

**Dream of a Common Language:  
Multi-Class Activism in Faith-Based Community Organizing**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study argues that faith-based community organizing (FBCO) does extensive cultural work to produce a “common language” of organizing that produces unity among working-class and middle-class black, white, and Hispanic participants. Data include a year of participant-observation in St. Louis and San Jose, and 37 interviews with participant-leaders. In the contemporary U.S. wealth is dramatically polarized, and middle-class Americans increasingly share the interests of working-class Americans. Yet vehicles for working-class and cross-class political mobilization are dramatically absent. The author argues that contrasting middle-class and working-class cultures inhibit cross-class coalition-building, but that FBCO has developed multiple tactics to break through working-class alienation from politics, while also appealing to middle-class members. Interview data illustrate how a “common language” of organizing addresses common working- and middle-class urban conditions and unfamiliarity with politics, and effectively empowers participants across class lines.

Herbert Gans writes, “Collective action requires a good deal of mutual trust and a commonality of interests and priorities . . . When people are similar enough socially - or know each other well enough - to possess that commonality, they are likely to develop sufficient trust as well.”<sup>1</sup> But what if they are not similar enough socially? Gans suggests that if they “know each other enough” and have “mutual trust and a commonality of interests and priorities,” then collective action is still possible.

Is this optimistic view justified? Faith-based community organizing suggests that it is. This study examines the concepts, language, and practices of that rarity, cross-race, cross-class social action. It is a mass-based progressive movement of locally-rooted federations of congregations, with norms that differ markedly from middle-class progressive movements. Its formal, structured practices are more akin to labor organizing, which shares a tradition of clear, separate roles for paid organizers and grassroots leaders (although leaders may become organizers). Both aim to build a mass base and deliver concrete results. Like labor unions, faith-based community organizing (for brevity, FBCO or FBCOs) needs to offer concrete improvements in order to motivate and retain poor and working-class members. Unlike the labor movement, faith-based organizing unifies diverse members along the axis of religious commitment. Participants are economically diverse, ranging from low-income to upper-middle class, with a large poor and working-class base. FBCO is multiracial: a 2001 national survey found that of 2,700 governing board members, about 43% were white, 32% black, 21% Hispanic, and 2% Asian.<sup>2</sup> FBCOs have redistributed billions of dollars for reforms in housing, public safety, health care, education, public transit, and other programs (see Swarts 2008).

Faith-based community organizing suggests that it is. I argue that FBCO does extensive cultural work to produce a common organizing language among working-class and middle-class black, white, and Hispanic participants. This includes training them in principles for organizing that members across lines of class and race come to embrace as uniquely effective and empowering. FBCO accomplishes this with explicit and implicit communication and norms, some of which is specifically designed to reach ordinary working people who are leery of political activism. Yet these principles and practices also appeal to highly-educated people as well. Because enduring and effective cross-class organizations are relatively rare in the U.S., a fine-grained analysis of FBCO can shed light on the mechanisms of one successful form and method.

Data are taken from a larger study. I draw from participant-observation and 37 interviews with grassroots leaders in two FBCOs: San Jose PACT in California, a member of the PICO National Network, and MCU for St. Louis in Missouri, an affiliate of the Gamaliel Foundation.<sup>3</sup>

The article proceeds as follows. First I discuss the contemporary political context in which wealth is dramatically polarized, and middle-class Americans increasingly suffer income and health care insecurity characteristic of working-class Americans. Yet when needed the most, vehicles for working-class and cross-class political mobilization are dramatically absent. I review the literature on contrasting middle-class and working-class cultures to illuminate how it has inhibited cross-class coalition-building in movement organizations. Next, I introduce the history and elements of faith-based community organizing and its cross-class membership. The remainder of the article closely examines attitudinal and emotional barriers to working-class participation, along with the tactics faith-based organizers use to break through these barriers, recruit, and empower these participants. Interview data from middle-class participants shows how this organizing approach also appeals to them. I conclude by demonstrating how a “common language” of organizing addresses common working- and middle-class urban conditions and unfamiliarity with politics, and effectively empowers participants across class lines.

### **Class polarization in American politics**

A large literature documents the dramatic rise in U.S. income inequality and increasing poverty rates consistent with growing income polarization.<sup>4</sup> The New Deal legacy of worker rights and social programs continues to be eroded and living standards for poor, working-class, and even middle-class workers are in a long-term decline. Not only are Americans increasingly divided by income (overlaid on patterns of race-based inequality), but social classes are increasingly isolated geographically from each other. This keeps the affluent distant from the social consequences of poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Political vehicles to address these disparities are inadequate, and the poor and working-class participate little in politics.<sup>6</sup> Vehicles to mobilize the working class are scarce, as the labor movement has long been under siege: in 2010, the union membership rate was 11.9 %, down from 12.3 % in 2009, and from over 20% in 1983.<sup>7</sup> Attacks on labor heightened dramatically after the 2010 midterm election. Aided by the

Tea Party movement, far-right conservatives won a majority in the House of Representatives. Republican governors and legislatures in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, and New Jersey launched their own attacks on organized labor. They used teachers' unions as a wedge to attack all public-sector unions, manipulating envy of public employee wages and benefits to win middle-class support for these attacks. Further, since the decline of traditional fraternal/sororal and civic associations, cross-class vehicles for political mobilization have declined markedly.<sup>8</sup> It may seem a particularly inauspicious time to try to build alliances across class lines.

Yet middle-class Americans' ever-more-limited yet expensive healthcare, shrunken funds for education and public services, skyrocketing foreclosure rates, and plummeting home values may lead them to make common cause with working-class Americans. Middle-class wage earners have far more in common with working-class Americans than with the most affluent: as of 2009, 80% of American households (the bottom four-fifths) brought home 50% of aggregate U.S. income; the top one-fifth got the other half. The top 5% of that quintile got a full 21.7%.<sup>9</sup>

This, of course, says little about how American socioeconomic classes perceive themselves or with which groups they feel a shared fate. A detailed analysis of American political attitudes and class is beyond the scope of this article. However, faith-based community organizing enables working- and middle-class Americans to forge ongoing coalitions and construct a sense of shared fate through its interfaith coalitions of churches, synagogues, and mosques (and sometimes other institutions such as schools). While union membership has plummeted, 67% of blue-collar respondents to a major survey were members of a church.<sup>10</sup> However, recruitment of congregations is merely the first step. Within each congregation, organizers must activate members, identify potential leaders, retain them, and keep the organization growing by continually replenishing the pool of congregations and their active participants. This is accomplished partly through intentional cultural work. I analyze this work through the lens of contrasting class cultures, and show how features of FBCO address both the different and common needs of working- and middle class congregation members.

## Different class cultures

Census data from 2009 indicate that over 70% of Americans 25 years and older do not have a bachelor's degree or higher.<sup>11</sup> A majority movement for social justice must therefore include large numbers of working people with a wide range of incomes. However, recruiting and retaining a cross-class membership can be difficult.<sup>12</sup> Part of the reason is that class-related cultures of family life, child-rearing, education, and job experience differ significantly.

A large literature treats differences in class cultures. For Bourdieu, Lamont, and others, class cultures help produce *embodied social structures*, a concept that links the macro and micro dimensions of social structure: "the cognitive structures which social agents implement in their practical knowledge of the social world are internalized."<sup>13</sup> In this view, because social class is organized hierarchically, class cultures reproduce structures of domination. Ethnographies of working-class men such as Lamont's and Halle's show that their values and beliefs can also be tools of resistance.<sup>14</sup>

The reproduction of class through individuals is a life-long process. Lareau has researched middle- and working-class childrearing styles.<sup>15</sup> She finds that middle-class parents' style of *concerted cultivation* cultivates their children's development, skills, and sense of self by encouraging reading, analytical verbal interaction, and organized activities. Children develop a sense of individual entitlement. In contrast, she found poor and working-class parents' saw childhood as a process of natural growth. While they care and set limits for their children, within these limits children play spontaneously and watch television. Rather than reasoning with children, parents issue directives. Their children develop a sense of constraint. In contrast, middle-class children learn they have a right to demand services and challenge authorities in professional-run institutions, which provides them advantages that working-class children lack. Lareau found that while race predicted some differences, middle-class African-American children had more in common with middle-class white children than with poor or working-class black children.<sup>16</sup>

Patterns of child-rearing produce children and youth primed for different and unequal educations. In a study of five elementary schools, Anyon found that entire schools were in effect tracked for vocational education, while others were geared to produce highly-skilled professionals.<sup>17</sup> Rist found that in poor schools

of low-income black students, the few middle-class students received special awards and attention.<sup>18</sup> Students who enter higher education are rewarded for autonomy, independent thinking, and self-expression, which professional jobs require. In contrast, working class jobs are characterized by “physical labor, a relatively dangerous or dirty environment, boring or routine tasks, close supervision and limited opportunities for upward mobility.”<sup>19</sup>

College-educated people typically value their careers and advancement. In her study of working-class men, Lamont argued that those who cannot excel according to educational or economic criteria “construct a sense of self-worth” using moral norms by which they reverse social hierarchies. Central working-class male values were work, family, friends, and character, in contrast to wealth and personal career ambition.<sup>20</sup> Some argue that this is why in 2000, George W. Bush’s self-presentation as a “common man,” which appealed to these values, won many white male working-class votes, whereas Al Gore’s appeals based on data and expertise appealed to the educated middle-class.<sup>21</sup>

Lamont found overlap but also differences between black and white working-class American men. The northern white urban workers in her study created a racial boundary of superiority to blacks. These men valorized a “disciplined self” characterized by a strong work ethic and sense of responsibility. Black working men more often valorized a “caring self” of solidarity and warmth, and more often offered structural explanations of poverty rather than individual failure.<sup>22</sup>

Organizing the poor and working class is difficult due to their widespread feelings of powerlessness. Gaventa’s classic study of Appalachian coal miners is echoed by Croteau’s ethnography of factory workers, who exhibited without exception a sense of political and social inefficacy. Eliasoph studied the political discourse of various activist and social groups. Although not clearly segmented by class, they included “few college graduates who worked at jobs which made use of their mental faculties, some manual laborers, and many low-paid white collar employees and service workers.”<sup>23</sup> Many of her subjects exhibited forms of political alienation such as avoidance of political talk, or conversely, extensive but cynical political talk, a style she terms “cynical chic.”<sup>24</sup> Their irony and cynicism was defensive, preventing them from looking

ignorant or foolish in front of others, saving face, and “absolving themselves of responsibility for what they saw as the absurdity and corruption of political life.”<sup>25</sup>

Before analyzing how FBCO addresses these barriers to working-class participation, I introduce this form of activism and its language, norms, and practices.

### **Faith-Based Community Organizing**

Faith-based community organizations are federations of congregations, ranging from 10-15 member institutions to 80-100. They bring low-income, working class, and middle-class Americans together to build power so members have a voice in the policies that affect their lives. Each congregation pays institutional dues, although FBCOs also need grants from foundations and denominations. There are 180-200 FBCOs in the U.S. and more abroad. While its name sounds generic, faith-based community organizing is a distinct ideology and method. Some of its norms and practices are found in other community and labor organizing; its uniqueness comes from consciously rooting strategic organizing in religious values. Its oldest ideas originate from Saul Alinsky and his Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). After Alinsky died in 1972, his deputy Ed Chambers and organizer Ernesto Cortes developed the “modern IAF,” built on federations of congregations. Cortes developed the approach in San Antonio, Texas, where Communities Organized for Public Service won over a billion dollars in improvements and brought poor Hispanics and middle-class whites together to open up San Antonio city government.<sup>26</sup>

By the mid 1980s, many neighborhood-based organizers switched to the more durable church-based structure. Today there are four large national FBCO “networks” with independent local affiliates, and some independent FBCOs.<sup>27</sup> The networks train and supervise organizers, start new affiliates, conduct national training sessions for members, and increasingly coordinate locals in statewide and even national organizing. Some FBCOs also include labor unions, schools, and neighborhood associations.

FBCOs aim to empower the disempowered: poor and working-class Americans. Organizer Saul Alinsky noted as early as 1971 that middle-class Americans also had little control over the institutions that affected their lives.<sup>28</sup> Middle-class congregations can more easily afford dues to their local FBCO. However, FBCO’s character-based rather than educated skills-based understanding of leadership opens the field to



participants from all classes (see below). The limited survey data that exists as well as numerous case studies show that FBCOs recruit nontraditional leaders – poor and working-class, non-white, and female – into meaningful participation.<sup>29</sup> (NOTE: The term “leaders” always refers to members, not paid organizers. This usage is common to labor organizing as well.) Warren and Wood provided the first comprehensive survey of FBCOs in 2001.<sup>30</sup> Data on leaders is limited to boards of directors. Data on member institutions shows the ethnic pool from which they draw leaders.

	Ethnic Composition of Member Institutions of FBCOs	Ethnic Composition of individual members of FBCO boards of directors
White	36.06	43.36
Black	35.03	31.73
Hispanic	20.89	21.05
Immigrant (of various race)	10.81	(unavailable)
Interracial	6.49	1.07
Asian	1.29	2.31
Native American	0.22	0.47

**Table 1. Ethnic Composition of FBCO Congregations and Boards of Directors**

Source: Warren and Wood 2001, Tables 4 and 5:<sup>31</sup> All figures are percentages.

Individual board members of FBCOs were 49% male and 51% female; 73% laypersons, and 27% clergy. The 2001 study does not have data on occupation and income; however, numerous studies including my own report that education levels and occupations of participants were highly diverse, including many working- and lower-middle class participants, along with some very low income and also middle- to upper-middle class participants.<sup>32</sup>

FBCOs partially address the racial divide through institutional diversity, recruiting predominantly black, white, Latino, and mixed congregations. In coalition, their members have a powerful common identity as people of faith, but the integrity of individual congregations, where participants feel “at home,” remains.

Racial distrust does not simply disappear, and FBCOs use other strategies to address it such as black clergy and organizer caucuses, which cannot be explored in depth in this article.

The following sections examine the deficits and the assets that working class members bring, and the specific FBCO cultural features that address them in the service of organizing. Then I discuss the cultural capital and greater felt efficacy that middle-class members bring – but also the lack of political savvy that many share with working-class members. The discussion highlights the elements of FBCO culture that appeal to both kinds of members.

The sense of remove many poor and working people feel about politics extends toward social movements for change. One of the first tasks of the DBCO organizer is to communicate familiarity and normality to parishioners who view activists as “other.”

### **Working-class attitudes toward social movement activism**

Congregation members range from politically unaware to well-informed. New FBCO recruits may be surprisingly naive about grassroots organizing, let alone progressive politics. Some feel strongly that conflict and power politics are “un-Christian.” One working-class Catholic laywoman, asked to describe a Gamaliel Foundation event, said, “I didn't know what Gamaliel was! At first, they were so hyped up, I said to Sister, are they Communist or what? Then I talked to Sister and she said [the biblical] Gamaliel was an apostle . . . and I was relieved because they were not Communist.”

Members of peace, environmental, feminist, and other left-liberal movements are predominantly college-educated and middle-class.<sup>33</sup> They often try, but have great difficulty recruiting working class members.<sup>34</sup> While many working-class people have a clear sense of injustice, some see “experts” as the only people qualified to propose policy solutions.<sup>35</sup> Yet they also tend to mistrust middle-class experts—often, the professionals who have authority over them on the job. Croteau notes that middle class professionals lie between labor and capital in the relations of power. The owners of capital—the top 1% of Americans owns 43% of financial wealth<sup>36</sup>—are invisible to workers. Therefore, resentment gets directed to the middle-class professionals supervising and controlling them. Workers directly experience the benefits they get from capital, namely jobs, but exploitation is delivered through the managerial class. Workers do not experience

their direct relation to capital often, except, for instance, when factories close. Croteau observes that middle-class activists tend not to be aware of how “the middle class benefits from the oppression of the working class through the rigid division of mental/manual labor and the resulting difference in expertise. Understanding this dynamic goes a long way toward explaining the resentment of the working class toward professionals and intellectuals,” and the political Right has capitalized on this resentment.<sup>37</sup>

Working class aversion to progressive social movements has roots in the 1960s. Among the politicized working class, Levy shows that radical student organizations such as SDS and SNCC had deep biographical and organizational links to the Old Left. However, as the decade wore on, the New Left’s turn to the hippie counterculture alienated older allies. During the anti-Vietnam War movement, this alienation was expressed in its most extreme form by construction workers who “rampaged through New York City’s financial district,” on May 8, 1970 not to attack the center of capitalism along with students, but to beat and pummel protestors with slogans like “Kill the commie bastard,” “Don’t Worry, They Don’t Draft Faggots,” and “All The Way, U.S.A.”<sup>38</sup>

The following section draws from David Croteau’s analysis of factory workers’ attitudes toward left-liberal social movements in his ethnography *Politics and the Class Divide*. FBCO tactics and organizers’ self-presentation are a response to attitudes similar to those of Croteau’s subjects. Workers largely held two attitudes: a defense of movements’ right “to exist and to speak out,” coupled with skepticism about their “goals, motives, and impact.”<sup>39</sup> Workers saw middle-class movements as faddish, tactically ineffective and sometimes bizarre, negative, naïve, extreme, and made up of marginal non-conformists, not “regular” people like themselves. I examine each attitude in turn, along with the FBCO strategy to counter it.

*Social movements are nonconformist and extreme, not mainstream.*

One factory worker Croteau interviewed contrasted the pragmatic, “mainstream” National Rifle Association with peace protestors who are kind of always against the tide . . . Nobody really wants to hear that stuff . . . You can’t be far out there like some of these people. You’ve got to be mainstream so that you can get people to belong.” Both left-of-center movement tactics and goals appeared extreme. Commenting on the environmental movement, one factory-worker said, “They stop all these projects because there’s some

bug or fish or whatever in the area, you know? I think that gets crazy.” Another worker commented on movements in general, “No, this is not middle America, that’s for sure...they don’t really have the support of people, so they have to resort to this kind of thing to get on the TV.”

Croteau’s subjects observed property damage as a tactic during the Gulf War and were “clearly opposed.” Since his study, global justice protests (such as the highly-publicized Battle of Seattle in 1999) and the mass marches against the war in Iraq included playfully dressed protesters and giant puppets in a carnival-like atmosphere. Anarchists who committed property damage received extensive publicity. This theatricality provided working-class Americans with nonconformist, outlandish images of activism.

#### *The faith-based organizing response*

In contrast, FBCO practices symbolically convey that community organizing is “mainstream American,” not radical or countercultural. Organizers wear professional clothing and convey norms of serious business, such as timeliness and formality. Meetings are famous for starting and ending on time. Ordinary people with families (both working- *and* middle-class) are not expected to debate long into the night, or arrive at consensus after three-hour discussions. The main tactic in the FBCO repertoire of contention, the mass meeting with officials (also known as a “public meeting” or “action”—*not* a “protest” or “rally”) is orderly, formal, dignified, and businesslike.

These norms date to Saul Alinsky’s Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), which began organizing long before the cultural watershed of the sixties. Previously, union and community organizers as well as businessmen typically wore suits in public. In light of 1960s movement norms, the FBCO model sometimes appeared almost reactionary in its determination to appeal to ordinary Americans. For several reasons, Alinsky and his successor Ed Chambers shared an aversion to middle-class sixties radicals. Alinsky thought they romanticized the poor; were expressive and deeply non-strategic; and above all, feared that the radical counterculture alienated the blue- and white-collar majority. Long after Alinsky’s death in 1972, IAF national trainings for members (on which later FBCO networks modeled their national training programs) emphasized the need to communicate respectability and normality to average Americans.

*Social movement members are faddish, transient, and ineffective.*

Said one factory worker Croteau interviewed, “For a while it’s abortion, then it’s ecology, then it’s dolphins or whales or something.” To working-class Americans, middle-class movement issues may seem arbitrary because they are unrelated to immediate life challenges. Middle-class activists’ motivations may be more long-range or ideological as opposed to immediate and personally pressing. Furthermore, one worker felt these movements “always focus on the negative. They’re against this or they’re against that. But they never seem to be for anything . . . I don’t think it really helps anything.” Even their tactics seem stale and predictable: “I don’t think they’re very effective. . . Maybe [when it was new] it had a sort of impact. Now, though, everybody’s got their own cause and their own marches and demonstrations so people kind of expect it.” If they do not seem to propose solutions, social movements seem unrealistic: as one worker said, “I’m sure there are still some starry-eyed people . . . out there finding some crusade to work on . . . thinking that it’s gonna make a big deal but nothing every really happens, I think.”

*The faith-based organizing response*

To counter perceptions of activism as faddish, transient, ineffective, and unrealistic, community organizations present themselves as pragmatic, enduring, instrumental, and effective. They draw on religious congregations’ stability, legitimacy, authority, and shared beliefs and values. These are formidable resources. The PICO Network states, “PICO brings people together based on faith and values, not just issues or anger. As a result PICO federations have the ability to act on a comprehensive vision for their communities, cities and regions.”<sup>40</sup> Rather than faddish and transient, FBCO ideology emphasizes building stable, ongoing organizations. Many have survived twenty or thirty years or more.

To counter views of grassroots activism as naïve and idealistic (and the feeling of impotence that often lies just beneath), Alinsky-influenced organizing of all kinds emphasizes picking practical issues that affect people’s lives directly. FBCO organizers and leaders conduct meetings with individual congregation members to identify the most widely felt issues. Called “one-to-ones,” these interviews serve many purposes. When a staffer begins organizing in a congregation, she recruits an organizing team (with members often suggested by the pastor) through one-to-ones. Team members commit to conduct a quota of one-to-ones with

church members, which may range from 100 to 400 meetings, before coming together to compile their findings. One-to-ones are the most basic form of research that FBCOs conduct. A norm of thorough research, demonstrating that an issue is widely felt, gives participants a sense of legitimacy when they make demands. One FBCO leader said, “Now it is recognized that we do our research, we know what we are talking about. We don't come in as rabble rousers, but we just keep digging at them until we can get what we want.”

The PICO Network communicates practicality and political neutrality by framing organizing as finding “solutions” to “problems.” Its mission statement begins, “PICO is . . . working to create innovative solutions to problems facing urban, suburban and rural communities.”<sup>41</sup> This practical, neutral language has cross-class appeal, to liberals, moderates, and even some conservatives. Rosemary is a white middle-class school teacher who got involved with San Jose PACT through the school where she taught, not her conservative evangelical church. She was concerned about public schools’ inadequate offerings for the 70% of Americans who do not earn a four-year college degree. She explained that, in contrast to groups with more confrontational tactics,

We don't come and force issues on people. When we go to an action we've done our homework and we are just presenting the facts: “Here it is, what are you going to do about it?” Politics really doesn't interest me that much, and I thought—now, is PACT going to be a bunch of politics? And it really isn't. It's about making the politicians listen to the regular people. And do what the regular people want. And so it's not really political, although you have to learn about politics. You have a force by being part of PACT. . . . I don't see anything wrong with that.

Just because FBCO uses a less unruly repertoire of contention and tries to appear mainstream to its members doesn't mean that officials see it as mainstream. One San Jose bureaucrat once sent a memo to all city departments forbidding them to meet with PACT, which he described as a militant Alinsky-style organization. The policy was reversed when PACT sent a letter protesting this “anti-democratic policy,” arguing that “it is essential that the government encourage input from the families and neighborhoods that are the lifeblood of a city's vitality.”<sup>42</sup>

Tactically, FBCO eschews movement-style demonstrations that express unrealizable demands. It insists on mobilizing power (a mass base) in targeted actions (usually formal meetings) with decision-makers who have the power to grant its demands. By winning concrete improvements, members cannot characterize it as idealistic or ineffective.

*Left social movement language may be unfamiliar or alienating*

Eleanor, a white Methodist retired factory worker and active PACT leader, said, “The first time that I saw the word “activist” related to PACT in the paper, I thought ‘Activist? I’m an activist?’ (laughs) I guess I was, because I was acting on something.”<sup>43</sup>

Not only the identity “activist” but middle-class movement jargon may be daunting or alien to those without higher education or movement experience: daunting if too sophisticated or technical, alien if it is language drawn from identity politics that average Americans normally do not use. The term “racist” is widely familiar; “sexist” is less familiar, although blue-collar women who have experienced discriminatory treatment may use it. However, terms such as “classism,” “homophobia,” and “multiple oppressions” are not everyday speech for the population FBCOs seek to attract.

*The faith-based organizing response*

The language of FBCO values largely mirrors the ordinary language of people with little or no left-liberal movement experience, both working *and* middle-class. This helps build a common language for working-class and middle-class church members. FBCO language does not just mimic the language of members, but no doubt influences it; in practice, the mutual influence is impossible to disentangle. People talk about their “neighborhood,” “community,” “children,” “families,” and their “church,” “God,” and “justice.”<sup>44</sup> The following are typical responses by members when asked about their “deepest values” and what their FBCO stands for:

I believe in God, and that . . . all humans should be respected.

The church should be about the community and not just the inside of this building. We should be outside . . . helping to make it the best community we can.

We're real committed to our neighborhood and our church and [our town] Ferguson.

Justice issues . . . whether it would be preventing a shopping mall from going up, to targeting drug houses, to picking up trash; just making our community a safe place to raise kids and have a family, but it's based on faith so it's a faith-based organization.

my values that I hold dear are honesty and hard work and dedication to my family and my job . . . I have a strong faith . . . building relationships.

Below is a summary of the most common values-related themes drawn from interviews I conducted with 41 FBCO participants from St. Louis and San Jose. They are from answers to two questions: “What would you say are the values and beliefs that guide your life?” and “If someone asked you ‘What does (name of group) stand for?’ how would you best answer that?” The numbers below are number of times a theme is mentioned, not number of people who expressed that theme. One individual could express multiple themes.

Religious Values		Other Values (can be perceived as secular or religious)		Other Themes	
God / faith in God	18	Justice	4	Family	7
Bible/Gospel	5	Work ethic	2	Community	4
Jesus Christ	2	Honesty	2		
Catholic values or social teaching/ human rights	2	Love	2		
		Respect for humans	2		

**Table 2. Number of mentions of various “values and beliefs” from semi-structured interviews with 37 FBCO leaders**



In order of frequency, the most common answers to the question were:

God / faith in God / Do God's work	18
Family	7
Bible/Gospel	5
Justice	4
Community	4

Interestingly, FBCO language addressed to the wider public through the media usually avoids mention of “God,” preferring terms of identification like “people of faith, “children and families’ needs,” “ordinary people,” “neighborhood needs,” and “working families.” Reasons may include groups’ desire for the broadest possible public appeal, for coalition-building beyond religious congregations, and a desire not to be confused with the Religious Right. The PICO Network’s mission statement begins, “Faith-Based Community Organizing is a method of working with *faith communities* to address the problems and concerns of their communities, and in turn, vitalize and strengthen the *life of congregations*” [emphases mine].

Excerpts from PICO’s statement of “Values” include:

PICO believes in the potential for transformation . . . and the power of *people of faith* to lead this transformation. PICO believes that people should have a say in the decisions that shape their lives . . . PICO believes that *family is a value* that motivates participation in public life and that across economic levels most American families share common concerns for good schools, affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, high quality health care, civil rights and civic participation. PICO values the racial, ethnic, religious and regional diversity that has shaped American society. [author’s emphases]

Similarly, the Gamaliel Foundation’s mission statement begins, “Gamaliel’s mission is to assist local community leaders to create, maintain and expand independent, grassroots, and powerful faith-based community organizations so that ordinary people can impact the political, social, economic, and environmental decisions that affect their lives . . .”<sup>45</sup>

## **Confronting working-class resistance to participation**

Even if organizers succeed in defusing negative associations with activism, they still must recruit and retain working-class members who are pessimistic about improving their communities. FBCOs address feelings of inefficacy by providing training and experiences of success and empowerment. The resistance working-class Americans often feel toward civic engagement is both cognitive and emotional. Expressions of apathy often disguise feelings of hopelessness. Even if they are interested, many potential participants don't know how politics works, and are afraid of making mistakes. Although separated analytically below, these barriers are closely entwined.

### *Feelings of powerlessness and lack of confidence*

Karen, a 51 year old white working-class Catholic woman in a declining St. Louis neighborhood, felt both intimidated and intrigued at a workshop with an expert in urban policy: "The speaker] was really interesting. And I'm sure I shouldn't have been there because . . . like people would say I'm the head of this, and I'm the something of this, and I'm thinking, oh, what am I going to say? I'm nothin!"

Karen had been active in her Gamaliel-affiliated FBCO for several years, but felt deep pessimism about her neighborhood:

Maybe we should have had CUCA [a subgroup of MCU] twenty-five years ago, when there was something more to hold on to. . . Who in their right mind is going to do anything with this mess? When you go to the Central West End, there's movement, there's activity, there's people walking the neighborhood, restaurants, bars, bookstores, and there's families! Families is a big thing; and it doesn't make any difference *what* kind of families, if they're single parent families, if they're gay families . . . We're all—all we got is each other. And all we got is one shot at it. It just seems like we wasted a lot of time--doing nothing, just going through the motions of doing nothing!

Yet Karen's experiences with CUCA caused small stirrings of hope. Describing the speaker at the organizing workshop, she exclaimed,

He talked so fast, and those graphs, and it's like, slow down! And the ministers and the Lutheran bishop; everybody was so . . . excited about what they were doing! And it seemed like there WAS

hope. And sometimes I just look around and think, oh, man, pack it up! Sometimes it gets overwhelming, cause you think what can we--we got fifteen old people [referring to her church], what are we going to do?

Karen's organizer had been urging her to attend national training, FBCO's most intensive opportunity to produce shared commitment to its concepts, norms, and practices, but Karen resisted:

See, I don't know, because maybe . . . I haven't . . . maybe if I get more into it . . . it seemed kind of scary, I think. Because, I imagine it's pretty intensive, it's five days. And I think you would come out of there thinking, do you like yourself or not? (laughs)

Nevertheless Karen had not only been an integral member of her church's organizing team, fighting drug houses, slumlords, and local crime, she had taken a new step into the public arena by delivering a speech.

I was pretty proud of myself when I did this. I was pretty proud of myself. But it was like, my brother was in from town—and I gave that speech over about fifteen times that weekend! I gave it over in my head. And I thought, that was a pretty good speech!

Karen has become active and taken some risks, but is still holding back out of fear.

### *The faith-based organizing response*

FBCO places great emphasis on developing leadership from among congregation members. In both one-on-one and group work organizers address barriers to activism through a mixture of support and challenging. Organizers ask new participants to perform tasks like chairing a meeting, or playing a speaking role in a small meeting with an official. Staff and experienced leaders develop potential leaders by role-playing, rehearsing, evaluating their performance, and simply encouraging them. The trust built through repeated interactions allows organizers to challenge members to take risks.

*Challenging* is an organizing term of art. Its goal is to break down defenses against participation. When the work is rooted in members' stated values, organizers have a basis to challenge members: "When we first met, you said what you valued most was your children's safety and their future. The meeting to plan strategy for getting an after-school tutoring center in their middle school is on Tuesday. Are you willing to stand up for what you value?"

*Agitating*, another term of art, means challenging, but perhaps more aggressively and deeply.

Organizers must discern whether a person is developed and psychologically robust enough to be agitated:

“Agitation is not to direct anger at a person, attack someone who is vulnerable, or publicly ridicule anyone. It should be done in a safe space and in the context of a relationship . . . Only agitate someone who you think is ready to deeply reflect on their self-interest and apply it in their life.”<sup>46</sup>

If a member like Karen, above, is challenged to attend week-long training, she will initially be intimidated. However, if she attends she is likely to have a powerful experience in which she meets about 100 other racially and economically diverse FBCO leaders from all over the country, is astonished by how much they have in common, and feels that her world has expanded. Week-long training for some is akin to a conversion experience. It addresses both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of reticence (fear and shame, as well as lack of skills). It imparts FBCO concepts, norms, and practices that help unify a diverse membership base.

In training and back home, Karen will learn that issues should be “immediate, specific, and winnable.” New participants must experience success to counter their felt powerlessness and ensure that the work is relevant to their needs (hence “immediate” and “specific.”) This has given rise to the stereotype that organizing just wins stop signs, a common first campaign issue. As members gain experience, typically they learn about the more distant sources of the policies that affect them directly, such as national government and multi-national corporations. Talented organizers provide both experiences and analysis that allow them to make these connections and become motivated to take on major policy campaigns.

#### *Difficulty envisioning or feeling entitled to alternative futures*

When a congregation begins the organizing process, organizers conduct an exercise (originated by the IAF) called “real vs. ideal world.” In one version I observed, the organizer queries the group on the minimum cost to meet a family’s needs, such as housing, food, clothing, transportation, and insurance. Participants came up with a minimum budget of \$2150 per month, and contrasted that with what the (then) minimum wage of \$5.75 per hour would produce: \$1,000 a month. As the group discussed survival strategies, the organizer crossed out items on his newsprint pad that would have to be cut. They discussed

pressures on families such as having to take second or third jobs, credit card debt, bankruptcy, depression, illness, domestic violence, divorce, addiction, and loss of hope—and how this devastates their congregations. This is an ideal time for an organizer to “agitate” members in order to provoke anger at the contradiction between what people need and what they get. Fanning the flames of anger at injustice is a staple of community organizing designed to move people to action.

*Lack of civic skills and knowledge*

Members like Karen are intimidated by people with specialized public policy knowledge. A key part of empowerment is learning to conduct basic research. In addition to the most most fundamental method of one-to-one interviews to identify widespread concerns, members learn about officials’ interests through small-group meetings with them, and also learn how to research public records. The PICO Network formalizes grassroots research meetings with officials by calling them “research actions.” They prepare members with role-plays of different scenarios. Members play specific roles, sometimes as “understudies” in case another becomes too nervous. It cannot be overstated how foreign it is for most working-class people to meet with their elected officials and feel entitled to answers and action. Loretta, a retired data entry worker, explained, “We wouldn't have known what to do if we didn't have that PACT staff person. Because I haven't dealt with the city before, I didn't know anything. It's different now! (laughs).” As part of her Methodist church’s local organizing committee, Loretta conducted one-to-one interviews, and the team learned that church members and area residents were “worried about the kids. There were kids hanging around the schools and so we wanted a safe place for them to go to after school.” They interviewed members of the Methodist Youth Fellowship, and then

went to the various schools . . .and asked them what they thought of a teen center. And so we did a lot of research. We had a pile like this [indicates a foot-high pile of documents] I'm not kidding! I felt like I was looking for a left handed wrench going around City Hall, because, oh, you go to that department, no, you go to this department. (laughs) So we went to the library and. . . we did things that we had never done before. I think that's when I really became hooked on PACT.

In contrast with Loretta's upbeat narrative, the biggest challenge is organizing the entrenched poor in abandoned neighborhoods, as in parts of St. Louis. In contrast, many of San Jose's poor are Latino and Asian immigrants with hope for a better life. Although California had recessions about once a decade, overall Silicon Valley has been an information-age job generator. Latino immigrants in PACT churches often worked two or three jobs, but the jobs were there. Devastated inner-city neighborhoods are harder to organize. One St. Louis priest said,

In this neighborhood . . . I see it because of poor education levels . . . abuse patterns . . . self-esteem is often very low, and willingness to risk, get involved and make commitments isn't there. Just *is not there*. For example, we did our first shot at one-to-ones a couple years ago. We had ten to twelve people, each of whom would take ten one-on-ones and do them. We put people through one (training, and) a commissioning with the whole church in part of our Sunday liturgy. We tried to empower people as much as we could. Lots of people never did their conversations! They got cold feet, because they called somebody up who said "No, I don't want to talk with you," and they'd quickly back off. Or just picking up the phone for the first time and calling to make an appointment was more intimidating than they thought.

### **Working-class empowerment**

Many working-class members also bring assets that organizers try to develop. FBCO's definition of a leader as someone "with followers" is simple but inclusive; a person attracts followers based on character and personality traits that people of all classes exhibit. The organizer aims to develop these traits further so local leaders gain in confidence and experience. In addition, participants of all classes have social networks. FBCO relies on leaders mobilizing their networks ("relationships") to events and actions with authorities. FBCO emphasizes that organizers and leaders are all accountable for their commitments. None of these qualities requires middle-class advantages.

When working-class members show leadership qualities, organizers work with them to develop skills more common among educated people: the confidence and ability to speak in public, chair meetings (which

do not require parliamentary rules of procedure), conduct research, learn to think strategically, and make demands of officials in front of large groups.

Raul, A 69 year old Catholic Latino man with two years of college, described how his work with San Jose PACT affected him:

[PACT] focused all these things that I've always wanted to do; helping the community, knowing how the government works at the city level, at the state level. All that within a year! I've made speeches, I've done things that I *never* knew I . . . the organizer kept telling me, you can do it, you can do it! I felt better about myself, I got more confident.

Raul's experience was not unusual. Helen, a 53 year old Protestant minister, sought a San Jose church so she could to practice an urban ministry of organizing with PACT. In her Central Valley town, she

was especially impressed with the leaders that had been trained in [the PICO Network], and who continued to be effective community leaders. A woman who had been working in the laundry room of the hospital. . . And she doesn't have a college education, although you certainly wouldn't know it. Her husband's a foreman in the strawberry fields and they live out on the edge of a field. But she is a very professionally effective leader.

Another working-class member said, "I had no idea that we could be as powerful as we are. Now, any problem that comes up, we don't care. We will take it right to the president of the U.S.!"

Lupe was a 38-year-old PACT leader who entered the country illegally from Mexico with a 6<sup>th</sup> grade education. After divorcing her domineering husband, Lupe became a single mother of seven children. In mandatory parents' meetings at Migrant Education [a program for children that work in the fields] she was so afraid to speak that she sat as far back as possible so no one would call on her. Later, when her children were enrolled in a San Jose school, Lupe discovered that teachers at the 100% Latino school relaxed in the staff room while children were left alone. She learned from a friend and PACT participant in her church that PACT could help her achieve change. Through a translator, Lupe said that at first she felt

very ignorant because I didn't know how to go about to solve the problems. And with PACT I learned that learning and being educated, you can fight with intelligence better. I used to feel ignorant, but I was

very interested in learning about it, and then after I started participating it's like a big door opened. I actually enjoy it very much. I was going through the same trauma as a lot of women that are married. My husband wouldn't allow me to actually go out, he wouldn't let me watch radio or television. He wanted to keep me under. But it was something in my blood, I wanted to get out of it. I learned a lot.

Interviewer: Like what?

Lupe: That you can speak to important people. We have the right to defend our own rights, and we can speak. I am very confident. It has given me a lot of security. The most that I have learned is to have the security of self assurance. And that is the reason why I live more peaceful, I'm not afraid of anybody! Before I used to take whatever people imposed on me, but things have changed. Now I go out and fight for whatever I feel is the right thing to do. My impression of myself is that I have matured a lot as a person. I'm not even scared of the devil!

Lupe's next, all-consuming goal was to learn English so she could be even more politically effective.

### **Middle-class experience and motivations**

After decades of urban disinvestment, many middle-class FBCO members experience problems similar to those of working-class members. The health care crisis, housing foreclosures, declining services, and neighborhood blight affect many middle-class participants, if not as severely as poorer members. In St. Louis, middle-class whites loyal to their city and churches experienced dramatic disinvestment, white flight, and sprawl in a way that San Jose citizens did not.<sup>47</sup> Blacks' and whites' shared experience of community decline, in the city proper or inner ring suburbs, helped bring St. Louisans together across race and class. Janine, a white 43-year old Catholic leader, reported that in her town, "property values . . . are falling fast. People are moving from our parish in droves— about 150 families in the last one-and-a-half to two years. So not only are we losing friends and relatives, it's the [property] value." Members saw their congregations shrink, local department stores close, and businesses replaced by check cashing outlets. Those who loved their towns and felt some efficacy were determined to act. Catholics had no say over the diocese's decisions to close churches. Many MCU Catholics had lost their home church and attended churches that served two or



three consolidated parishes. Protestant churches have more autonomy, but rely far more from members' financial pledges. Pastors wanted to save their congregations and their jobs.

Though economically dynamic, San Jose's mixed-income and poor neighborhoods experienced the effects of California's long-term budget crisis. Under-funded schools, lack of youth and neighborhood services, drug and gang activity, and loss of public hospitals affected many residents across class lines.

### **Middle class empowerment**

To attract middle-class members, an organizing method must provide more political savvy and a larger power base than such members can otherwise access. Consistent with other research on FBCOs, middle-class participants in the two groups studied here gained political and strategic efficacy.<sup>48</sup> Some experienced activists did not express strong feelings of empowerment. One PACT leader said, "I don't know that it taught me any new skills; it has refined skills." A well-educated pastor said, "I think I've learned what I already knew in some cases; part of it was about relationship building." However, she noted that "I wouldn't have gotten out in the community and met mayors and . . . city clerks if it hadn't been for CUCA [a sub-group of MCU for St. Louis]."

Maureen, a white 48-year-old teacher and top-level PACT leader, said that before she got involved she "felt like I had lots of power. I was active, I was busy" but "now I belong to a larger community." Before, "my issues were smaller, less important issues." From PACT, she "learned how to have relationships with people . . . the most important thing [is] the power of the group. And the power of our faith." However, Maureen also said she learned many new skills, such as "how to run a meeting. How to do research. How do you get a meeting [with an official]. Redevelopment money. How do you get money. Where the money is, where the power is."

Many others reported significant learning. Both working- and middle-class participants seemed to marvel at their empowerment:

If you'd have told me seven-eight years ago that I would be involved in organizing the raising of \$25,000 for several years in a row, I'd think you were crazy, because I don't know anything about fund raising.

Without the money that I've helped organize to raise, CUCA wouldn't be nearly as financially stable as they are now. It makes me proud that I'm a part of that. (a middle-class white woman)

[on doing radio interviews:] That was nerve-wracking, I was so nervous but it was a lot of fun. I would never have dreamed I could do something like that. (a middle class white woman)

George, a 68-year-old retired black professional with graduate training who lived in a segregated St. Louis neighborhood, had a long history of leadership in civic and professional groups. He “always had a positive feel that I could make some difference,” although his FBCO experience “magnified it” and he gained “a greater sense of power.” Yet even with his experience, when George testified to the state legislature, he expressed amazement:

I just never imagined myself doing that ten years ago! (laughs) And here I was sitting in front of a Senate subcommittee testifying on the importance of legislation to curb urban sprawl, and trying to answer their questions! I mean, that was a big deal.

A white middle-class participant said,

The whole hospital thing just blew me away a number of years ago . . . I remember telling friends of mine about all the stuff that we were doing, with respect to getting a hospital. I remember saying to somebody, "That's how stuff gets done." I thought things just happen, but they don't. There's always a plan and there's always somebody making the plan.

A 41-year-old white Catholic woman expressed the thrill of exerting power in a large group, a feeling as rare for middle-class Americans as for less privileged ones:

When you find that the person you've been taunting for a long time actually shows up at a public meeting, and the question is posed: “Will you do this?” and they say yes, you kind of go, “Yee ha, this is great!” It's fun to see what 500 people in a room can do to effect change.

Another leader explained her involvement this way: “I like the people. It's a wonderful group of people . . . while it's frustrating, it's also energizing to be a part of those groups. And exciting.”

### *Political education and skills*

Well-educated FBCO participants reported gaining new political experience and concrete civic skills. Five of twenty-six FBCO leaders who answered a question about skills reported gaining one or two new skills. However, the vast majority - twenty-one members - reported learning either three or four skills, such as researching issues, public speaking, chairing meetings, planning strategy, and conducting individual interviews with potential recruits.<sup>49</sup> One minister commented, “I’ve noticed that people move from not ever speaking out to chairing a local meeting, and then maybe being a small part of an action, to chairing an action. It really doesn’t take all that long.”

A 47-year-old white Catholic priest helped negotiate with a multinational oil company to win a local gas station toxic cleanup: “I’d never done anything like that before—meeting with this executive and trying to get him to agree to do something that we know he really doesn’t want to do, and not wimping out just because it was difficult.” A Catholic priest with extensive organizing experience said shifting scale from the local to the state legislature was new and empowering: “Social action: how do you take an idea...and turn it to law. That’s a whole new experience for me.” Another pastor with extensive organizing experience reported,

The MCU stuff is *the* most sophisticated level of organization I’ve ever been into. The scope, the toughness of urban sprawl, and the pervasiveness of it: nobody’s ever tackled that big a thing like that before. Community organizing’s forte has always been the stop sign and the drug house, but never a metro issue like this. . . That’s been a learning experience for all of us.

Anna, a Filipina woman in her forties, was a nurse, union member, and confident civic leader. When her teenage son got involved with drugs and gangs, she discovered that her education was useless to solve the problem:

I thought I knew where the resources were. I was pretty articulate. I’ve been president of PTA’s, I knew where to go to get help. I thought I knew. But all the things they said were there to help us weren’t there . . . You need to go to so and so . . . and they’d say, “Well, we don’t take intakes on the weekend.” [Or]

he's a minor and we don't take minors. I went to them about a drug rehab, residential rehab, and they said there's none. He has to get arrested. Would you believe that?

Learning that she was powerless to help her son moved Anna to get involved with her FBCO.

Through organizing, a Catholic layman in St. Louis reported a paradigm shift in his understanding of urban sprawl:

Compared to the last week or so ago, I thought the main thing driving urban sprawl was race. But I figure that's an oversimplification . . . I'm beginning to believe that there's some sort of economic thing going on; like we're not really aware of the rules. Some people know the book. They've read the book and we haven't. Occasionally I get a postcard from a real estate agent, saying "So and so has moved into your block, and here's my number."

Now, you know they're not thinking I'm going to move *on* my street, because I'm already there! They want to know if I want to move *off* the street. So you know that they're playing on this thing. I just realized these people are using the forces that cause urban sprawl.

There are people that *use* these forces— that's not just happening; some people I think are actually *causing* things to happen.

### **Imparting a common language and culture**

The heavy FBCO emphasis on training is one of the most important methods of empowering both working- and middle-class members and producing a unifying ideology of organizing. In PICO, training in a specific skill is an agenda item in almost every meeting. Both PICO and Gamaliel affiliates engage in the universal FBCO practice of evaluations at the end of meetings, actions, and other events. The organizer typically begins by asking how people feel, and begins with emotion words. Emotional responses are seen as valuable indicators of the event's degree of success, which is multi-faceted: for example, an official commitment to a policy reform is important, but so is a leader's growth in her ability to stand up to authority. Since FBCOs are multi-issue and aim to build an organization over decades, organizers not only view "wins" as valuable in themselves, but also as tools to train leaders over the long haul. One leader explained, "First we evaluate how everybody's feeling—and you break the whole thing down: how did the introduction go,

how did the first speaker do, how did the second speaker do, you know, evaluate all the parts. The facility, the agenda— that's standard to do after an action.” One-to-one meetings with leaders are also occasions for coaching and training. Before actions with officials, the “action team” usually rehearses with the organizer, practicing how to keep control of the agenda and handle different possible responses from authorities. PACT holds a planning meeting before each individual church organizing committee meeting. One member commented, “if you're trying to develop leaders who've never done this before, that's a perfect way of doing it. It's like a mini training.”

The single most important training event is national “week-long” or “five-day” training, which is held about four times per year in different parts of the country. All active members are strongly urged to attend. There participants learn the essential concepts, norms, and practices of the method: how “power,” “self-interest,” and “values” are defined and linked together; the basis of organizing in relationships; how to conduct the all-important one-to-one interview. The PICO Network has a sheet of PICO Principles (many of which originated in the IAF), such as “The power is in the relationship” and “When in doubt, do a one-to-one [interview].” Trainers explain these and back home, organizers reinforce them at opportune moments. PICO-affiliate members speak of “the integrity of the process.” Rosemary, the religiously conservative teacher and PACT member, commented that the trainers “were all really good, and . . . I learned about the history of organizing . . . Definitely a strength of PACT is the process. They have processes and also their principles.” When asked to explain, she added,

Their action process. Their one-to-one process . . . the fact that a good process is maintained; where people go out and do one-to-ones, they report their one-to-ones, and issues surface. If you maintain the integrity of the process it just makes everything move forward. Like a very, very slow steamroller. Debbie, another middle-class female PACT member, credited training for the fact that many people have noticed that over the years that I have changed. They don't know what it is. I was a little bit on the shy side, you know, and I'm still not overly vocal, but If an issue comes up and I feel strongly about it, I don't hide any more and I just feel stronger. But I know I've changed a lot, and I think a lot of it's because of the training that I've got.

Similarly, a middle-class MCU leader said,

You know, training has been a key to this. We go to advanced leadership training. The training I've received has been invaluable and affected me the most on a personal level. It's made tremendous differences in my life and I'm just really into it.

Other MCU leaders reported that they learned about “power analysis,” “negotiation,” “how government works,” “about how my own church hierarchy works,” “how to sit and talk to people,” “how to present myself in public,” and “about elections and the local factions” that “try to control the town.”

Above, Maureen, the teacher and PACT leader, described the “PACT process” that members internalized through training:

Maureen: There was a training at every meeting. You go to one event, one meeting after another. You learn the agenda, you memorize it, right? I mean, I can just write it down, right? Like a lesson plan.

Interviewer: Does it ever get boring?

Maureen: I love it. I think it's the only way every meeting should be run. I get very frustrated, I can't stand going to a meeting at work. There's never an agenda, there's never a time frame. People just go to a meeting and think things are going to happen.

Interviewer: But—aside from having an agenda and a time limit, do you ever wish the content or the structure could be varied at all?

Maureen: (shakes head no)

Interviewer: How come?

Maureen: ‘Cause it works.

The fact that meetings are highly organized, usually limited to an hour, and begin and end on time appeals to participants from all class backgrounds: one thing they share is limited time. One middle-class MCU member was won over when “they called me . . . and said would you like to come to the meeting, and I really did not want to go to more meetings. But I was intrigued because they kept the first [meeting] to an hour. I was so impressed with that and their organization.”

Loretta, the retired data entry worker from PACT, has learned to value the same organizing practices as Maureen, the teacher:

Interviewer: Within the church how do you get the word out?

Loretta: Through our bulletins and word of mouth. You do one-to-ones with a lot of different people and tell them . . . we need to get so many people there because this is very important. And they know that if we say the meeting is going to be until 8:30 that it usually is 8:30 and we are believable. In our church they should have a meeting with the PACT people on how to run a meeting. You don't need to sit there and chew the thing to death. You have this amount of time, that's it, you do your homework ahead of time and get it done.

Lupe, the Mexican immigrant who spoke no English, explained the PACT process:

First you talk to people on one-to-one basis from home to home. and when I talk to them a lot of problems come out and then we take one, whatever has the highest priority . . . as they say in PACT, you can slice the bread in many pieces, but we have to pick one! Once we solve that problem then we go to the next one, and everything is by priority.

With a translator, she has chaired meetings, spoken in public, negotiated with the San Jose mayor, and planned strategy, but the one-to-ones are “mas importante” to learn about the needs of the people.

Rosemary, the religiously conservative teacher and PACT member, noted that the cross-class membership base is

one of the things that I really like about PACT. And I respect other people that obviously don't have as much education. Some of them don't even work. Some of them are unemployed more than they are employed, and yet they still want to do this kind of work . . . Being in this organization allows the playing field to be level. I really think that's really a great thing. And for some people who don't have a lot of education, it just gives them so much self-confidence, because they're taught how to be a leader.

Rosemary appears to exhibit a mixture of condescension and respect. Her condescension lies in the assumption that formal education is required for assertiveness. However, her respect is genuine:

I have respect for them. I can see that even though they're people that don't have a lot of money, don't live in really good circumstances, they really have a heart for doing this kind of work and want justice. If you all have a common goal it doesn't matter what station in life you're in. And it kind of just puts everybody on a level playing field, and so I really respect people who are willing to do that.

Loretta, the retired data entry clerk, said “Instead of just saying, “No that's too bad, you can't fight City Hall”—well, you can too.” The words of middle-class Debbie, also a PACT member are strikingly similar.

When explaining what she learned from her FBCO, Debbie, said,

“Well, that organizing—can make changes. “You can't beat City Hall”—I don't believe that any more.”



## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Herbert Gans, *Middle American Individualism* (New York: The Free Press, 1988), 111.

<sup>2</sup> Mark R. Warren and Richard L. Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field* (Jericho, NY: Interfaith Funders, 2001). At this writing, a new survey of FBCOs conducted for Interfaith Funders is in process, designed to update the findings of Warren and Wood 2001. Personal communication

<sup>3</sup> This article draws on research conducted from 1997-2007, including a year of fieldwork in 1997-1998.

<sup>4</sup> Dean Baker, *The United States since 1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Douglas Massey *Categorically Unequal* (New York: Russell Sage, 2008); Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Larry M. Bartels, *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the New Gilded Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> In 1970 affluent Americans lived in neighborhoods that were 39% affluent; in 1990, their neighborhoods were 52% affluent. Affluence is defined here as family incomes at least four times the poverty level. Massey, *Categorically Unequal*.

<sup>6</sup> Massey, *Categorically Unequal*. The legally disenfranchised poor include many low-income immigrants, prisoners, and ex-felons. In this article I join the categories “poor” and “working-class.” The term “working-class” includes widely varying groups, from well-paid unionized construction workers to minimum-wage fast food workers. However, Michael Zweig points out that “poverty happens to the working class because unemployment and low-wage jobs happen to the working class,” and “more than half the working class experiences poverty in a ten-year period.” *The Working Class Majority* (Ithaca: ILR/Cornell University Press, 2000), 86-87.

<sup>7</sup> Union Members Summary, Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 21, 2011, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm> accessed May 24, 2011.

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<sup>8</sup> Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Table H-2. Share of Aggregate Income Received by Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent of Households, All Races: 1967 to 2009, U.S. Census. Accessed on June 10, 2011 at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/data/historical/inequality/index.html>.

<sup>10</sup> Sidney Verba, Kay L. Schlozman, and Henry Brady, *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 387.

<sup>11</sup> Table 227. Educational Attainment by Selected Characteristics: 2009, U.S. Census Bureau. Accessed on June 10, 2011 at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/socdemo/education/>.

<sup>12</sup> For example, see Fred Rose, *Coalitions Across the Class Divide: Lessons from the Labor, Peace, and Environmental Movements* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999); also Croteau, *Class Divide*.

<sup>13</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984): 466-484.

<sup>14</sup> Michele Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class and Immigration* (New York and Cambridge, MA: Russell Sage Foundation and Harvard University Press, 2000); David Halle, *America's Working Man: Work, Home and Politics Among Blue-Collar Property Owners* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>16</sup> Parenting norms have changed in the past half century; many middle-class adults can recall childhoods with far more freedom to play on their own, greater discipline, and less entitlement than middle class children have today.

<sup>17</sup> Jean Anyon, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work," *Journal of Education* 162 (Fall 1980).

<sup>18</sup> Ray C. Rist, "Student Social Class and Teacher Expectations: The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy in Ghetto Education," *Harvard Educational Review* 70, 2000 (1970).

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<sup>19</sup> Andrew Levison, “Who Lost the Working Class?” *The Nation* 272 (2001): 26, citing Halle, *America’s Working Man*; also see Croteau, *Class Divide*.

<sup>20</sup> Lamont, *Dignity*, 17-55.

<sup>21</sup> Levison, “Who Lost the Working Class?”

<sup>22</sup> Lamont, *Dignity*, 46-50.

<sup>23</sup> John Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness: Quiescence and Rebellion in an Appalachian Valley* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982); Croteau, *Class Divide*, 73; Nina Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 265.

<sup>24</sup> Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*, 154.

<sup>25</sup> Eliasoph in William Gamson, *Talking Politics* (England and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 21.

<sup>26</sup> Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>27</sup> The Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) has six regional clusters totaling over 60 FBCO groups. The PICO National Network and the Gamaliel Foundation each have over 50 affiliates. The DART (Direct Action, Research, and Training) Network has 20-30 affiliates, and there are some smaller networks and independent organizations. The IAF, PICO, and Gamaliel have begun to organize internationally. Many local affiliates are united in statewide organizations.

<sup>28</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971), 184-196.

<sup>29</sup> To date, surveys by Hart and Warren and Wood (2001) have been conducted; see Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001)..

<sup>30</sup> Warren and Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing*.

<sup>31</sup> Note: I have revised Warren and Wood’s Table 4 so that racial/ethnic composition is listed in order from largest to smallest. The rest of their Table 4 lists member institutions by region and they vary accordingly. For example, in the southwest 54% of congregations were Catholic, and 40% of member institutions were

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predominantly Hispanic, and 20% predominantly immigrant. In FBCOs in the southeast, only 15% of member congregations were Catholic and 50% of member institutions were predominantly African-American. See Warren and Wood 2001 for a full regional breakdown..

<sup>32</sup>See Swartz 2008; Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action : Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Warren, *Dry Bones*; William Julius Wilson, *The Bridge Over the Racial Divide: Rising Inequality and Coalition Politics* (Berkeley and New York: University of California Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> “New social movement” participants have high educational status, experienced economic security in their formative years, have relative economic security, and work in personal-service occupations; see Claus Offe, “New Social Movements : Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics,” *Social Research* 52 (1985):833; Croteau, *Class Divide*, 31; Dieter Rucht, “Themes, Logics, and Arenas of Social Movements: A Structural Approach,” *International Social Movement Research*, 1 (1988):305-328; Hanspeter Kriesi, Ruud Koopmans, Jan Willem Duyvendak, and Marco G. Giugni, *New Social Movements in Western Europe* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995.)

<sup>34</sup> For example, see Paul Lichterman, “Piecing Together Multicultural Community: Cultural Differences in Community Building Among Grass-Roots Environmentalists,” *Social Problems* 42(1995):513-53.

<sup>35</sup> Croteau, *Class Divide*; Eliasoph, *Avoiding Politics*; Rose, *Coalitions Across the Class Divide*.

<sup>36</sup> Data are from Edward N. Wolff, Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze - An Update to 2007. *Working Paper No. 589*. (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY: The Levy Economics Institute of Bard College, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Croteau, *Class Divide*, 183.

<sup>38</sup> Peter B. Levy, *The New Left and Labor in the 1960s* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 1, 7-21.

<sup>39</sup> The quotations in this section are from Croteau, *Class Divide*, 81, 83, 84, 86, and 89.

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<sup>40</sup> “The PICO Community Organizing Model,” from “About PICO,” PICO National Network website, accessed June 12, 2011 at <http://www.piconetwork.org/about?id=0002>.

<sup>41</sup> <http://www.piconetwork.org/about>, accessed June 12, 2011.

<sup>42</sup> Letter, 1991, author’s possession.

<sup>43</sup> Individual and organizational names have been changed to protect anonymity.

<sup>44</sup> See Swarts 2008.

<sup>45</sup> Accessed June 12, 2011 at <http://www.gamaliel.org/AboutUs/Mission.aspx>.

<sup>46</sup> University of Denver Center for Community Engagement and Service Learning, *Community Organizing Handbook 2009-2010*, accessed May 26, 2011 at [http://www.du.edu/ccesl/docs/CO\\_Handbook\\_2009\\_Pri.pdf](http://www.du.edu/ccesl/docs/CO_Handbook_2009_Pri.pdf), 9.

<sup>47</sup> Swarts 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Warren and Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing*.

<sup>49</sup> Systematic national data is available from surveys by Warren and Wood, *Faith-Based Community Organizing*; a 2011 follow-up survey is in process.