

Congregation-based Organizing: A Cautionary Tale

Jane Ramsey

When I first learned of serious efforts by the Union for Reform Judaism to initiate a congregation-based organizing project, I was of two distinct minds.

As Executive Director of the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, I believe it is vital that we transform our synagogues into communities that embrace the struggle against social and economic injustice, a struggle that is inextricably linked to our faith and religious practice. Indeed, its proponents say congregation-based organizing will achieve just that. And many of our closest allies are turning with hope to this organizing model. For example, we have joined with Jewish Community Action in Minneapolis/St. Paul for our second year of co-sponsoring “*Livnot Koach - A Jewish Social Justice Training*,” which uses related techniques useful in congregation work but also with unaffiliated Jews and other community-based efforts. That said, having long observed the congregation-based organizing model from Chicago, where legendary organizer Saul Alinsky planted its seeds in the working-class Back of the Yards neighborhood more than 60 years ago, I am concerned that its enthusiastic embrace may overlook its dark underbelly, as well as lead to rejection of other potent means of social-justice engagement and coalition building.


Alinsky and those who followed in his footsteps believed the way to gain power was to identify an issue with the broadest possible appeal, based on self-interest, even if it did not address the most dire of public needs. Rev. John Heine-meier, a Lutheran pastor in Boston, characterizes “faith-based organizing as one of the more effective instruments for seeking justice and peace in the city/community.” Nonetheless, he lists nine precautions, many of them reflecting a concern that faith-based organizing can fail to engage the hard-core poor, lose accountability, be taken over by professional organizers, and, finally, “become power-over, rather than power-with.”

I am not saying congregation-based organizing cannot be effective. In fact, when the issue is right, the outcome can be very powerful — even transformational. But Alinsky himself proved that his model actually had potential for promoting social injustice. Although Alinsky insisted organizing was the instrument for overcoming racial conflict, Rev. Richard Luecke, Community Renewal Society’s then-director of studies, in reviewing a biography of the legendary organizer, noted that it could backfire if not undergirded by a vision of justice: “Back of the Yards managed to set aside ethnic differences between Poles, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Irish and Germans only to use this combined power to keep out blacks.”

Many exciting and innovative organizing models across the country are bringing change, creating coalitions, and mobilizing young, old, affiliated and unaffiliated Jews, including the Progressive Jewish Alliance in California and Jewish Community Action. The JCUA model, founded in 1964, puts us in coalition with groups in Chicago’s most vulnerable communities that request our assistance and partnership on issues *they* have identified as critical to their well-being. Of late, we

have worked with members of the Pilsen Alliance to create and promote the “Pilsen is not for sale” campaign in the face of rampant gentrification and widespread loss of affordable housing. Reaching out to Chicago’s Jewish community, including 40 local rabbis, we supported the hotel workers’ union and helped to achieve living-wage contracts for thousands of hospitality-industry employees. And our Community Ventures Program has helped create 2,400 units of affordable housing in partnership with local community development corporations. We have partnered with diverse racial, ethnic, and religious communities to highlight and end police torture, fight for quality healthcare, eliminate discriminatory real-estate practices, and derail plans to replace large tracts of affordable housing with an in-city golf course for downtown workers.

As the Jewish community seeks the best way to build powerful, ethical alliances that are true instruments of social change, it is critical that we choose the best features from many organizing models. In this effort, which likewise will bol-

ster the strength and vitality of Jewish communal life, we stand firmly behind Just Congregations as it takes its place to move our community for social change. It is my hope that it boldly and creatively works with many others to help create models that will help transform our congregations and that it uses its potentially significant resources on behalf of those who need it the most. Because, ultimately, our greatest self-interest lies in tackling the great injustices in which we think we have no self-interest at all. 

Jane Ramsey has been Executive Director of Chicago’s Jewish Council on Urban Affairs for over 25 years. She has been a principal organizer of coalitions that bring diverse groups together to address common concerns, including homelessness and community displacement, community reinvestment, police conduct, unemployment, racism, and antisemitism. She served as Director of Community Relations for Harold Washington, Chicago’s first African American mayor. Jane has also served as the co-chair of the Justice Coalition of Greater Chicago, as well as on numerous boards and commissions such as the Chicago Coalition to Protect Public Housing, Public Welfare Coalition, the Commission on Social Action of the Union of the Union for Reform Judaism, and Women in Charge.