the congregation is conducted, or through a more informal process of diffusion from FBCO participants out to other congregation members. We analyze explicit changes in worship services later, in considering the role of clergy in this work. The nature of our research ruled out much analysis of informal diffusion to the congregation; we note only that we encountered no significant evidence for such diffusion *except* where congregational leaders created specific structures for linking the organizing process to the overall ministry and work of the congregation.

## **Power and Public Presence**<sup>11</sup>

The fourth and final aspect of congregational development that we examined concerns the organizational profile of congregations, i.e. to what extent do congregational members—both clergy and lay people—perceive their congregations as having a significant presence in the larger community, and how confident and comfortable are they as carriers of that public profile? This matters, for to the extent congregations have a public presence and feel confident and comfortable exerting political influence, they can bring the distinctive ethos of religiously-grounded teachings regarding societal reform to bear on public life. Again, we have evidence in this regard from both interviews and surveys. Here, the evidence is often indirect, for we are assessing people’s perceptions of how *others* view their congregations, as well as their own levels of comfort and confidence in public interaction.

An initial view of FBCO’s impact on congregations’ public profiles comes from examining how clergy feel when they interact with political leaders. Particularly at a moment in American history when religious voices emphasizing issues of socio-economic justice are marginalized, and those emphasizing issues of individual morality receive salient attention, the confidence with which FBCO clergy interact with political leaders may be undermined. But when asked “How confident do you feel when interacting personally with high elected officials from your city?” (from 1= “very unconfident” to 5= “very confident”), the mean clergy respondent reported a 4.4 score. They also traced some of that confidence to their FBCO experience. When asked “To what extent has your experience in community organizing affected your confidence?” the median responses fell halfway between “some improvement” and “major improvement.” Lay leaders reported slightly lower—but still rather high—levels of political confidence and FBCO contribution to improving that confidence than clergy (mean scores 4.0 and 3.7 respectively). Thus, FBCO engagement appears to strengthen the public profiles of congregations, at least in terms of their clergy and lay political confidence.

The interviews give some feel for the difference that this kind of new confidence can make. Billy Reedus, from New Faith Baptist Church in Columbus expressed that difference well. When asked how he felt when interacting with political officials, he answered:

Well it’s interesting. I would say five short years ago, before I got so involved [in the FBCO work], I would have felt uncomfortable in those meetings because I would’ve felt that maybe I wasn’t quite on a par with those individuals. Now I have no problem sitting in on those meetings. I feel comfortable, I know the issues that we’re talking about, I can dialogue with those individuals.

Assessing the comfort level of participants as carriers of a religiously-grounded social justice ethic into the public arena was complex. To get at this, we asked about respondents’ comfort with religious languages from *other* faith traditions being used in public arenas, in order to capture the pluralism of the American religious landscape and in the belief that this would also translate into articulation of an agenda for social justice using the language, symbols, and stories from respondents’ faith traditions. So we asked survey respondents “If you were at a political gathering and public prayers were offered using a faith language from a tradition very different than your own, how uncomfortable or comfortable do you think you would feel?,” with responses ranging from “very uncomfortable” (1), to “neutral” (3), to “very comfortable” (5).

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<sup>11</sup> In this section and elsewhere, we use the terms “public profile” and “public presence” as brief nomenclature for congregations’ insertion in the wider community, including the political arena and civic life. This risks creating the misimpression that congregations are private institutions; in fact, they represent one of the important “public spaces” in American civic life.

The mean response was 4.2, suggesting a broad embrace of incorporating diverse religious languages in the public arena. Notably, they credited their FBCO experience with some of this increased comfort, the median response falling halfway between “no change” and “much more comfortable,” with “much less comfortable” (1), “no change” (3) and “much more comfortable” (5). Clergy responses on these items closely paralleled the lay leader responses. These patterns suggest that the FBCO experience contributes broadly to increasing support for integration of interfaith religious expression in the public arena, in ways that may strengthen the opportunities for religious congregations to claim a higher public profile.

One clergy member, when asked what he had learned through his involvement in faith-based community organizing, articulated the change in public profile that congregations can achieve through this work:

I think sometimes that faith communities should have a voice, more of a powerful voice, in what happens... and we've abdicated that. You know, all mainline churches have become sidelined... There's absolutely no political sway in the Presbyterian Church, whether it's nationally or locally. The mayor doesn't care if he knows me. Now, I think the mayor needs to know who I am. But I didn't think that for the first five years I was here. So that's a really significant change.

By contrast, other respondents discussed the impact that their congregation now has in civic life. For example, lay leader Yvette Cuevas from Camden noted:

I think that, through working with CCOP, Christus Lutheran [Church] has etched its name up in city hall somewhere where they say, “OK. Pastor Miller's from Christus Lutheran. Yvette Cuevas is from Christus Lutheran. They have a problem. We have to address it—because if not, they'll get together with the other churches and they'll pin us down again.

Similarly, when asked whether his congregation had much of a public profile as a result of its organizing work in Boston, Rabbi Jonah Pesner answered:

Yeah, for sure. We are often in the press, quoted. I get called as a clergy person in the community who matters. You know, on the [Justice for Janitors] thing I've been quoted. Rabbi Friedman's been quoted on a number of things. They'll cover the things that we do here through GBIO. And that's good. It's good for membership at the Temple, because we've become a draw. And it's good for the community. And it's good for the Jews.

Perhaps nowhere is this new public profile more beneficial than in congregations in low-income, minority neighborhoods that often carry little political clout. Fr. Michael Jacques described the public presence of the organizing effort at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church in New Orleans, and the difference it makes there:

As we begin to build leaders in the community, and people begin to be outspoken... if you're a poor person and you have never felt that you can ever meet with the mayor, and you're conducting a meeting when the mayor is there, that's a lot of power. Or you have the ability to go to the mayor's office and to say to him, “This is our agenda. Not yours. This is our agenda.” That's power. Or when you can gather people in a community who think like you do, and you can effect change... that's power.

Rev. Heyward Wiggins, from Faith Tabernacle in Camden—among the American cities hardest-hit by the economic restructuring of recent decades—noted the change in his congregation as it gained recognition in city politics:

Now [the mayor] was more willing to work along with us, based upon the profile.... What CCOP has done has provided some methodology of how to change what seemed to be unchangeable. People always used to say, “You can’t fight city hall.” But in the mind-set of CCOP, they’re interjecting in your mind, “You can fight city hall. You can change the government—the state government. You can change on the federal level.”

Lucy Morado, an organizer who emerged from a local congregation in Los Angeles, described a common transformation in participants’ understanding of political life:

When I thought about politics before, [it] was that politics was dirty. It was partisan. And I never really saw it as addressing my needs or the needs of the people in my community... And I guess what I’ve learned through the organizing is that it’s building those relationships between yourself and other people so that you’re willing to work together to create the change in your community that needs to be created...

In closing, note the contrast of these expressions of a confident, congregationally-based public profile with the previous absence of such a profile prior to the organizing effort in McAllen, Texas. When asked whether his Catholic congregation was weaker or stronger or the same as a result of its organizing work with Valley Interfaith, Rev. Bart Flaata responded:

Definitely stronger. When I first came here, eleven years ago, I went to the county clerk who was in charge of elections, and I still remember asking him “what do politicians think about South McAllen [the Hispanic part of the city].” He looked at me and said, “Father, I’m sorry, but I’m going to be honest with you.... For politicians, South McAllen doesn’t exist, because the Mexicano doesn’t vote.”

Since that time, St. Joseph the Worker and other churches have helped transform politics in McAllen by refashioning members’ understanding and experience of public power, and exerting political influence through both voting and FBCO-led political action.

## **Summary**

By changing the fabric of relationships, building new leadership capital, forging stronger faith links, and reshaping the congregation’s public presence and members’ understanding of power and politics, faith-based community organizing can contribute—sometimes powerfully—to strengthening the diverse religious congregations that are its primary institutional base. Such congregational development is not as widespread as proponents of faith-based organizing sometimes claim and would like it to be, but it is significant and might be multiplied if we can better understand both the dynamics that generate it and the obstacles that hinder it. We turn now to examine these in turn.

# GENERATING STRONGER CONGREGATIONS

## The Constellation of Factors

An important pattern that emerged in analyzing the experiences of these congregations—albeit an unsurprising pattern, when one considers the complexity of congregations and of engagement in public life within a culture that emphasizes private happiness—is that strengthening congregations through faith-based community organizing requires aligning a constellation of factors. Where clergy, organizers, and lay leaders successfully bring the key factors into alignment, faith-based community organizing can contribute significantly to congregational development. Importantly, this is not just “church growth” that, in some forms, is divorced from the ethical callings of faith communities. Rather, this model of congregational development strives to embody the commitment of most faith traditions to social justice and concern for the whole community—linked, in the strongest cases, to public efficacy in pursuing that mandate. In contrast, where few of these factors are present, congregational development tends to be thinner, sometimes even in congregations with a rather high profile in the political arena.

The key factors contributing to congregational development are:

- a comprehensive approach to CD by the FBCO group that engages the complementary skills and orientations of lay leaders, clergy and organizers, and honors each congregation’s distinctive vision and mission;
- systematic and ongoing implementation of the FBCO principles and practices, combining a *disciplined focus* on using these practices to transform congregational culture with a creative effort to adapt these practices in ways appropriate within a particular faith community;
- strong relationships between organizers and clergy, in which sufficient trust develops to undergird real collaboration *and* the constructive give-and-take of mutual challenge;
- active construction of meaningful connections between the particular congregational faith tradition and the FBCO process; and
- participation by clergy, in which they consciously place FBCO-driven congregational development at the heart of their ministry, recognize that their ministerial role transcends the organizing process and allow lay leaders to carry out much of the concrete organizing work.

Engaging in faith-based community organizing does not automatically generate congregational development; rather, stronger congregations result from this kind of civic engagement when the participants actively craft it to do so. Shepherding a congregation through an FBCO-linked congregational development effort involves critical contributions from leaders, clergy and organizers who align these factors so that they reinforce each other. Clergy can lead their congregations into the organizing process and help link it to the wellsprings of spiritual meaning and ethical reflection. Lay leaders can bring their networks of relationships, their grounding in worship communities, their passionate commitment to improving their families’ quality of life, and newly acquired skills to implement the principles and practices of FBCO. Skilled professional organizers can bring important tools, insights, and skills for building powerful institutions, and an orientation to congregational development. The combination of these roles and of the factors noted above created, in the strongest exemplars of congregational development that we studied, a kind of dynamism between the spiritual and organizational life of the congregation internally and its civic experience in public life externally. This dynamic interplay lay at the foundation of long-term congregational thriving.

Thus, where lay leaders, clergy and organizers have aligned a constellation of factors, they have generated stronger faith communities that combine rich engagement in the congregation’s faith tradition and effective work for justice. It is noteworthy that, in these congregations, getting this alignment in place often involved

strategic advice and assistance from judicatory-level denominational advisors, network-level organizing staff committed to strengthening congregations, or well-informed partners from funding agencies. In the following sections, we identify and discuss common patterns in this complex interplay of dynamics, beginning with the roles of lay leaders, clergy, and organizers.

## **The Role of Lay Leaders**

For congregational development to occur broadly, lay leaders must have significant responsibility in all aspects of the organizing, including relationship-building, power analysis, issue research and selection, finances and FBCO governance. According to interviewees, one of the most important roles of lay leaders within their congregations and in the public arena is to implement the FBCO principles and practices. This includes identifying and mentoring new leadership, building relationships, producing turnout for public actions, communicating as the liaison between FBCO and congregation, working with clergy, taking a lead role at public actions and events, engaging in mutual accountability with all participants, and participating in issue selection and in smooth operation of the organizing team. But how do leaders get prepared to fulfill such heavy responsibilities? Before discussing the critical jobs that lay leaders carry out in the FBCO/congregation relationship, we will address how leadership development happens.

### **How does leadership development happen?**

Most lay leaders and clergy described themselves prior to FBCO involvement as having no or very few leadership skills and those with previous skills agreed that the challenging assignments of the FBCO/congregation collaboration require different skills than managing or administrating. Furthermore, the majority of lay leaders had not experienced the changes described in the section on evidence of leadership development, *until* their involvement with faith-based community organizing. In contrast, clergy often come to the ministry equipped with more general “people skills” than many lay leaders, but nearly all reported that their seminary education included no training for public life, outside the congregation.

Lay leaders and clergy, then, reported benefits from two primary interventions—local, regional or national network training and regular participation in the organizing work, both of which the FBCO group and/or network provides. The following discussion will focus first on the impact of national network training on lay leaders’, then clergy’s development and secondly, on the contribution of regular participation in FBCO work to leadership development.

### **FBCO training**

All of the national FBCO networks offer national, regional and local training for congregational leaders, though such training is not mandatory and not all leaders attend. Usually, participants travel out-of-town for national training and stay overnight for five, seven or ten days, often in a retreat type setting. One of the strengths of national training is that it provides attendees with a clear, focused and systematic model of how to act publicly on private faith and provides organizers as trainers to facilitate the learning and practice of organizing skills.

#### *Lay leader participation in national training*

On the *surveys*, 55% of lay leaders reported having attended a national training offered by the networks, and 80% reported having attended a local training “that taught you new leadership skills.” Leaders gave many descriptions of the value they received from national training:

- Camaraderie: meeting other like-minded folks from different regions of the country; hearing about what other people are doing in their communities;
- Experiences of diversity: meeting people from diverse ethnic, economic and faith backgrounds and participating in interfaith worship;
- Awareness: becoming more aware of the community “outside the walls of our building,” realizing that organizing offers a means to enhance all congregational ministries;
- Reflection: having time away for reflection to clarify own “calling to social justice;”
- Development of skills: gaining a language and process to concretize and jumpstart an existing faith-based commitment to social justice, and to bring this back to the congregation; gaining confidence to be a leader in the organizing work, and gaining specific leadership skills to use in organizing and other congregational work, such as: how to set up and run an effective meeting, how to research an issue, how to conduct one-to-ones, how to negotiate with public officials, how to create accountability in the congregation, and how to discover self-interest.

Sending lay leaders to national training clearly correlated with stronger congregational development (statistically significant at the .05 level). Among the congregations we ranked as strong on congregational development, nearly half the leaders interviewed had attended national training (12 out of 25); among congregations ranked as medium, only about a quarter had attended national training (12 out of 46 leaders); and among congregations ranked as weak on congregational development, only one leader in eight had attended national training (3 out of 24). Of course, this correlation does not mean that sending leaders to national training will necessarily produce a stronger congregation; but it appears to be one significant factor.

In a secondary finding, the most basic difference between leaders who had attended national training and those who had not is that attendees talked more often about their increased political life, e.g. gaining relationships with politicians, as in, “. . . *before [national training] we didn’t talk to our commissioners, we thought they were high and mighty. VI [training] has taught us that they’re just one of us, and they are our servants.*” Leaders with this orientation can act powerfully in meetings with school superintendents, mayors, town council members and any other people in positions of power, whereas leaders without this understanding are more likely to be intimidated.

Two questions then arise: how can FBCO groups and congregations increase the number of leaders who attend training? And, how are decisions made regarding training? For what may also matter to leaders is the level of clergy commitment to the organizing/CD work that is demonstrated by decisions about how many leaders will attend training. For example, in a strong congregation in New Orleans, the pastor, Fr. Michael Jacques required all seven or eight of the church staff, including the business manager and the director of religious education to attend week-long training. That sends a loud message to leaders that their congregation and clergyperson are serious about the undertaking—which may, in itself, strengthen lay leaders’ engagement.

#### *Clergy participation in national training*

Quantitatively, note that approximately 62% of clergy had attended national training. The connection between number of clergy that had attended and strength of CD held for the congregations rated as strong for CD and those rated as weak, i.e. a high percentage of clergy from strong CD congregations had attended national training and a low percentage of clergy from weak rated congregations had attended. But in an unexpected finding, fourteen of seventeen (82%) of clergy from congregations rated as only medium for CD



had participated in national training. So why is the high percentage of nationally trained clergy from medium rated congregations not having enough impact for their congregations to have accomplished strong CD? The readily apparent answer is the constellation of factors finding as previously discussed. One clergy person alone cannot accomplish the disposition of numerous factors; therefore, training sufficient lay leadership is critical. The data shows that only 25% of lay leaders from the medium CD rated congregations had attended national training. Given the complexity of lay and clergy leaders' responsibilities in the FBCO collaboration, congregations may want to ensure that as many leaders as possible receive training, whether it is local, regional or national.

Another contributing factor might be that, as interviews with organizers revealed, the emphasis in training is on political impact, not congregational development. Explicit training for congregational development is not part of national training in several of the networks, and in others, is a recent addition. Perhaps clergy, lay leaders, and organizers need more training that directly addresses the challenges and opportunities of guiding the FBCO/congregation partnership; we would propose this as supplementary to the essential training for political engagement that each network offers.

### **Summary of the contribution of training to leadership development**

Training in the work of faith-based community organizing – whether local, regional or national – provides leaders with a vocabulary and the tools to do their job, and a grounding in the culture of organizing that is, at times, counter to the status quo in many congregations. Since quite a few leaders described changes that had occurred recently, we can presume them to be in the “rookie” stage of development – a critical time for learning, being challenged, and being nurtured as leaders. Interviewees talked about gaining such nurturance in the form of affirmation, support and/or collegiality from national training. Skillful organizers acting as trainers challenge leaders to intense self-development—finding their voices, and their power, and acting on self-interest for the larger purpose of leading the congregation “upstream” to a state of vibrant engagement in social systems change. It is through the dynamics, challenge and camaraderie of group training that such nurturance and growth occur most powerfully.

### **FBCO work in the congregation and community**

Comments from lay leaders and clergy as discussed previously in “Evidence for FBCO-driven CD, Leadership Development” indicated the significant impact of participation in FBCO work on leadership development. It is critical that new leaders have ongoing opportunities for practicing the skills of organizing; this responsibility falls mainly to organizers and will be discussed in “The Role of Organizers” that starts on page 54. The findings show that in all of the congregations with significant positive changes in leaders, culture and levels of engagement, lay leaders, clergy and organizers were systematically applying the tools of organizing such as the one-to-one meeting, holding people accountable, discovering self-interest, selecting issues, planning and attending public actions, and making connections with the faith tradition's values—in short, engaging in the organizing work in congregation and community.

### **The work of lay leaders**

In the next sections, we will look more closely at two essential elements of the work of lay leaders in the CD effort: the make-up of the organizing team, and the implementation of the FBCO principles and practices, specifically the one-to-one meeting and accountability.

### The make-up of core teams

The strongest examples of congregational development occurred where core teams or “local organizing committees,” “organizing ministries,” “organizing teams,” etc., included members positioned at the “heart” of congregational life, i.e. recognized as formal or informal leaders within the congregation, as described in the following quote from leader Ron Stamper of St. Matthew’s Lutheran Church in St. Paul, Minnesota: *“So just the core team that we have is actually those people that were the people that were on a lot of the other different—not just committees—but choir and things like this.”*

Organizers have long seen such strategic leadership as ideal for the sake of legitimizing the organizing work and drawing the congregation into public life. The interesting finding here is that the same ideal composition appears to better foster congregational development. This *may* be because such an organizing team allows the political and relational dynamism of skillful organizing to penetrate the heart of the congregation, through the relational ties and credibility of these central congregation leaders. With greater trust in place, the organizing effort can be institutionalized within the congregation so that leaders have access to influential congregation members, clergy, newsletter space, and time during worship, adult education classes, and ministry meetings.

This kind of core team contrasts starkly with the dynamic common in congregations, according to many organizers and some clergy and lay leaders we interviewed in which “social justice committees” or similar congregation-based groups bring together people from the margins of the congregation who share a commitment to certain kinds of issues. Typically, such groups are seen as ineffective in actually advancing work on those issues, and are seen as rather peripheral to congregational life. Such “social justice” groups appear to be similar to the organizing teams in the very weakest congregational organizing efforts we studied, which shared another least common denominator—lack of a clear, sustained discipline around the core FBCO practices of one-to-ones, accountability, and systematically building an organization based in relationships.

### Implementation of the FBCO principles and practices

We have seen that leaders are experiencing changes in personal development, in their faith lives, and in skills acquisition, and that, as a result, many of them are participating more in their congregations and communities. And we have seen that such leadership development is happening through FBCO training and through participation in the organizing work. The study also attempted to find out by what specific means congregations develop as organizations, through their engagement with FBCO. One of the study’s hypotheses, shaped by prior research and literature, was that the “principles and practices” of faith-based community organizing play an essential role in changing congregational culture.

The following section begins with a description of the principles and practices that constitute the primary tools by which clergy, lay leaders and organizers carry out the FBCO work. We then focus on two of the principles—relationality and accountability—and explore how these are implemented, by whom, and the differences in the appropriation of these tools in congregations experiencing high development and those experiencing less.

Faith-based community organizers work with roughly nine principles and practices—two that are discussed below and seven that are listed here: 1) “leadership development” which has been covered extensively; 2) “acting out of self-interest,” i.e. out of one’s hopes, dreams and goals; 3) “the Iron Rule”: “don’t do for others what they can do for themselves;” 4) “relational power,” i.e. acting politically based on relationships; 5) “action,” whereby individual and collective values are expressed publicly through meetings,

public sharing of stories, ceremonies, etc.; 6) “flow of organizing,” i.e. preparation (research and rehearsal), action and then reflection; and 7) “private/public,” the distinction between the individual and the collective domains. Because of our keen interest in social capital as evidence for congregational development, and as an ingredient for rich civic participation, we studied the qualitative data on ways in which one-to-one meetings are used to increase relationality. Because of our suspicion that the practice of holding people “accountable” is a defining, and challenging practice in terms of successful CD we wanted to study how accountability is being cultivated in the congregations with the strongest levels of development. Interviews with clergy and lay leaders have provided critical insights into these issues.

### *Relationality*

Interviews revealed that one-to-one meetings play a key role in developing the culture of relationality described in “Evidence for FBCO-driven CD.” One-to-one meetings are commonly used to cultivate relationships based on mutual respect of interests, to recruit new congregational members, to discover the self-interest of current members, and to build core teams that harness and apply the “talent” (leaders and members of their congregation) to both the mission and goals of the congregation and the organization. These strong relationships are the foundation for holding leaders accountable to their commitments, as well as the venue through which issues are unearthed. Furthermore, lay leaders usually carry the primary responsibility for implementing one-to-one meetings and are most effective in this effort when organizers train them and clergy support them. Organizers, clergy and/or lay leaders further enhance these efforts by creatively adapting the practice of one-to-one meetings to suit the culture of their faith tradition and congregation’s needs. Rev. Burns Stanfield, pastor of the 115-member Fourth Presbyterian Church in Boston, gives a detailed description of a creative adaptation (naming the system of one-to-ones seems to help distinguish it from sporadic or non-systematic implementations, so that the congregation knows it’s a significant undertaking):

So we will say, for the next two, three weeks, we are really going to focus on one-to-ones. We call it “Let’s Talk.” We advertise it, we have people sign up. They stay for an hour after church, draw names and agree to meet with somebody else during the week. And we’ll have a goal. . . aim for 25 each week. The people decided to do it the last two weeks of August, on a Wednesday night with ice cream. You build community, and if you do your one-to-ones, then you get to build an ice cream sundae. That was it.

Rev. Stanfield described the one-to-one meeting as “*a spiritual discipline*,” and added that lay leaders in his congregation do a full one-to-one campaign involving the whole congregation, a few times a year. That is an example of the kind of strong commitment to the systematic and ongoing use of “one-to-ones” that the study showed as most effective for congregational development.

Fr. Finn, pastor of St. Mark’s Church in Boston described the faith-linked implementation of one-to-one meetings in his congregation:

This one-to-one [effort] and doing it in a campaign style, has made the difference for us. Picking an eight-week, a six-week, and setting a goal and celebrating it when it’s over. . . In the mass on Sunday... we had people give testimony about what it meant to them to be a part of this. And after the campaign was over, we had a big celebration in the church, because we want to integrate it into the core of the community itself. And not just as a fringe group here. But rather, we wanted to create a culture and a way of going about life, which is relational.

This kind of integration with worship appears to increase the likelihood of building cultural relationality. The more connections that are made between the faith tradition, the organizing work and worship experiences, the more lay leaders' commitments to participation seem to grow.

In an unusual case, when St. Luke's Catholic Church was in a clergy transition, lay leaders, with the help of the organizer, but without active clergy support, organized an in-reach in which 100 people trained to do one-to-ones did about 500 over a five-week period. As one leader said about the effort:

That was very exciting...and it was a parish-wide thing...trying to teach other groups how to do one- to-ones... So within the Social Justice Committee [the core team] itself, it is a part of their operations... And talking about, "Who are we going to build relationships with?" And every month people would commit to doing so many one-to-ones. What happened out of the in-reach was that we tried to move it to be a consistent part of the parish and how we operated as a parish, like wanting to include all the staff in the in-reach. And I would say that's still in process.

This is also a systematic implementation, intentionally applied to the whole congregation by which lay leaders are trying to create a culture of relationality in which it's "*the way ministry is done.*" This same leader and others also talked about how building relationships creates trust, which allows people to divulge self-interest and become more willing to be held accountable. Such a high level of intentionality portends well for the success of this skilled and committed group of lay leaders who are advancing the social justice effort in spite of several clergy transitions.

The evidence clearly shows, then, that lay leaders from the congregations rated as "strong" who institute systematic, ongoing one-to-one meetings are seeing a change in congregational culture from individualistic to relational. In the interviews lay leaders demonstrated their understanding that a systematic vs. sporadic implementation maximizes benefits from the FBCO/congregation relationship and are committed to continuing and, in some cases, accelerating, this practice. The benefits are further increased when trained lay leaders agitate clergy to publicly validate the practice of one-to-one meetings as a tool to advance the mission of their congregation and to implement a process of congregation-wide one-to-one meetings.

#### *Accountability*

In the FBCO model, accountability means challenging folks to act on their values and to take responsibility for fulfilling their commitments, as opposed to making grand plans; e.g. the lay leader at St. Matthew Lutheran Church in St. Paul challenging the congregation council for making big plans but not committing to implement them with deadlines. Paul Marincel, an organizer from Isaiah in Minnesota described accountability as one of the most profound things that can happen in a congregation and a lay leader explained the value of accountability in her congregation:

The only way we're going to be successful is to hold people accountable for what they say they will do. And support them... So it's helping people to understand why we hold them accountable, and not to use it as a shaming thing, or in any way threaten people, but to help them to see that we [all] need to hold each other accountable... not just the organizer... I think that's one of the reasons [our congregation] keeps people, because when we have meetings something happens, and that's why people continue to be involved, and also why the group there has been successful in doing very positive things. And then people from the outside saying, "Ah! They're really doing something there. Maybe I want to be part of that group."

When people are accountable to act on their values and do what they say they will do, the important work of a congregation will get done. That may sound simple, but in many congregations, a misunderstanding of accountability creates a culture of non-accountability in which people show up late for meetings, don't follow through on their commitments, and don't wrestle with clarifying what's important; this wastes precious resources and saps the life from the most well-intentioned efforts. The research has uncovered significantly varying conceptions of accountability among lay leaders and clergy from congregations across the ratings including personal responsibility to God, to others, to society, to those we meet with, to our congregation; the accountability of core team to congregation and to work and to pastor; the accountability of pastor to congregation and to work and to God, and to society, and others. This has made it hard to clearly assess how much FBCO-driven accountability is happening. It seems that most of the strong congregations have a system for accountability, i.e. they don't just wait for it to happen, and have a vision for it to be practiced congregation wide. It also seems that congregations experiencing a culture of accountability, or moving in that direction, or practicing it in one area, are the exception rather than the rule. We will discuss several such positive examples; the dynamics that hinder the practice of accountability will be discussed in the section called "Obstacles to Successful Congregational Development."

A lay leader from a strong congregation who sees accountability as a real contribution to synagogue culture captured two truths that can serve practitioners: *"It's accountability that distinguishes this form of organizing from other forms. Accountability ensures that everyone pulls their weight in the organizing area."*

Lay leader Estela Sosa-Garza described St. Joseph's, also a congregation rated as strong for CD, as "the most accountable you can be." She said that they have block captains who call people from the "small faith communities" to follow up on commitments to action that people make at meetings. According to this leader, accountability is tied to empowerment, that is, at St. Joseph's people own the organizing effort, so they feel accountable and will hold others accountable.

In a powerful show of their own accountability to the work, as described previously, the core team from St. Luke's Catholic Church in St. Paul is trying to move accountability out to the whole parish by asking the staff clarifying questions about mission, hopes, goals, resources needed, etc. Gaining clarity on what is important is a first step toward taking responsibility for one's actions. Lay leaders testified that a process is in place that helps them keep the work going even without clergy leadership and that it [this process] has made them "much more effective."

These examples confirm that it is possible to practice accountability in congregations. Perhaps clergy need to be more courageous and accountable by thinking hard and inviting agitation from organizers and lay leaders regarding how to educate their congregations about the countercultural nature of holding people accountable. Perhaps FBCO groups can give more attention to helping clergy and lay leaders break down these resistances through training and/or strong, agitational relationships with clergy and lay leaders.

## **Summary**

Evidence from the congregational development research study reveals a significant phenomenon—by experiencing the organizing work, including FBCO training, and consistent interpretation of learnings into the language of the faith tradition, leaders are, in their words becoming, "*stronger, more aware, more faith-filled people*" and "*better leaders*" and that they are applying these skills within the congregation and outside, in the larger community. The study also showed that building such leadership capital

is essential for the ongoing development of the congregation because of the irreplaceable roles that lay leaders play on core teams, and in implementing practices that develop a congregational culture of relationality and accountability and empower a congregation to extend its faith life to the larger community. For these reasons, investments in leadership training usually deliver a high payoff, if other key factors are in place.

One lay leader expressed her vision of these dynamics:

My vision is that we become the synagogue to go to if you care about your Judaism and you want to take action to make this a better world. So that people will join our congregation because of who we are and that we are organized and it actually works. This isn't just a lot of committee meetings, but there's going to be change. And if you want to be a change agent and be Jewish, this is your home. We're not there yet... But I would say that [congregants] may be connected to synagogue life in a more profound way. And since we are so big, people do feel that they have a hard time finding a niche. People that you would assume just feel they are the heart and soul of the place. And it wasn't until the Ohel Tzedek moment for them that they felt they found their home.

## **The Role of Clergy**

This section examines the role of clergy in parlaying FBCO engagement into congregational development. We begin by considering clergy motivations for involvement with organizing. We then examine how clergy can best promote FBCO-led congregational development, as seen from the standpoint of clergy members themselves, professional FBCO organizers, and the patterns we see nationally. We conclude the section by considering the role of “clergy caucuses” in faith-based community organizations.

### **The interests of clergy in organizing**

In a broad sense, clergy we interviewed led their congregations into faith-based community organizing because part of their faith tradition involves an ethical obligation or calling to help build a just society, and/or they see a crying need for specific improvements in the quality of life for their congregants or for poor, working, or middle-class members of the wider community. That said, three additional reasons for choosing faith-based community organizing as the primary form of societal engagement emerged in our interviews with clergy. First, a minority of clergy we interviewed, but including some with the most impressive instances of congregational development, were explicitly using faith-based community organizing tools as a strategy to strengthen their congregations internally—*as well as* to strengthen their congregations' contribution to social justice. Second, many clergy spoke of deeply valuing the *relationships* that they develop—most often with clergy from other faith traditions, but commonly with organizers. Thus, when asked why he is involved in organizing, one clergyman noted:

I [already] had the convictions about social teaching... but I think that [organizing] keeps that in my mind, keeps me stimulated and agitated... You might want to say, “Why do you stay on this stuff?” I am fairly critical in many ways. Well, probably because I need it. I said that to [lead organizer] recently... I mean, I need it. I need to meet these other pastors or leaders... and get the agitation, stimulation, and challenge.

This pastor, and many others, particularly valued the relationships initiated across interfaith lines and across the racial and ethnic divides of American society. And they continue to be involved in order to cultivate

those relationships. Third, the benefit most commonly expressed by clergy interviewees from involvement in organizing was a shift in role. Most expressed this as a new or renewed vigor or dynamism in their work, and usually attributed it to the opportunity organizing provides to transcend the small world of the congregation by linking it to the larger community and beyond. Thus, for example, Rev. Grant Steverson of St. Matthew Lutheran Church noted, “*what’s true for me is that [organizing] has radically expanded my public life.*” Fr. Dave O’Connell of Ascension Catholic Church in Los Angeles said, “*It’s given me consciousness of myself as a leader in the church and the community. It’s pushed me to take a public role in society.*”

For those whose work already emphasized their denomination’s social service or social justice teachings, the shift involved a sense that organizing offered a more effective model for pursuing substantial social change in ways consonant with their faith tradition’s teachings. For example, the Sword of the Spirit Christian Center (a large Pentecostal church in Camden) had a community presence through the delivery of social services, but Rev. Willie Anderson noted:

My relationship with CCOP has probably strengthened the way my congregation sees me as a public leader in the public arena [and] has strengthened my position as a public leader in the eyes of other religious organizations and government organizations in the city of Camden, without a doubt.

For all these reasons—to advance their faith traditions’ voice for social justice, to address urgent human needs, to strengthen their congregations, to cultivate meaningful relationships, and to expand their public role as ministers—the clergy members interviewed for this study have chosen to engage in faith-based community organizing. If all of these interests are addressed within the organizing effort, clergy will be more likely to keep this work front-and-center within their congregations, which in turn will make significant congregational development more likely.

### **Clergy members’ understanding of their role**

When we asked how clergy understood their roles, most respondents who had successfully used faith-based community organizing to promote congregational development commented that FBCO work represented not so much a radical transformation as an evolutionary change in their understanding of ministry to something more satisfying to them. Fr. Bart Flaar of St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in Brownsville, Texas was typical in this regard. He had spent many years as a pastor in suburban parishes, working as a missionary in Guatemala, and serving as a spiritual director for college students. However, he noted that all that paled in comparison to his experience in organizing: “*But it was mainly... just maintenance work...there was no development.... I think that this [model of pastoral organizing work] is so much more life-giving.*”

Perhaps surprisingly, when asked what the key aspects of their roles were, many clergy did not speak much about the standard practices of organizing (though some of them engage in those practices extensively); rather, clergy emphasized other aspects of their role in four distinctive areas:

- generating the broad vision that animates faith-based organizing;
- infusing a sense of spiritual and religious meaning into the work;
- sustaining the network of relationships (particularly among clergy, but also with other institutional leaders) that underlie the FBCO organization; and
- serving as a counterweight to the influence of organizers thus maintaining a healthy dynamism within the FBCO organizing.

We consider each of these in turn.

### Generating the vision

With their gift for articulating a message in public, their groundedness in sacred scriptures and theological teachings, and their ability to draw on religious symbols and stories, clergy are uniquely positioned to shape the vision that guides faith-based community organizing in each local setting. This role may be the most crucial of all for clergy, in that the whole ethos of community organizing, and in particular many organizers reject the notion that any particular ideology, societal vision, or social analysis motivates their work. Such a stance makes sense strategically in that it insulates organizers from the accusation of imposing an outside ideology, but it also risks reducing the organizing process to a set of neutral political tactics divorced from any ethical grounding. Thus neutered, organizing would be ripe to be manipulated by whatever ideology captured it, as arguably has happened to the Christian Right, where cutting taxes is pursued with theological fervor.

In our view, such an outcome is unlikely in faith-based community organizing—but unlikely precisely because clergy have retained an influential role in generating and articulating the spiritual commitments, social ethics, and religious vision that animate the work. This occurs both in citywide work and through each congregation’s participation, as the organizing effort draws on the ethical teachings of the African-American churches, Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, Judaism, Unitarian/Universalism, social evangelicalism/Pentecostalism, and the other religious traditions that sponsor this work.

The centrality of clerical articulation of a vision for their congregations has an important corollary: where clergy are unwilling to be active in generating and articulating such a vision, or unable to do so effectively, or where organizers lack the skills to facilitate this, successful congregational development driven by this model is extremely difficult. Without such an articulated vision as a standard against which to measure progress, clergy cannot be effective in holding organizers, leaders, or themselves accountable for assuring that the organizing process returns benefits to the congregation.

### Infusing meaning into the organizing process

At Temple Israel in Boston, Rabbi Jonah Pesner helped lead a process through which congregation members discerned an area in which they wanted to grow—putting their commitment to social justice into concrete practice—and helped craft a process to use the tools of organizing to do so, but in a way grounded in the wellsprings of meaning within the congregation. This is crucial—as powerful as the experience of being politically active in society can be for FBCO participants, sustaining commitment over the long term requires that participants find that engagement *meaningful*. Given the broad religious underpinnings of American culture, the faith-based inspiration of many participants, and the fact that congregations form the institutional core of these organizations, among the most powerful tools for making this work meaningful are the symbols, stories, and rituals of whatever faith traditions sponsor the local work. Thus, nearly all meetings begin and/or end with public prayers; at lower-profile organizing meetings, these would typically be led by a layperson. But at high-profile public actions, clergy nearly always lead prayers – and the most articulate of them can powerfully invoke the divine presence upon the gathering in language that participants find deeply meaningful. Similarly though less regularly, organizing meetings and public actions may include a “reflection” or other element that frames the issues being addressed within the ethical understanding of sponsoring religious traditions. Here, again, clergy often take the lead, especially in higher-profile events.

All of the above is standard practice in faith-based community organizing. But at Temple Israel and the other impressive instances of congregational development we saw in our case studies, clergy went a step



beyond this. They also built a link between their faith tradition and the organizing effort *during the congregation's regular worship services*. St. Peter Claver Catholic Church is located in an impoverished African-American neighborhood of New Orleans. The pastor there, Fr. Michael Jacques, has strived to build the parish's entire pastoral ministry around a combination of faith-based organizing practices, especially one-to-ones and accountability, and Afro-centric cultural themes. When asked how the organizing practices would affect a visitor to worship at St. Peter Claver, he notes:

You'd see life: young, old, middle-aged, children, who are engaged in what's taking place. And you would hear a song that reflects the history of a people. You'd hear in preaching a challenge in how to make your community better, how to make your life better. You'd hear a challenge on taking the Gospels and applying them to your life, and making sure that you make a change wherever you are, whether it's at work or whether it's in your home, whether it's in the community. [You would hear] that there's a process for being engaged. And then you'd have an opportunity for you to get involved.

Note that both the organizing effort and these principles are brought to bear directly within the worshiping community. This example represents a particularly dramatic case of a broader pattern, in which the congregations that most successfully used organizing as a tool for self-development did so by carefully incorporating its key practices into their internal workings, rather than leaving them at the margins of congregational life. Lay leaders often did much of the work in implementing the key FBCO practices, but clergy were the key players in linking those practices to the core of congregational life in ways consistent with their faith tradition. Another facet of this pattern concerns one of the core "teaching" functions of clergy—the sermon given as part of worship. Many of the successful clergy in the study spoke of using their sermons to link worship to the organizing effort; they also emphasized that this must be done carefully, not imposed bluntly. To these points, Rev. Jeff Kee of New Faith Baptist Church in Columbus, Ohio noted:

We have to keep on preaching messages of justice...in a way that people can embrace... As a result of being connected with BREAD, I'm always confronted by what's happening in the city and what's happening in the world. And I think in order to be able to preach a gospel that's relevant to the way people are, you have to be connected to that dimension.... So BREAD has certainly been a vehicle and a forum for me to stay sensitive to what's going on in the community, and bridging that with the ministry and the preaching of the Gospel.

Such a focus represents a key way for clergy to move organizing from the margins into the heart of congregational life; worship constitutes the very core of a congregation as a moral community, and linking the symbols, narratives, prayers, and rituals of worship to the effort at societal change does at least two key things. First, it presents the organizing front-and-center as *a community* commitment. This not only aids in recruitment of new leaders, it also empowers those who are involved to act confidently as representatives of the entire moral community. Second, it links leaders' political experience to those religious sources of meaning, allowing their community organizing work to become part of an integrated spirituality. Note that this move also can infuse new meaning into the *worship experience* for many participants. Instead of worship being an isolated moment divorced from the broader social, economic, and political context of their lives, linking religious symbols and societal change can transform worship into an integrating experience.

A final important dimension of clergy members' role in infusing meaning into the organizing effort involves working with organizers and lay leaders to *create specific structures* for forging such linkages. We examine these structures later in discussing the varying approaches of organizers to congregational development.

### Sustaining the relational network

Although organizers are typically the primary animators that drive the relational organizing process (at least initially), they cannot do so on their own. Especially among clergy new to organizing, only other members of the clergy carry sufficient credibility to recruit them into organizing. As a result, clergy are crucial to establishing and nurturing the clergy networks that provide part of the infrastructure for organizing. They do so in part simply by fostering social relationships focused on organizing, but also through conversations that theologize the organizing process. Rev. Shanta Premawardhana of Ellis Avenue Baptist Church in Chicago noted about his clergy peers:

We want to understand the theological ramifications of what we are talking about, and we want to make sure that our preachers know how to preach about these issues, because that's how you get the people organized... We need to do that by thinking through our theology [among] ourselves, so that when each of us gets in our pulpits, we know how to communicate that.

This relational network of clergy often also plays a crucial role in recruiting new congregations into the FBCO effort. Though organizers may be central in this regard, entrée in new congregations is reportedly far easier to gain if a strong clergy network stands behind the organizer, especially if it includes some members trusted by the new pastor, priest, minister, or imam. This role in sustaining the clergy networks that undergird faith-based community organizing pays particular dividends when strong clergy caucuses develop (see later section of report).

### Providing a counterweight within the organizing process

Clergy and professional organizers play differing roles within faith-based community organizing. Organizers bring the skills and tools of social analysis that clergy and lay leaders rarely have, at least initially. But their primary and appropriate focus typically is on building the FBCO as a power organization. The best organizers, however, recognize that, in the long term, building a strong organization requires strong congregations, and some make congregational development a focus of their work. But even when they do, it is as a means to a stronger FBCO, and only one among several foci to their work. In contrast, clergy typically are focused on their congregations. Even when also deeply committed to the work of organizing, the fact that clergy are embedded in congregations and structurally responsible for them, gives clergy a qualitatively different investment in congregations as moral communities.

Some of the strongest organizing work *and* some of the most powerful cases of congregational development occur where these complementary roles and orientations of clergy and organizers are not suppressed but are allowed to create a healthy tension within the dual congregational-FBCO structure. Such constructive complementarities introduce a dynamism into the organizing process, as the organizer-clergy dialogue then embodies a dual focus on the health and thriving of *both* the FBCO as an organization *and* the congregations as its core sponsoring institutions. In such an arrangement, clergy provide a counterweight to professional organizers – *not* in order to “check” their influence and thus paralyze the organizing process, but rather to build a more dynamic effort by challenging organizers to live up to the full promise of the faith-based community organizing model. But note that clergy can only play this counterweight role effectively if they are clear about where they want to lead their congregations, and strong enough to challenge and be challenged by organizers.

Four areas of such challenge emerged in our interviews as central in this “counterweight” role of clergy. First, clergy challenge organizers to recognize that congregations are more than just useful “mediating

institutions” for the organizing work; as moral communities, congregations hold a status that transcends the organizing work. One pastor presented a particularly articulate view of this, in noting that organizers are “*politically-oriented and pull faith institutions into an institutional arrangement, in order to address public policy and power issues in the community. From my vantage point, I think the church has been used for a political dynamic, as opposed to the benefit that has accrued to the churches.*” Note that this pastor continues to engage actively in the organizing effort, in part because he finds he can successfully challenge organizers to deepen their understanding of faith communities. He continued:

But now, having said that, I also think that it is the kind of arrangement that needs to occur. That’s why I participate, [to address] the public policy dynamics, the power arrangements in a society... So for me, there’s sort of this, what we call a Niebuhrian ambiguity [laugh]. And so I participate and try to engage churches in this arena.

The term “Niebuhrian ambiguity” refers to theologian H. Reinhold Niebuhr’s writing on how engagement by the faithful in the political world is both entirely necessary and also laden with less-than-ideal compromises and ironies – and thus requires a tolerance for ambiguity. One such ambiguity involves the fact that very talented organizers may well be people of faith, but may also not be, or be deeply committed to a faith tradition different from that of a given congregation. But a deeper ambiguity is the one inherent in the differing roles of clergy and organizers; only if it is embraced and allowed to generate creative tension can their relationship be mutually and constructively challenging.

A second dimension of the counterweight role of clergy lies in assuring that the life of the congregation maintains a balanced focus, and that the organizing effort fits into that balance. Many clergy emphasized this need; as one put it:

It’s like the church has a social function, but it’s not its only function. [Organizing] is not the church...so we ought not to think or talk or operate as if it were. So I think that you’d get an awful lot more parishes and people involved if you were seen and perceived to be helping people develop leadership in all areas.

Many clergy we interviewed emphasized the importance of this balance, and noted that clergy were in the best position to be stewards of this balance.

Third, clergy often carry an important voice within FBCO groups in assuring that the work maintains a sufficient locally-rooted quality, even as FBCO groups aspire to influence larger political arenas. In the view of the same pastor just quoted, it is critical to balance expansion efforts with a significant amount of local-level organizing on issues addressed through congregation-sponsored actions:

I think we do need to be more local. And that’s frustrating, in some ways. Especially in the kind of world that I’m in; people are fearful and people are immigrant and they’re not highly educated, and so on. So I think that we’ve all failed that way. Haven’t done enough small stuff. And maybe it’s slow and frustrating, that small stuff. But I do think that’s a step... for which there is a price if you jump it. So think small. And local. I think that you do need to retain sort of control of it here [locally].

Finally, some organizers spoke eloquently of how clergy help organizers to continue developing personally within the context of the organizing work. For some, this was primarily in maturing within their own faith tradition. Organizer Joaquin Sanchez told of how he’d been challenged and mentored by Fr. Alfonso

Guevara in Texas: “*At my third meeting with Fr. Alfonso, he called me theologically ignorant, and my response to him was, ‘well, what are you going to do about that?’ So we started the practice of looking at and reflecting on different theologians.*” For others, this role involved helping insulate them from developing the cynical worldview endemic among long-time political actors. Thus, a significant minority of the clergy and organizers interviewed for this study, including some of those engaged in the most impressive congregational development *and* organizing work, spoke glowingly of the mutual challenge and support for ongoing personal development that they found in their relations with each other. Multiplying that experience might significantly strengthen the work of faith-based community organizing, both as a democratic force and as a means of congregational development.

Thus, in articulating the societal vision behind the organizing work, infusing meaning into it, sustaining the relational network undergirding it, and providing a counterweight to the role of organizers, clergy play an important role in structuring faith-based community organizing so that it fosters congregational development. To varying degrees, clergy often recognize these elements of their role. Other elements come to the fore from the standpoint of organizers, to which we now turn.

### **Organizers’ understanding of the role of clergy**

Many of the organizers we interviewed articulated strong views about the role of clergy in the organizing effort. Quite a few affirmed the centrality of clergy as the spiritual heads of congregations; as one put it:

I always see the pastor as the spiritual leader of an organizing ministry. And I try to keep reminding pastors that they are the spiritual leaders, that this isn’t a political action group, this is a faith-based justice ministry that needs spiritual nurturing as well. That is at a minimum.

But organizers also spoke extensively about the factors that prevent clergy from effectively engaging in faith-based community organizing or using it to help strengthen their congregations. Some emphasized that too many clergy lack the confidence or “ego” to be fully effective; as one said:

Lack of ego, frankly, is an obstacle to that relationship. Particularly when a pastor is trying to please their congregation instead of challenge them. Then the lack of ego prevents them from thinking clearly about who they are and who they want to be as an institution, what role they want to play in the community...[we need clergy] who’ve got an ego, who can go after me, who can critique and challenge me. But someone who can also take challenge and critique. Someone who’s not afraid to think about some hard questions.

Other organizers noted how simply being too busy and unreflective, gets in the way of clergy effectiveness:

[Another difficulty is] being willing to stop their activity and activism to think about themselves and think about their institution. There’s a lot of critique of misuse of power in the church, but frankly I think the greater sin is the unused power. That the clergy have tremendous power that they do not employ, and I think that is the more common sin. I don’t know if it’s greater, but it is the more common of the sins – clergy who do not use the power that they have to truly lead people, to truly challenge people, to truly build something, instead of [just] maintaining something or administrating something.

In this vein, another organizer challenged the notion that clergy do not have time for organizing, arguing that the real issue lies in clergy’s frequent inability to prioritize their time well:

I sat down with a Catholic bishop and said, “Well, how come you don’t spend more time doing the things you enjoy?” Because he had scheduled to come to a meeting and at the last minute he cancelled, because he just collapsed physically. So I sat down with him and said, “You know, it sounds to me like the way you work is that everything is equal – that’s the way you’re scheduling yourself, and then you just work yourself until you’re just exhausted. And then you cancel everything. So there’s no sense of what really gives you energy, what’s meaningful to you, what renews you.”

This organizer went on to suggest that this lack of an ability to prioritize their time around what they consider most important is endemic among clergy, who need organizers to challenge them to see and change this.

Finally, some organizers identified another factor that stands in the way of clergy being more effective—simply the lack of dedication to their work; as one put it:

I believe that we’re all made in the image of God for greatness, and yet we’re all lazy cowards. At every opportunity, we have a chance to take the easy way out or the less creative way out, or do things in a chicken way instead of a courageous way. So we can be extremely intelligent and hard-working and [still] be lazy about how we go about being creative. A fog can descend upon you in a moment, and if you don’t have a community of people who are saying, “Why are you spending your time this way?” We need that, right?

The many organizers we interviewed thus commonly both valued the roles that clergy play within the organizing process and in stewarding their congregations, and saw broad ways that most clergy were failing to play those roles as effectively as they might. Many challenged clergy to be more relational with their members, more willing to share power and decision-making, and more willing to bring the organizing process into the heart of their congregation without controlling the whole process. As South Central Los Angeles organizer L.B. Tatum stated: “*A good pastor knows how to move people, knows how to mobilize people, is not afraid to give authority or delegate... [and s/ he] doesn’t have to have her/ his finger on the pulse of everything that’s going on.*”

### **Summary: Building trust, meeting interests**

In all these ways, clergy members can parlay their congregations’ experience of civic engagement into significant congregational development. At its best, this generates the dynamism between public engagement and the internal worship life of congregations that was the hallmark of congregational development in our strongest case studies. Such a dynamism demands a great deal of trust between clergy and organizers—trust that must be built and earned on both sides.

Clergy are far more likely to become part of FBCO organizations to the extent that they perceive them to be settings they can trust and which address their self-interests as clergy. Once involved, the quality of their experience is profoundly shaped by their engagement—or lack thereof—with other clergy participants, a subject to which we now turn.

### **Analysis of the impact of clergy caucus on congregational development**

Different FBCO groups vary in their reliance on religious congregations as the institutional foundations of their work, but only in the sense that congregations represent either the *exclusive* foundation of that work, or the *primary* foundation (with some additional institutional base provided by labor unions, public schools, or

other community organizations). Because they recognize this centrality of clergy in the organizing process, many FBCO groups strive to provide an ongoing forum for participating clergy, generally called a “clergy caucus” or “clergy table.” These vary rather widely in content, purpose, perceived value, and format; we here analyze respondents’ experiences of clergy caucuses and how they can best serve the purposes of organizing and congregational development.

Organizers sometimes make strong claims for the effectiveness of clergy caucuses. For example, when Minnesota organizer Paul Marincel, who worked for years in a denominational agency before becoming an organizer, was asked about the clergy caucus in his organization, he responded:

I think that they are head and shoulders above, in terms of effectiveness, virtually any other kind of clergy gathering that I’ve ever been exposed to – neighborhood ministerial alliances and all those things, support groups that clergy have. These things are a hundred percent more effective than that. They train clergy. They get clergy to be straight with each other. They get to act together on issues, to act together on working to involve their congregations, etc.

Most of our respondent clergy and organizers saw the clergy caucus as a crucial dimension to the organizing process. As pastor Jeff Kee described it: “*It creates an environment for us to collectively understand why we do what we do... it’s a forum for us to put anything on the table, so that together we can stand...*” Likewise, organizer George Hemberger of Chicago noted:

Look at any faith-based organization anywhere, and if there’s a strong clergy caucus that’s very agitational, that’s very visionary for themselves and for the organization, that is a strong organization. Where the clergy table is weak... the organization is certainly not as powerful as it could be, should be.

Significant for our purposes here, a strong clergy caucus seems to be a crucial component not only for the strength of the political organizing effort, but also in enabling FBCO’s most powerful contributions to congregational development. Of the eight congregations in which FBCO work had contributed most significantly to congregational development, five of the clergy either described the clergy caucus as crucial to their current, ongoing formation, or had experienced clergy caucus as a powerful influence on their ministry in the past. And of the remaining three, two had been founding clergy leaders of their FBCO groups, whose initial “sponsoring committee” had essentially functioned as a combination clergy caucus and steering committee for several years. When Rev. Burns Stanfield of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Boston spoke of his experience of clergy caucus, he noted: “*The glory days for me were when we had a clergy sponsoring group. That’s how it began. Very exciting. It’s the best clergy group I’ve ever been a part of.*” Likewise, Rev. Bart Flaatt of St. Joseph the Worker Catholic Church in the South Valley of Texas recalled: “*There used to be a time that we really, as clergy, came together. The group was larger... and it really kind of looked at issues and started doing, together with the organizers, some theological reflection... It was very exciting doing that.*” Thus, seven of our eight strongest examples of FBCO-driven congregational development are closely linked to strong clergy caucuses – in the present or in the recent past.

Yet the fact that the last two clergy quoted above both looked *back* toward such a significant clergy caucus experience reflects another pattern seen widely at our research sites: most FBCO groups do not find it easy to maintain a strong clergy caucus amid all the other pressures of political organizing. Typical difficulties reported by our respondents included:

- the busy schedules of clergy, which inhibit sustained attention and participation; this was a general problem, but often reported to be especially acute among Catholic clergy.

- a tendency to fall toward either of two extremes: clergy caucus may become a fairly directionless support group for clergy, or (more commonly) another forum for doing organizational business. Either extreme often led to a fall-off in clergy attendance.
- the constant turnover of clergy participants; clergy caucus then serves to introduce new clergy to the work and relationships within the organization – but at the cost of the ongoing development of established participants.
- the busy schedules of organizers, and the rapid pace of organizing work; under the pressure of issues work, political actions, fund-raising, and leadership development, clergy caucus becomes too easy an item to drop from the list of commitments.

Thus, an FBCO that had one of the stronger clergy caucuses some years ago, in recent years had been unable to sustain it. One clergy participant noted: “[*The clergy caucus*] sputters, and it’s lacked identity. It’s lacked the organizing principle. I don’t think there’s a shared sense of why this is a good thing, what we get out of it. There’s no self-interest by the participants, so it fizzles.” Likewise, another clergy participant noted:

We have our regular board meetings, but if you’re talking about the clergy caucus type, it hasn’t been something that’s been done lately, over the past maybe two years...We’ve been involved in a very large project, and that’s consumed most of our time and drained a whole lot of people.

Dropping clergy caucuses in the face of urgent organizing tasks seems painless in the short term. But over time, de-prioritizing clergy caucus may sacrifice the vitality of FBCO work. The work that goes on in clergy caucus may not seem obviously linked to organizational power in the public realm, but in generating a network of relationships among key institutional leaders in congregations and *linking* those relationships to theological understanding of how faith traditions presume a commitment to social justice and the common good, strong clergy caucuses appear to be crucial in building the latent power that sustains effective long-term organizing. That such linkages matter for the work of organizing is reflected in the fact that the last clergy person quoted above went on to note that, in the high-profile work the organization pursued, they “*drew from that time of having regular clergy caucuses*” —that is, their ability to project statewide power was partly a product of their earlier foundational work among clergy.

#### The make-up of clergy caucuses

The stronger models for clergy caucuses that emerged in our interviews varied in their details, but typically combined the following elements. First, they were largely convened, planned, and led by clergy—not to the exclusion of input from organizers regarding content and process, but with a sense that these meetings offer a forum guided by *clergy*. Second, they met regularly, typically anywhere from once a month to every six weeks or two months; some met less often than this, but this appeared to make it harder to sustain momentum and participation. Third, the tenor, concerns, and interests addressed in clergy caucus meetings were linked to clergy members’ experiences of ministries and public life, and to the organizing process within their congregations; these were not general clergy support groups of a therapeutic kind. Fourth, they usually included similar elements: shared prayer, theological or scriptural reflection, learning about one another’s faith traditions, time for “relational work” through focused sharing of life stories or of the burdens and joys of congregational work, and often shared meals. Fifth, participants entered with a sense of being implicitly linked by a shared commitment to public life and to faith-based community organizing as a tool for social justice, but caucus meetings were not dominated one-dimensionally by that commitment.

Beyond these characteristics of caucuses most valued by clergy, there is no single exemplar for content. Some strong models emphasized helping clergy develop one another's resources for linking their preaching to the organizing work—as one organizer put it, “*building the ability of clergy to preach and teach justice ministry.*” Other strong models were premised on building a firewall between the work of organizing and the clergy caucus—essentially no “organizing business” was to be conducted at the clergy caucus. As organizer Stephanie Gut from San Diego noted, “*It’s their meeting...the focus is on them as pastors and how they get filled... clergy caucuses are about development and renewal and fellowship for clergy.*” As organizer Maureen Geddes from Isaiah in Minnesota put it, “*their job is the theological reflection on what faith-based organizing is.*”

But some clergy wanted the caucus to be *more* linked to the organizing work, so that it would have a clearer focus and purpose. In some places, this generated a different strong model of clergy caucus. As one organizer noted, “*When we’ve been in [issue] campaigns, we’ve used [clergy caucus] to talk about some of the deeper issues of justice and morality and values, and tried to use it as a way for them to think about and interpret how they’re going to present this back home in their congregations.*” This is a much more “programmatic” model of a clergy caucus, and appears to have generated real interest. Noteworthy, however, was that some clergy in this organization lamented its turn away from a more faith- and relationally-centered model of clergy caucus—underscoring that no one model may be right for every phase of an organization’s development, or for all clergy.

Finally, one FBCO developed a unique response to a problem commonly cited by our interviewees—the difficulty of sustaining a culture of deep reflection and relationship when there was constant turnover in caucus participants. When some of their leading clergy raised the possibility of forming a separate clergy caucus for the most experienced clergy, organizers in the Twin Cities demurred, arguing that they needed these strong clergy participants to help train and orient newcomers. But they negotiated an arrangement whereby the established clergy meet periodically as an advanced clergy table for those more experienced in organizing; however, this comes *in addition* to their participation in the regular clergy caucus. The advanced clergy table includes participation by organizers but is led assertively by clergy, and a strong culture of accountability, agitation, and trust appears to have been established.

What all these alternative approaches share in common is that they create a “free space” among the core clergy participants in an FBCO—an internal public space in which power relations within denominations and competitive relations among clergy can be temporarily suspended (or at least tamped down), so that clergy can reflect together as relative equals within the organizing effort, benefit from each others’ insight, and share experiences of how organizing can best contribute to their efforts to strengthen their congregations. That most clergy have remarkably few such opportunities in their lives was a theme reiterated in many interviews. Creating such a forum is an art form requiring patience, insight, trust, and the right balance of disciplined focus and relaxed engagement from clergy and organizers alike.

The clergy caucus matters for congregational development because when clergy *do* get involved in organizing, they may well not recognize the difference it can make to their congregations. It is often seen primarily as a way to influence public policy. But, as we argue here, organizing can also be a significant tool for congregational development. A good clergy caucus can help fire the imaginations of pastors and priests, rabbis and imams to see how their work with FBCO groups can strengthen their congregations in multiple ways. In that way, rather than assuming a tension inevitably exists between civic engagement and congregational growth and that the former undermines the latter, clergy can together



seek ways to use the tools of organizing to build both stronger congregations *and* a more effective public ministry. Finally, clergy caucuses can also make an important contribution to the fundamental task of organizers—generating a strong political culture within their FBCO groups for effectively pursuing the democratic tasks our society so desperately needs. Building a political culture capable of taking on the urgent democratic tasks facing American society involves significant work, and clergy caucuses can help capacitate religious leaders for that work.

### **The Role of Organizers**

It would be difficult to overestimate the value of organizers in successful congregational development; indeed, according to the findings, in many cases, it is the organizer who initiates contact with a congregation through the clergyperson—and even may be the clergyperson’s first point of exposure to organizing. We wanted to find out what roles clergy expect organizers to play as the relationship develops—and what roles organizers see themselves taking. Given the current interest and challenge of recruiting organizers, it was important to learn what professional and personal qualities of organizers precede success with congregations and how the development of organizers impacts CD. The role expectations and training and recruitment processes emerge not in a vacuum, but in a local FBCO culture that, in turn resides in a network culture. Therefore, what basic orientations to congregational development do organizers articulate based on these contexts? Is congregational development an expressed objective or strategy, and is it part of organizers’ visions and training for their work? In the following discussions, such questions will be explored beginning with the study findings about the qualities of organizers that clergy value in the FBCO/congregation relationship. Please note that the emphasis on clergy input to these discussions and the shortage of lay leader input reflects two factors: 1) variations in interview questions, and 2) the tendency for organizers to answer general questions about the congregation in terms of clergy.

### **Qualities of the organizer that impact CD**

From interviews, we found that clergy most want organizers to be trustworthy, that is, competent, and respectful of the congregation’s vision and faith tradition; experienced; perseverant; honest; open; knowledgeable about issues, the locale, and other clergy and congregations; sophisticated in their thinking about congregations and the work of social justice; strong negotiators; self-aware and self-confident; and able to relate well with people. Across the congregational ratings on CD, the primary qualities desired were trustworthiness and capability and the strongest clergy/organizer relationships seemed to be formed when organizers possess these qualities. Clergy overall hold high expectations of organizers, but the interviews reveal substantial differences among organizers in their apparent strengths in these areas, level of experience and in their overall talent for the complex work of congregational development. At least some speak much more articulately about who they are and why that matters in their relationships with congregations. This is important because time-constrained and often sophisticated clergy are more likely to spend time developing relationships with organizers who they see as sophisticated enough to be prospective partners in advancing the mission of the congregation. Judging from the study, it may benefit FBCO groups to recruit organizers with the above qualities or mentor them to be skilled enough to be valued by the most seasoned of clergy people.

## **Two vital roles of the organizer in the FBCO/congregation relationship**

As the FBCO/congregation relationship progresses, two vital roles for organizers emerge. The first is centered on work that organizers are expected to fulfill in the internal, congregational community, such as providing or directing newly identified lay leaders to training, further developing leaders' skills, and agitating them regarding their role in the organization. The second is to help bring the lay leaders and congregants into relationship with the external, larger community, often by connecting them with other congregations facing similar issues.

Underpinning both roles is an essential, relational function that clergy want organizers to fulfill—that is, as co-strategists. In this role, the organizer builds a relationship of trust with the clergyperson and lay leaders such that all become accountable for the congregational vision, as discussed in “The Role of Clergy.” A skilled organizer continues to serve as a strategist or consultant to the clergy and core team throughout the life cycle of the partnership—agitating for continual reassessment of congregational vision and reshaping of supportive strategies. The study has shown that if the foundational trust that enables success in the co-strategist role is in place, and the organizer has accepted that role, the partnership is more likely to be mutually beneficial.

In the following sections, we'll explore these roles and how organizers impact the FBCO/congregation partnership, beginning with the relationships they cultivate with clergy.

### **Organizers' relationships with clergy**

Please note that while the quality of the clergy/organizer relationship is crucial to the success of the FBCO/congregation partnership, organizers also have unique and rich relationships with lay leaders. However, given our interest in congregations and in clergy as their spiritual leaders, and specific research constraints, it was not possible to study leader/organizer relationships. Looking at one measure of organizers' success, interviews indicate that organizers who clearly articulated their role as partners, mentors, coaches, or consultants to clergy, tend to be overseeing congregations experiencing strong CD. One organizer, for example, clearly articulated a strong capacity to influence and support clergy on several levels. When asked about his ideal relationship with a clergy member, organizer Kevin Malone in San Diego answered:

One, I'm interested in the development of that congregation... and how organizing can help to build that. But I'm also interested in their involvement within the organizing effort, in a supportive way. . . . And my most successful relationships [with clergy] are ones where they see me as an organizational consultant to them. They know that I can build and develop organization through this model, and I'm going to help them to do that within their congregation, for themselves.

Similarly, Judy Donovan talks about a mutual exchange of critique, challenge, and learning that she describes as organizers and clergy becoming “co-conspirators”—conspiring to strengthen the congregation and its engagement with the world:

Ultimately, as it evolves – because it takes a long time – [I want to see the clergyperson] become a co-conspirator. Somebody who really becomes a colleague, in the sense of really kind of arguing with each other, figuring this out, strategizing together. So it's real mutual.

In Donovan's ideal relationship, both parties need to have ego enough to participate in this “feisty win-win situation” that includes lay leaders and congregations as well as the clergy.

Inexperienced organizers, on the other hand, sounded in interviews, to be more intimidated by clergy and their authority, or mentally wrestling to position themselves strategically, but safely vis-à-vis clergy. Such a tentative stand does not facilitate mutual critique and challenge. Listen to a quote from an organizer reflecting back on her early development:

I think about myself and what's intimidating and how do I overcome certain things within myself so that I can have a real conversation with this person [clergy]... And probably because of fear, there was a lot of overcoming, you know, about this whole process that I had to deal with.

Strong congregational development, therefore, is more likely where organizers agitate leaders on self-interest, thereby gaining an understanding of the congregation as a unique entity, and where leaders trust the organizer enough to engage them as co-strategists.

### **Role expectations from the perspective of clergy**

Clergy want organizers to identify and train lay leaders, and help lay leaders identify and initiate relationships with other prospective lay leaders, “*to evoke the stories to help us find common ground,*” “*to listen to congregational issues,*” “*to help us see our gifts,*” and “*to help the congregation see organizing as the heart of congregational work.*” For the larger community work, clergy want organizers to help them see the broader picture. Clergy depend on organizers to “*. . . agitate us to think more broadly,*” and “*to provide a forum for ecumenism.*” Clergy value organizers more for how they can connect lay leaders, congregations and communities than for how organizers participate in the “nuts and bolts” of the organizing effort, or at least clergy talked less about the latter in interviews.

A broad range of clergy talked about their expectations of organizers as “co-strategists.” For example, Fr. Dan Finn, of St. Mark’s Catholic Church in Boston, said that the local organizer initially convinced him that FBCO could be a vehicle for accomplishing his desire for his congregation to be highly relational, with significant involvement in the community. Similarly, clergy want organizers “*to support the vision,*” and “*to consult and co-strategize about the congregation.*” (Other clergy articulated a realization that the onus is on them to communicate the vision, so as to avoid the potential perception among congregants that the FBCO is “stealing its leaders.”) Other aspects of the co-strategist role that clergy described include, “*expecting the partnership to build a strong public life for the congregation,*” and “*erasing the dichotomy between congregational development and social justice work...*” Most significantly—because organizers stated the same expectation—many clergy want organizers to agitate them toward accountability for the congregation and the partnership; and they want the organizer to receive agitation and be accountable to “*help carry forth the vision.*”

On the other hand, differences emerged in the quality of relationship clergy from the differently rated congregations enjoyed with organizers. Clergy from the congregations with greater congregational development talked more richly about the contribution that organizers make to the work of CD; they rely more on the organizers and enjoy more deeply the mutuality of the relationship, especially as it ages. These clergy also have a keener appreciation of the difference between experienced and inexperienced organizers and the impact of each on the congregation. Clergy or lay leaders from several sites talked about the damage that was done in their congregations by organizers who were not well trained, did not grasp the complexities of the FBCO/congregation relationship, or did not possess the necessary “*people skills.*” Such an experience can set back congregational development by many months or even years.

### **Role expectations from the perspective of organizers**

The majority of organizers also spoke of their roles in terms that reach beyond the “nuts and bolts” of organizing. Organizers see their role as respecting the congregation’s faith tradition, agitating lay leaders and clergy toward their mission, and erasing the dichotomy between strengthening congregations and engaging in social justice. They hope to bring something valuable to the table, such as skills, insights, experience and the courage to take risks, and they want to give the congregation inspiration, clarity, energy and a set of tools and disciplines that will advance the mission.

Organizers expect to continuously engage in self-critique and self-reflection so as to know their self-interest and they expect to teach leaders who haven’t experienced it, that true dialogue and mutual agitation can only occur when all parties bring a clear self-interest to the table. In successful FBCO/congregation relationships, organizers clearly understand that the FBCO effort will only succeed as a long-term venture when, according to organizer David Hatch, “*organizing work is at the center of congregational work, and is transforming the culture of the congregation.*” And this happens most effectively when leaders know the mission and see FBCO as a vehicle for accomplishing it. Conversely, when a strong co-strategist relationship between organizers and clergy is not present a congregation may be less clear about its purpose, and more likely to push the organizing effort to the fringes of congregational life. Organizer George Hemberger described the contrast well:

It is when this leadership team that we build, and in some ways the staff and pastor are right smack in the middle of everything in the congregation. When that occurs, the congregation just seems to come alive all across the board, not just being at actions and organizing, but internally as well. When the core team and the organization is kept way out on the periphery is when we struggle the most.

In general, clergy and organizers agree that the most fundamental role organizers fulfill is building a partnership of trust, i.e. a mutual commitment to clarify, express and agitate one another to employ the FBCO process in support of the core mission of the congregation.

In a diversion from the majority opinion, several organizers expressed their role more in terms of practical constraints. One wants to train leaders so “*they can go back and do it [leadership training of others] themselves. If it’s all organizer, an organizer can’t, just can’t possibly do more than ten churches. And yet we only have three organizers with over 70 churches.*” Similarly, another organizer wants to empower lay leaders to do the [organizing] work themselves in the congregations. Considering the myriad of roles that organizers play in a dynamic relationship, this strategy may alleviate logistical difficulties, but the potential costs in relationships, trust and dynamism to the overall FBCO/congregation relationship need to be weighed. Professional, well-trained, seasoned organizers from the FBCO group provide several critical, differentiated assets that congregations need. First organizers provide a deeply held, well-cured, experiential knowledge of key FBCO principles, namely “relational power,” “self-interest,” and “agitation/accountability,” that spark controversy in some religious cultural contexts. Organizers are needed to train lay leaders in these principles and help them translate difficult concepts and practices into a faith/organizing language that congregants can embrace and act on. Second, lay leaders need the commitment that organizers provide, to act on the above-described knowledge as strong co-strategists. Organizers contribute a dynamic to the congregation that lay leaders, with a self-interest presumably more similar than different from the clergyperson’s self-interest, cannot offer.

Comparing interviews from more and less experienced organizers revealed one key difference in expectations that organizers hold of themselves—less experienced organizers did not talk about the strong, charged exchange of ideas or accountability—the agitation—that more experienced organizers talked about repeatedly. The quote below reveals how easily an organizer gives up a component of the partnership that stronger organizers consider to be essential:

I always want to develop a strong relationship with the clergy at congregations that are members . . . They are not always interested in that. Where they are, I seek to maximize that, and really engage with them. And where they make it clear that it's really not a priority, I let that go, . . . and I meet with them once or twice a year . . .

We know from the research that agitation evolved from trusting relationships is one of the key factors in successful congregational development. Perhaps assessing the real chances of securing this needs to be one of the many criteria for developing relationships with congregations.

### **Orientations of the FBCO group to CD**

With an awareness of how much the organization's orientation matters to congregations and of a common misconception, organizer Kevin Malone said:

The [FBCO] model. . . can be seen to develop only community organization. And that's a mistake. Certainly from the point of view of the [clergy]. They need to see that we have a tool and a process that can help them to build a strong congregation. That has in it an organizing effort that's external. That's pointed toward the community. And when that works well, when a pastor sees me as a confidante, as a tool, as a consultant that can help them think through the problems they're having, I'm where I want to be.

Experienced organizers very often were oriented toward congregational development as crucial to the self-interest of the organizing work. Organizers Stephanie Gut and Maureen Geddes expressed the linkage of congregational and FBCO interests:

Gut: When we shifted to the PICO model, [congregational development] was at the forefront, the center of it... If you don't have strong local congregations, we don't have a reason to exist. Those congregations don't exist for [the local FBCO]; we exist for them.

Geddes: We see [congregational development] as a critical component of our organizing. The two pieces that we like to emphasize the most are the issues and congregational development. . . if we're not concerned about congregational development and strengthening the leadership capabilities of the members of the parish, then we are a weaker organization.

Organizer Judy Donovan from Texas and Los Angeles described an orientation shared by many of the stronger advocates of serious congregational development:

What we find is that most institutions are overwhelmed. Good pastors, good leaders, good principals, good rabbis... usually doing all kinds of things, spreading themselves way thin. And congregational development offers them an opportunity to simply stop. Evaluate their mission, think hard about their values, the traditions of their institution, and attract new leaders, so that the best did have time and energy and kind of institutional permission and blessing to be about the work of social justice.

## Six approaches to congregational development

All these perceptions and orientations were widespread—though by no means universal—among the organizers we interviewed (and we will discuss later the variability of commitment to CD among FBCO groups). Overall, an interest in congregational development can be said to be widespread in the field. But *how* organizers pursued that interest varied considerably. We identified six fundamental approaches to congregational development that do *not* necessarily “line up” with particular FBCO networks—though some are more widespread in one or another network, we saw instances of each in multiple networks. Note also that these approaches are *analytically distinct*, not necessarily empirically distinct—they can be combined, so the congregational development efforts of a particular organizer or FBCO organization may draw on more than one of these. We discuss each approach in turn.

### 1. Approaches emphasizing internal organizing “campaigns”

In this approach organizers and lay leaders carry out one-to-one meetings for a focused and predetermined period of time, often within a congregation. These “internal organizing campaigns” or “in-reaches” typically last two to six weeks and some of the most successful are linked to the seasons of congregational life (Lent or Passover or Advent or Ramadan, for example) to give them added meaning within the particular faith community. The strongest examples included a culminating celebration linked to the worship life of the congregation, and some formal evaluation meeting to reflect on and assess the results of the campaign. A piece of the statement on congregational development by the InterValley Project in New England best summarizes this approach:<sup>12</sup>

Intentional Use of Time – Campaign Time. The use of time is critical in congregational development. Time is intentionally used as a campaign, breaking out of normal cycles of time. As a campaign, time is organized as an arrow, piercing the routine cycle of organizational life. The development work is organized as a campaign, galvanizing people and their resources of time, energy, and commitment for a specific time, purpose, and set of goals... Without the “campaign mode” the work would be lost in the routine cycle of ordinary time.

Examples of this approach include the story from St. Mark the Evangelist in Boston that opened this report, as well as the “in-reach” efforts sponsored by Isaiah in the Twin Cities.

### 2. Approaches emphasizing small groups

A second approach adopted by some FBCO groups revolves around ongoing small groups of congregation members who meet regularly to engage matters of faith and the mission of social justice. Examples of this include Fr. Bart Flaar’s use of *comunidades de base* as the foundation for his parish’s organizing work in the South Valley in Texas; Temple Israel’s building its *Ohel Tzedek* (“tent of justice”) organizing effort on *hevres*—small groups of synagogue members sharing common concerns; the “Living Lent” series used in Christian congregations in the Twin Cities and linking the organizing effort to small faith-sharing groups from the “Renew 2000” movement, as was done at Miami’s Notre Dame d’Haiti congregation. A lay leader from Notre Dame d’Haiti describes the value of this approach:

I became more involved in PACT [the local FBCO group] because in the Renew 2000 movement we meet every week with the leaders and the small communities and share life, share the word of God and then [plan how] to take action in the society. Because when you start sharing with each other, then you discover that there are problems that can be addressed [by] PACT.

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<sup>12</sup> See “InterValley Project Congregational Development Program” (July 2003), available from [intervalleyp@aol.com](mailto:intervalleyp@aol.com). IVP includes an emphasis on *repeatedly* engaging in such campaigns over the course of years.

All these share a common thrust: using small groups to create “public spaces” linked to congregations—public spaces more permanent than the “house meetings” often used in community organizing; in some places, a small group approach provides truly long-term communal foundations for the organizing effort.

### 3. Approaches emphasizing local action

A different approach is adopted by some organizers who emphasize regular engagement in political actions carried out by a single congregation or “small cluster” of congregations. These organizers suggest that by tightly linking at the most local level the experiences of congregation members in identifying leaders, cutting issues, doing research meetings, strategizing politically, engaging in power analysis, evaluating meetings, and leading political actions, more lay leaders will be trained, than with approaches that place greater emphasis on citywide action.

We have heard voices from clergy and organizers advocating such local action sporadically throughout this report; but it is important to note that this approach need not *preclude* a parallel commitment to “moving issues” at the citywide, regional, state, or even federal levels; indeed, some congregations emphasizing this approach were also powerfully involved in larger-scale arenas. The difference lies in their emphasis on constantly returning to local action.

### 4. Culturally based approaches: Faith-focused strategies, Afro-centric strategies

This category includes a wide range of efforts to link the organizing work more profoundly to the cultural well-springs that bring meaning to participants’ lives and orient them in the world. Three broad kinds emerged as important in our fieldwork. The first is a systematic effort to link faith-based community organizing techniques to cultural resources associated specifically with African-American faith communities, in order to engage and transform black churches more successfully. Rev. Eugene Williams, an organizer working primarily with African-American churches in Los Angeles, when asked about how his approach differs from others, described this orientation:

[The members of our African-American churches] learn through the use of Biblical idioms. They learn through the use of old traditions. And that engulfs their entire being. So knowledge construction has to be understood through their lens; that’s critical. The other thing is not to view African-Americans as an object of someone else’s organizing, but rather the subject of organizing. Meaning let’s look at our sojourn here in America, and let’s look at what we did, in spite of the odds, and then what has unfolded...How has God revealed Himself, continues to perform miracles in the context of this particular community?

The second culturally-based approach is rather different—instead of appealing to members’ existing cultural resources, organizers using this approach strive to expand cultural and intellectual frontiers by creating a culture of rigorous reading and reflection. Rosi Rodriguez, an organizer in Texas, described this effort:

IAF is continuously teaching us, through reading books, how to think differently. How to be able to read something and understand it in a different way. And if we are exposed to that, then you come back and do the same thing to the congregation. So you’ve got people reading books that they had never even thought of before, and saying, “This is what it means to me.” And using it to understand their community, or understand history, or understand the congregation.

We witnessed the third culturally-based approach much more widely in our fieldwork, and it is familiar to the reader—it is the linking of organizing to the religious cultures of particular faith communities that we

have documented throughout this report. Given the salience of faith as a source of meaning in American life and the fact that the base of FBCO organizing lies in congregations, this is a crucial approach. As we argued regarding faith links, without real effort in this regard, this kind of civic engagement can only remain at arms length from its primary constituents in faith communities. Thus, the official statement on congregational development by the InterValley Project (*op cit.*) placed links to religious culture at the core of their model:

Theological and scriptural reflections are a key component to linking faith and action in congregational development... Each congregation selects its own theological and scriptural themes as it creates its eight-week congregation development campaign, guided by training from the IVP organizer. [For example,] a Jewish congregation in Boston developed its eight-week one-to-one campaign along the themes of Passover and concluded the campaign at Passover with a community Seder.

#### 5. Approaches emphasizing agitation

The fifth approach emphasizes congregational development in a strongly assertive mode that challenges faith communities to live up to their own ideals. Done well, this classic “agitation” model from the Alinsky tradition of community organizing appears to be a powerful approach to spurring congregations and their leadership to move beyond complacent satisfaction with the status quo. At least, some clergy and leaders noted that agitation from organizers had been crucial in helping their congregations move forward. Paul Marincel, an organizer in the Twin Cities, described one agitational approach to spurring congregational development:

[In our initial work with a congregation] there’s a group of attitudes and disciplines that we talk about. Number one is the attitude that the work of the church is important. When you say that in a room full of fifty or a hundred people, they all agree, “Well, of course.” [But] when people start getting honest, they can talk all night about all the things that they do in their parish or their church that actually telegraph just the opposite—It’s not important... “[we] come to meetings late, leave early... We don’t have agendas. People don’t do what they say they’re going to do, and we don’t hold them accountable. We don’t know why we’re here. We’re not clear about our goals... We’re not committed to building up this institution.” I’m talking about everything about organizational life... By moving from just issues to working on congregational development, we’re entering into a whole new fight, a whole new struggle about what keeps congregations from fulfilling their promise and their mission. And the truth is, there’s a lot of self-delusions implicit in these organizations.

#### 6. Approaches that assume that “just doing the organizing” will benefit congregations

The last approach to congregational development was no doubt the most prevalent at one time, and is still very much to be found in the FBCO world today. It places the emphasis on just doing the work of organizing, and asserts that if done well this will automatically spin off benefits to the congregation. Though we did not hear a great deal of this approach in our interviews with organizers, we did hear it from some clergy. Even an organizer in principle committed to congregational development articulated that commitment in a way that leaves open specifically how it might happen:

In terms of a rigorous kind of plan for congregational development we do not have that. We have examples of lay leaders who weren’t so involved in their congregation, begin through their organizing to get more involved. Maybe it’s implicit that if we’re doing good leadership development that there will be a payoff for the congregations.



The question, of course, is whether the payoff or the more explicit focus on congregational development ever fully materializes – presumably in some cases it does, but clearly in other cases it does not.

All these approaches are potentially valuable for generating greater benefits for congregations from their engagement in faith-based community organizing. They often come packaged together in particularly ambitious and focused efforts at congregational development. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, striving to link its urban congregations systematically to local FBCO groups, is pursuing an especially interesting combination nationally. Organizer Paul Marincel noted one such collaboration, when asked about innovative efforts at congregational development:

I think creating denominational partnerships—the thing that we’re doing right now in Gamaliel Foundation and a number of places with the Lutherans. We’re doing it in Chicago, and we’re doing similar things some other places. Getting the denomination to form a partnership with the organization and bring a bunch of congregations into the organization, in a way that is sponsored by the bishop and the denomination.

In the end, any of these may be fruitful avenues for organizers, clergy, and lay leaders to explore—but all require at least a partial shift of perspective away from large-scale political victories as the only measure of FBCO success, to seeing the success of organizing as partly in immediate democratic impact and partly in the gradual strengthening of the institutional underpinnings of democratic life—including congregations. As organizer Margaret Quern from Camden noted, *“I think it makes a big difference if they’re willing to see the victories within the process as well as the actual product.”*

## **How FBCO approaches are implemented**

### Approaches in the congregations with the strongest CD

An analysis of the interviews from organizers overseeing the high level CD congregations revealed two important characteristics of approach. The first is an appreciation of each congregation’s uniqueness, and the parallel commitment to tailoring the approach based on what organizers learn from clergy and lay leaders as they form strong relationships. The second is the centrality of relationship-building and issue work as leaders are trained, the FBCO principles and practices are implemented and the core mission of the congregation is advanced. Regarding a commitment to a tailored approach (vs. a generic one), organizer Judy Donovan said:

We have to think separately about each one [congregation], in terms of their own self-interest. We have to think hard about the [clergy] and the key leaders. . . there is no kind of overall strategy. Each one requires a power analysis and relationship building and a kind of an institutional analysis of the structure and who’s at the center and who listens to whom and how things operate.

The key to the success of this approach is a strong clergy/organizer relationship in which organizers earn the trust of clergy, who then feel “safe” enough to reveal that kind of information, thus setting the stage for the tailoring process.

Organizers described the implementation of an approach that addresses the need for balancing issue work and relationship-building. Once a mutual self-interest is established through one-to-ones with organizers, clergy and lay leaders, then organizers and lay leaders generally initiate a process of one-to-ones with potential lay leaders and/or the whole congregation. Over time, with skillful guidance and training by organizers,

the expanding network of lay leaders is urged to extend their power base from the internal congregational community to the external community at large or vice versa, depending on the initial orientation. In the strongest congregations, the FBCO/congregation partnership cycles around relationship-building, public action, and reflection in a fairly balanced rhythm. Clergy, organizers and/or lay leaders may periodically feel an imbalance that is pulling leadership away from the mission of the congregation. At those times, organizers may suggest that congregations step back from issue work and rebuild internal relationships or they may need to wean leadership off the relative comfort of internal work and invite them into increased engagement in the public arena. No one in this intricate orchestration acts alone; hence, the non-negotiable need for strong relationships.

#### Approaches in congregations with weaker CD

When compared to the approach that seems to be the most effective, other approaches were oriented more narrowly than comprehensively to, for example, producing leaders quickly or dealing with external community issues only; they were applied more generically, with less input from clergy and leaders, less commitment or capacity to knowing individual congregations and less flexibility to accommodate the varying needs of particular congregations.

One example of an approach that has focused primarily on public issue work comes from an organization that has understandably felt compelled to address issues because of the dire needs of its city. Organizers at this site value clergy as the gatekeepers of the FBCO/congregation relationship and are committed to developing relationships with them. But they hold two guiding assumptions that inform their orientation toward issue work. First, that congregational development is the “territory” of the clergyperson, and second, that CD will happen automatically as the leadership engages in public action, as described previously. A concern arises based on interviews from several leaders and clergy over the cost that urgent issue work has had on CD because it has taken their attention away from relationship-building and ministry-building within their congregations. They are hoping that, in time, this dynamic will change.

#### **Summary of approaches to CD**

Different organizers adopt quite divergent orientations and approaches to CD, and these differences matter greatly to the strength of the organization/congregation relationship. Clergy generally look to organizers to help them lead the social justice aspects of congregational life in ways that build up their congregants. Approaches that clergy feel focus too one-dimensionally on the FBCO group’s issue work, or otherwise fail to strengthen the congregation, may cause lay leaders and clergy to lose trust that the partnership is mutually beneficial. In the congregations with the strongest CD, organizers take a balanced approach to CD that focuses equally on issues and relationships—though the focus may emphasize one or the other at any particular moment. They also work with a degree of sophistication and commitment that enables them to creatively tailor their approach according to each congregation’s particular vision.

#### **Variability of commitment to CD**

Because organizers do not work independently but as part of organizations that are, in turn part of networks, their approach to CD is shaped by many factors such as organizational culture and strategy, availability of resources, training and prior experiences of the organizer, and personalities and self-interests of staff. As a result, different FBCO groups vary somewhat in their commitment to congregational development as an explicit aspect of the organizing effort.

As we have seen, overall, the majority of organizers expressed a desire and a commitment to strengthen congregations. Through the discussion of orientations, approaches, and implementations, we identified common themes of this commitment: to link the organizing work with the congregation's mission, to help leaders clarify the mission, to develop strong congregations for public action, to balance external issue work with internal relationship-building, to move the core team (the organizing work) to the heart of congregational life, and to use one-to-ones as the primary practice for engaging more lay leaders. But if one were to base expectations of actual congregational development on the responses to the interview question, "What is your approach with congregations?" one would look for significant CD in almost all of the congregations. So why is the articulated commitment not translating into more positive results in the overall work of congregational development?

Other data offer a clue: organizers' talent for and experience with congregational development, as described in clergy and lay leader interviews, varies greatly which leads to significant inconsistencies in how effectively the CD strategy is implemented. It also raises the question of the recruitment and training of organizers; more precisely, how well new organizers are prepared to deal with the complex responsibilities associated with building partnerships with clergy and lay leaders and more fundamentally, what the level of commitment of the FBCO group is to congregational development as demonstrated by strategic decisions on these matters. One organizer provided a concrete explanation when he said that new organizers don't have time to understand congregational development because they're responsible for an issue campaign or they're thrown into the work. He feels that training needs to be more explicitly about CD and that *"we're going to have to be much more aggressive in that."*

Through the study we have identified not only dynamics that facilitate successful CD, but those that hinder it. The issues discussed above introduce our discussion of the factors that interviewees named as obstacles to successful congregational development.

# OBSTACLES TO SUCCESSFUL CONGREGATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The congregational development research study has provided new evidence that engagement in faith-based community organizing, *when done well*, can significantly strengthen congregations by developing new leaders, deepening members' faith lives, raising the public profile through civic participation, and in some cases increasing membership and financial status. But the study also showed that the FBCO/congregation relationship is a deeply challenging and complex endeavor that is not always successful. We hold the deepest respect for those struggling to lead congregations into greater civic participation and into increased internal development amid the strong tides of individualism, consumerism, and anti-egalitarianism prevalent in contemporary American society. In identifying obstacles to successful congregational development, we intend our observations not as criticism of those doing the hard work of democratic organizing, but rather as part of an ongoing conversation and shared commitment to strengthening that work for the benefit of its sponsoring institutions and the wider society.

Given the complexity of organizing work and of congregations as institutions, it is not surprising that interviewees identified significant obstacles to effective congregational development, even in congregations experiencing substantial leadership development. We have grouped these as 1) obstacles primarily rooted in congregations, or congregational hindrances, 2) obstacles primarily rooted in the FBCO group, or FBCO hindrances, and 3) obstacles that bridge both institutions, or bridging hindrances.

## Congregational Hindrances

### **Congregational culture**

Clergy and lay leaders who are “all charged up” by new learnings, transformations and the greatest of intentions, may face a multi-faceted resistance when they attempt to apply in their congregations what they have learned from FBCO training. The facets of resistance fall into roughly two categories: 1) religious cultural resistance including the social justice-faith tradition dichotomy, and 2) social status quo resistance.

Organizers (and sometimes clergy and lay leaders) noted the formidable challenge of overcoming the religious cultural resistance that almost all congregations face as leadership attempts to institute the practices of faith-based community organizing. Organizer Paul Marincel from the Twin Cities FBCO group Isaiah explained religious resistance in terms of a dichotomy—discussed earlier by some clergy—between social justice work and effective congregational work:

We're up against clergy and laypeople saying, 'Well, is Isaiah about building our church up, or is it about impacting the world?' We're up against people saying, 'You're lying to us, because it's got to be one or the other. It can't be both. And if you're saying it's both, there's a deception here.'

According to Marincel, this dichotomy is deeply ingrained, and pervades not just congregations, but seminaries. Kevin Malone, an organizer from the San Diego Organizing Project, talked about a different aspect of religious cultural resistance—some members of congregations hold an understanding of the separation of church and state by which they believe that they are supposed to be quiet, stay within their walls, and not get involved in politics—all of which are the opposite of what organizing asks.

Organizers and clergy spoke at length about another religious cultural resistance—a distorted norm of quietness and “*niceness at all costs*” that springs from a generally Christian interpretation of “kindness” or “love” as being meek and passive. Clergy and organizers from middle-class white congregations, in

particular (as well as others) talked about the challenge of making religious precepts and FBCO principles and practices like agitation and accountability congruous in a culture with these norms.

Interviewees gave the following examples of religious cultural hindrances that specifically interfere with the implementation of one-to-one meetings and accountability—two of the key practices for congregational development. Regarding one-to-one meetings: the congregation is not used to listening to each other; one-to-ones are contrary to the culture of minding your own business; congregants feel one-to-ones are an artificial way to talk with people; and they are easier to do within the core team – harder to take outside. A clergyperson said, “. . . you know, in the Jewish community, we’re used to writing a check. We’re used to writing a letter. But to gather a group of people, or to gather individuals, and listen – listening is not something we’re very advanced at. We’re much more advanced at talking!”

Culturally, accountability seems even harder to institute than one-to-one meetings. Many people in congregations find the practice contrary to accepted religious culture. We heard in interviews: “*It’s not nice.*” A leader from Boston said, “*I think of it as ‘towing the line’ and ‘following the rules’ and I don’t think that’s what Christianity is necessarily all about. It’s more acceptance than accountability.*” In these and other ways, some FBCO principles and practices radically challenge the religious status quo.

Another obstacle on the religious side of culture was cited by several organizers as the overspiritualization of problems. The following quote provides an example, “*Well, the Bible says the poor will always be with us.*” This orientation to faith might or might not preclude participation in FBCO work, depending on how the clergy and leaders of these congregations envision the mission. It is true that clergy from faith traditions that emphasize personal salvation over social salvation often face a greater challenge in discovering connections with social justice work, or “social work” as it is often called in some historically African-American faith traditions. But there are examples, from this study, of such congregations that are thriving as active participants. The connections exist; maybe this points to the need for clergy, organizers, and lay leaders to work harder to discover and articulate how improving the living conditions in one’s community and beyond reflects the teachings of their faith communities.<sup>13</sup>

Paul Marincel went on to describe a second aspect of cultural hindrances as the “social status quo”- the fact that this type of organizing challenges people’s assumption about the dominant culture - about power, wealth, class, race and what the world looks like, who has what, and how social change happens. He concluded, “*And that scares the hell out of people.*” Stephanie Gut, organizer from San Diego Organizing Project, sums this up by calling the work “*counter-cultural...almost counter-intuitive in most of our congregations . . .*”

Whether from non-FBCO trained clergy or congregants, or, in some faith traditions, from powerful family dynasties, the religious cultural and social status quo hurdles can be daunting. They usually sound something like this: “*Religion and politics don’t mix. We’ve never done it that way before. We’re called to take care of our own. Don’t rock the boat. We’re supposed to love people, not confront them.*” It takes a strong will, enduring courage and plenty of patience for lay leaders and clergy to persevere through that obstacle course. And some decide it’s not worth the effort.

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<sup>13</sup> Resources for this articulation are many; see particularly the writing of Dr. Robert Linthicum and Rabbi Jonathan Sacks on the Christian and Jewish traditions, respectively.

### **Congregational environments**

Interviewees also attributed difficulties in building the FBCO/congregation relationship to profound weaknesses in contemporary congregations, including the lack of a clear sense of mission; overburdened, distracted or unprepared clergy; and congregants pressured by family and professional demands. More than one organizer pointed to the fact that many congregations are in survival mode in today's culture of less giving, less time for lay leader involvement, and many bi-vocational clergy. Organizers elaborated on the difficulty of working with a congregation where the clergy person and core team are not clear on congregational mission—one effect of time shortages—as one put it, the greatest challenge is:

...clergy not having strong teams in their own institutions. Not being clear on the missions of their own institutions. Or [not] having a team that shares with them that mission. You know, a team that all know, own and drive the institution's mission.

Another organizer talked about the obstacle of weak core teams and the need for core teams to constantly strengthen themselves with new leadership. And another asserted that many congregations don't have a system in place for that.

That leads us to consider the limitations of lay leaders, especially new ones. Lay leaders face logistical constraints as volunteers including work and familial responsibilities that may conflict with organizing meetings and trainings. In addition, interviews showed a pattern of leadership development in which the early stages are typified by attitudinal and orientation changes, like greater awareness of the community outside the walls of the house of worship, and making faith connections and clarifying goals. These early stage changes do not always position lay leaders sufficiently to overcome religious cultural or social status quo resistances for the systematic implementation of FBCO principles and practices in the congregation.

Sometimes even where lay leaders have experienced important changes, the process of congregational development includes digressions. Rev. Roy Brown, a clergy leader from Progressive Baptist Church in Chicago told a story about how, in the early stages, his congregation viewed the organizing effort as a negative thing:

It was negative because here we go taking away people who can get things done and pulling them off into another arena. Now [after continued involvement] they see the benefits of the tools that come out of faith-based organizing. [They see] that the relationship building that results in growth is an additional tool that [the FBCO network] brings. . . It is not just about fighting the state legislature, but it's about developing your congregation. And I am pushing that concept because I believe it can work.

Judging from this quote and the rest of Rev. Brown's interview, he has exercised considerable courage in seeing his congregation through its initial resistance and pushing his belief in the potential for FBCO to strengthen his church.

This brings us to the limitations of clergy. In contrast to Rev. Brown, some clergy become an obstacle to the FBCO-driven congregational development effort. At times that failure reflects their lack of courage to overcome the cultural resistance or inertia of congregational life; at other times their lack of confidence and willingness to assert themselves constructively within the clergy-organizer relationship, and thus inability to provide a healthy counterweight to organizer influence within the FBCO process. At still other times, their lack of imagination for cultural change in their congregations, or their inability to

prioritize congregational development even if they are convinced of its value causes congregations to be less able to contribute dynamically to the organizing effort.

### **FBCO-based Hindrances**

Clergy (and some organizers) saw the primary obstacle to broader and deeper FBCO-linked congregational development as a shortage of organizers with a strong commitment to faith communities and a dedication to self-development. In the view of clergy, this shortfall sometimes leads to an imbalance of attention, as discussed below, between intensive mobilization around external issue campaigns, and the slow work of deep congregational development. In other settings, it leads to such a high ratio of congregations to organizers that even the best organizers cannot focus sufficient attention on individual congregations to parlay the tools of organizing into effective CD. The latter factor is sometimes exacerbated when FBCO groups focus on exerting power in broader geographical areas or higher political arenas, without sustaining strong local work in congregations. In our view, this is not an argument for neglecting the critical work of geographical expansion or projection of power but for doing so with concomitant attention to strong local organizing in congregations.

In discussing the role of organizers, we also noted the impact that the FBCO group's approach can have on the sponsoring congregations. It bears repeating here that an approach that addresses only one component of congregational development, such as training; or that is applied to a congregation generically, without regard for the faith tradition or mission of that congregation; or that does not explicitly address congregational development is likely to be an obstacle to creating a successful partnership. In a related vein, organizers who do not value a diversity of faith traditions or who do not recognize the long-term FBCO interest in strong congregations can become an obstacle as they attempt to create relationships of trust with lay leaders and clergy whose self-interest is inextricably linked to their faith tradition and community.

### **Bridging Hindrances**

A different challenge often arises as newly trained lay leaders begin applying their skills—integrating their new participation with the work of the congregation and the community. Some leaders who were terribly shy, now are willing to speak in public, but they are often practicing within the relative safety of the congregation – not in public actions. Conversely, other new leaders are applying recently acquired skills primarily to the public organizing work, and may not contribute them back to the internal work of the congregation. As lay leaders further develop the skills of organizing, they need to be challenged to exercise leadership in the FBCO/congregation partnership as a whole.

In two particularly instructive cases, the FBCO/congregation relationship has focused for years on high-profile political action, due to extreme community needs. Leaders have cut their teeth on public actions and are highly developed as public speakers and in creating relationships with political leaders, but do not appear to have strengthened relationality or accountability within their congregations. In one city, for example, every leader who talked about leadership development linked it to skills in the political arena, and very few spoke of positive changes within their congregations. Some interviewees suggested that the work had become unbalanced, and that it was time to re-emphasize building relationships within congre-

gations. Our interest lies not in second-guessing the decision to pursue high-level issues; urgent social needs in the context of governmental and corporate abandonment of cities may dictate such a strategy. Rather, we raise the dilemmas this strategy poses for congregational development, as voiced by clergy and lay leader participants.

Only one of the sites described above has a structure of systematic one-to-ones in place to facilitate a re-balancing, i.e. integration of public skills with the internal development of the congregation. The result? Congregations without such structures are experiencing exciting and critical victories in the public arena, but leaders voiced concerns about the lack of similar advances in relationality, accountability, or availability of leadership for the non-organizing work of the congregation. This is not to minimize the victories, rather to place them in their differently oriented contexts and to raise the following question: how does leadership from the local organizing group and the congregation negotiate the balanced distribution of a growing cache of leadership capital? In the early stages of the FBCO/congregation relationship or in cases where the relationship is weak, this can be particularly difficult since the foundational relationships of trust that are required for successful negotiations of self-interest are only in the formative stages, or not in place at all. It takes a skillful and trustworthy organizer to guide the ongoing negotiation of this balance among these constantly shifting dynamics.

Given the finding that one of the key factors to successful FBCO/congregation relationships is strong organizer-leadership relationships and given the variations in skills and experiences of clergy and organizers, it is not surprising that one of the obstacles named by interviewees is weak relationships between organizers and clergy. According to interviewees, weak relationships commonly result from excessive professional demands; clergy or organizers without the discipline, self-development, professional skills or imagination to make them engaging partners to one another; or distrust or lack of understanding of the other's role. Judy Donovan, an organizer from Texas and Los Angeles, talked about clergy becoming reactive to the distractions of congregational work instead of reflective about their relationships with organizers and lay leaders. According to Donovan, the job of clergy and organizers is to challenge congregational leadership to continually clarify self-interest, but someone without clear ground or ego, "*will be aiming to please, not agitate, and this will attract weakness, not strength.*" This returns us to an earlier hypothesis: if prospective clergy received training for public life in seminary, and active clergy received FBCO training early in the FBCO/congregation relationship, they would have a better chance of engaging in FBCO-linked congregational development as the strong, courageous, skillful, disciplined leaders this work requires.

### **Possible Antidotes to Obstacles**

Finally, it is likely that organizers who are aware of and can articulate the obstacles and possible antidotes most clearly, may be the most successful in addressing them. In the comprehensive quote below, organizer David Hatch from Chicago articulates an impassioned plea for several solutions to the obstacles that face congregations and FBCO groups as they engage each other for civic participation and congregational development. When asked, "How do you think organizations can best build successful relationships with congregations?" Hatch responded:

I think integrity is important. When folks trust that you're in a relationship of mutual self-interest, and trying to help them meet it, I think that goes a long way. I think agitation's



important to be successful because good intentions are great, but stuff falls apart when people just don't do what they commit to one another to do. I'd say that's [lack of a culture of accountability] one of the biggest problems with churches today and why they're shrinking.

So I think . . . if I were a [religious leader], I would not call a clergy into my diocese or synod, [etc.] without sending them to weeklong [training]. I would center my entire structure . . . around just doing organizing training. If the pastors who've been to weeklong [training] and understand it, really make it central. . . This is the stuff that will turn that [a culture of non-accountability and non-relationality] around. . . . But to actually get a pastor and a group of leaders . . . so that every structure begins to operate like this and you walk into the church and you know for certain that agitation is a part of the culture of the church. Imagine that.

Note that this organizer prioritizes the practices of organizing—especially leadership training and agitation for accountability. Our findings suggest that transcending the rote and vestigial way in which these practices are sometimes implemented, and creatively and strategically aligning the constellation of factors identified in this report, including the systematic and ongoing use of the FBCO principles and practices are keys to overcoming the obstacles to FBCO-led congregational development.

# CONCLUSION

The Congregational Development Research Study suggests that promoting congregational development presents a critical, yet challenging opportunity for faith-based community organizations and their sponsoring congregations. Across the research sites, organizers spoke about healthy congregations as the keystone of successful organizing. Many described the mutual nature of the relationship and are prepared to invest the time needed to create congregations that can participate in a vibrant exchange. Just as clear, however, are patterns that reveal the complexities and difficulties of this process.

Clergy, leaders and organizers all play irreplaceable roles in the dynamics that catalyze the most powerful FBCO-linked congregational development. When the contribution of lay leaders, the participation of clergy and the work of organizers complement each other, a dynamism is created through which FBCO generates both democratic power and congregational development. Where leadership development is thriving, oncesilent leaders are finding their voices and using them to put their faith into action for the betterment of the community. Where clergy engage actively in the FBCO effort, they are discovering that the dichotomy between social justice and building strong congregations is a false one. Where well-trained organizers ground their work deeply in the fertile soil of faith communities, their organizations are acting to make political and economic elites more accountable to the wider community. This is the political face of effective organizing. Simultaneously, in some places lay leaders and clergy are acting in their congregations to make them more effective and truer to their own ideals. They are weaving tighter relationships between the congregation's various ministries, committees, racial-ethnic groups, or attendees at different worship services; moving work for justice closer to the heart of congregational life; and producing a more disciplined congregational culture, where meetings are more focused and members are challenged to greater responsibility. This is the congregational face of effective organizing.

Through both the political and congregational faces of organizing, clergy and lay leaders are discovering that not only is it possible, it can be personally enlivening and organizationally effective to fulfill their faith tradition's social justice mandate through FBCO work. Both congregations and local FBCO groups, in turn, benefit from the national and regional organizing networks, denominational leaders, and foundation staff who sustain this work from the background. Our hope is that the findings from the Congregational Development Research Study will catalyze discussion among all the stakeholders regarding how congregations, faith traditions, and FBCO groups can flourish through their engagement in the democratic work so desperately needed by American society.

We wish to raise several key questions and initial responses to them, that emerged from the study; however, we recognize that these questions can *best* be answered from within the local organizations, organizing networks, faith communities, denominations, and foundations that support faith-based community organizing. First, *whose responsibility is it to assure that congregations are strengthened by their engagement with this work?* The organizers who promise such benefits and shape the day-to-day flow of organizing? The clergy who have the most voice in setting the vision and tone of congregational life? The lay people who ultimately make up the faith community and do much of the work of organizing? This study suggests that strong congregational development will result from FBCO work only where one of these groups – or all of them together – make it a fundamental commitment within their organizing effort.

Second, *as the organizing networks and many local FBCO organizations move to address the critical social issues of our day through larger-scale organizing efforts, how can participants best assure that the roots of organizing in local congregations are fully nourished and watered, rather than allowed to wither?* We have argued that larger-scale organizing can either undermine or strengthen the local roots of

faith-based community organizing, and that it is in the best interests of all participants to see to it that the urgent tasks of projecting democratic power nourish rather than diminish local faith communities. But only constant attention to those roots, through adequate staffing, and a basic orientation from clergy, lay leaders, *and* organizers toward both effectively working for justice *and* building stronger congregations can assure such nourishment. Identifying and spreading the best practices for linking large-scale organizing to local congregational development can be the focus of much ongoing learning within the field.

Third, *what is the proper balance between issue work and congregational development?* That is, faith-based community organizing does important “public work” in two dimensions: first, by strengthening the internal public life of the congregation and second, by promoting greater public dialogue and democratic accountability regarding issues in the political arena. We have argued that these two dimensions of organizing, when done well, can be deeply complementary. But getting the balance right – not in a static sense of achieving the perfect proportions but rather by mixing the two dynamically over time and sometimes emphasizing either one — represents a critical area of discernment for organizers, lay leaders, and clergy alike.

If the Congregational Development Research Study promotes reflection on each of these three questions, it will have done justice to the scores of lay leaders, clergy and organizers who generously gave their time to our research. If that reflection generates progress on each of these questions, it will have offered something valuable to the thousands more who bring to life the public witness of their faith communities at this crucial time in America.

### **The National and Regional FBCO Networks**

InterValley Project: 95 Fair Oaks Avenue, Newton, MA 02460-1143. (617) 796-8836.

Regional Congregations and Neighborhood Organizations Training Center: 738 East 92<sup>nd</sup> Street, Los Angeles, CA 90002. (323) 755-RCNO.

Direct Action and Research Training Center: 314 N.E. 26<sup>th</sup> Terrace, Miami, FL 33137.  
(305) 576-8020.

Gamaliel Foundation: 203 N. Wabash Ave., Ste. 808, Chicago, IL 60601. (312) 357-2639.

Industrial Areas Foundation: 220 West Kinzie, Fifth Floor, Chicago, IL 60610. (312) 245-9211.

Pacific Institute for Community Organization: 171 Santa Rosa Ave., Oakland, CA 99610.  
(510) 655-2801.

### **Interfaith Publications**

*Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field, 2001.* By Mark R. Warren, and Richard L. Wood. Interfaith Funders, 2001.

*FBCO: Building Democracy for the Next Millennium.* By Interfaith Funders, 2001.

*FBCO: Five Stories of Community Change.* By Interfaith Funders, 2001.

*Renewing Congregations: The Contribution of Faith-Based Community Organizing.* By Interfaith Funders, 2004.

*Good for the Soul, Good for the Whole.* By Interfaith Funders, 2004.

*Faith and Public Life: Faith-Based Community Organizing and the Development of Congregations.* By Mary Ann Ford Flaherty and Richard L. Wood. Interfaith Funders, 2004.

### **Contact Information**

To order publications, or for other information, contact Interfaith Funders by calling Jeannie Appleman, Executive Director, at (516) 364-8922, faxing to (516) 364-6676, or by sending an email to [interfaithfunders@yahoo.com](mailto:interfaithfunders@yahoo.com).

To contact Mary Ann Flaherty call (610) 626-5220 or send an email to [mafordflaherty@comcast.net](mailto:mafordflaherty@comcast.net).

To contact Richard Wood, call (505) 277-3945 or send an email to [rlwood@unm.edu](mailto:rlwood@unm.edu).

## **The Authors**

Richard L. Wood is Associate Professor of Sociology and the Director of Religious Studies at the University of New Mexico. He served as research director for the Congregational Development Research Study and writes on faith-based community organizing, the cultural and institutional underpinnings of American democracy, and the role of religion in American public life more generally. See *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2002).

Mary Ann Ford Flaherty has been a staff/consultant for Interfaith Funders since 1998. She has consulted with Interfaith Funders on projects of grantmaking, research and outreach. For the past two and a half years she has served as project director and one of the principal researchers for the Congregational Development Research Study. She holds a Master's degree in Education, has taught in the education department at West Chester University and is published in the field of creative thinking.

## Notes



# What is Interfaith Funders

Interfaith Funders (IF) is a network of seven faith-based and three secular grantmakers committed to social change and economic justice. IF's mission is to act as a collective voice for faith-based funders, and to advance social and economic justice through support of grassroots community organizing. To fulfill its mission, IF launched an Initiative to support and advance the field of Faith-based Community Organizing (FBCO) that has taken the following forms:

- **Collaborative grantmaking:** over the last five years, IF has awarded nearly \$1.8 million in grants to faith-based community organizing groups and networks, that have enacted some of the most innovative organizing strategies nationally to promote living wages, school and welfare reform, and economic development for impoverished communities;
- **Collaborative research:** IF conducted the first ever field-wide, national study of FBCO, the findings of which are documented in *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field (2001)*. Through its study on congregational development – the focus of this publication – IF seeks to increase support for and engagement in FBCO among congregations and faith traditions;
- **Strategic convenings** of stakeholders in the field: organizers, leaders in faith traditions, funders, and scholars—who typically don't have the opportunity to develop relationships—discuss the current state and future of the field, and other topics of mutual interest, such as the role of FBCO in strengthening congregations; and
- **Education and Outreach** sessions and workshops on FBCO at funder conferences and briefings, and gatherings of religious communities, as well as individual meetings.

Current members of Interfaith Funders include: the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's Domestic Hunger Program, One Great Hour of Sharing Fund of the Presbyterian Church USA, Catholic Campaign for Human Development, Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock, Jewish Fund for Justice, Dominican Sisters of Springfield, and the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. The Mott Foundation, Needmor Fund, and the New York Foundation are Associate Members. Each IF member also supports a broad range of community organizing groups in low- and moderate-income communities around the country, including faith-based groups and those using other organizing models.





**Interfaith Funders**  
1 Dover Lane, Syosset, NY 11791

[interfaithfunders@yahoo.com](mailto:interfaithfunders@yahoo.com)