

What's Faith Got to Do with It?
Early Insights on Faith-Based Civic Engagement
from the
Organized Religion Evaluation Initiative

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*Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society,
but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions.*
Alexis de Tocqueville, 1831

Americans have always felt ambivalent about the role of religion in public life, yet its influence in shaping policy can be traced from the beginnings of the Republic. Although the Constitution provides a framework for debate about the role of religion and public life, it leaves ample room for interpretation. Today we live in a time when more and more Americans feel turned off by or shut out of public life. Extremes of wealth and poverty are greater than ever before. At the same time, after decades of secularism, religion is now recognized as a powerful force in public life, for good or possibly ill, from Iraq to the White House.

The Organized Religion Evaluation Initiative is working to understand, improve, and strengthen evaluation of faith-based civic engagement projects in the U.S.¹ When Rainbow Research began working with the Initiative, we viewed the work primarily through a secular civic engagement lens.² However, we have come to realize that the lens of religious meaning is

¹ The Initiative began in 2001 with support from the James Irvine Foundation. It has been designing evaluation tools and collecting data through surveys, interviews, observation and administrative record-keeping that will help document the strengths and limitations, the challenges and possibilities of these models. A public conference, planned for late 2004, will offer dialogue on emerging findings and the possible lessons for democratic renewal.

² Rainbow Research, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization specializing in evaluation and effectiveness products and services, coordinates the Initiative.

³ The six projects include: COPA, Communities Organized for relational Power in Action (Santa Cruz and Monterey Counties); Faith-Based Leadership Training Institute (San Diego); FAITHS, Foundation Alliance with Interfaith to Heal Society (San Francisco Bay Area); Interfaith Initiative of Santa Barbara County; LAM, Los Angeles Metropolitan Churches (Los Angeles); OCCCO, Orange County Congregation Community Organization.

⁴ See, e.g., Stephen Hart, 2001: *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement Among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), and Richard Wood, 2002: *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

equally important in the description of the work. While our first language may be that of civic engagement, many of our project partners use a language of faith. The Initiative's two core questions reflect an interweaving of civic and religious concerns.

- **What draws people into public life?** What awakens people's appetite to look beyond their private and congregational lives to join in the hard work of community leadership?
- **What's faith got to do with it?** What's distinctive about faith-based civic engagement as practiced by these projects?

This paper offers some preliminary insights from our work with these projects over the past two years on the nature of faith-based civic engagement and what it offers for democratic renewal. It also describes a framework to differentiate faith-based models.

This Initiative involves six projects in California that share some assumptions about why working through faith-based institutions strengthens civic engagement:³

- Faith-based institutions are places where people gather: new residents, poor people, people of color and others marginalized or alienated from civic participation, as well as people well connected to networks and resources
- Faith-based institutions promote values that underpin civic engagement: stewardship of the common good, the dignity of all people, a strong message of hope, and belief in the capacity of ordinary people to act together for justice
- Faith-based institutions offer concrete ways for people to act on their faith through engagement in the community and public affairs
- Faith-based institutions are rich in social capital, offering relationships, trust and settings where people can develop skills for public life.

The projects share some common goals: (1) Develop and mobilize participants' leadership skills; (2) build strong networks through strategic relationships with congregations and other institutions; and (3) transform relationships into civic power to influence positive social change. Their achievements include leadership development for hundreds of pastors and lay leaders; creation or expansion of numerous educational, health, youth and community development programs; establishment of powerful working relationships with policy makers in school districts, cities, counties, state and even federal government; and numerous policy reforms to address housing, health care, education, criminal justice, immigration and other concerns.

Core Questions

What draws people into public life?

In these projects we see three forces, in particular, that draw people into public life. Two of these are common to a broad range of civic initiatives and well established in the civic engagement literature. The third is distinctive to faith-based approaches.

First, issues draw people into public life. People become active in community affairs when some issue directly affects them. Those who live near airports work to minimize jet noise. When crime goes up, people join block clubs and pressure the police and mayor to make changes. When their own children are students, people work to strengthen schools. As people work together in public they develop skills that can lead to a sense of efficacy as a public actor – a reward that sustains engagement for many.

These six projects all work to awaken people’s awareness of the issues that affect them. They look for the people and pastors who are passionate about community issues, and they encourage and equip them to act on those passionate concerns. They challenge and empathize, educate and agitate so that people realize how their lives are touched by various issues, thus awakening an urge to do something in response.

Second, relationships and the hunger for community draw people into public life. People go to meetings, join committees, and do work because someone they know and trust invites them; because they enjoy the people they work with and feel a sense of mutuality with them. People also enter public life because they want the relationships that are only possible through public work together. Public work understood as sustained work of value, paid or unpaid, done in public with a mix of people, can offer alternatives to the isolation and atomization so prevalent in American society. Even when the work seems tedious, mundane, or slow-going, if participants feel that their contributions are connected to a larger purpose, and when they feel a sense of loyalty and mutual support they will continue in it. These projects leverage relationships, offer environments where relationships can grow, and teach leaders to build and use relationships for power and change.

Third, people’s belief systems and faith identities propel and sustain their civic engagement. An intrinsic love for the richness and drama of public life and an appetite to be part of work with large purpose flows partly from beliefs about world and self that religious teachings reinforce. These projects share a belief system, centered in the traditions of major world religions, with two crucial convictions: (1) We are called to actively care about the world, and (2) we are created in God’s image and therefore destined to be co-creators-redeemers-sustainers of this world. We are made with God-given

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dignity, not to be invisible or silent or ignored but to be visible, known and engaged. When we are committed to and accountable to that purpose, our appetite for a life of power, significance and importance is appropriate. Furthermore, the messy drama of community problem-solving and institutional change is part of God's world, too: a place where we can join with God and grow in faith. Public settings are not God-forsaken places but spaces where faith takes on meaning. These insights radiate from the heart of faith-based civic engagement as practiced by these six projects.

What's distinctive about faith-based civic engagement?

Leaders and organizers in these six projects are deeply anchored in their religious convictions. They experience civic work as part of their relationship with God, part of a spiritual journey.

Faith, deeply intuitive and experiential, offers a lens for participation in public life. Faith traditions teach that people may be transformed by their encounters in the world -- they too may have their eyes opened by a stranger on the road to Emmaus. Biblical stories teach people to trust their God and step out of the boat even when empirical evidence and scientific logic predict they will sink.

Faith-based civic engagement is distinctive for integrating personal growth with civic change. Leaders in these projects say their civic work lets them align their outer lives with their inner beliefs. They grow closer to God as they act publicly on their beliefs. This is an empowering experience that frees them to act with still more agency and wisdom. Additionally, the skills and self-awareness they acquire in these projects are useful in their workplaces, family relationships, congregations and other community settings.

Additionally, organized religion offers cultural skills that are powerful tools for effective civic action. Faith groups use ritual, song, symbol and story to create meaning, build community, strengthen courage, and project power. Thus faith brings resources for engaging in the cultural work of community transformation – asserting an alternative values system, tapping people's "power-from-within" and "power-with" – as Stephen Hart and others have noted.⁴

Faith and public life: Three illustrations

Faith and public life intersect in varied ways as projects evolve and more people develop leadership for public work. Three examples show how project leaders view faith as a resource.

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“Biblical stories can help deepen understanding of contemporary issues and expand perspectives,” explains Rev. Eugene Williams, director of LAM. People of faith sometimes hold strong moral positions about right and wrong, which can limit their involvement in community work. Several years ago when LAM launched an initiative to change public policy and provide programs to help reintegrate ex-offenders by assisting them to earn GEDs, parishioners were challenged to think differently about incarceration. “A Biblical lens helps people see things in a new light,” says Williams. “How many apostles spent time in prison? Paul, for instance, wrote extensively in prison, which suggests both that he was literate and that prisoners have redemptive qualities.” In this example, Biblical text helped engage people in public work, people who might otherwise see themselves as apolitical.

Faith understood and practiced in an interfaith context holds particular power in a time when people strive to work together across diverse faith traditions and lived experiences. “Building a network of interfaith organizations that share a moral conviction to ‘get along’ for the purpose of improving the community serves as a local example for the larger society,” says Rev. Richard Ramos, director of the Interfaith Initiative in Santa Barbara. “Interfaith” is broader than “ecumenical,” which spans various denominations within one tradition. Working on common goals across faiths taps a core element in the American democratic ideal – diversity is a resource for a vibrant public life. In the Interfaith Initiative, Ramos has found that “civic authorities and institutions respect and often give more credibility to a collective voice of diverse religious leaders than to groups representing one theological point of view.”

“Congregations are incubators for leadership development,” says Corey Timpson, lead organizer for OCCCO. They provide multiple opportunities for people to develop political skills and build confidence for public engagement. Echoing Williams, Timpson adds that faith provides analytical resources for public leadership. “Faith traditions offer a framework for social analysis, a benchmark for critical thinking and public action,” he says. “Rooted faith has a long tradition of social responsibility that guides practical action. For example, a cornerstone of Catholic social teaching is a fundamental ‘option for the poor.’ When groups use this teaching as a benchmark, a contrast between what is and what should be is created. The resulting tension motivates people to act and provides a rationale for change.”

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Tensions in faith-based civic engagement

Faith perspectives in the public realm bring inherent tensions. Public support of religious organizations has long been challenged under “separation of church and state,” a principle core to the founding of the Republic. Controversies abound over religious symbols in public spaces. The Bush administration’s program to encourage religious groups as social service providers has helped to fuel the current debate. Tensions experienced by these six projects include:

- **Tension between charity and justice**, between social service and social change. Is their role to provide tutoring to compensate for underfunded and poorly staffed public schools, or to be prophetic voices of justice and reform? How much should they focus on bandaging victims and how much on confronting the root causes of violence and poverty? If they serve people as clients, can they also engage people as change agents?
- **Tension from religious differences** and the search for a common language they can use to express faith-based convictions in a pluralistic, secularized civic sphere. A vibrant public life assumes a plurality of moral frameworks, but to negotiate these positions and to use faith as a resource requires civic skill. The interfaith projects that reach beyond Judeo-Christian faith communities, in particular, find both frustration and inspiration in the attempt to build a common public voice among diverse religious traditions.
- **Tension between human development and community improvement goals.** What’s more important: developing citizen leaders or achieving institutional change? People grow through the experience of civic work, but the pace of social change may be slower. Funder and community expectations for policy change and other “tangible” results often exacerbate these tensions.

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Organizing models: Common elements, strategic choices

The six projects in this initiative vary in their models, contexts, and stage of development. Some use the model of forming permanent federations of congregations as vehicles for leadership development and community action. Others rely more on ad hoc collaboration. Three are affiliated with national faith-based community organizing training networks, and three are freestanding local models. Some concentrate on public policy change while others emphasize on-the-ground projects for local improvement. (It is also important to note that while projects take up issues at the local level, they

connect local problems to larger, systemic injustices such as the prison-industrial complex, economic disparities, and inclusion of immigrants into society.)

Their geographic contexts vary from urban and suburban to small-city and rural settings in coastal California. Religiously, some work solely in an ecumenical Christian context while others are explicitly interfaith; some work mostly in small Protestant churches while others include huge Catholic parishes. Culturally, their context ranges from Afrocentric to Latino/Anglo to polycultural mixes (though all recognize the multiculturalism of modern California).

Some projects are in the start-up stage: for example, the Faith-Based Leadership Training Institute began in 2001. Others are in an early-adult transitional stage: the Interfaith Initiative began in 1999 and is now incorporating as a nonprofit organization, and COPA emerged in 2003 after three years under a sponsoring committee. The others are mature organizations, in operation for nine or more years: FAITHS and OCCCO have weathered two or more transitions of senior staff leadership.

What they have in common is a conviction that religious institutions and people of faith can contribute to community problem solving, and indeed that faith requires engagement with issues important to people's lives such as education, health care, housing and poverty. Rooted in values of love for neighbor and stewardship of God's creation, embracing a participatory vision of civic life that is pluralistic and democratic, these projects emphasize the outward-looking yet locally-rooted aspects of religious faith. They also share an orientation toward communities of color and the concerns of immigrants and poor people.

As Rainbow Research has worked with these projects since 2001, we have identified strategic elements that help explain how the projects conceptualize and pursue their goals. Together, these elements help map the strategic choices faced by projects that work at the intersection of faith and public life. Despite their variations, all projects wrestle with options related to power, relationships, the role of faith, programs, and pathways into public life. These elements are dynamic and interactive, and we believe they provide a beginning framework to answer core questions about activating civic engagement and the contribution of faith to public life.

Organized power

These projects recognize that change requires power, and they use a combination of strategies to build power, including power from individuals, from existing institutions, and from new institutional arrangements. They creatively integrate three perspectives on the role of structures in generating and wielding power.

What kinds of structures should be built, or transformed, for powerful civic engagement is a fundamental riddle facing the faith-based civic engagement field.

One view holds that communities need new structures within which ordinary people can build and express their power. If not, their civic engagement will lack power and therefore meaning, and current top-down power structures will continue unchanged. Creating and sustaining such new structures is a major activity, in this view.

Another view holds that existing institutions such as congregations and nonprofit organizations wield sufficient power and resources to achieve community improvement. In this view, mobilizing and equipping these existing institutions to act is the major activity.

A third view holds that individuals have the power to achieve change, if adequately informed and trained. In this view, developing individual leadership is the top priority.

These last two perspectives also note that building new organizations for powerful participation requires energy and resources that otherwise might be used for immediate community improvement.

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Relationship building

These projects recognize that successful civic engagement depends upon public relationships. Building relationships and training leaders to build and use public relationships is central to the work of all six projects.

Relationship building usually begins with one-to-one interviews to determine interests and potential leadership. Later, relationships grow through shared experiences as participants create a common history. One-to-ones and small groups are used then for leadership development, to process experiences for lessons and meaning and to strengthen bonds among members, leaders and staff.

These projects teach leaders the skills of public relationships: how to voice questions and draw out others' thinking, how to tell one's own story and declare one's values and priorities, how to respectfully disagree and persist in the search for common ground, in ways that acknowledge each person's dignity and that invite ongoing partnership.

Clergy are key stakeholders. In connectional denominations, bishops and other high-ranking officials are, too. These figures can serve as project leaders and can mobilize or block congregational and denominational resources. Building and sustaining relationships with these religious leaders are core priorities. However, since they are embedded in networks that

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include parishioners, denominational and interfaith peers, as well as other civic leaders, projects use multiple pathways and strategies to keep these relationships strong.

Role of faith

Faith activates public engagement in these projects, which distinguishes them within the field of civic engagement. Faith is rich in complexity and variation of individual expression. Often understood as a journey metaphor, spirituality deepens over time and is shaped by lived experience.

Religious stories, teachings, and values prepare and support people in civic life. Faith-based institutions also offer concrete resources such as facilities, funds, and pre-existing social networks. From a secular perspective, therefore, religious faith and religious institutions are useful for increasing and sustaining civic engagement.

Many people within these projects, however, say that is only half of the story. Equally important, participation in public life is a way to grow closer to God, to grow in one's faith, to be faithful. Indeed, certain kinds of spiritual growth are impossible unless one engages in caring for the world. Some engage in public life so that the sacred might redeem the secular in this world. Faith is integrally linked with action: acting on one's faith deepens and strengthens it.

Faith, therefore, is both means and end in faith-based civic engagement. We might equally call this work "civic-based faith engagement."

Stance toward social programs

Recently, a growing number of policymakers have noted the potential of faith-based organizations to provide social services, heal lives and strengthen communities. According to a 2001 report prepared by the Urban Institute for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, more than half of all congregations and many other faith-based organizations provide some form of human services.

The projects in this initiative bring a nuanced view to social programs, however. Several readily encourage their congregations to operate service and community development programs. These programs – e.g. education, health, job placement, housing assistance, youth development, emergency assistance – provide a hands-on way to respond to community concerns. They increase visibility of and knowledge about social issues, develop planning and management skills, provide employment and attract funding, provide a basis for relationships with other community actors, and increase the visibility, credibility and power of the sponsoring organization.

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However, the projects also use these programs as a doorway into systems change engagement. As congregations operate programs they become knowledgeable about funding and policy, and form relationships with funders and policy-makers. They also expand their relationships with hard-pressed people who are participants in their programs. These projects encourage faith-based leaders to ask critical questions about root causes and to work for lasting solutions. They create vehicles to help shape the policy framework and public will in support of social programs, and to hold authorities accountable for program performance. Operating or volunteering in service programs thereby fosters larger roles in active citizenship.

Pathways into public life

These projects are fascinating for how they balance five different pathways into public life:

- Building relationships through one-to-one contact
- Training leaders for public engagement
- Offering technical assistance so congregations/organizations can operate programs and projects
- Convening forums (where information can be imparted and discussed, and people can rub elbows and become familiar with potential partners)
- Organizing public “actions” (strategic events expressing people’s values and power to challenge institutional decision-makers to work for the community’s goals).

In any given week or year, these civic engagement projects must decide how much of their resources to invest in each of these pathways. And they must decide how to integrate these five modalities of civic engagement for greatest impact in terms of community, congregational and individual change.

The choices projects make depend on their reading of local circumstances, their stage of development, their sense of what they do well, and their beliefs regarding what will be effective.

Learning from faith-based civic engagement: a work in progress

We have seen in this Initiative that faith-based organizations have potential as “civic” spaces – places where people can gain knowledge and a sense of power and authority to take up the democratic work of an engaged citizenry. Today we face enormous forces moving in the opposite direction – trends toward privatization and growing corporate power, a loss of public space and public practices along with a thinning of our understanding of citizenship, and serious disengagement of people from politics, to name only a few. If

Running service programs are also a doorway into systems change engagement.

people are to regain civic authority, to exercise democratic power, then we must rediscover and rebuild the settings that support and facilitate this function.

In the early part of the last century, organizations such as settlement houses, the YMCA and YWCA, labor unions, reform organizations and political parties were spaces where people could develop public leadership and do public work, understood as sustained work, done in public with a mix of people. These “mediating institutions” were rooted in a neighborhood or city but also part of larger national networks. People who belonged at the local level felt a sense of ownership and that they could shape agendas, develop strategies for action and call on resources from the national networks, thus building real “civic muscle.” Over the years, many factors, including a growing influence of specialized knowledge and dependence on professional expertise for problem solving, eventually eroded these public spaces, leaving few places today where ordinary people can build democratic power through public work and deliberation.

Working with these six projects for the past two years has convinced us that faith-based civic engagement projects, working with congregations and their leaders, can help renew the idea of mediating institutions for the twenty-first century. Unlike social service agencies based on program delivery models with primary accountability to funders, congregations have “unprogrammed” space in which participants or members can decide together what ought to be done. In the first instance, people tend to see themselves as clients or recipients. In the second, people more easily see themselves as people with agency, influenced by shared values, acting together in public.

Faith-based civic engagement projects such as these six are pioneering ways to nurture and channel the civic potential in congregations. The Organized Religion Evaluation Initiative is accumulating data to help answer the questions of leadership development, congregational change and community improvement explored here. We also are pioneering the adaptation of mainstream evaluation techniques to the relational, values-based culture of faith-based community action. The initiative is helping project leaders become more rigorous and self-critical by generating tools and data that can test assumptions and inform strategy. We are blending the conversational, intuitive culture of faith-based engagement with the skeptical, empirical tools of evaluation.

This is a work in progress, fraught with tensions and ambiguity. Faith-based institutions can make significant contributions to civic engagement. They draw a mix of people with diverse perspectives and a passion for a reinvigorated, inclusive society; they teach citizenship skills and create vehicles for meaningful participation; they achieve policy reforms and model accountability and responsibility, qualities increasingly rare in American civil society. Faith-based civic engagement projects such as these six offer some of the most hopeful examples of how to bridge race, class, and gender

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tensions in American life. These projects are extraordinary for their cross-class, multi-cultural, gender-balanced, immigrant-friendly inclusiveness. In a time when many people are nervous about sectarian extremism as a threat to democracy, these projects model a vigorous democratic tolerance.

Ultimately the fate of our democracy depends upon the ability of ordinary people to reclaim authority as co-creators of our communities and the nation. Early lessons from the Organized Religion Evaluation Initiative leave us hopeful that this can, indeed, happen. We look forward to sharing a more complete set of findings in 2004 and 2005.

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