

# REALITIES ARE GREATER THAN IDEAS

*Evangelisation, Catholicism  
and Community Organising*

*Dunstan Rodrigues with Angus Ritchie and Anna Rowlands*



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“Stand up, come into the Centre!”  
*(Luke 6)*

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“To build power, pray, and then ask  
- “What is the right way?””  
*(Lucy Achola)*

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# INTRODUCTION

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*To evangelise with a joy that the fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus is the central mission given to the People of God.<sup>1</sup>*

This report concentrates on the social dimension of this mission: how Christians can make the kingdom of God present in our world and engage in the public square.<sup>2</sup> It is written to help lay leaders, parish priests, teachers, chaplains, young people and others to discover and engage fruitfully in one means of so engaging: the craft of broad-based community organising.

In Part A, we begin with what community organising is. Chapter 1 outlines eight characteristics of community organising, describing what makes it a unique and important practice in Britain. Chapter 2 describes what it looks like for Catholic churches to be engaged in organising, outlining seven hallmarks of an organised Catholic church.

Part B makes a case for why and how Catholics can engage in community organising. Chapter 3 explores what organising offers the Church and what the Church offers to organising. Then chapter 4 examines how Pope Francis' vision of a Church of the poor both resonates with and challenges the practice of organising.

Part C shares the stories and experiences of people who have been involved in organising over the last twenty years and asks what we can learn from their experiences. Chapter 5 describes the opportunities it offers lay leaders, chapter 6 does the same for priests, and chapter 7 for teachers, chaplains and young people.

## SOME HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The Catholic Church in England and Wales has been closely involved with the creation, spread and growth of community organising alliances across the country. After challenging and difficult attempts at organising among churches alone, organising with all civil society institutions seemed necessary. As Bernadette Farrell - who worked with Bishop Victor Guazzelli on this and became the first Catholic organiser - notes, 'This idea of organising across the sectors - he understood from the outset, and so did I - this is what we needed'. So, in 1996, TELCO (the

East London Citizens Organisation) was created and other alliances of civil society shortly followed.

Over the last twenty years, these alliances have spread throughout the country and, at the same time, the number of Catholic institutions engaged has greatly increased. Citizens UK - the main community organising alliance - now exists in London, Birmingham, Nottingham, Tyne and Wear, Leeds, Milton Keynes, Manchester, Wales and Maun Valley. Moreover, as published on the Citizens UK website in March 2018, the number of Catholic institutions as members of alliances number just below 80 (76), the majority of which are churches (38) and schools (29), but which also include charities, chaplaincies, and convents.<sup>3</sup>

Against this backdrop and history, this report seeks to take stock. It builds on previous research in this area. In 2002, the study *In the Middle of Our Street* (2002) examined a range of community development initiatives and described broad-based community organising as it was in its early stages in Britain.<sup>4</sup> It gave a broadly positive account - noting that 'broad-based organising has clearly had an impact. It has bonded people together and built bridges between different faith and ethnic communities facing the same economic and social conditions.'<sup>5</sup> Dr. Austen Ivereigh's *Faithful Citizens* (2010) meanwhile gave a rich, detailed and vivid account of organising campaigns in London - around the Living Wage, Housing and Asylum - and forcefully made the case that 'the fuel and roadmap offered by Catholic Social Teaching have found a perfect vehicle in community organising'.<sup>6</sup>

The focus of this report is slightly different. It describes in more detail the practice of organising from the perspective of parishes involved; it makes use of Pope Francis' teachings to address the questions of why and how Catholics are called to organise; and it shares stories and lessons from the last twenty years from the perspective of lay leaders, priests, chaplains and teachers.

The report is jointly funded by the Caritas Social Action Network and the Diocese of Brentwood.

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.citizensuk.org/local\\_chapters](http://www.citizensuk.org/local_chapters)

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Agency for Social Concern, *In the Middle of Our Street* (London 2002), pp. 51-60.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* p. 60

<sup>6</sup> Austen Ivereigh, *Faithful Citizens*, (London: 2010), p.11.

<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (hereafter EG) 1

<sup>2</sup> EG 176

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## PART A

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## COMMUNITY ORGANISING AND THE “ORGANISED CHURCHES”

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# 1 WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANISING?

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By Angus Ritchie



Community organising is a way of doing politics which brings together grassroots institutions like churches, mosques and schools in a particular town or city to work and act on issues of common concern. It originated in the USA in the 1930s and has been growing in the UK since the 1990s.

There are community organising alliances in a growing number of towns and cities across the country. They are all part of the national community organising movement, which is called Citizens UK.

The roots of this form of community organising lie in the slums of 1930s Chicago, where Saul Alinsky pioneered this particular form of social action. He was a secular Jewish activist, who discovered churches and synagogues were vital allies in the struggle for justice. He began his work in the 1930s in some of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods.

Jay MacLeod sums up his unique approach:

Alinsky's breakthrough was to reverse the logic of paternalistic reform by wresting control away from the professional do-gooders and handing it over to the people they were supposed to help. Alinsky transformed community activism from the liberal, elite-led endeavour it had become around 1900 into something he hoped would be more hard-headed and democratic.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth noting that Alinsky both influenced and worked closely with the Catholic Church in the United States. His approach had an important impact on the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and helped influence the launch of the Campaign for Human Development - its domestic anti-poverty program.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, Alinsky developed hundreds of relationships with Catholic leaders, including a close friendship with Thomistic philosopher Jacques Maritain.<sup>3</sup>

Alinsky's model of organising had eight key characteristics, which continue to characterise the work of community organising movements

worldwide – including Citizens UK.

Firstly, there is a **relentless focus on relationships**. At the heart of community organising is the 'one-to-one' meeting. Both community organisers and the leaders of churches and other institutions which are in the alliance conduct 'one-to-ones' on a regular basis. The purpose of these one-to-ones is to identify and build relationships with grassroots leaders.

As Michael Gecan characterises it:

An individual meeting is a face-to-face, one-to-one meeting, in someone's home or apartment or workplace or local coffee shop, that takes about 30 minutes. The purpose of the meeting is not chit chat, whining, selling, gossip, sports talk, data collection or therapy. The aim of the meeting is to initiate a public relationship with another person'

Secondly, organising **identifies and acts on the interests of local people**. In the language of organising, participants are taught to identify their own and others' 'self interest' by asking: 'What relationships are central to this person's life?', 'How do they spend their time and money, and why?', 'What are the motivations for key decisions they have made?', 'What institutions are they involved in, and why?'. Organising works by acting on the interests of people as they are - often starting with smaller issues. Sr. Josephine OA Canny reflects on the importance of this approach when organising with sixth-formers as Chaplain of a secondary school:

'At that age they are much more selfish than most adults and there was no way I could engage them without pointing out their self-interest i.e. the need for good content on their applications for the best Universities, applying for bursaries etc. I am just convinced that for most of us, even when we are being generous, there is always an underlining self-interest which drives our energy - it's such a primitive drive that we simply cannot overlook it. I am absolutely convinced of its importance in engaging people. We are not all saints yet!'

<sup>1</sup> J. MacLeod, *Community Organising: A Practical and Theological Evaluation* (London: 1988)

<sup>2</sup> L. Engel, 'The influence of Saul Alinsky on the Campaign for Human Development', *Theological Studies* 59 (1998) pp. 641-643.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 645.

Thirdly, organising is **built around institutions**. Instead of mobilising people to campaign together on single issues, organising uses those issues to build a long-term alliance between the religious and civic institutions within a neighbourhood. There is a focus on campaigning on ‘winnable issues’ so that people unused to any kind of successful action in public life (let alone action with neighbours of other faiths and cultures) begin to have confidence that common action is worthwhile. The alliance develops at the speed they develop. That way, they remain in the driving seat.

Fourthly, organising builds alliances which are **financially independent**. Their costs, including the pay of salaried organisers, are funded as far as possible from annual dues paid by member institutions (‘hard money’) topped up by grants from charitable foundations (‘soft money’). Funding from government – whether federal, state or local – has never been accepted. Every year, Citizens UK seeks to increase the proportion of ‘hard money’ funding its work, so that action is determined by members’ priorities, rather than those of external funders.

Fifthly, organising **teaches through experience and action**. Problems, once identified, are turned into tangible, winnable demands. Action is not only engaged in to win on the specific issue, but to develop grassroots leaders, give the most excluded and often disillusioned communities the confidence that public engagement could be successful and indeed enjoyable, and build relationships of solidarity and trust across communities. In each new campaign, a community organiser will be considering how the next action could develop capacity in leaders, and evaluation – teaching the principles of organising through the experiences of success and also the mistakes – was a key part of their pedagogy.

Sixthly, **organising recognises the vital role of tension**, teaching that power is never handed over without a struggle. Dramatic tactics might be used to apply moral or practical pressure to the ‘target’ of an action. (In Alinsky’s words, the aim was to “polarise and personalise”.) They would be legal and peaceful, but would seek to embarrass the ‘target’ – often into living up to his or her rhetoric. An example of the dramatic use of tension was the ‘tie-up’ of a bank in the London Living Wage campaign.

### *The Living Wage Campaign*

Despite sending his office a number of letters from religious and civic leaders, London Citizens had been unable to secure a meeting with Sir John Bond (the Chairman of HSBC) to discuss the poverty wages of those who cleaned the bank’s new international headquarters in East London.

The nuns at St Antony’s Catholic Church in Forest Gate came up with an idea. The 2000-strong congregation had an account with HSBC. Each Tuesday they deposited a large number of coins in their local branch, because of the many visitors who came in to church each week to light candles.

The nuns decided to save up these coins for a few months, until they filled a small van. Just before Christmas, with a wider team of London Citizens leaders, they drove to HSBC’s Oxford Street branch (in the heart of the capital – and near to BBC Broadcasting House). In full view of the national media, with placards saying “SIR JOHN BOND – SCROOGE” and “PAY HSBC CLEANERS A LIVING WAGE”, the nuns tied up the branch completely by paying in their coins one by one. The tension worked: within an hour, Sir John had agreed to meet a team of London Citizens leaders, and in due course, HSBC became one of London’s earliest Living Wage employers.

Seventhly, however, organising avoids the “wedge issues” which divided people in the poorest neighbourhoods from one another. While Alinsky sought to generate tension with those beyond the alliance, it was axiomatic that action would only be taken on issues where the interests of diverse groups led to a common desire for action. Issues on which those groups could not agree were left to one side. The decision to avoid “wedge issues” does not imply that they are less important. However, the solidarity and trust which is built on the issues where we can work together often leads to a better conversation on those where there is disagreement.

Finally, mass meetings – assemblies – are at the heart of community organising. The power of the local broad-based alliance comes from

its ability to gather organised people, and organised money. Regular assemblies bring thousands of members together, to hold the ‘targets’ of an action to account.

These assemblies are participatory democracy in action - where grassroots leaders from civil society groups across the city call elected officials, businesses and governmental managers to account on issues of local concern. Congregations and schools will pledge to send a certain number of people to participate in the assembly.

The importance of the community, of the sense of ‘being and doing together’ is crucial at each stage of the work of broad-based community organising. It is not the individual who is trying to make changes on behalf of his or her community, but the whole community who participates in the changes. These words of a woman who is a member of TELCO through her parish, best describe the functioning of broad-based community organising: “First, we acknowledge the problems of the local community together. Second, we address these problems together. And third, we take actions together to solve the problems. We take actions united around a common cause.” Another churchgoer described her involvement with TELCO as a way of “promoting justice for the underprivileged, and doing this with people of my own Church and others, as a community.” At the TELCO assembly, the opening address by the guest speaker, the then Catholic Bishop of Brentwood, summarised the whole ethos of broad-based community organising: “It is better together. [...] We are responsible together. [...] We can bring more transformation in this world if we can do it together.” And this was the theme that ran throughout all the major speakers of the assembly, individuals working together, as a community, can achieve more than alone.

Taken together, these eight characteristics – focusing on relationships, identifying and acting on local interests, building around local institutions, seeking financial independence, recognising the vital

role of tension, avoiding “wedge issues”, and gathering regularly in assemblies – have enabled community organising to grow into a unique movement. A powerful alliance is being built upon the very citizens who are usually marginalised and ignored. These are the people whom politicians often say are “hard to reach” – whereas, in reality, our political and economic systems keep power out of their reach.



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## 2 THE HALLMARKS OF AN “ORGANISED CATHOLIC CHURCH”

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by Angus Ritchie and Dunstan Rodrigues

This chapter sketches out what it looks like for a Catholic church to participate in community organising.

What does it look like for a Catholic parish to participate in organising? In over a decade of work with churches in east London which are involved in community organising – including a growing number of Catholic parishes – the Centre for Theology and Community have identified seven **hallmarks of an organised church**. These habits can help one understand what it can look like for a Catholic parish to engage in the practice of organising.

Firstly, an organised Catholic parish **integrates theology, spirituality and action**. The congregations' participation in organising flows out of their encounter with Jesus Christ. So, rather than social action feeling like the passion of only a few church members on the sidelines, it instead is integrated into the spiritual and sacramental life of the community. There are different opportunities for theology, spirituality and action to be so integrated. Preaching is one: the priest connects the daily scripture to the reality of the congregation's life as discovered through listening and one-to-one conversations. Moreover, the campaigns and neighbours of the organising alliance can be offered up in intercessory prayer. What is known in organising terms as 'house meetings' are another such opportunity. As the organiser Ernie Cortes characterises them:

'these small group meetings are about telling stories and developing narratives, but also about enquiring into the deep concerns affecting people's daily lives'<sup>1</sup>

In a church context, these house meetings can be intertwined with theological reflection and prayer. They start with prayer and reflection on the Gospel or a spiritual text. Next comes a 'round' - where everyone in the group shares a story or experience. Then there is time for relationship building - with people sharing with someone they do not know. And, finally, there is communal time for reflection which involves asking how the community can act on an issue of concern.

Secondly, an organised Catholic parish utilises the craft of organising to build a **relational culture**, hospitable and open to all. Many Catholic churches in Britain have people from a great number

of cultures from around the world - it is a 'church of migrants'. The tools of organising are used to cultivate relationships across difference in an intentional way - so everyone is welcome and the community is hospitable. The main means by which this relationship building takes place is the **one-to-one conversation**, the cornerstone of community organising. One priest in residence at St. Ignatius' Church explains: one-to-ones are 'about sitting with people, listening, really listening, and sharing'. Another priest, who visits parishioners in their homes to have these one-to-one conversations, describes them: 'In thirty minutes or so the subject of the conversation is ourselves, as I try to listen to the person in front of me, work out what their passions are, and establish a connection.' Through such one-to-one conversations, then, the parish builds stronger relationships across difference.

Thirdly, an organised Catholic parish uses the craft of organising **to renew its focus on people, by constantly reorganising**. In a couple of East London Catholic parishes, organising has been helpful in preventing the community from becoming bogged down in bureaucratic processes or become dominated by unrepresentative cliques. Instead, following the maxim that 'All organising is disorganising and reorganising', the churches use the tools of organising to evaluate whether its meetings allow every voice to be heard; whether people from different cultures, age groups and classes are involved in leadership, and whether the activities of the church genuinely reflect the concerns and values of the whole membership – and are accessible to those on the fringes of the church community.

Fourthly, in an organised Catholic parish, **leaders are being developed through public action**: the congregation uses the tools of organising to develop new leaders. Activities within the church, and community organising campaigns beyond its walls, are selected with the development of new leaders as an explicit goal. These actions can be small campaigns – to persuade the council to light a park, put in a zebra crossing, or even just put up a sign which lets neighbours know where the church is. At St. Stephen's Parish, the congregation led a small action called "We Don't Want A Miracle, We Just Want A Sign", where they gathered outside the council offices to protest about the lack of signage for their church. Other kinds of action involve hosting those in authority - a local councillor, headteacher or police commissioner - in

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<sup>1</sup> Bretherton p.122.



one's institution. For instance, in October 2016, one East London parish hosted the local councillor for a meeting. Four families facing urgent issues around housing shared their stories with the group. This resulted in one of the parishioners later avoiding eviction with the intervention of the Councillor, emboldening the congregation to realise what is possible when one acts together. These humble "actions" are often the process by which members of the congregation who have never been involved in public life take the first step into active citizenship – and discover both an appetite and aptitude for leadership.

Fifthly, organising can be a helpful tool for a Catholic parish to ensure that **power and responsibility are shared** in the community. While a common challenge for the priest or religious in a Parish is that everything goes through them, organising can be a helpful means to develop leaders and build capacity in the church. In one Parish, the priest conducted many one-to-one conversations and asked the question 'how can I enable the person in front of me to flourish?'. Over time, new lay leaders emerged and led new initiatives - such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul, a renewed young adult ministry, and a team devoted to building a stronger community. As such, responsibility and ownership in the church became more shared.

Sixthly, participation in organising offers occasions for the church to **work with those beyond its walls**, the most striking example being the **organising assembly**. As we saw in chapter one, these assemblies are participatory democracy in action - where grassroots leaders from civil society groups across the city call elected officials, businesses and governmental managers to account on issues of local concern. Congregations and schools will pledge to send a certain number of people to participate in the assembly. These assemblies are an excellent opportunity for the congregation to act on an area of concern with other civil society institutions across their city. In 2016, for instance, there was an assembly in the run up to the London mayoral election. St. Ignatius' parish participated and sent over 100 people, and the event is remembered as a significant moment of kindling hope. Many from the congregation who attended were struck by the diversity and the sheer number of people present. As one Sister recalls, 'the great energy and great variety of people in that arena was a real learning for us'. Being counted with civil society inspired a real expectation of change: 'we were

reminded of the tremendous good that is possible and we left feeling powerful'. The parish priest observes the profundity of this, observing that 'people have been overwhelmed by hopelessness and have forgotten themselves as individuals, but more powerfully as a community which can be a sign of hope, manifest the Kingdom of God and make change'.

Finally, an organised Catholic parish will of course **tell and embody the Christian story**. When engaged in the public square, the congregation does not need to leave its identity behind but instead can point to Christ in deed and truth. Organising assemblies again are an instance of this. The congregation will come with its church banner, can pray for the assembly, and also share the stories of Christians from the past thirsting for justice. As one priest puts it:

A key moment was the first assembly. When the church stood up, said we are here from St Margaret's, and people clapped, it was amazing. People appreciated us for what we were. Suddenly there was a sense that "Yes, we do have something to say"

What is more, at these public assemblies and meetings, institutions are able to read publicly their sacred texts - including scripture and social encyclicals. As one interviewee put it, 'we all went with our texts... the sacred texts are used all the time'. So, in this way, organising is a means by which Catholic Christians can tell and embody the Christian story.



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## **PART B**

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## **THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

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## 3 HOW SHOULD CATHOLIC CHRISTIANS ENGAGE IN BROAD-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANISING?

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore why and how Christians should engage in community organising.

The story of Lucy Achola can exemplify better than words and principles how Christians can engage in community organising. Lucy is a mother of three who was facing housing eviction. Were it to go ahead, this displacement would have huge consequences: it would mean that she would move far from the place where her two daughters sing in the school choir and her son is an altar server. Ultimately, she would be left without a place to live, away from her friends and community.

Fortuitously, at the same time, her parish church was engaged in a listening campaign around housing. Through a one-to-one conversation, her story became known, and she was asked to share her testimony along with three others with the local councillor at an accountability assembly in the Church. The acknowledgement of her struggle itself gave her hope and joy: as she put it, 'I was so happy - the whole Parish was behind me.'

On that evening she and others spoke truth to power, shared honestly their struggles, and negotiated with the council. The event was full of tension, tears and laughter.

The organising worked: after pursuing her case, she was able to stay in her home. She shared her story with the congregation - giving hope and encouragement to others. Her children drew hand written cards and walked to the local council offices and gave them, along with some Ugandan fruit, to the councillor. 'I am like the leper healed by Christ who remembered to give thanks', she remarked. Then, a few weeks later, at an organising Assembly in the East London Mosque, she shared her story in front of hundreds people from schools, churches, mosques, clubs and charities.

Not only did this episode enable her family and children to remain a part of the community, but, as she put it, 'God really opened the door.' At a prayer meeting soon after, she meditated with others on the words in the Gospel - 'Be merciful as your heavenly Father is merciful' and St. Peter's exhortation: 'Be hospitable'.<sup>1</sup> She gave thanks for what she had experienced, and felt moved to welcome one lady facing homelessness into her home, and then welcomed another - offering them both comfort and support.

This is now her mission: as she puts it, 'Being sensitive to needs of

<sup>1</sup> Luke 6:36; 1 Peter 4:9

people around me and helping where I can help', while - at the same time - working in her church's Building Community team to tackle the structural issues which render people vulnerable to precarious housing in the first place.

Her experience exemplifies how Catholic Christians can engage in broad based community organising. We can notice three features.

First, the tools and practice of organising enabled her to embody something of the Gospel: by encountering others in her community face-to-face, speaking truth to power, and offering hospitality to the vulnerable. So, in section 1, this essay looks at what the craft of organising offers the Church.

Second, her actions embodied the wisdom of Catholic Social Teaching, and she set an inspiring example for the organising alliance. She was not merely a campaigner for justice, but - embodying Pope Emeritus Benedict's dictum that 'justice is inseparable from charity' - the successful campaign for justice opened the door for an outpouring of charity in her life.<sup>2</sup> In a similar spirit, section 2 asks: what, by its example, can the Church offer to community organising?

Third, at the same time, Lucy practised organising whilst abiding in Christ - engaged in action, yet deeply prayerful. As she expresses it: 'We build power, pray, and then ask - "What is the right way?"' So, in section 3, we point towards features of distinctive Christian involvement in community organising.

### 3.1 WHAT DOES ORGANISING OFFER THE CHURCH?

#### (A) *The one-to-one conversation*

First, the one-to-one conversation is a great gift that community organising offers the Church. It is a disciplined, focused practice for building relationship, developing capacity and discerning gifts in a congregation or school. Whereas it is very easy for members of a community to remain anonymous to one another, and for relationships to be functional, the one-to-one offers a way of getting beyond this. As one priest describes them: 'In thirty minutes or so the subject of the

<sup>2</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (hereafter *CIV*), para. 6

conversation is ourselves, as I try to listen to the person in front of me, work out what their passions are, and establish a connection’.

It is important to note how the one-to-one is distinct from other kinds of conversation that might happen in a community. It does not involve counselling, sharing private information, or spiritual direction, but rather - in the language of organising - seeks to build a public relationship. As such it complements others kinds of interaction but offers something distinct and particularly helpful for developing leadership in a community.

Like much of organising, it is a craft that is developed and cultivated over time and with practice. On community organising training run by the local alliance, members of a congregation or school learn the art of one-to-ones, but it is really through practice and evaluation that it starts to become clear how powerful a tool it is. Just by sitting down with a person for 30-40 minutes, sharing defining moments, key relationships, joys and struggles, it is amazing what can emerge.

The one-to-one can help the church embody what Pope Francis calls a culture of encounter - helping a congregation or school to feel compassion for one another and those on their doorstep. In her essay, Dr. Rowlands shows that Francis is interested ‘in challenging all forms of ‘social organization, production and consumption [that] make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people’.<sup>3</sup> The one-to-one conversation offers a wonderful means to challenge this.

Moreover, in helping identify what really matters to a person - what they really want - the one-to-one captures something of the manner Jesus encountered others. Jesus listened deeply to people, but also challenged them by asking directly about their deepest desires. The question he repeats to the first disciples and several others he encounters is: ‘What do you want?’. This, in another kind of way, is what the practice of doing one-to-ones can help a community discern.

The profound impact these one-to-one conversations can have on a congregation and school is evident from the experiences of ministers in East London. As one parish priest puts it: ‘Doing one-to-ones is a profound act of solidarity. Going into somebody’s home, entering into

<sup>3</sup> See ch. 4 below; *EG* 162

their world, even just briefly - you are at one with them in some sense’. One Sister from St Ignatius’ Parish, who has been involved on and off in the parish since the 1970s, saw a striking change in how she saw parishioners after having these one-to-one conversations. As she puts it, ‘I realised that one young mother, who I had taught as a girl, had been in much poorer housing than I had realised for some time’.

## **(B) Leadership**

The manner of leadership taught in organising in certain ways resonates with the manner in which Jesus taught his disciples. First, both Christ and the practice of community organising train leaders to be **‘wise as serpents’**. It is noteworthy that Christ makes sure that the disciples were themselves well organised: sent out in pairs, and wary about the forces that would oppose them. Jesus sends out the disciples with the instruction: ‘I am sending you out like sheep among wolves, so be wise as serpents yet gentle as doves’.<sup>4</sup> This wisdom consists in discerning, being aware of temptations, and - through prayer - staying alert to the kingdom of God at hand. Yet, it also means, surely, being aware of hostile forces - dealing astutely in worldly matters. Commenting on the parable of the unjust steward, Pope Francis has described this quality as a kind of ‘Christian craftiness’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, in community organising, leaders are trained to become crafty - they learn the craft of negotiation, team building, power analysis, and evaluation and are given helpful tools for understanding the nature of state and market power in their area.

Second, both Jesus and the practice of community organising train leaders **through experience, action and failure**. Jesus takes his disciples to places of activity, life and action, and his disciples often take risks and learn through failure. In a similar way, organising encourages the development of leaders through public action - by being bold and taking risks. By going out, beyond the walls of the church and one’s normal comfort zone, one learns and grows as a leader. Pope Francis

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 10:16

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis Homily, 10th November 2017, Casa Santa Marta, accessible at - <http://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope-francis/mass-casa-santa-marta/2017-11/pope-at-mass---christian-craftiness-prevents-us-from-falling-int.html>

has recently encouraged young people in the pre-synodal meeting to be bold and take risks.<sup>6</sup> One sixth former at St Bonaventure's school puts it, 'As humans we learn through trial and error; we learn from failure and through practice.'

Third, both Jesus and the practice of organising train leaders to **lead by listening to and developing others**. The disciples are not called to be the focus of attention, but are always driven beyond themselves - listening, walking with and feeding others. He calls the disciples to become 'fishers of men'.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, leaders in organising are trained to identify and develop other leaders in their institution. As a young leader put it, 'I like being in a leadership role mainly because you get to listen more'; 'when you are head of the group, just listening to people can enable a lot more things to happen'. Similarly, organisers are dedicated to the leadership of others. One organiser shares her delight in seeing others flourish: 'You understand it is the people themselves achieving things for themselves - this is what I really loved. People becoming their best selves and living out their faith day by day'.

### **(C) 'Stand up, come out into the middle': Agency for those on the periphery**

Finally, community organising enables those leaders who are often on the periphery of society to come into the centre of politics and public life. Almost uniquely in public life, those on the margins of society can come into the centre and speak truth to power, particularly during organising assemblies. We see this in Lucy's story.

As a practice, this resonates both with the ministry of Jesus and with Catholic Social Teaching. Jesus, who through his self-giving, death and resurrection, was 'The stone rejected by the builder which became the cornerstone', often calls those normally discarded by the system into the centre.<sup>8</sup> One instance of this is when Jesus heals the man with the withered hand.

<sup>6</sup> Address of his Holiness Pope Francis, 19th March 2018, Pre-Synodal Meeting with young people, accessible at - [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/march/documents/papa-francesco\\_20180319\\_visita-pcimme.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2018/march/documents/papa-francesco_20180319_visita-pcimme.html)

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 4:19

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 118

*But Jesus knew what they were thinking and said to the man with the withered hand,*

*"Stand up! Come out into the middle". So he arose and stood there.<sup>9</sup>*

It striking that, rather than defending the man with the withered hand in a paternalistic manner by deflecting attention away from him, Jesus calls him to '**Stand up, come into the centre**'. In doing so, Jesus calls the man to take the initiative, and gives him agency. This is a recurring element in the Gospels.

In both *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis similarly emphasises the importance of including the poor in society - not just as a matter of justice and responsibility, but also because we can become enriched and learn by listening to them. As Francis puts it:

The new evangelisation is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way.<sup>10</sup>

At its best, community organising is a practice which can help make this possible. It challenges us to listen to the lives of those who are often ignored in our community, and gives them the chance to share their story. This process of sharing one's story and pain can be healing both for those who share and those who listen. As one leader and organiser put it: 'I've worked with families whose sons have been murdered. I've seen how their faith has been strengthened. Their private pain has somehow become connected with public life and enabled change.' And as one East London priest summarises: 'This is the power of organising: people who often think they do not have a voice, who have been in terrible situations, treated so badly by the state and bureaucracy - can speak. We have seen examples of those kinds of people speaking to the most powerful people, and the effect that it has.'

<sup>9</sup> Luke 6:6

<sup>10</sup> EG 118



## 3.2 WHAT DOES THE CHURCH OFFER TO ORGANISING?

At the same time, just as organising can help us as Church, so - likewise - the Church, drawing on traditions of the common good and Catholic Social Teaching, can offer much to the organising alliances. In particular, the Church can play an important role through its example in preventing the broad based alliance from becoming unduly influenced by ideological forces. The encyclicals of Pope Emeritus Benedict and Pope Francis, along with the whole body of Catholic Social thought, offer helpful guidance in this regard.

First, the Church can help remind the broad based alliance - as Francis puts it in *Evangelii Gaudium* - that **'time is greater than space'**. Pope Francis insists that we must organise with patience and with a focus on people. He argues that we must devote ourselves to: 'generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains'.<sup>11</sup> He continues:

"This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results'...

'One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes'

Whereas political and societal power structures tend to spread by expansion, Jesus indicates that the kingdom of God is different. An apparently small, hidden development can lead amazingly to fruitfulness and growth.<sup>12</sup> So, people - who grow and flourish in amazing ways over time - rather than campaigns and structures, which expand yet are fragile, must be the focus of our organising.

This is a very helpful maxim for guiding the broad based alliance. It

<sup>11</sup> EG 224

<sup>12</sup> For more discussion see Charles Taylor, 'Authenticity: The Life of the Church in a Secular Age', *Lectio Magistralis*, March 5th 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=152NgoqYRIM>

is already implicit in the community organising principle that 'people come before programmes', and the Church can hold the alliance to account on this point. Rather than become dominated by campaigns, the Church by its example can encourage the alliance to care deeply about people, and demonstrate patience in developing and nurturing these leaders. As one organiser put it, 'that is the slow and patient work of the organiser - to live in tension and to hold tension between the world as it is and the world as it should be. This can lead to real concrete change'.

Second, the Church - by embodying a rich culture of encounter - can help remind the alliance that **'realities are greater than ideas'**. The Church can play a role in ensuring that organising campaigns are rooted in deep listening, and so respond to the reality of the people's lives, rather than fashionable policy ideas or campaigns.

This is a powerful and challenging maxim in Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*. As he puts it:-

Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric. So a third principle comes into play: realities are greater than ideas.<sup>13</sup>

Francis explains that our tendency to become detached from realities explains the weakness of many of our institutions:

We have politicians – and even religious leaders – who wonder why people do not understand and follow them, since their proposals are so clear and logical. Perhaps it is because they are stuck in the realm of pure ideas and end up reducing politics or faith to rhetoric.<sup>14</sup>

Of course, by conducting lots of one-to-one conversations, a church can ensure that its initiatives - and those of the broader organising alliance - are rooted in the realities of lives more than just ideas about

<sup>13</sup> EG 221

<sup>14</sup> EG 222



what those lives are or might be like. Such deep, attentive listening is vital if the alliance's actions are to be rooted in the concerns of its members – and if those members are to be at the heart of the action.

Third, Christians through their example can show the broad based alliance that **'Justice is inseparable from charity'**.

Pope Emeritus Benedict often reminds us that, contrary to the aspirations of ideology, we can never impose and create heaven on earth or an ideal society. Justice alone is not redemptive and cannot heal humanity. Rather justice and charity are both required and affirm one another. As he puts it in *Charity in Truth*:

Not only is justice not extraneous to charity, not only is it not an alternative or parallel path to charity: justice is inseparable from charity, and intrinsic to it. Justice is the primary way of charity or, in Paul VI's words, "the minimum measure" of it, an integral part of the love "in deed and in truth" (1 Jn 3:18), to which Saint John exhorts us. On the one hand, charity demands justice: recognition and respect for the legitimate rights of individuals and peoples. It strives to build the earthly city according to law and justice. On the other hand, charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving.<sup>15</sup>

It is worthwhile meditating on these words, which have a mystical quality. On the one hand, 'charity demands justice', and community organising offers an excellent craft and methodology for charity to lead to justice. As one leader put it, 'We have concentrated on individual acts of charity. Now we are moving to corporate acts of justice.' But, on the other hand, we must remember that 'charity transcends justice and completes it in the logic of giving and forgiving'. We see this in Lucy's story. The successful campaign for justice after she triumphed over housing eviction opened the door for an outpouring of charity in her life, leading her to welcome two women into her home. She experienced and shared the mercy of God. 'Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est': Where charity and love are, God is there.

<sup>15</sup> *Caritas in Veritate* (hereafter CIV) 6

### 3.3 WHAT DOES DISTINCTIVE CATHOLIC CHRISTIAN ENGAGEMENT IN ORGANISING LOOK LIKE?

In a number of ways, Christian engagement in organising will be distinctive. First, an obvious but important point is that it will be suffused with prayer. As Francis puts it in *Rejoice and Be Glad* - 'holiness consists in a habitual openness to the transcendent, expressed in prayer and adoration.' He continues:

The saints are distinguished by a spirit of prayer and a need for communion with God. They find an exclusive concern with this world to be narrow and stifling, and, amid their own concerns and commitments, they long for God, losing themselves in praise and contemplation of the Lord. I do not believe in holiness without prayer, even though that prayer need not be lengthy or involve intense emotions.<sup>16</sup>

Prayer, regular reflection on the Gospels, and worship is vital to nourish and enliven the work of community organising - something that emerges from the case studies in Part C.

Second, distinctive Christian organising will be grounded in a conviction that fruitful change comes from God rather than human cunning. Whereas the argument of Citizens UK is 'If you want change, you need power', it is worth holding the saying of Saint Ignatius of Loyola alongside it: "He who goes about to reform the world must begin with himself, or he loses his labor." We can also meditate on St Paul's exhortation - 'do not conform to the world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind'.<sup>17</sup> Both Christ and the prophets emphasise that fruitful change occurs if we abide in the Lord. The prophet Hosea said of the Lord - 'I am like a cypress every green, all your fruitfulness comes from me'.<sup>18</sup> While Jesus says it is only if we abide in him that

<sup>16</sup> *Gaudete et Exsultate* (hereafter GEE) 147

<sup>17</sup> Romans 12:2

<sup>18</sup> Hosea 14:8

our initiatives bear fruit: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty.'<sup>19</sup> So, it is vital that abiding in Christ is the first priority and focus. All change must start with our encounter with God - which transforms us and then enables us to change the world. God and God's grace, not human cunning, is the agent of fruitful change.

Third, distinctive Christian organising will also recognise and be attentive to the activity of God, particularly in the one-to-one conversations. Pope Francis makes the beautiful suggestion in *Rejoice and be Glad* to notice Christ in the faces of those around us:

*Holiness, then, is not about swooning in mystic rapture. As Saint John Paul II said: "If we truly start out anew from the contemplation of Christ, we must learn to see him especially in the faces of those with whom he himself wished to be identified". The text of Matthew 25:35-36 is "not a simple invitation to charity: it is a page of Christology which sheds a ray of light on the mystery of Christ". In this call to recognize him in the poor and the suffering, we see revealed the very heart of Christ, his deepest feelings and choices, which every saint seeks to imitate.*<sup>20</sup>

Seeing in this way deeply informed the practice of the social activist and founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, Dorothy Day. As she put it: 'How do we know we believe? How do we know we indeed have faith? Because we have seen his hands and his feet in the poor around us. He has shown himself to us in them.'<sup>21</sup>

So, one-to-ones are a great opportunity to listen to God, and to see revealed in those we speak to - especially the poor and suffering - the very heart of Christ. This is a central tenet of the practice of Fr. Sean Connolly. As he puts it, 'one-to-ones are sacramental encounters'. He continues: 'our sacramental Church means that genuine respectful and open encounter is at the heart of our faith: we meet the Master in our

meetings with each other if we know how to listen'.<sup>22</sup> This is what makes Christians' organising distinctive: 'We share stories with one another, but what makes us different is an awareness of the risen Jesus with us...'

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<sup>19</sup> John 15:5

<sup>20</sup> GEE 96

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from P. Jordan, Dorothy Day (Minnesota: 2015) pp. 78-9

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<sup>22</sup> The Catholic Parish of Manor Park, St. Stephen and St. Nicholas, Parish Newsletter, 2017, 29th and 30th Sundays of the Year (A)



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## 4 POPE FRANCIS, EVANGELII GAUDIUM AND COMMUNITY ORGANISING

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by Dr. Anna Rowlands

This essay is a lecture given by Dr. Anna Rowlands in April 2016. It is on Pope Francis' vision of the church of the poor, and particularly on how the wisdom contained in *Evangelii Gaudium* offers helpful guidance for the practice of community organising.

## 4.1 POPE FRANCIS AND THE CHURCH OF THE POOR

Last year the media got themselves rather exercised by the story of a man called Willy. Willy was an 80 year-old Belgian homeless man who lived in Rome. Willy spent his days attending Mass at the Church of Santa Anna, and his nights sleeping in the area around St Peter's. When he heard of Willy's story and death Pope Francis broke with usual protocol and suggested Willy should be buried within Vatican walls; that he should be laid to rest in the place that he had viewed as his home. This was Francis' recognition of the personhood of Willy.

Focusing on homelessness has been a key theme for Pope Francis. In November 2014 the Vatican began work on the construction of showers for the homeless just outside St Peter's Square. The decision to build showers followed a conversation between a key priest in the Vatican and a homeless man who had been invited to eat with him. The man explained that he could not eat with the priest, because, he said: 'I stink'. The priest took him to dinner anyway. The man told him that accessing some kind of food wasn't the most pressing problem for the homeless in Rome, but finding somewhere to wash that didn't involve travelling some distance was. And so the Archbishop and Francis planned the Vatican showers. But here is a crucial and overlooked bit of the story. There is one day a week when the showers don't operate: a Wednesday. On Wednesday the tourists come in great numbers to hear Francis at the papal audience. Some suggested cynically that this represented less a Vatican option for the poor and more an option for the tourists. What in fact was happening on a Wednesday was that the homeless, who by now had been moving in some number from the area around Termini station towards the Vatican, had taken on a different kind of role. They were taking a leadership role in distributing prayer books for the papal audience: serving the tourists.

Recognition of the importance of place to Willy, accompaniment and reciprocal action with the homeless in St Peter's Square, these are the marks of Francis' option for a church of the poor. Whilst the media tend to focus on anything that Francis does that seems to break the old rules,

what these stories present is something more interesting and more uncomfortable: that recognition of the personhood of the poor and the importance of place would become hallmarks of Francis' papacy.

The first key point to grasp if we wish to understand what Francis means by the option for the poor is that this option is entirely 'theological'. The Church opts for the poor because God opts for the poor. The Church believes in an option for the poor, not primarily because of who 'we' are (worthy warriors for the good) or because of who 'we' the poor are (those who cry for justice) but because of who God is: a personal God who is goodness, justice, love, and truth. And goodness and love seek always by their nature to communicate themselves: to be known and to be shared. For those who live with a deficit in their deep sense of being loved and being part of a community of care, the Church requires to intensify that message so that it can be heard.

This core belief has consequences for the kind of option for the poor that the Church teaches. In the text of his letter *'The Joy of the Gospel'* Francis argues:

*Our commitment does not consist exclusively in activities or programmes of promotion and assistance; what the Holy Spirit mobilizes is not an unruly activism, but above all an attentiveness which considers the other "in a certain sense as one with ourselves". This loving attentiveness is the beginning of a true concern for their person which inspires me effectively to seek their good.<sup>1</sup>*

Key to Francis' letter *The Joy of the Gospel (Evangelii Gaudium)* is the story of the Feeding of the 5,000. If this Gospel passage is not at the forefront of your mind, here is a quick reminder. Jesus and his disciples are exhausted – not even enough time to eat and rest - so he takes them away in a boat to a quiet place, but undeterred a great crowd follow him hoping to be taught by Jesus and set up camp. Reading Pope Francis' account of this parable again made me think about this as an organiser's parable; he says something that should make any community organiser smile with recognition. Francis picks out the bit of the story where the disciples are telling him that he needs to send the overwhelming

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<sup>1</sup> EG 199



crowd away: the people will need food and should be sent away to sort themselves out for the night. Confusingly Jesus seems to act against the ‘don’t do for others what they can do for themselves’ teaching. Jesus rebukes his disciples – we are told he has compassion on the crowd, he sees that they are sheep without a shepherd. ‘Jesus’ command to his disciples: “You yourselves give them something to eat!” (Mk 6:37): Jesus sets his disciples about organising the crowd, and from scarcity (the crowd’s) and fear (the disciples’) there is abundance. There is something in this story that only Jesus can do: teach and break bread, but there is a necessary organising role for his disciples in responding to the initiative of the people who have followed Jesus. Francis interprets this one line of Jesus’ command to his disciples thus:

*‘You yourselves give them something to eat!’ It means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter.<sup>2</sup>*

This idea of solidarity read into the feeding of 5,000 is vastly important to Francis. He has argued that solidarity and the option for the poor are the two principles most needed to seek the common good in our times: for they are most lacking in our world. He tells us that:

*The word “solidarity” is a little worn and at times poorly understood, but it refers to something more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few.*

He continues:

*Solidarity must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them. These convictions and habits of solidarity, when they are put into practice, open the way to other structural transformations and make them possible. Changing structures*

<sup>2</sup> EG 188

*without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual.<sup>3</sup>*

So, we get important hints here of how Francis sees a commitment to the common good: not unruly activism, more than a few sporadic acts of generosity; a form of accompaniment of the poorest in which the poor are not simply recognized but can teach, and through which the dignity of all is affirmed; a new mind-set capable of thinking in terms of the common good; a change in structures that also changes attitudes.

When Francis visited Lesbos he did so because he said he wished to be close to those who were suffering most. What he did when he met people was to listen, to bless and to bow. His gesture to Muslim refugee women he met was to stand before them and to bow. This way of being present in the most dehumanising of contexts communicates both his dignity and the dignity of those he meets. Without words he communicates precisely a mind-set capable of thinking in terms of the common good – a form of communication he still hopes might be contagious...

But I want to be clear, it is not sentimentality we should read into such action. Pope Francis is too complex a communicator for us to read his actions as mere sentiment. Francis is a man who thinks that we need to be prepared to feel uncomfortable. He agitates us when he opposes the discomfort of true solidarity to the consumerist search for well-being. Discomfort is necessary for the development of solidarity and for the life of the common good. Whether at the heart of the EU, in Lampedusa or Lesbos, with workers in Sardinia, in Mexico or Congress, or in challenging the church herself, Francis challenges the settled patterns of relationship that we can fall into: patterns of life that make me feel that bit more comfortable to spend my time with, to make public policy for, to employ in my business, to admit to my university people who are already basically pretty much ‘like me’. In an age when we can pretty much select and control who we spend time with, whose voices we hear, who counts in our social world, I don’t think we can underestimate how challenging this is to us at every level of our lives.

<sup>3</sup> EG 189

But he's surely right: the common good doesn't stand a chance unless we are willing for these patterns to be disturbed.

## 4.2 FORGETTING AND REMEMBERING

To disturb these patterns Francis thinks we need to learn once again how to remember, how to expose and overcome processes of social forgetfulness. Whilst of course he thinks recalling the past is important, this isn't what Francis means when he talks about forgetting and remembering.

An example can help us clarify. When Francis visited the Italian island Lampedusa, he celebrated Mass by the water's edge, and he preached a sermon. Francis begins his sermon with a reflection on the first two questions which God asks humanity in the Scripture: Adam, where are you? Cain where is your brother? Francis interprets these passages as stories of human disorientation, of the first signs of a tendency in humankind to lose our place within creation, to lose our orientation as creatures towards a creator, to become forgetful of what is most true about being human.

It is interesting that Francis turns our conventional ways of thinking about migration on its head: he juxtaposes an account of the disorientation of the settled in relation to the orientation of the displaced. He sees the flight of the refugee as a rightly oriented movement towards order and dignity. In order to identify what might be going wrong in a failure to respond adequately to the challenge of the displaced, of the refugee, we must first see our own disorientation. Francis roots this disorientation not only in a classic account of the Fall, but also in the particular conditions of our time. He thinks we're addicted to the idea that what we should seek is personal well-being, and he thinks this culture breeds indifference towards others. A by-product of the culture of well-being is that we become inured to the suffering of others. He unpacks this idea elsewhere in his writings:

Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens

us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.<sup>4</sup>

Our own transient cultural ways breed indifference towards those forced to become truly transient people. Thus globalization, despite its many benefits also produces as its by-product, the globalisation of indifference. And he goes a little further: in an indifferent culture we become anonymous – unable to understand ourselves as named, particular and responsible in relation to named, particular and responsible others. In a phrase that should be deeply resonant for anyone interested in community organising, Francis concludes, 'The globalization of indifference makes us all 'unnamed', leaders without names and without faces.'<sup>5</sup> This is the kind of forgetting and remembering that concerns Francis, a forgetting and remembering that we are called to be leaders with names and faces.

For Francis this process in which we become leaders without names and faces is precisely the opposite of the Creator-creature relationship, through which as named beings we are called to account for other named beings. Adam, where are you? Cain, where is your brother? Francis is standing on a physical border: the edge of the Mediterranean but he has another border in mind: the internalised borders of the human heart. And Francis wants us to see the deep, practical interconnections between the two. What Francis is therefore interested in challenging is all forms of 'social organization, production and consumption [that] make it more difficult to offer the gift of self and to establish solidarity between people'.<sup>6</sup>

Whilst most of what Francis has to say is focused on the distinct calling of the church in the world, he also has some pretty sharp things to say about the role of civil society. And here again we might spot that he adopts a bit of an agitator role once again. Francis talks often about the failure of the state and the market to serve human dignity, but he also points out what he sees as the failure of civil society. He argues that when politics fails in the face of humanitarian need, then we need

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<sup>4</sup> EG 54

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis Homily, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2013, Island of Lampedusa

<sup>6</sup> EG 162



to confront the fact that civil society has failed too. The political forces that make up modern governments are not the place where basic human compassion will be generated from scratch. This is naïve. Politics acts for the good when it is founded first in healthy institutions and organisations who can form human beings to be free, creative beings who learn how to talk together and act together for the sake of the whole, that is all. He reminds us:

‘We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality.’<sup>7</sup>

Francis argues that it is civil society’s task to keep our politics and economy honest: to be the spiritual engine that drives compassion and humanity and that seeks new attitudes. It is the political vocation of civil society to watch out for – and call out – patterns of dehumanisation. This is a tough and not much wanted message: it’s actually easier just to feel disgusted with elites than to examine our own role as individuals and organisations in generating thoughtful and productive politics. To be clear: Francis isn’t dismissing the incredible work already done by many individuals and organisations for the common good, work often frustrated by a failure of state responsibility. This could sound disheartening to those who have fought for the legal pathways necessary for children in Calais to realise the rights they already have, or those who have given their holidays to travelling to Greece to help arriving migrants. He isn’t laying a greater burden on weary shoulders. He is simply reminding all of us that politics is a vocation that begins at home, at school, in the mosque, church or synagogue, at the food bank. Without civil society telling the stories, creating the organised contexts, and acting together across our differences, states and economies will fail us. Available employment, just wages, decent housing, inspiring

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<sup>7</sup> EG 204

education for all, and a duty to the stranger depend on it. Francis is clear: an option for the poor requires the renewal of civil society.

I will conclude with reference to just two facets – one small scale, one bigger – of this renewal that Francis draws attention to (there are of course many more we could speak of):

Francis, following in the steps of Pope Benedict before him, believes that small gestures of civic love build the common good:

Love, overflowing with small gestures of mutual care, is also civic and political, and it makes itself felt in every action that seeks to build a better world. Love for society and commitment to the common good are outstanding expressions of a charity which affects not only relationships between individuals but also “macro-relationships, social, economic and political ones”. That is why the Church set before the world the ideal of a “civilization of love”.

The burial of Willy within the walls of the Vatican, a pope bowing before a Muslim woman in a detention facility in Greece: these are small, personal gestures of love but they are also somehow mighty civic and political gestures too. They are actions that shatter a cynical worldview. Francis calls organised people to participate in this kind of civilisation of love, with a close attention to place and its people.

The renewal of civil society should be based upon a process of dialogue: between all people of goodwill, those expressing religious and non-religious beliefs. Sometimes we make the mistake of thinking that the common good IS education, or healthcare or housing. Each of these things IS a ‘good’ for sure. But the common good is in fact a process not a thing: it is the process through which people, with all their differences, seek to communicate about what matters to them as persons and matters to building something good which can exist between and beyond them. It is in a communicative process: that’s where we discover the shape of that elusive thing we call ‘the common good’.

Francis calls for such a process and reminds us that we ought not to be afraid of arguing for the public role of religion as a cornerstone of this dialogue.

Consequently, no one can demand that religion should be relegated to the inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting

society. Who would claim to lock up in a church and silence the message of Saint Francis of Assisi or Blessed Teresa of Calcutta? They themselves would have found this unacceptable. An authentic faith – which is never comfortable or completely personal – always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it. ....If indeed “the just ordering of society and of the state is a central responsibility of politics”, the Church “cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice”.<sup>8</sup>

All Christians, their pastors included, are called to show concern for the building of a better world. This is essential, for the Church’s social thought is primarily positive: it offers proposals, it works for change and in this sense it constantly points to the hope born of the loving heart of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup>

Pope Francis’ vision for a Church of the poor presents interesting challenges to faith communities as they engage in organising. There is a challenge to the church to be a community, living according to the Gospel, and able to bring its distinctive Christian witness into the processes of organising in pluralist cities. I will highlight three areas for particular attention. Pope Francis talks about the need to remember that time is greater than space: the task is not to colonise spaces but to focus on temporal processes that enable human persons to live in a dignified and peaceable way across time. Our task is to introduce social processes that are intergenerational rather than short term and reactive, seeking to build lasting experiences of social relationship where it is most needed and to challenge the pressure to produce and consume according to the logic of a throwaway culture with throwaway people. This is tricky to do: how do we build this into our ways of planning and acting in organising? Pope Francis makes a link between the micro processes of social love, small gestures that build the common good, and the macro processes of injustice: but as Fr Leo Penta asks – how do we move in our organising between these processes? How does

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<sup>8</sup> EG 150

<sup>9</sup> EG 184

communal action take form? Can we talk about the tensions and even conflicts that will accompany this process of building solidarity? Francis asks us to find ways to listen that will help make visible and vocal those who disappear within our culture: to overcome our own and our neighbours anonymity. In urban communities driven by internal and external migrations, how do we create communities that enable us to become leaders with names and faces?

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## PART C

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## CASE STUDIES - WHAT DOES FRUITFUL ENGAGEMENT IN COMMUNITY ORGANISING LOOK LIKE?

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The purpose of the following case studies is to explore how the craft of organising has been practised by Catholics over the last twenty years, and what we can learn from their experiences.

This will be explored from different perspectives - that of lay leaders, parish priests, teachers, chaplains and young people.



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## 5 LAY LEADERS

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The purpose of this chapter is to describe what it looks like for lay people to participate fruitfully in community organising.

## 5.1 WHO WAS INTERVIEWED?

The lay leaders interviewed have been involved in community organising in different ways and for different lengths of time.

One has been involved in community organising for over twenty years and started while working in public health, noticing the poor working conditions experienced by cleaners in her hospital.

A second has been involved for over five years and started by organising the Brazilian community across London, before becoming a community organiser herself.

A third has been involved as a leader in the last two years, initially while facing eviction from her home and seeing the precarious housing and homelessness in her area.

A fourth has been involved in the last few years, and now practises organising mainly by having one to one conversations and developing leaders in his congregation as chair of the parish pastoral council.

A fifth has been involved for over five years as a parish leader, helping parishioners confront poor housing conditions and often representing the needs of his parish at Citizens meetings.

Learning from their experience, the chapter addresses two main questions. First, what opportunities does community organising offer? Second, what does distinctive Christian involvement in organising look like?

## 5.2 OPPORTUNITIES

***‘I wanted to change things, I wanted to act... organising offered a method to create change’***

For most of the participants, learning the craft of community organising has helped them to make meaningful change in their areas - something they often desired, but did not know how to do.

Two interviewees shared striking stories illustrating this. For one person, at the age of sixteen, she had a huge desire to change things: to help people in a vulnerable situation not just by charitable works but also by working for structural change. As she put it:

‘I was part of the Catholic church in Whitechapel. We would receive food, give to the poor, but there was no action....I wanted to change things, I wanted to act, but I had no idea where to start, because I had never learnt how to do that... Citizens offered a method to create change’

This person subsequently became involved with the Strangers into Citizens campaign, organised Brazilian migrants, conducted lots of listening and built teams of leaders - so that the experiences and struggles of the community were heard.

For another interviewee working in public health, the tools of organising helped her organise alongside cleaners in the hospital where she worked. In the late 1990s, when hospitals were beginning to contract out cleaning, she saw tremendous injustice - as she put it, ‘workers were being treated unfairly, with poor pay and very few rights’. At the same time, she discovered broad based community organising through a friend. Then she became involved in the Living Wage campaign from the beginning, and helped hundreds of institutions become accredited Living Wage employers. As she puts it, organising ‘gives you the knowledge, skills and attitude to stand up against injustice’.

***‘The tools used to train me were used to train others’***

For one interviewee, his experience of organising and leadership training both emboldened him to play a larger role in his parish and also gave him the tools to encourage and develop others as leaders. He tells his story:

I used to come to church every Sunday but used to sit at the back. Mostly, I normally am the first to go out. As soon as the Mass finished - the last prayer said - I am out, even not waiting for the last hymn to be sung. Then I was invited to an open Parish Council meeting. Through that, a community organiser asked me for a one-to-one. I agreed - so we had it. After it, he asked me whether I would be available for training. I didn’t know what he saw in me. During the training, I was starting to see things differently. Then I started to

do more things in the church. The tools used to train me were used to train others, and this has had a great impact in our community.

This person now spends lots of time having one-to-one conversations in the parish. He is keen to develop others. Before and after Mass, in the afternoon, he is interested in finding more leaders for the community, and works with the Parish priest to do this.

Another person similarly expressed their joy and delight in developing other leaders, and seeing them become their best selves. As she put it:

...it is the people themselves achieving things for themselves - this is what I really loved. People becoming their best selves and living out their faith day by day.

These examples illustrate a broader trend - that participating in organising can help create a culture where leaders not only grow and flourish themselves but also look out for and delight in the sight of others similarly growing in confidence.

### ***‘We worked with the Salvation Army and the Muslim community’***

Another general point is the opportunity that the broad based organising alliance offers Catholic institutions to work alongside their neighbours and build relationships with other faith groups and communities. As one person put it, ‘I knew that if religions could work together, there could be a chance for peace.’ Another interviewee describes their experience as follows:

Citizens UK helps build bridges between Christians and the Muslim community. Until organising, we never met people from the Salvation Army or the Muslim community.

She remembers how, at an action to work for better conditions

for social care workers, ‘We had a Sikh, Muslim, Rabbi, and Catholic standing and talking together... that’s pretty powerful’.

This is a sentiment with which several others shared - that organising ‘takes you outside of your own narrow world’ and enables you to work alongside neighbours for the common good.

### ***‘Be hospitable’***

For all of the participants, involvement in broad based organising helped them see hardship in their area, leading to greater charity and hospitality in their own lives. For one interviewee, involvement in community organising invigorated her appetite and conviction to help others in the Parish, enabling her to hear the exhortation to ‘be hospitable’. Another person described how organising helped ‘open her eyes to injustice’.

## **5.3 WHAT DOES DISTINCTIVE CHRISTIAN INVOLVEMENT IN ORGANISING LOOK LIKE?**

### ***‘My constant reinforcement isn’t about training - it’s about listening to the gospels’***

Two interviewees spoke explicitly, and two others implicitly, about the importance of regular reflection on the Gospels while organising. As one participant put it:

The Gospels give direction and help us see what is important. The beatitudes teach you really that the poor are to be valued.

Another interviewee went further and talked about the importance of putting Jesus Christ above all else, and that concern for social justice will flow from that. As she put it: ‘But above everything is Jesus... above everything’.



***‘Faith in God prevents work being done for personal approval’***

One interviewee talked about the importance of faith in preventing the organising being done for personal approval. As she put it, she has a strong sense that faith ‘helps her remember that she is not doing this for my own gratitude or to build a CV.’

***‘We build power, pray, and then ask - “What is the right way?”’***

Another participant spoke about the importance of being spiritually nourished whilst being involved in organising. There is a danger, because of the sheer pace and activities, that ‘You can hit a brick wall’ if the work is not rooted in prayer.

All participants found prayer and discernment to be vital in their organising. One person described the importance of the organising being suffused with prayer. As she captures it: ‘this is the power of the community... build power... pray.. take action.... we pray, and then ask - “what is the right way?”’

## 5.4 LEARNING POINTS

- The craft of community organising can enable lay leaders to make meaningful change in their local areas, giving them the confidence to confront seemingly huge challenges, such as poor pay, lack of affordable housing and standards of care work.
- Organising trains leaders who have a disposition to train and develop others; it offers a good opportunity to work with other denominations and faith groups for the common good.
- Participating in organising can help lay people see and understand injustice in the community, leading to greater charity and hospitality in their lives.

- At the same time, regular reflection on the Gospels is vital in nourishing the work. Faith in God helps prevent the work being done for personal approval, and it is important to be spiritually nourished whilst organising, so as to avoid burnout.
- The practice of community organising can fruitfully be accompanied by prayer and discernment. It is surely important that organising is suffused with prayer so that human plans and strategies are in harmony with God’s loving purposes and actions in the world.

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## 6 PRIESTS

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore how the tools of community organising can be helpful for Parish Priests. The research is based on interviews with four priests who have been actively involved as leaders in Citizens UK, two for over twenty years, and two in the last ten.

From the interviews, a number of both benefits and challenges of engagement in organising emerged - each captured by a quotation.

## 6.1 BENEFITS

*‘I’m now doing one-to-ones all the time - it is what I do when I’m with people.’*

For two of the parish priests interviewed, learning the one-to-one conversation has proved to be very helpful for ministry. This is because it offers an excellent way of interacting with others - to develop leadership and build relationships.

For one priest, the one-to-one conversation has been vital to help him resist succumbing to a task oriented culture by being swamped with administrative tasks and thus unable to be with the people.

Over a period of five years, he had nearly three hundred one-to-one conversations, as well as countless shorter informal ones. He would visit people in their home with no agenda other than to hear their story, share his own, probe what really mattered to that person and see whether we could build a public relationship with them. So, rather than another burdensome task, the one-to-one conversation has become an integral way of engaging in ministry. As he puts it, ‘I’m now doing one-to-ones all the time - it is what I do when I’m with people. It has become so closely tied to my ministry’.

One example shows how effective it can be. As he describes it:

“Very early on I saw how it worked. I visited a man who worked helping the elderly return to their homes after a spell in hospital. We had recently tried to get a campaign going to support the elderly in the community. I had written about it in the newsletter and spoken several times at Mass about it. This man, despite attending church each week, knew nothing about it. Following our conversation I knew that it would be different in future: he would no longer be just another parishioner whose face I might recognize and whose name I might possibly remember; and I would no longer be to him a priest he knew at a distance, speaking stuff irrelevant to his life.”<sup>1</sup>

*‘A great way of going beyond being a ‘sacristy religion’*

Second, another benefit all the priests noticed was that, by joining and participating in a broad based alliance, one’s parish can become more outward looking. By meeting and working with neighbours on issues of common concern, it becomes possible to face outwards and - as Pope Francis has put it - move beyond the sacristy. As one priest put it - engaging in organising is a ‘great way of going beyond being a sacristy religion’.

One priest observed that this is quite novel and distinctive about participating in broad based alliances, compared with other forms of social action and ministry. ‘Everything else, even though it was good, ended up being inward looking’. By contrast, by engaging in organising, one had ‘a sense that we are appreciated by others, but we have something to say. This opened up the doors and possibilities.’

In particular, public assemblies were found to offer an excellent opportunity to help the parish go beyond itself. As one priest puts it:

‘a key moment was the first assembly. When the church stood up, said we are here from St Margaret’s, and people clapped, it was amazing. People appreciated us for what we were. Suddenly there was a sense that ‘yes, we do have something to say’.

For another parish priest, participating in the assembly was a reminder for his congregation that they can manifest the Kingdom of God. As he puts it:

‘people have been overwhelmed by hopelessness and have forgotten themselves as individuals, but more powerfully as a community that can be a sign of hope and who can manifest the Kingdom of God, who can make change’.

<sup>1</sup> Quotation from Austen Ivereigh *Faithful Citizens* pp. 62-3.

***‘Here’s a very practical way that this was doing something’***

Third, the priests felt that the campaigns in organising do often speak to the needs of those in the congregation.

This was the case for the Living Wage in particular. As one priest puts it:

‘when things like the Living Wage came along, it was clear that there were people in my congregation who were working two or three jobs, the impact that that had, they couldn’t come to Church.... here’s a very practical way that this was doing something. People understood it and the concept behind it.’

Similarly, priests found that more recent campaigns around housing and energy, based on listening to the congregation, similarly also speak to the needs of congregations.

## 6.2 CHALLENGES

***‘How can I have more time for organising?’***

First, two of the priests described the challenge of finding time to have one-to-one conversations. One remarked that the sheer challenge of maintaining the parish means that he has little time to engage in organising. As he put it: ‘How do I park other stuff so as to make more time for relational encounters, for the organising model?’

***‘How do you keep momentum up among the congregation?’***

Second, two of the priests described the challenge of keeping momentum up when engaging in community organising. They remarked that normally an organising assembly brings energy and enthusiasm, but there is a challenge in keeping up momentum after it has finished.

Moreover, as one priest put it, the busyness of people’s lives also

make things difficult. ‘People are often very committed elsewhere - so it is difficult to sustain momentum.’ One priest described a ‘supermarket culture’ - where parishioners do not feel an obligation, or have the desire or even energy for building community. Another remarked: ‘Mostly, I found it hard to keep momentum up.’

***‘How can one develop a culture of encounter in a very large Parish?’***

Third, one priest talked about the challenge of developing a culture of encounter in a Catholic context, particularly in a large parish. The sheer size of a Parish can lead to anonymity. As one priest who leads a particularly large parish put it, ‘In churches like this - with around 2,000 people every Sunday - the process is a lot slower.’

***‘How do you prevent everything going through the Parish priest?’***

Fourth, the priests described the challenge of preventing everything going through them.

As one priest put it, ‘you have to be quite exceptional to break through the model of ‘Father knows best’. In response to this issue, another participant talked about the importance of developing lay leaders, so everything is not dependent on the priest.

***‘Compatible with Catholic Social Teaching?’***

One priest talked about the challenge that some of the concepts of community organising - such as ‘self-interest’, ‘power’ and ‘anger’ are not entirely comfortable for Christians. Another priest was more positive about the fit between Catholic social teaching and organising, but nevertheless feels that it is very important to ask and keep asking the question of ‘why are we involved in this?’. He added that he has found it very helpful to have a community of Christians involved in organising, where it is possible to discuss and reflect on this question.

## 6.3 POINTS FOR REFLECTION/SUMMARY

It seems the craft of organising has a number of benefits for the priests interviewed. Namely:-

- The practice of one-to-one conversations offer an excellent means for the priest to relate to the congregation - by building relationships.
- The opportunities to go beyond the walls of the Church, particularly at assemblies, that organising makes possible are very valuable, enabling the congregation to move beyond a sacristy religion.
- The campaigns of organising - such as for the Living Wage, for good housing conditions and for affordable energy - often speak to the needs of the congregation.

A number of challenges were also raised. Namely:-

- How can the parish work in such a way that the priest is freed from a culture of maintenance but instead can devote time to walking with and encountering parishioners through the one-to-one meeting?
- Particularly in large parishes, developing a culture of encounter is very challenging - it takes time and patience, and there seem to be social forces rendering this particularly difficult. What does it look like to create a culture of encounter in a very large parish?
- How can the priest avoid the problem of everything going through him? It seems that it is very important to develop other lay leaders in the parish so everything does not depend on the priest.
- It seems that there is an appetite for priests to reflect on how the tools and concepts of organising relate to the Gospel and Catholic Social Teaching. What could such a space for reflection look like?



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# 7 TEACHERS, CHAPLAINS AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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The purpose of this chapter is to explore how community organising can help those involved in youth ministry and young people themselves.

The Chaplain or Teacher in a Catholic school or chaplaincy can be an important catalyst in initiating or renewing a relationship between an institution and broad based alliance, and can also - as has been the case in Manchester - help create a broad based alliance.

This chapter is based on four interviews: that of a school Chaplain, a University Chaplain, a School Teacher, and a young leader - and draws learning points from them.

## 7.1 HOW CAN ENGAGEMENT IN ORGANISING ENABLE YOUNG PEOPLE TO FLOURISH AND DEEPEN IN FAITH?

*‘Young people are not always interested in ideas; instead they like to take action’*

One theme that emerged from the interviews was that organising is effective in enabling young people to put their faith in action. As Chaplain in the school, Sr Josephine had a sense that it would be good to engage her students in some kind of activity to live out their faith, and that she was called to encourage this. Her observation, learnt over many years of ministry, was that ‘young people are not always interested in ideas; instead they like to take action - and in particular they like the feeling that they are making a difference.’ Similarly, For another Headteacher, Mr. Lewis, he saw in community organising a means by which to teach his students about Catholic Social Teaching. He wanted to convey to them a sense that being a Christian is ‘not just about prayers and Mass, but also about putting faith in action, and helping those in need’.

There were numerous examples where the craft of organising was great for action. One such action was the Living Wage Walk. Sr Josephine remembers vividly how TELCO members walked down Mile End Road, visiting places of historical interest where people had to campaign to win their case, including the Suffragettes and the Salvation Army. She remembers that there was a visible church presence with Bishop Guazzelli and Fr. Jonathan Armitage leading the walk, and that the event had a big impact on the school. Moreover, community organising assemblies were also described as actions which have a big impact, and can help young people re-imagine what is possible in public life and politics. For Shaun, the 2016 London Mayoral Assembly was a highlight. ‘I never envisioned the size of TELCO’, he observed. It was also an experience of seeing that change is possible - as he put it: ‘I believe the Mayor did honour quite a few promises that he committed to’.

*‘Gang violence has been a big problem and we want to see people feeling safe in the community’*

Second, organising enables young people to resist and constructively respond to the social ills affecting them - including gang violence and poor housing.

Against the backdrop of multiple stabbings in London, people shared stories about how organising has helped young people create safer communities. In 2018, as co-chair of his school’s organising team, Shaun is currently working on street safety in the local area. Following a process of listening to students about their joys and worries, it was discovered that gang violence was a big problem. ‘Gang violence has been a big problem and we want to see people feeling safe in the community.’ In order to do this, Shaun describes how they have built a relationship with the local MP, Stephen Timms, and are now doing the same with the local police commissioner. They are conducting research about what their local authorities are doing about street safety and how the St. Bonaventure’s team can help.

Working for street safety builds on previous work by Citizens UK with which Fr. Tim Byron SJ has been involved. Fr. Tim first became involved in organising in 2010 when he was Chaplain and also football coach of St Ignatius’ College in Enfield. A big event was the death of Ghanaian Godwin Lawson, a victim of gang violence. Godwin was one of Fr. Tim’s former pupils, the pressing concern, then, was how to make the streets safe. As Fr. Tim puts it: ‘That struck me - how these big men were frightened. So it was through that I realised we had to do something. Out of that listening came the City Safe campaign’.

Poor housing conditions has been another issue. At one school, by conducting a listening campaign, stories emerged of students having to travel huge distances or leave the school because they had to be re-housed, sometimes out of the borough. There were also many other stories about evictions and the poor quality of housing. In response to this, eight committed students came together to reflect and take action. They decided to focus on the mental health and educational effects of housing issues. They went to a mental health fair in a nearby school to share their findings, have met with their local councillor, and are writing up all their findings as a formal report. The local community organiser

has helped them think about how their concern over this issue can be translated into some kind of action. Most recently, the team - now in Year 9 - led negotiations with the Mayoral candidates in the borough of Newham at the local assembly around housing issues.

***‘What impressed me about community organising was that they trained the young people to come up with the ideas themselves’***

It is powerful to see organising give those on the margins a voice and take action on what is important to them. There were several stories of young people growing in confidence by coming up with the ideas themselves. In Manchester, an asylum seeker from Pakistan with nowhere to live knocked on the door of the chaplaincy. She built a relationship with the Chaplaincy, did the leadership training, and has become an active leader in the community. Among other things, she has now helped initiate a leadership programme with Catholics, Muslims and Mormons.

For another young person, he described how organising helped him develop as leader through discernment and listening. As he puts it, ‘I like being in a leadership role mainly because you get to listen more’. He continues, ‘when you are head of the group, just listening to people can enable a lot more things to happen’. Of course, because organising trains through action, he has also learnt through mistakes, and sees how this is part of being human. ‘As humans we learn through trial and error, from failure and practice.’ So, having been thrown into the deep end in Year 9, now he feels more confident to make a difference.

***‘Seeing everyone in the community made a huge difference’***

Finally, organising methodology has been a tool by which the young people listen to the voices of the poor and marginalised in their midst, who can so easily be missed or ignored.

One school Chaplain encouraged the young people to engage in one-to-one conversations with the cleaning and catering staff in the

school. Among other things, her students discovered that they were not being paid the Living Wage, and so they decided to act on this issue. Subsequently the students had one-to-one conversations with care workers in the local area, and negotiated with the Council around their working conditions.

There were also stories about how organising has enabled young people to listen to asylum seekers and refugees. At a time when there was a campaign for an Amnesty for Zimbabwean refugees who had been in the UK for over ten years, the chaplain was shocked to find that the young people reacted negatively. ‘If this is happening in a Catholic school, then what is happening outside?’, she wondered. In response, with the help of the local organiser, various forms of action were taken. First, her pupils participated in the annual TELCO assembly, where pupils dramatised the history of the East End of London with its immigration history. Secondly they participated in the newly established Migrants Mass on the Feast of St. Joseph (instigated by Cardinal Cormac Murphy O’Connor and Fr. Jonathan Armitage as a means of celebrating and thanking immigrants). Third, with the help of the community organiser, an assembly was held in the school, inviting Zimbabwean and other refugees to tell their story. They explained to the sixth-formers that the government gave no money to these people (only vouchers to be used in specific shops) so there was no money for them to travel unless the school provided. They also explained that the refugees were unlikely to have had breakfast so the sixth formers were invited to serve them breakfast.

The impact of listening to these voices is palpable. As one young person put it, ‘it helped me realise the importance of service and making the community better. Seeing everyone in the community made a huge difference.’

## 7.2 LEARNING POINTS

What are the common threads and themes?

- Taken together, the stories illustrate the rich possibilities for ministry that organising offers: by opening young people’s eyes to issues on their doorstep, putting their faith in action, living out the social

teaching of the church, and helping institutions to be more outward looking.

- The Chaplain or Teacher in a Catholic school or chaplaincy can be an important catalyst in building a relationship between an institution and broad based alliance, and can also play a role in helping create a broad based alliance if it does not exist.
- Community organising is distinctive in being - as one participant put it - 'outward looking but in a local sense'. This is a neat characterisation. It seems that community organising complements other kinds of youth ministry.
- Using the tools of organising can be an excellent way for young people to listen to the voices of the poor and marginalised - such as the cleaning staff, asylum seekers, elderly or people from outside the student bubble. The experiences show that listening to these people's stories is very powerful and can change mentalities.
- What is more it is clear that organising can help develop leaders effectively. The fact that organising encourages young people to 'come up with the ideas themselves' is particularly attractive, enabling young people to take ownership, learn from experience and develop as leaders.



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## 8 CONCLUSION

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‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction’.<sup>1</sup> These profound words of Pope Benedict, which Francis never tires of repeating, declare that being Christian is about an encounter with the risen and crucified Jesus Christ. No tools or human strategies can on their own renew or revitalise us as Church: what matters above all is our encounter with Jesus Christ.

At its best, community organising can help us to be faithful to Christ. Community organising offers excellent opportunities for ministry: a craft for embodying a culture of encounter, for developing leadership, and for enabling those on the periphery to share their story. It is a means by which Catholic Christians can engage in the public square, preaching more by deeds than words.

At the same time, Catholic churches and schools across the country are called to organise with patience, charity and boldness, attentive to the realities of people’s lives through deep listening. Moreover, like the moon which reflects the light of the Sun, we are called to illuminate the light of Christ and organise distinctively. We must aspire to organise like the saints, for whom ‘mental prayer, the love of God and the reading of the Gospel in no way detracted from their passionate and effective commitment to their neighbours; quite the opposite.’<sup>2</sup>

Rather than a perfect blueprint, organising offers opportunities yet also raises challenges for ongoing prayer and reflection. For lay leaders, it is clear that the craft of organising can help them make meaningful change in their local areas, giving them the confidence to confront seemingly huge challenges, such as poor pay, lack of affordable housing and standards of care work. At the same time, regular reflection on the Gospels is vital in nourishing the work and the practice of organising can fruitfully be accompanied by prayer and discernment.

For priests, the one-to-one conversation offers an excellent means to build relationships. The opportunities to go beyond the walls of the Church that organising makes possible are very valuable. Yet there is the ongoing challenge of how the parish can work in such a way that the priest is freed from a culture of maintenance but instead can devote

time to walking with and encountering parishioners through the one-to-one meeting.

Finally, for teachers and chaplains, organising offers rich possibilities for ministry: by opening young people’s eyes to issues on their doorstep, putting their faith in action, living out the social teaching of the church, and helping institutions to be more outward looking. One ongoing challenge is to encourage young people to listen to the voices of the poorest in their community, for this is a beautiful means not only to change mentalities but also to encounter Christ.

So, inspired by the stories here - whether a parishioner, student, priest or chaplain - could you do similar in your own context? The next step is to contact your local organiser, ask to meet leaders from institutions already involved, and experience an assembly. Just as Jesus said ‘Come and See’, undoubtedly the best way to understand the craft of organising is to see it in action. And then, like Lucy, you can start ‘...to build power, pray, and then ask - “What is the right way?”

## POINT OF CONTACT

If you are interested in engaging in community organising, please email [hello@theology-centre.org](mailto:hello@theology-centre.org). Staff at CTC will then introduce you to the person best placed to help you.

<sup>1</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict, *Deus Caritas Est*, para 1

<sup>2</sup> GEE 100

## AFTERWORDS

### *Steven Webb, Director of Development, Diocese of Brentwood -*

Although it is not specifically targeted to our diocese and clearly has application well beyond our boundaries, this report is a very helpful addition to our thinking in Essex and East London. In the Diocese of Brentwood we are looking to Restructure and Renew ourselves and this report is a valuable contribution to the efforts we are making.

We set ourselves a broad range of topics for our Renewal and this report touches on many of them either directly or indirectly. It speaks directly of Caritas, Education, Formation, Integration, Leaders, Prayer and Spirituality and the relationship between Priests and People.

It is a privilege to be able to facilitate this excellent work of the CTC and we are very pleased to commend it to everyone looking to help form a community that can be a sign of hope and who can manifest the Kingdom of God, who can make a change. The Church sets before the world the ideal of a civilisation of love and this report will help many to turn the ideal into a local reality.

Working together as a Catholic community in the wider community will achieve more than acting alone. As we seek to discover new ways to evangelise our diocese, we express our gratitude to the authors for providing materials that will foster (one to one) conversation and lead to action for the common good.

### *Phil McCarthy, Chief Executive, Caritas Social Action Network -*

This report from the Centre for Theology and Community is a timely contribution to national debates on what it means to be a 'Church of the poor', and how Catholics can best address powerful systems that can increase or reduce division in our society.

Catholics, among whom many are poor themselves, relate to many of those most excluded from society. These relationships, whether as individuals or through charitable organisations, not only relieve poverty and misery but can create and sustain community life. In some places, churches offer one of the last spaces still open to everyone.

Catholic social thought offers a framework to discern the focus of social concerns and action. The more that Catholics participate in this tradition as individuals and together, the more effectively they can contribute to questions of how social reform is best achieved, alongside those of all faiths and none.

We have been pleased to support CTC in reflecting on how a process of community organising, in this case with Citizens UK, can shape Christians who, as Pope Francis yearns, are on the streets and not clinging to their own security. We intend to broaden the dialogue, in consultation with Catholic dioceses and others, on the points for further reflection listed in this report.

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Sr. Josephine Canny OA	Former Chaplain, Trinity Catholic High School Woodford
Fr. Sean Connolly	Parish Priest, St. Stephen's Manor Park
Fr. Simon Cuff	Tutor and Lecturer in Theology, St. Mellitus College
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Bernadette Harris	Leader, St. Thomas of Canterbury Woodford and Redbridge Citizens
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Dr. Austen Ivereigh	Former Organiser, West London Citizens
Neil Jameson	Executive Director, Citizens UK
James Jukwey	Leader, St. Stephen's Manor Park and Newham Citizens
Mr. Andy Lewis	Assistant Headteacher, St. Bonaventure's Forest Gate
Fr. Brian McGrath OFM	Priest, St. Francis Stratford
Sr. Una McCreesh OSU	Former Chair of Trustees, TELCO
Fr. David Smolira SJ	Parish Priest, St. Ignatius' Parish, Stamford Hill
Bernard Thiana	Leader, St. Stephen's Manor Park and Newham Citizens

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