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One of the more effective instruments for seeking justice and peace in the city/community is faith-based (congregation-based) organizing. I define faith-based organizing as the intentional and disciplined putting of the diverse peoples of a city in relationship across all racial, economic, denominational and neighborhood lines for the purpose of making that city "work better" for the good of all.

I will divide this essay into two sections:

1. [Characteristics of faith-based organizing](#), and
2. [Precautions about faith-based organizing](#).

Characteristics of Faith-Based Organizing

1. It is ecumenical and considers diversity a strength.

It recognizes that no one congregation can make much of an impact upon a city for purposes of justice or peace and that no one denomination can do so as well. (It also recognizes that no ecumenical collective can do so without the training, honing and holding accountable to its own goals that professional organizers provide.) In the case of Boston, The Greater Boston Interfaith Organization deliberately chose to organize GREATER Boston, rather than the far more simple task of organizing parts of Boston or Boston as a whole.... for the purpose of addressing the evident "Balkanization" of Boston in terms of ethnicity, class, denominations, neighborhoods, etc. GREATER Boston provides infinitely more clout on the power grid than either of the other two options.

2. It is *people and leadership oriented*, rather than project oriented.

While such faith-based organizing (hereafter: FBO) needs to be credentialed by projects (such as the Nehemiah Housing Project in Brooklyn and The South Bronx), a FBO can easily become consumed by such projects. They must be spun off into allied but separate entities (the Nehemiah Housing Associations in New York City both became dues-paying member institutions of their sponsors, East Brooklyn Congregations and South Bronx Churches) so that the main work of the FBO can proceed always center-stage. And that main work is ALWAYS the development of local leadership. (This local leadership then has a spill-over effect into the lives of local congregations and neighborhoods as well.)

3. Its goal is the "release of power" in local individuals, families, congregations and communities.

This is not "empowerment", the granting of bits of powerfulness by holders of power to non-holders of power. Power is an inherent gift within each person; it is, among other things, what the "image of God" means. This powerfulness is often bottled up or misdirected. It needs to be released in purposeful and highly focused ways. II Timothy 1 says, "God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and

self-control." We are already-powerful. FBO helps that power to be -released.

4. It is owned by the people, primarily because of its dues base and because they lead it.

In GBIO the dues of each institutional member is one percent of that institution's annual budget. That is a substantial commitment. People's interest and engagement **tends** to follow their financial commitments. This FBO accepts little or no monies from the government on any level. It desires to remain free and locally owned.

The overwhelming majority of the leaders in FBO are lay members, as contrasted with clergy (perhaps as many as fifty to one). The people both own and lead this organizing work.

5. It listens to the people.

When GBIO set out to determine which issues it would first address it **set up several** hundred house meetings: Groups of ten or a dozen people meeting with a convener and recorder trained by the FBO to list and then prioritize the most urgently felt community needs of the people. Thousands of people thus chose housing and education-youth as the beginning issues of GBIO. Organizers do what the people tell them to do. GBIO is collecting the signatures of at least 100,000 persons for its affordable housing campaign. 6. It expects accountability both from its organizers, its leaders and from other holders of power in the city.

All meetings of FBO start on time. Member institutions take on quotas, for example, for public meetings, and they must announce publicly at those meetings whether or not they met their turnout quotas. Leaders are expected to do what they say they will do. FBO contends that an organization cannot authentically hold other holders of power accountable if it will not hold itself accountable.

But one of the most dramatic and effective actions of a FBO is to, in fact, hold other holders of power accountable to their public commitments. Before thousands of FBO citizens, political figures, for example, are required to answer Yes or No to specific courses of action that the FBO puts before them. These are not hollow or forgotten commitments; they will hear from the FBO again (and again) on their specific follow-through.

This "culture of expectation" also permeates the member institutions that are taking this organizing work seriously. For example, at Resurrection Lutheran Church, Roxbury, where the author is Pastor, these six "Marks of Discipleship" are re-affirmed annually by all the members:

1. I will be in worship every Sunday.
2. I will aim at tithing my income in my offerings.
3. I will study the Bible regularly, preferably with other members.
4. I will attempt to bring at least one member of my network into the fellowship of the church each year.
5. I will pray every day for the congregation and for the community.
6. I will get involved in at least one ministry, either in the church or the community, for which I will make myself accountable.

6. It can focus on any issue(s) it chooses, beginning always with smaller issues, always-winnable issues.

In Brooklyn, the East Brooklyn Congregations started with upgrading some ten local supermarkets. In Greater Boston, GBIO is starting with the collection of 100,000 signatures in support of its affordable housing initiative. EBC went on to build (and is still **building**) **over three** thousand Nehemiah Homes for the working poor, and to establishing a new health clinic and to the sponsorship of two public high schools. GBIO will go on to build Nehemiah Homes here in Greater Boston and to ask that the state add \$250M to

the next education budget. But a FBO is careful to find its legs slowly and/surely.

7. It puts people into relationships, using the one-to-one relational meeting as the basic organizing instrument.

It recognizes that the most radical act any of us can do in the public arena is to introduce one person of power to another. It does this slowly and with great deliberation, always on a one-to-one, not two-to-one or three-to-one basis. Thousands of one-to-one meetings are happening as a new FBO is being established. In the case of GBIO all meetings of the organization (even ones as large as the four thousand to attended GBIO's inaugural rally in November, 1998) will probably have at least a mini-one-to-one meeting as part of the agenda.

In these one-to-one meetings the two participants trade energy, vision, anger, hopes for the future of the community. They talk about what is most important to each. There is vital listening on both participants' parts.

They decide whether or not the other person has primary leadership qualities, whether they want to meet again, whether they think they can work together on issues that matter to both. These **meetings are agenda-less**; they are for the purpose of a genuine meeting **between two important persons**.

8. FBO membership is institutional, rather than individual

Faith-based institutions are already organized ... both in terms of people and money. Only such institutions can become official members of a FBO. But a FBO may choose, as GBIO has, to include institutions other than faith-based communities as members. There are several unions and a number of community development corporations as dues-paying members of GBIO, for example.

9. It practices the "Iron Rule" (Never do for someone what that person can do for him/herself)

Organizers do not run or do most of the work of the FBO; leaders do. FBO both expects and equips leaders to exercise their own gifts and abilities and leadership in this work. The clergy leaders of FBO often find that they need to adapt their modus operandi according to this principle as they administer their own congregations.

10. It uses collective leadership, rather than charismatic leadership.

A wide range of leaders share central roles in the strategy teams, task forces and actions of an FBO. Elected representatives to such leadership groups seldom serve more than one year, opening up the position to additional leaders in turn. There is almost no misting a beat when any one leader moves on (e.g., accepts a call to a new church or synagogue).

11. All actions of a FBO, as well as all training, are for the increase and honing of leadership skills and confidence among the local leaders.

If any **particular action does not specifically** promise to advance the **skills and abilities** of the leaders, it probably will not be implemented. In the kind of preparation necessary for any action (research, role playing, power analyses*, assigning roles and tasks)... the action itself being done in a very disciplined fashion... the mandatory evaluation of all actions... all have a similar purpose: the further advancement of the effectiveness of the appointed leaders.

12. FBO knows the difference between problems and issues, and it will only work on issues.

Issues are those parts of a problem that are "cognizable" and "winnable." Drugs in the community are a problem. Closing down a specific drug-dealing house is an issue. Declining membership in a congregation

is a problem. Changing a non-inviting liturgy is an issue. Affordable housing is a problem. Getting the state to add \$200M to its 2001 budget for affordable housing is an issue.

13. **FBO trusts people.**

Saul Alinsky, the guru of almost all broad-based organizing in the United States, once said, "Most people, when given the opportunity, will do the right thing." FBO believes that and acts accordingly. It is the basis for any democratic society, and FBO is profoundly committed to the democratic principle. It wants to make democracy work, and, to the extent that democracy does work, it will be for the benefit of all its citizens. FBO recognizes that in the United States currently, democracy is not working very well at all. It seeks to change that situation.

Some Precautions about Faith-Based Organizing

1. It **CAN** skew the faith-based community's agenda, taking energy away from that institution's worship, evangelism, formation and social ministry mandates. This FBO allows the faith-based community to address its social change mandate in an effective, collective manner, but caution has to be exercised so that that important and exciting and energizing work does not become the tail that wags the dog.
2. It **CAN** miss a needed emphasis (in the Christian understanding) on the "Theology of the Cross" (the power inherent is weakness and self-sacrifice).

The impact upon the American conscience made by the student sit-ins and the freedom rides during the civil right5movement and by ministers and laity willing to go to jail and lay their lives down if necessary for this cause was perhaps the greatest facilitator of social change during that entire era. FBO needs to carefully assess taking on power on the terms of those other "holders of power". It needs to continue to act "outside of the experience" of its targets, and constantly making its appeal to distinctly moral claims.

3. It **CAN** defer to "experts" such as professional organizers, and thus not realize the Iron Rule.

Professional organizers tend to fill vacuums of leadership very quickly and instinctively. Unless **leaders exert themselves and are** willing to drive the organization, organizing staffs can and probably will take over. The best organizers will be determined not to let this happen, but not all organizers are that principled.

4. It **CAN** fail to engage the hard-core poor.

The hard-core poor are, by definition, difficult to organize. If they were not, they would probably not be hard-core poor. For example, attempts were made in the South Bronx to organize tenants of public housing--a dues paying "institution" was TOPH (Tenants of Public Housing). Attempts are being made in GBIO with the deliberate inclusion as member institutions of the Pine Street Inn and St Francis House. But this work is never easy.

5. It **CAN** be consumed by projects (e.g., tie \$350M Nehemiah Housing Program of EBC and SBC in New York City).

Any FBO has to be constantly vigilant so that organizing remains always its main agenda, not the maintenance of the projects it spawns. It is always primarily in the people business, and not just to get this or that done.

6. It **CAN** be unaccountable.

A FBO is Pittsburgh in the early 80's became unaccountable, taking on its judicatories as the target, Professional organizers can become unaccountable, beyond the control and best interests of the FBO. The organizational structure of a FBO can impede internal accountability. Any time the broad bases of people are not in clear control of the FBO, at least through their chosen representatives, it is becoming unaccountable.

7. It **CAN** be content with people just "getting a piece of the American pie" rather than being an agent of transforming their values.

In some very clear ways it is more dangerous to be rich than poor in this country, in terms of values and what is really important. While FBO attempts to enhance the station-of all, particularly that of the working class and below, it is supremely aware of the hazards of the kind of materialistic culture which prevails in these United States. It desires to enable no-option people to become full-option people, but accompanies those endeavors with constant appeals to the religious traditions which under-gird and temper all this work.

8. It **CAN** fail to transfer solid organizing principles from the organizing process to everyday parish ministry.

Almost every one of the cardinal principles of FBO can be applied to ordinary parish life and ministry, but, sadly, this is frequently not accomplished. Many clergy, for example, leave their learnings and experience in FBO sealed off from what they do in the administration and leadership of their congregations.

9. It **CAN** become power-over rather than power-with.

FBO at its best is always redemptive in purpose. It is reciprocal in its dealing with other holders of power. It is inclusive and willing to be acted upon as well as to act upon. It is not like most other power relationships in this country, those relationships that usually exhibit dominant power, unilateral power, controlling power. FBO's understanding of power is that it is always relational, interactive, and reciprocal. It is the kind of power we see in God.