

Community Organizing From a Parish Perspective

Community Organizing:

- Aims to change structures, systems, policies. (*Direct service programs aim to meet a need, solve an individual problem. Don't necessarily get to the root of the problem.*)
 - I.E.: A person needs homecare, but cannot afford it. You could volunteer to help that person with immediate assistance or you could look to change the system and find out why this person is in the position in the first place. If you change the system, you not only help the individual, but also others who are in the same position.
- Is accomplished through group action by large numbers of people. (*The idea is enable many people to participate in the struggle for social justice. Not done by just a few charismatic heroes.*)
 - A community voice
- Expresses power through numbers because we don't have the money resources of large power structures (e.g. prescription drug companies)
 - I.E.: Accountability sessions and rallies

Some thoughts about parishes and community organizing:

- When thinking about social justice, people in parishes understand direct service and even advocacy. Community organizing is out of their experience and it takes a while to understand its approach to resolving problems. .
 - Step back and find out WHY someone is in need. If you find the source of the issue, you can then create more permanent change that affects everyone with the same issue.
- Think about the parish as a family community and try to discover how members of the parish are adversely affected by systems. For example, people who are caregivers, people who lose their health insurance, people with pre-existing conditions, etc.
 - Fix systems

Break for Questions

Two factors motivate people to be involved:

- Relationships (If a friend or relative asks you to do something, you are more inclined than if you were asked by a stranger.)
- Self-Interest (This should not to be confused with selfishness. It may relate directly to an issue, but it also could be connected to a value system.)
 - I.E.: Immediate (acquiring a conpace card) and value related (faith commitment)

The one-on one interview as a common tool of community organizing to build numbers of people involve because it: (think of it as a conversation with a goal in mind)

- Builds relationships. (*Importance of relationships in communities like parishes*)
- Discovers the self-interest of the person you are interviewing.

We prefer a common sense approach to doing interviews. Keep the interview simple.

- Make an appointment to speak with other parish members. Typically the interview should take about 30 minutes.
- There are many ways to find potential candidates for interviews – e.g. parents of children in religious education programs; people you at Mass regularly; people on committees; names suggested by parish staff. (*This needs some explaining. I found this to be a big issue in Prospect. People just weren't sure how find and approach people for interviews.*)
 - I.E.: people you know; both children go to religious ed, someone who sits 3 seats away from you every Sunday
- Ask open-ended questions that begin with “what”, “why” and “how.” This gets people talking. Interviewer should spent time listening. It is a good idea to develop some questions before the interview so that you can somewhat the flow of the conversation.
 - I.E.: What do you feel are the most important concerns for people in this parish?
- Don't take notes. Have a conversation – not conduct a survey.
- Don't sell anything and try to recruit person on first conversation.
 - Just Listen
- Ask about other people in the parish that the interviewee thinks would be good to contact.
- Write notes after the conversation. Review the conversation for keys to other relationships may have in the parish and outside the parish and for indications of a person's self-interest.

15 mins, Break for Exercise:

-Get into pairs and create a few open ended questions

Ask for some volunteers to share there open ended questions. Ask them to put the questions into the sample conversation on their sheet

20mins, Break for Exercise:

-Get into pairs and practice having the sample conversation with each other

Sample Conversation with a Parish Member

Introduction: Hello, my name is _____. Father _____ suggested that I speak with you. I want to thank you for taking the time to meet with me.

A number of parishioners have volunteered to interview parish members to ask about concerns that they might be having.

Open-ended question: What do you think are the most important issues facing families in the parish these days?

Many people in the parish have lost their jobs with the economy. A lot of them were working at _____ and got laid off a couple of months ago. My neighbor told me that her daughter and son-in-law had trouble paying for physicals for the kids for camp.

Conclusion: _____, thank you for taking the time to talk with me. Is there anyone else in the parish that you suggest I speak with?

Next step: The Parish Council and the Social Action Committee are going to review the information from our interviews. I keep you informed of our next steps.

-After Exercise:

-How many people learned something new about the person you interviewed?
-How did you feel asking the question?

-The more you do this, the easier and more natural it will become

-Hand out business cards and let everyone know that if they have follow up questions or get stuck at some point, to feel free to contact us.

Parish Listening Campaign

Purpose: To develop and strengthen relationship networks within the parish
To gather information about concerns and hopes of parishioners with a view to increasing the relevancy of the parish to members
To surface new leaders in the parish community

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Levels of participation (ownership) in a parish:

1. People who always attend services, volunteer for many committees or events, chair committees, can be counted for their participation
2. People who regularly attend services, participate in parish events
3. People who regularly attend services
4. People who occasionally attend service

Try to select representative sample of people in categories 2 and 3. Also hearing from a couple of people in category 4 as part of the overall campaign would also be helpful. Finding people to interview should not be a problem. Some places to look for interviewees:

- Parents of children in Communion and confirmation classes
- Parents of children in CCD
- People you see in church every week
- Names suggested by Father Mark or other parish staff
- People who attend the parish who live in your neighborhood
- People who attend parish events

Asking people for an interview should be direct and simple. For example: *I am a member of the _____ of St. Anthony's Parish and we are doing a Listening*

Campaign with people in our parish community. I was wondering if I might speak with you for about thirty minutes about the parish. Would you be free for a few minutes after Mass next Sunday or would you prefer to get a cup of coffee some afternoon next week?

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