RACE, RELIGION AND COMMUNITY ACTIVISM:
DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES AND INSTITUTIONS
TO ADDRESS STRUCTURES OF RACISM

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1. INTRODUCTION

Churches provide an essential foundation for the revitalization of low income communities of color.\textsuperscript{1} But their role is not well understood, or studied. Most scholars and policy makers operate in a secularized world where very real images of white evangelical churches pressing conservative social agendas, or African American and other churches condemning homosexuality, have made them deeply suspicious of a larger public role for religion in America. Yet churches have some essential, and unique, contributions to make to community revitalization. They are the repositories of the cultural traditions and community care networks that have helped people suffering from poverty and racism survive, and, at times, to challenge the system that oppresses them. Currently, churches underpin many of the most important community revitalization efforts, including community development corporations, systems of social service provision, and, particularly in the black community, networks of political representation.

While these efforts have made important contributions to community revitalization, most of these initiatives have proven quite ineffective in generating the power sufficient to confront the structural causes of poverty and racial inequality. The processes that generate poverty, social isolation and political exclusion originate in the larger institutions of American society. The ability to transform these institutions will require the kind of organized power to which churches are essential contributors, but cannot be expected to generate on their own. Meeting this essentially political requirement involves organizing an independent base within communities of color through strategies that engage community residents, develop indigenous leadership, and build community-based institutions that are accountable to the wider community. At the same time, these strategies must work to overcome isolation by forging links to broader institutions, so that poor communities can demand the resources and services needed as well as work to transform the processes that reproduce racism and exclusion.
If we understand racism to be a structural feature of American society, then we need to address institutional transformation. Such transformation requires the power to confront vested interests, even if we can argue that overcoming poverty and racism are in the larger interests of all Americans. But institutions in which low income people can participate broadly, lead and leverage into the mainstream are sorely lacking, especially with the decline of the community ties of political parties (Wattenberg 1990; Weir and Ganz 1997). To the extent parties, or unions, ever represented poor communities of color very well, they are in crisis today.

The broad array of community development and service initiatives sponsored by churches play an important role in building community institutions, in developing human and social capital. While some emphasize community action, few are broadly participatory or seek to build an independent base of power from which to intervene with dominant institutions (Stoecker 1996). Political action in this broader movement, to the extent it occurs, trades support for political candidates in exchange for funding or service provision. Black pastors play a particularly central role in this system. While these resources are often critical to community survival and the success of individual development projects, the process hardly serves to challenge or transform dominant institutions.

One section of this broader movement, however, has intentionally sought to build a new kind of community institution that is broadly participatory and politically powerful. Faith based community organizing networks build local affiliates that engage ministerial and lay leaders from congregations, but are independent from any one church. These new institutions are nonpartisan, but fundamentally political entities, that train indigenous leaders in community mobilization, policy development, and complicated processes of confrontation and collaboration with dominant institutions. Religious leaders bring important cultural traditions and social organization to these efforts, while professional
organizers from the national networks provide training and broader connections to the local affiliates.

The first part of this paper will provide a very brief sketch of the orientation of American churches to issues of race and poverty. The second part will explore, again fairly briefly, the broad array of revitalization efforts that churches sponsor, focusing mainly on the Black Church. The third part, constituting the bulk of this paper, presents a close analysis of the faith based community organizing movement. I end with a discussion of future directions for research and action.

II. INDEPENDENT EFFORTS OF THE BLACK CHURCH

The central argument of this section of the paper is that the Black Church contains the deepest understandings of the structural causes of racism among religious communities, and a commitment to speak out and act to combat racism. It provides a critical resource for a variety of community-based revitalization efforts. But, the institutional forms it has developed, important as they are, are inadequate to address the very structural causes of racism the Black Church condemns.

There is now a large body of scholarship that documents the central role that the Black Church has played in the African American community. Because of segregation and systematic exclusion from mainstream institutions, the Black Church emerged as the center of social, political and (to some extent) economic life for African Americans. While churches provide a mainstay of American social life in general, the Black Church had a profoundly more extensive and central role in the African American community, a legacy that continues to this day (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). While African Americans in our urban centers have become more geographically dispersed and differentiated by class, the church continues to be a place where blacks come together and share their cultural and religious traditions. Moreover, because it was one of the few institutions owned and
controlled by blacks -- and therefore independent from dominant white institutions -- the Black Church was at the forefront of the civil rights movement and other struggles against racism (Morris 1984; Harris 1994).

Theologically, scholars have shown how the themes of deliverance and freedom lie at the heart of Black Christian spirituality (Cone 1969; West 1982). Freedom, in this view, meant deliverance both into God’s kingdom as well as from slavery and racial oppression in the real world. The African American world view relies deeply upon its religious theology, and its practice draws heavily from the church’s cultural styles of worship, such as call and response (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Patillo-McCoy forthcoming). The Black Church, then, is fundamentally about sustaining the African American community and working for its liberation.

The understandings of the Black Church and its approach to issues of racism have not been monolithic, nor static through history. But it has contained three critical elements that have persisted. First, racism is seen as endemic to mainstream society. It is the responsibility of white society to change, but the responsibility of the Black Church to challenge racism in order to promote change. Second, change will occur as well through efforts of the black community to improve itself. Community self-help is a moral endeavor, but takes place through pursuing education, economic development and social organization. Finally, the Black Church has a fundamental responsibility to evangelism and the moral uplift of individuals. But this saving of souls comes through the bonds of community represented by congregational life.

Although personal salvation and moral uplift have always been at the heart of the Black Church’s mission, these tasks have never been conceived as the primary method to overcome poverty or racism. Unlike mainstream American institutions which have, in different historical periods like the present, blamed the poor for their own problems and placed the responsibility for combating
poverty upon the individual, the Black Church has always placed primary emphasis on the responsibility of societal institutions. Moral uplift occurs as part of a collective endeavor to find freedom in this world and the next.

Although the Black Church has consistently spoken out against the evil of racism, its willingness to act to confront racial oppression has varied amongst its constituent parts and historically. In order to engage black congregations and their pastors in the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. had to work to refocus religious traditions to direct them towards active engagement in the struggle for racial justice and equality (Morris 1984). Some ministers declined to participate because they thought the church should concentrate on personal salvation, not political action, or because they were hesitant to take the risk of disrupting power relations. But a large number of ministers did play central roles in local civil rights movement organizations and a commitment to an action orientation developed among a new generation of African American ministers.

The theological and social understanding of racism that developed historically in the Black Church and were shaped by the civil rights movement provide a rich potential resource for current community revitalization efforts. While some critics continue to emphasize the “other-worldly” orientation of black religion (Baer 1988), there is overwhelming evidence that the Black Church has been, and continues to be supportive of broader civic and political activity (Harris 1994). In a national survey conducted of 2,150 black congregations, Lincoln and Mamizy (1990) found that over ninety percent of black clergy approved of taking part in protest marches on civil rights issues and of speaking out on political and social matters. There is some evidence that even the most evangelical black churches can be engaged in community action (Warren forthcoming; Franklin 1996).
With their deep theological understanding of racism, the Black Church has provided an important resource to the community revitalization movement that has emerged in the last two decades. Black religion provides many resources critical to these efforts. It motivates people to act for the care of their fellow brethren and for collective improvement. It can tap common cultural understandings for collective action. As one of the few institutions left in the inner city, churches offer meeting places and independently controlled funds. They also offer established and legitimate leadership in the role of the pastor, as well as supporters already organized around the church. Finally, the church can play a particularly important role in instilling the hope and vision necessary to work to overcome tremendous obstacles.

With these resources and commitments, black congregations have played critical roles in many of the community development corporations (CDCs) and other economic development agencies that have emerged out of the inner city. The community self-help tradition of the Black Church can be implemented directly to promote housing and economic development (Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). These efforts are widespread and include such well-known cases as the Abyssinian Development Corporation, centered around Rev. Calvin Butts and the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem (Clemetson and Coates, 1992), and REACH, Inc., housed in the Twelfth Street Missionary Baptist Church in Detroit (Thomas and Blake 1996). There are now well over 2,000 CDCs and they build much of the affordable housing in this country (Vidal 1996). Through collaboration with foundations, financial institutions, and political officials, CDCs have brought in public and private funds to build affordable housing and promote economic development. Beyond housing, CDCs and the variety of other church-based community efforts work to involve residents in bettering their neighborhoods and healing the tears in their social fabric (Clemetson and Coates, 1992).
Holistic in orientation, and drawing upon and extending church-based resources, CDC and related efforts have made important gains in combating crime and drug use, involving youth in constructive group activity, cleaning up neighborhoods, and fostering community pride and spirit (Committee for Economic Development, 1995). CDCs train some leaders from their communities, particularly in financial and project development skills.

However, CDCs, as important as they are to community improvement, have not been able to confront the broader structures that undermine the inner city. Some have tried to keep an emphasis on community organizing and activism, like the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative in Boston (Medoff and Sklar 1994). Because they are reliant on outside funding that is cautious to support possible confrontational organizing, and as CDCs become focused on developing and later administering housing programs, few have been able to sustain broad popular participation (Vidal 1992). CDC efforts become dominated by a few staff or key leaders including the original Black pastors. Relying solely on building consensus with financial institutions and public officials, few develop an independent base of power capable of demanding broader change when resistance occurs (Stoecker 1997). Without an adequate strategy for developing political power, the gains of the community development movement have remained localized and limited.³

Black pastors continue to play a role in speaking out against racism, and the church often serves as a center for protest efforts as well. Membership in black congregations has an important effect on increasing African American civic and political participation through the training in skills
received in the church (Verba et al 1996). But beyond the church itself, few participatory institutions are sustained. The dominant mode of political intervention takes place through the endorsement of candidates by the pastor. Church members are mobilized in limited ways for particular elections. As important as these endorsements are for electing African American candidates to office, and for delivering important resources and services to the inner city, they have been inadequate to challenge the more systemic causes of racism. Overall, the system has been characterized as one of demobilization (Reed 1995).

III. FAITH BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Faith-based community organizing has been rapidly emerging as one of the most important initiatives within the broader community revitalization movement discussed above. Thousands of congregations across the country have engaged their members in collaborative efforts to improve schools, build affordable housing, provide job training, improve safety and bring public resources into their neighborhoods to provide a range of services from parks and libraries to health clinics and after-school programs. Four major networks structure this movement, by providing professional organizers and training services to about 120 local affiliates. These affiliates incorporate about 2,000 religious congregations reaching about 1.5 million families predominantly in poor and low-income communities. The number of local affiliates has been growing rapidly, and the movement is starting to receive broader public and scholarly attention.

Faith-based efforts link community-building with political action, and by doing so, many have become quite powerful and comprehensive in their revitalization efforts. For example, the premier faith-based organization, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS), an IAF affiliate
founded in 1973, encompasses 27 Catholic parishes in Mexican-American communities in San Antonio. Led primarily by low-income Hispanic women, the organization has commanded over one billion dollars in resources for its programs to improve streets and drainage, build parks, health clinics and a community college, and develop affordable housing. In cooperation with a multiracial sister organization (Metro Alliance), the organization developed an innovative job training program, Project QUEST, offering long-term training for jobs paying a “family wage.” It is engaged in a multifaceted program to improve education, including after-school programs, a compact guaranteeing scholarships and job opportunities to high school students, and institutional reform of public schools. The organization is run by a large and sophisticated corps of volunteer community leaders along with several paid professional organizers from the IAF, engages several hundred residents at any one time in developing and campaigning for community initiatives, and can bring over 3,000 supporters to its largest public actions. Although COPS is nonpartisan, it registers and mobilizes voters, commanding the support (and often collaboration) of powerful public officials and business leaders at the local and state level for its initiatives.

Faith-based organizing has begun to network its deeply rooted local affiliates and operate at the state level as well. The IAF operates at the state level in Texas, California and Maryland, with a metro New York City organization and nascent state networks in Arizona and Tennessee as well. The Texas IAF worked to pass health care for indigents, bring water and sewer services to the colonias, America’s equivalent of shanty-towns on the Mexican border, and more recently established an alliance with the state department of education for community-based reform efforts in over 100 schools in its local communities. The PICO network also operates at the state level in California, working to establish school to work transition programs. Even when the networks don’t operate at the state level, they seek to develop and coordinate regional strategies among local affiliates.

Faith-based community organizing has the potential to make several critical contributions to
the revitalization of communities of color. First, faith-based efforts reach deeply into the social networks of communities to bring large numbers of indigenous leaders, especially women, into political action. Second, the community organizing networks place primary emphasis on the training of these leaders so that they develop the capacity to create their own solutions to community problems, and command the necessary public resources and institutional reforms to implement them. Third, the networks build local institutions committed not to any particular issue, but to community building and empowerment broadly conceived. These institutions, rooted in religious faith as much as in practical self-interest, can sustain citizen participation and hold political (and, to a lesser extent, economic) authorities accountable to an organized community. Fourth, most of these local affiliates are metropolitan-wide, bringing community leaders together across racial lines to support each other’s initiatives and to develop collaborative efforts. In sum, while most community revitalization efforts are project or service oriented, and weakly participatory, faith-based community organizing offers a model for a new kind of mediating institution that creates an active and empowered citizenry.

Faith-based community organizing represents a collaborative effort between faith communities and professional community organizers. The faith communities provide institutional access to the social capital of neighborhoods, pre-existing networks of “leaders and followers” with a degree of trust and legitimate authority. Faith communities also provide systems of belief that can motivate people to participate in action for community improvement and that can provide a value framework to ground political action. For their part, professional organizers offer training to ministers and lay leaders in the skills necessary to build community and act effectively. Moreover, through continual recruitment, organizers broaden participation and help ensure that community organizations do not become dominated by a few leaders. Finally, professional organizers and their networks connect community leaders to outside institutions and actors which helps broaden the perspective of those leaders and their organizations.
In this paper I draw upon the recent research being conducted on faith-based efforts, including my own. Unfortunately, this research base is quite limited and has not systematically collected the kinds of data necessary for a thorough evaluation of the faith-based movement. Most of the research conducted is case study oriented, and most of it focuses on the oldest and largest network, the IAF. Only the study by Jeannie Appleman (1996) for the Discount Foundation collects data from several networks: the IAF, PICO and Gamaliel. I have tried to consider all of the available evidence to generalize with a reasonable degree of confidence about faith-based organizing. But the arguments and claims made below should be considered provisional, subject to further research.\(^5\)

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Faith-based community organizing traces its roots to the efforts of Saul Alinsky to build militant organizations in poor communities – a complex heritage from the standpoint of race. Alinsky, considered the “father” of community organizing in America, formed his first community organization in Chicago’s southwest side in 1939.\(^6\) The Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) worked to support the union organizing drives of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the nearby stockyards as well as to address the community needs of the impoverished workers where they lived. The Back of the Yards neighborhood consisted of a diverse array of white ethnic immigrants, largely Catholic. Alinsky’s council incorporated churches, but also small businesses and union leaders. Using militant tactics – like sit-downs and boycotts – drawn from the CIO repertoire, the BYNC won many concessions from city hall to improve local services. Based upon the success of BYNC, Alinsky moved on (leaving no professional organizer in place) and began launching other organizing projects around the country. With encouragement from the Catholic Church, he founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) in 1940, to raise money for these efforts. Meanwhile, a small group of leaders took long-term control of the BYNC and were co-opted by the
Chicago political machine. The BYNC degenerated into a reactionary organization by the mid-fifties when it worked to stop racial integration of its neighborhood, and in 1968 endorsed George Wallace for President.

Alinsky himself denounced these developments. Moreover, he was interested in using his organizing strategy to empower Black communities as well. In 1960 a coalition of local Black Protestant ministers asked Alinsky to set up a community organization in Woodlawn, near the University of Chicago. Between 1950 and 1960 Woodlawn had experienced rapid racial turn-over, from 80% white to 80% Black. The Woodlawn Organization (TWO) made use of picketing and boycotts to stop exploitative practices of local landlords and merchants. It also organized to stop plans by the city and the university for urban renewal in Woodlawn. Drawing inspiration from the Freedom Rides for voter registration in the South, TWO undertook a massive voter registration drive to force the city to give TWO representation on a school board and an antipoverty agency. TWO’s victories were widely publicized, launching Alinsky onto the lecture circuit and generating many requests from local activists.

In the sixties, many urban Black Power activists became interested in Alinsky’s methods because they promised to deliver effective political power to excluded communities. In Rochester, New York, an inter-racial group of clergy invited Alinsky to organize in the Black community. The Reverend Franklyn D.R. Florence, a dynamic Black minister fresh from civil rights organizing in the South, became president of the new organization, FIGHT (Freedom, Integration, God, Honor, Today). FIGHT won a pledge from Kodak for a job recruitment and training program for Blacks. When the company reneged on this promise, Alinsky launched a well publicized national campaign that succeeded in gaining control of stock proxies to pressure Kodak to fulfill its pledge.

As the Black Power and civil rights movements developed in the late sixties and seventies, however, they became divorced from Alinskyite community organizing. Activists influenced by the
ideological currents of nationalism and Marxism saw Alinsky as too pragmatic and conservative. The
NAACP focused on legal strategies, de-emphasizing the kinds of grass-roots organizing Alinsky
promoted. Meanwhile, as many Black activists from community action programs turned their
attention to the election of Blacks to office, Alinsky again seemed irrelevant. Alinsky cared little about
these elections, instead seeking to build institutions that could hold elected officials accountable,
whatever their color.

Alinsky died in 1972, leaving a legacy that inspired important efforts at popular organizing
among constituencies ranging from farm workers to welfare mothers. Cesar Chavez, who trained
under Alinsky’s protégé Fred Ross in California’s Community Service Organization, used community
organizing techniques in the UFW. George Ross followed Alinsky’s methods in forming the Welfare
Rights Organization, which Wade Rathke later developed into ACORN. ACORN is still active today in
organizing in low-income communities, although it is not faith-based. Finally, inspired by Alinsky’s
last major initiative to build a broad metropolitan and multi-class organization to address rising
concerns about pollution in Chicago, many activists formed Citizen Action Programs around the
country. These groups began to emphasize consumer issues, and in the eighties worked to form issue
coalitions and to elect officials, often at the state level (one of the most successful efforts developed
into LEAP in Connecticut).

Alinsky left a rich organizing legacy, but a weak institution. At the time of Alinsky’s death,
the IAF itself had only two professional organizers and one secretary on staff. Ed Chambers took
over the IAF and began to build the organization. He secured financing for the IAF by negotiating
extended contracts with community organizations to provide organizer and training services. He
systematized the training of organizers and promoted the professionalization of the occupation by
upgrading pay. At the same time, Ernesto Cortes, Jr., returned home to San Antonio from IAF
training to organize Communities Organized for Public Services (COPS) in the Mexican-American
south and west sides of the city.

The founding of COPS in 1973 marks the beginning of faith-based community organizing in the U.S. Through Cortes’ work in COPS, and later through the IAF’s growing efforts under Chambers, IAF organizers and leaders substantially reworked Alinsky’s approach. Alinsky wanted to mobilize the existing organizations within a community, so he formed affiliates that were coalitions of churches (and sometimes other organizations), led by representatives of these churches – usually the ministers and (male) presidents of church councils. Cortes wanted to unleash the broader leadership capacities of communities which could be accessed through churches. So Cortes reached beyond the institutional leaders of the Catholic parishes that constituted the membership of COPS to involve (mostly female) lay leaders. These leaders were rooted in their parishes, and in the social networks of families and friends that spread out from parishes into the neighborhoods, but they would not be formal representatives. They could develop a sense of identity and capacity for action in the interests of COPS as a whole.

Although Alinsky worked with religious leaders as a pragmatic strategy, he was not particularly interested in religion. But when Chambers established contracts with local affiliates for on-going organizer services, IAF organizers and religious leaders entered a long-term collaboration. Through this process, Cortes, Chambers and other IAF organizers became much more interested in the content of religious ideas and their ability to motivate people to participate. Cortes began a life-long study of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, and Chambers would write “Organizing for Family and Congregation” in 1978. Chambers opened the training guide with a Biblical quote, “God did not give us a spirit of timidity but a spirit of power and love and self-control” (II Timothy 1:7). At this point, community organizing became faith-based (not just institutionally based), as the IAF engaged religious beliefs and religious concern for the community to provide a value basis for political action.
These new developments within the IAF, coupled with COPS’ success in empowering Mexican-Americans, made the IAF appealing again to some African-American ministers. These ministers felt that the emphasis on electing Black officials, on identity politics, and on legal campaigns had failed to stem the rapid decline of their communities. The IAF formed large and successful organizations in East Brooklyn and in Baltimore in the late seventies and early eighties with the support of some prominent African-American ministers.

Meanwhile, several other community organizing networks began to emerge in the eighties, all drawing upon the IAF’s emerging faith-based approach. The Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), based in Oakland, began to adopt a faith-based approach in 1984 when it changed from a neighborhood-based to a congregation-based network. The Gamaliel Foundation was established in the Midwest in 1996. The Direct Action and Research and Training Center emerged in Florida.

The IAF grew to become the largest network with the broadest geographical reach, establishing 59 staffed affiliates in 53 cities in 21 states by 1996. PICO expanded beyond the west coast so that it has 29 affiliates in 60 cities located in 10 states. The Gamaliel Foundation has 26 staffed affiliates (and 10 unstaffed), located in 11 states in the Midwest. DART developed affiliates in Florida, Michigan, Ohio and Kentucky. In 1996, the IAF had 105 paid organizers on staff, PICO had 48 and Gamaliel had 36. Faith-based community organizing is currently growing rapidly, with each network sponsoring a number of organizing committees for new affiliates.9

CATHOLIC UNDERSTANDINGS OF POVERTY AND RACISM

Although the faith based community organizing movement is now quite multi-racial, its roots lie in the Catholic tradition. Consequently, it is important to understand American Catholic traditions in
regards to issues of race and poverty. That tradition finds its roots in the social teaching of the Catholic Church that began with Pope Leo XIII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. In that papal encyclical, Pope Leo identified the cause of poverty in the operation of the economic system, defended the rights of workers to organize in the face of powerful economic and political institutions, and called for responsible action by the powerful (Dorr 1983). As Catholic social thought developed, it came to reflect a deep appreciation for the importance of mediating institutions to structure community life and engagement with the broader society. The poor were to be evangelized and morally uplifted. But, as human beings, they had a fundamental integrity that was to be defended. In particular, the poor, and all human beings for that matter, could only develop fully as human beings within the context of the social institutions of the Church. In the context of the United States, the Catholic Church was the church of immigrants, initially poor and facing a significant degree of prejudice and discrimination. The Church implemented its social teachings quite successfully with impoverished Catholic immigrants. Its institutions structured their lives, strove to improve their communities, and worked to integrate them within the broader society (O’Brien 1996).

While the Church combated poverty and anti-immigrant prejudice, race was another matter. As white Catholic ethnics improved their status, the sanctity of the parish and its social life at the heart of Catholic social thought was used by some to oppose demands for integration of neighborhoods. In fact, white ethnics in Northern cities often used their parish based social networks and political influence to oppose efforts by African Americans to integrate neighborhoods in the fifties and sixties (McGreevy 1996).

Meanwhile, African-American and other Catholics fought against the racism of white Catholics. Vatican II reforms in the early sixties reinvigorated the Church’s commitment to social action and justice, while the Civil Rights Movement inspired American Catholic leaders to take a stand against racism. By the seventies, white Catholics had largely left disputed urban neighborhoods, and
anti-racist forces had gained the upper hand in the Church’s hierarchy. In 1979 the American Catholic Bishops issued “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” a pastoral letter on racism. The fact that this letter appears to be the Church’s best kept secret speaks to its limited effect on practice. Nevertheless, the letter proclaims in its opening sentence “racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our church” (National Conference of Catholic Bishops 1979, p. 1). The letter goes on to discuss in detail the structures of racism and economic inequality that must be overcome in American society, and calls for Catholics to support community institutions among ethnic minorities and to find ways to work across racial lines.

Although many white Catholics may not accept these teachings, Catholic social thought now provides an important theological resource for Catholics interested in working for community revitalization. Catholic social thought and an anti-racist perspective undergird the U.S. Catholic Bishop’s social action funding agency, the Campaign for Human Development, which has been arguably the single largest funder of empowerment organizing in communities of color, distributing $190 million by 1994 (McCarthy and Castelli 1994). Meanwhile, committed local priests have tapped these church traditions to motivate their own participation in community revitalization efforts. Much of this effort has been among Hispanic Catholics. But there two million Black Catholics in the U.S. And, because of the Church’s parish structure, it retains church institutions within the inner city even after white ethnics have “fled” to the suburbs. A white priest, Fr. William Linder, leads one of the largest and most successful community development corporations in the country, the New Community Corporation in a predominantly African American Protestant section of Newark.

CONTRIBUTIONS OF FAITH-BASED EFFORTS

Broad Participation

Faith-based community organizing has begun to receive greater attention because its
institutions are one of the few places in which large numbers of people actively participate in civic and political processes. Faith-based organizations vary in size, and each organization goes through cycles of greater and lesser activity. On average, though, each organization involves 20-30 community leaders at the equivalent of the executive committee/steering committee level. These leaders meet together monthly to decide organizational strategy and action. Most of these leaders will be involved almost daily in organizational activity. At the next level, the organizations involve about 200-300 participants in deliberative processes to develop programmatic initiatives and organize issue campaigns. These leaders are members of various action teams or “local organizing committees”, working on the restructuring of a neighborhood school, building affordable housing, developing a job training program. They hold house meetings in their churches, schools and neighborhoods, conduct research, meet with public officials and business leaders, organize large public actions. At the third level, faith-based organizations bring 1,000-3,000 community residents to large public accountability sessions. Some of these people will become more involved in particular campaigns. The majority of participants at all levels in faith-based efforts are women, mostly low-income, but with sizable contingents of men and middle class participants as well.\(^{10}\)

Few community or political campaigns can compare to this scale of participation. From time to time, an issue will galvanize a community and mobilize a high level of activity over a short time. But the issue will end (in either victory or defeat), and participation is infrequently sustained. Most issue organizations tend to be shell organizations, with very few regular participants (Walker 1991). Most community development initiatives also depend on limited numbers of community leaders (Stoecker 1996).

Faith-based community organizing engages community leaders (especially women) broadly because it intentionally and systematically reaches deeply into social networks through religious institutions. Most community mobilization attempts to recruit the (often disconnected) individual,
through posterings, media announcements, flyers. Some hire organizers who systemically knock on doors. Informal networks of neighbors come into play, but sporadically. Religious institutions provide community organizing efforts with pre-existing networks infused with faith commitments to community well-being. Meanwhile, faith-based efforts work to strengthen those networks and the connections between leaders and fellow community members. Faith-based efforts define a leader as someone with a following, and hold leaders accountable for the number of house meetings they organize and the number of people they bring to public actions. Community organizers train leaders in how to develop and deepen relationships geared towards action, building community as well as political power.

**Active Participation**

Faith-based efforts define participation as taking positive action with others to rebuild and sustain communities and families. Community leaders are engaged in all the necessary steps to accomplish this goal. They meet together and with their neighbors in one-on-one and small group meetings to identify a common bases for action. They research the issue and consider campaign strategies, paying particular attention to the power relations that shape the context for action. They meet with community stakeholders, media representatives, policy professionals, and public officials in order to develop allies and negotiate. They mobilize “followers” to large public actions where they speak in public. They educate and mobilize voters. They raise money. They organize broader community participation in their programmatic initiatives. They recruit new leaders and help to train and mentor them.

The scope of participant activity varies. But leaders appear to have the opportunity to participate in all of these activities, and to receive training in them. The 20-30 “primary” leaders at the executive committee level of local organizations do (or have done) them all. The 200-300
“secondary” leaders are in various stages of training and participation, but most have probably done many if not all of these activities. In some of the most developed efforts, leaders become quite sophisticated and leverage the power of their organizations at the state level. Many become well-educated on broad issues of American public life. The Southwest regional network of the IAF invites community leaders to the seminars with scholars and policy professionals which it holds almost monthly for its organizing staff.

The IAF names leadership development as its primary purpose. All of the faith-based networks emphasize training leaders. Most training is done locally in the context of particular campaigns. But the networks also offer extended training sessions at national or regional sites as well. The IAF offers the most extensive: ten days of training at a national center three times each year. The organizer’s primary job is recruitment and training (not, for example, program administration or directing issue campaigns). Faith-based efforts follow Alinsky’s “iron rule”: never do for others what they can do for themselves. While sometimes violated, this rule helps to empower community leaders to take responsibility and ultimate authority in their local organizations.

Compared to most political action, participation in faith-based efforts is not primarily about voting or lobbying, although faith-based efforts do lobby and do register and mobilize voters. Compared to most forms of community development, faith-based participation is not primarily about conducting a needs assessment and devising effective programmatic initiatives (or administering a program), although faith-based efforts do respond to community needs with innovative programs. Participation in faith-based efforts is primarily about building an organization through which people can find a common ground for action that will meaningfully contribute to community life and that is practically possible. As a result, most faith efforts start small – to get the proverbial street light on the corner. But as organizations develop a capacity for more complex and bigger initiatives over time, leaders can become an active and empowered citizenry.
Sustained Participation

Faith-based community organizing networks build organizations that appear to sustain participation over many years. The movement has grown rapidly so that many organizations are fairly young: in 1996 72% of PICO affiliates were less than 6 years old. Many are in the 7-15 year range (Appleman 1996). The oldest is the IAF’s San Antonio affiliate COPS, which is arguably the most powerful and active as well. The faith-based efforts spend 3-5 years organizing a new affiliate before it is formally launched. But once established, few faith-based efforts fold. Moreover, although organizations do go through cycles of activity, most appear able to sustain participation by community leaders at the levels described above.11

The institutional base in churches gives the organizations staying power through regular income from dues and a relatively stable source of participants. But it is the networks’ “relational organizing” strategy that better explains why community leaders sustain their involvement so that the organizations can pursue long-term revitalization efforts. Faith-based efforts do not conduct “issue organizing”, that is, mobilizing people around one particular issue. Certainly these efforts do pursue issue campaigns and do recruit people interested in those issues. But they also attempt to engage participants’ faith commitments to community. Moreover, they emphasize training in relationship-building, teaching people how to connect to each other to empower themselves to act. The fundamental unit of relationship-building is the individual meeting, where two leaders explore the sources of their personal, social and political commitment and seek to establish a common ground for action. Not every new recruit stays involved beyond a particular issue campaign. But a large number find organizational participation to be an important way to pursue their faith commitments, and find these relationships empowering.
Effective Power

Faith-based community organizing emphasizes building organizations that provide communities with an independent base of power. By organizing the capacities of communities to act, these organizations can then interface with public officials and economic interests, asserting community interests and holding other institutions accountable. In these relationships with outside institutions, community organizing groups combine confrontation with negotiation and collaboration. The organizations are non-partisan. They do not endorse candidates, although they do publicize the stances of candidates on the issues of the organization. Most register voters and mobilize them to vote as well. Public accountability sessions represent the main forum for demonstrating the organization’s broader community support and for demanding commitments of support for organizational initiatives from officials. Meanwhile, organizers and leaders meet with these officials to negotiate and often to collaborate on the organization’s campaign. The IAF has a reputation for being tough, but also for being flexible, pragmatic and effective.

Faith-based community organizing has demonstrated an important degree of effectiveness in three areas critical to the revitalization of communities of color: 1) increasing the distribution of resources and services to poor communities; 2) improving economic opportunities; and 3) stimulating institutional reform. Virtually all faith-based efforts work to increase resources for poor communities in order to address community needs. As noted above, COPS, has delivered over one billion dollars in resources for its programs to improve streets and drainage, build parks, health clinics and a community college, and develop affordable housing. The IAF affiliate in East Brooklyn built more than 2,200 moderately priced single family dwellings (the Nehemiah Homes), which became the model for national legislation; it has also opened two new high schools and a primary health care center. According to Ross (1996), the scale of the Nehemiah effort was large enough to impact the broader housing market. The Gamaliel affiliate in Milwaukee (MICAH) used the Community
Reinvestment Act to gain new home and small business loans for 2,400 residents (totaling $505 million) from 17 lending institutions (Appleman 1996). PICO’s New Orleans affiliate (ACT) won a new policy that funds and implements a comprehensive approach to address drugs and crime, including drug prevention and treatment, increase police personnel and performance (Appleman 1996). The IAF affiliates in the Southwest, Baltimore and elsewhere have established hundreds of after-school programs. As mentioned above, state level campaigns by the Texas IAF have led to the provision of health care to the indigent and water and sewer services to the colonias.

The stronger faith-based organizations have acted to improve the economic prospects of their communities. Three types of initiatives have proven effective. Several organizations have developed job training programs. COPS, for example, worked with local employers to identify job opportunities, gain commitments for a “living wage” and establish a program (Project QUEST) that provided long-term training for these jobs. A second approach has been to influence public authorities to increase wages. The IAF successfully lobbied the California legislature to increase the minimum wage. BUILD in Baltimore worked with the mayor and city council to pass a bill requiring city contractors to pay a “living wage”. The effort raised wages of 4,000 workers by 44%, totaling $8 million in 1995. The IAF’s Metro New York network recently got the city council to pass a living wage bill as well. Third, faith-based efforts work to improve educational opportunities and develop school to work programs. BUILD in Baltimore and other IAF affiliates have established compacts to guarantee college scholarships and job opportunities to high school students maintaining certain grade and attendance standards.

Working to improve education, however, has exposed the level of institutional failure in many poor communities. Increasing funding and new services has not proved sufficient and some of the more developed faith-based efforts have been working on more complex programs of institutional reform. The Texas IAF network developed a collaboration with the state’s department of education
which provides extra funds and waivers to over 100 local schools to promote educational innovation. Local IAF organizers and leaders organize community involvement in the school reform process. Some of these schools have experienced dramatic improvements (Shirley 1997). In New York, the IAF has been faced with more intransigent institutional failure. The network has identified 200 educational “dead zones”, poor communities lacking even one effective school. It has attempted to found schools with greater autonomy.

Multiracial collaboration

Many faith-based community organizations bring leaders from different racial communities together to work for common purposes, a rare occurrence in American social and political life. Some civic and political formations (like issue and electoral coalitions, or collaborative community development and revitalization initiatives) bring institutional representatives and a small number of activists together. The institutional structure of faith-based efforts, by contrast, bring hundreds of community leaders together at many levels, from large public actions with a thousand or more participants to issue action teams and the executive committees of organizations. While some of the older faith-based organizations are less multiracial because they were built to encompass a segregated community, virtually all new initiatives attempt to be metropolitan-wide and diverse racially. For example, the IAF’s Dallas affiliate, Dallas Area Interfaith, founded in the early nineties with 60 congregations is roughly proportioned with one third African-American, Hispanic (Mexican-American), and White participants. Many of the older affiliates like the Hispanic organization COPS now work closely with sister organizations in their area, constituting multiracial formations. The faith-based strategy is not integrationist. It respects the integrity of its member institutions, which reflect communities shaped by common racial, denominational and geographic characteristics. Leaders from member institutions (or from often racially and geographically defined clusters) can
initiate actions that respond to their interests. The IAF has a national Black caucus that meets periodically. At the same time, the local organizations are not racially defined; they articulate the need to bring diverse communities together. Faith-based efforts can thereby draw upon the resources of communities that share a common history, identity and culture. At the same time, they brings leaders from these communities together to broaden the basis of support for each community’s initiatives and to develop common campaigns as well. These collaborations are structured by membership in a metropolitan-wide organization, and by action teams that span across member institutions. Decision-making processes are generally consensual and action-based. That is, seldom are votes taken where the majority decide organizational direction. If substantial opposition occurs to a proposed course of action and consensus cannot be reached, most faith-based efforts will not proceed.

The Texas IAF’s school reform work provides an example of multiracial collaboration in faith-based efforts at its best. African-American ministers in ACT, the IAF’s affiliate in Fort Worth, Texas, initiated a campaign for parental involvement in a middle school in their community. Other Anglo and Hispanic leaders in ACT committed themselves to supporting the initiative by conducting outreach themselves in the neighborhood and by bringing supporters to public actions. Through the process, ACT leaders built trust and began to develop a broader program to address school failure in Hispanic neighborhoods as well. Meanwhile, stimulated by this campaign and by public debates about school reform, the Texas IAF brought multiracial groups of leaders from its affiliates together to develop a common perspective on educational reform. With some one hundred leaders meeting regularly for several years, the network wrote “The Texas IAF Vision for Public Schools: Communities of Learners,” which then served as the basis for establishing the Alliance School collaboration, a common, state-wide initiative pursued by IAF affiliates in over 100 schools. In general, these schools are located in minority communities. White IAF leaders are nevertheless quite involved, as teachers, school personnel, business leaders and citizens who see a common interest in
the effective education of city youth.

LIMITATIONS AND CRITICISMS

Who is left out?

Although faith-based efforts stand out in their ability to generate broad participation, particularly among low-income and working class women of color, they have not incorporated well several types of people. First, those who are not members of religious communities have limited access to participate. The networks have recognized this problem as a fundamental weakness, and have developed a number of strategies to supplement their church base by reaching more widely into communities. The IAF has involved parents and school personnel in its organizations in the Southwest through school based work. PICO establishes “local organizing committees” through which unaffiliated community residents can participate.

Second, non-Christians are poorly represented at this point. Many faith-based organizations have collaborative relationships with Jewish congregations, but almost none are members. Non-Christian Asian-Americans are seldom involved; and, to my knowledge, no Muslims. It remains to be seen how the organizing networks will address this issue.

Third, many observers have noted that the poorest and most marginalized members of inner city communities tend not to be included (Appleman 1996; Delgado n.d.). Participants, since they are drawn primarily from churches, tend to be middle-aged, employed women – although low-income and often poor. Youth, homeless people, perhaps gay people, and (to a lesser extent), people on public assistance are under represented. To some extent, of course, such residents are linked to these organizations through their relationships to participants. Some of the concerns that they share with them (like job training opportunities) are addressed that way. But they do not actively participate.
What issues are left out?

Although faith-based efforts excel in addressing many issues central to the well-being of communities of color, they tend to emphasize more “mainstream” issues rather than controversial ones. The church base of the organizations, again, shape their concerns, and the demands of a consensual process also mitigate against adopting controversial stands. For example, although participants are not unaware of problems of police brutality, they are more likely to emphasize better police protection, improving police-community relations, and even better community programs to help youth avoid crime and violence, rather than develop campaigns against police brutality. In addition, faith-based efforts shun questions of rights. They have not been at the forefront in demanding treatment for victims of AIDS. In general, they avoid divisive social issues of all sorts, from abortion to school prayer.

Are faith-based networks sectarian and too narrowly focused?

Although this paper has emphasized the commonalities among faith-based organizing networks, the networks themselves often focus on their differences and are fiercely competitive. In certain parts of the country (the northeast and Midwest generally), other community based organizations complain about the tough (some might say abrasive) style and go-it-alone strategy of the networks. Many political leaders criticize public accountability sessions because they do not have the opportunity to speak freely. Limited to yes or no answers to organizational demands, some public officials feel the organizations are trying to control access to their members. Interested community residents with a commitment to somewhat different organizing strategies complain that they must accept the whole faith-based “package.”

Organizations in faith networks do exhibit a single-minded focus on the growth and success of their own organizations – a factor that may account for some of their success in a world of
fragmented and competing demands. Faith-based organizations tend to focus on their own campaigns, forming alliances with others most often (although not exclusively) around their own initiatives. Where there is a relative vacuum of other community-based organizations (like in the Southwest), affiliates of the IAF have a fairly open field and charges of sectarianism are seldom voiced. Many observers suggest that the movement is hampered by the unwillingness of networks to cooperate (Appleman 1996, Dreier 1996).17

Faith-based strategies (like many other organizations for that matter) are quite committed to their organizing strategy. Many have proven flexible in responding to local conditions and to the interests of participants in different local areas. In fact, such flexibility is a strength of these efforts; there is no national program that all affiliates have to follow. Moreover, the networks have developed and revised their strategy over time, in response to diverse inputs. Nevertheless, because in many ways the faith-based strategy is so different from mainstream forms of participation, there is a sense in which a new recruit must embrace the whole package. Faith-based networks believe they have found the “right” way to organize, for which others need to be “trained.” Many are happy to embrace this approach; indeed, they have invited the organizers precisely because they have an effective strategy. Some, however, find this attitude arrogant.

The faith networks appear to keep the participation they promote and the power and accountability they generate primarily within their own organizations; and this may limit their broader impact. Leaders developed in the networks seldom seem to move on to take other leadership positions in civic or political life. The few who do, tend to participate in ways linked fairly directly to the work of the faith organization – like serving on the board of the Campaign for Human Development (the Catholic social action fund) or the board of a program initiated by the organizations (like San Antonio’s Project QUEST). From one standpoint, the networks may be successful in avoiding the co-optation of leaders in poor communities that has so often hampered empowerment initiatives. On
the other hand, seasoned veterans of the networks may have important leadership to offer their communities, but appear unlikely to get involved in other venues. Meanwhile, because faith-based organizations do not endorse candidates or directly involve themselves in political parties, party institutions themselves remain unreformed. Public officials become more accountable in relation to the specific work of the faith organizations, but not much beyond that.

Who “controls” the organizations?

A number of African-American activists outside of these organizations have raised the criticism that the organizations are really controlled by white professional organizers from outside of the communities of color. Historically, Alinskyite organizers tended to be white and male; so the contrast between the race (and gender) of leaders and organizers was dramatic. The IAF, for its part, insists that the primary criteria should not be the race of the organizer, and that some its best work in minority communities has been done by white organizers. Nevertheless, the IAF (and, I believe, the other networks as well) have been placing increasing priority on the recruitment and training of organizers of color, often drawn from the ranks of leaders within their organizations. As a result, the racial and gender differences between leaders and organizers is closing.

According to Appleman’s study conducted in 1996, 57% of the IAF’s organizers are people of color, with corresponding figures of 48% for PICO and 38% for Gamaliel. PICO has the highest percentage of women organizers, 42%; with the IAF at 40% and Gamaliel at 33%. My own analysis of organizer staff in the Southwest region of the IAF indicates that the proportion of women and people of color have been rapidly increasing in the nineties, with the number of minority lead organizers going from 1 in 1990 to 5 out of 16 in 1997 (3 Black, 1 Hispanic, 1 Asian). Despite these gains, the supervisors at the top continue to be primarily white. The IAF always had some important minority direction at the top. Currently, 2 of the IAF’s regional supervisors are nonwhite (Ernesto
Cortes and Gerald Taylor), and the African-American lead organizer of its new Chicago initiative (Stephan Roberson) also serves on the IAF national board.

It is difficult to determine who “really” controls an organization, and systematic research is lacking. My own research on the IAF suggests that both organizers and leaders share power in local organizations, and I find collaboration to be the best term to describe the relationship. Organizers, through their influence in recruitment and training and through their connections to their networks, certainly hold a significant degree of power within local organizations. In newer organizations, with less experienced leaders, their degree of power is more likely greater. But I found no evidence of manipulation of leaders of color, and more often, a large degree of mutual respect. Black leaders in the Texas IAF appear to find room within the organizations to express their concerns, are genuinely in agreement with the organizing philosophy, and (along with other leaders) retain ultimate decision-making power within organizations. Most likely, people of color who see the need for all-Black (or all-Latino) organizations, and who would make a fundamental objection to the assignment of a white organizer, simply do not participate within faith-based efforts.

Do faith-based efforts combat racism?

Faith-based organizing does not follow a race-based strategy. The networks do not organize people in principle on the basis of their race, and they shun identity politics. Although they encourage leaders to discuss their differences, they do not privilege the necessity to discuss racism per se. Moreover, they appear to be cautious in making public charges of racism against societal institutions. For some critics (Jennings 1990; Delgado n.d.), this approach means that Alinskyite community organizing subsumes issues of race in favor of issues that can unite everyone, building on the basis of class-wide unity or some other foundation of common interest. On the other hand, the large bulk of the activity of faith-based efforts addresses such issues of institutional racism as poor schools, the
lack of employment opportunity, inadequate health care, and crumbling infrastructure in poor communities of color.

There is little systematic research on the extent to which faith-based efforts attempt to combat racism as an ideology or at the personal level among participants. My own research suggests that organizations vary in whether and how they discuss questions of racism internally, or in their more public activity. In the Southwest IAF region, as Black participation has grown, the network both at the local and regional level has undertaken quite extensive discussions of racism and the African-American experience. The regional director, Ernesto Cortes, has invited prominent Black scholars with varying perspectives (like Cornel West, James Cone, William Julius Wilson, Glenn Loury) to hold seminars for organizers and leaders. Local affiliates have held retreats on the issue in the wake of seminars. And organizers and leaders have discussed questions of racism in their one-on-one meetings, the core relationship-building process. Some affiliates have publicly identified decisions by political authorities to reject their proposals for greater resources or improved services to minority communities as racist. On the other hand, some faith-based efforts may well submerge any open discussion of racism.

It is easier to describe what these organizations do, than to measure the results of their activity in combating racism. Faith-based efforts have the advantage of placing discussions of racism within the context of a commitment to undertaking action together. It is probably best to see this as a developmental process which depends on the particular configuration of participants within affiliates or regional networks. Trust is built over time through common action and personal relationship-building. At its best, faith-based efforts can combine education about the historical experiences of different racial groups, learning about group experiences through personal relationships, and analysis of the racial character of public decisions, all within the context of commitment to action. In some cases, though, discussions about racism may never get off the ground.
Can faith-based efforts address the national and international causes of community problems?

At this point, faith-based efforts remain largely local in scope, with their deep local roots a source of their strength. Some critics see this limitation as a fundamental weakness. Meanwhile, several networks have expanded their capacities by generating power at the state level (in Texas, California, Maryland). And some networks attempt to coordinate strategy from a regional standpoint. But none of the faith-based networks have undertaken any national initiatives. There are no inherent barriers to national action. If the networks worked together, they could probably take national action now. Within a few years, the largest network, the IAF, will likely have affiliates in 60-70 congressional districts, enough of a base to leverage for national legislation on its own. Whether the faith-based strategy will prove effective in the more complex and fractured world of national politics, and whether its base will be strong enough to address the most fundamental processes (at the national, let alone international level) remains to be seen. But the federated, networked structure of faith-based efforts appear to enhance their current capacity to act at many levels of government – city, school district, county and state. If they can build a sufficient number of strong organizations, national action will be the next likely step.

IV. FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN RESEARCH AND ACTION

There is enough evidence to suggest that the strategy followed by faith-based community organizing offers many critically important, and to some extent unique, contributions to the comprehensive revitalization of communities of color. Yet we lack the kind of systematic research that would allow us to measure these contributions, compare the faith-based strategy and its effects with other revitalization initiatives, identify and compare the differences in strategy within the
movement, and thereby make conclusions with confidence. The Project on Race and Community
Revitalization could sponsor research designed to develop an analytic framework and collect the data
necessary to answer these questions. This paper may constitute a preliminary effort to specify a
framework and the kinds of data that would help us draw critical lessons about effective community
revitalization strategies from this rapidly expanding movement.

Meanwhile, private foundations can play a role in advancing the promising initiatives of faith-
based community organizing in several ways. By doing so, they may be able to help improve the
practice of these networks in relation to issues of concern to race and community revitalization. First,
the networks report the shortage of professional organizers as perhaps the biggest obstacle to their
expansion (Appleman 1996). Since most training is done in-house, foundations could provide special
funds to pay trainee organizers and conduct special training sessions for them (the Southwest IAF
benefited from just such an arrangement). These funds, or a certain proportion of them, could be
ear-marked to train people of color as a way to increase the proportion of minority organizers in
faith-based efforts. Second, many of the networks are experimenting with efforts to broaden their
participation to those currently left out: unaffiliated residents who may be non-Christian, poorer or
more marginalized as well. The Texas IAF, Metro NY IAF and others work through schools; PICO
sponsors local organizing committees; and BUILD (in Baltimore) founded a worker association with
AFSCME. Foundations could provide funds earmarked to push these and other initiatives forward.
Third, most networks want to operate at the regional level, but, again, lack of funding limits the scale
of those efforts. Foundations could provide funds to hold various kinds of regional meetings (one
model would be the Southwest IAF seminars and leadership meetings). Such networking could help
to broaden the perspective and deepen the leadership capacity of local leaders in communities of
color.

Finally, the Race and Community Revitalization Project could invite representatives from
faith-based efforts to participate in discussions on the role of race in community revitalization. Such conversation would deepen the project’s understanding, and help to shape a research agenda. It could also help specify the best direction for foundation action to advance the faith-based movement. Moreover, the involvement of community leaders and organizers in these discussions could serve to stimulate further consideration of questions of race within faith-based community organizing.
REFERENCES


Maryland, College Park.


NOTES

1. This paper is primarily concerned with Christian religious communities. A full discussion of the role of religion would necessarily include a consideration of Jewish, Islamic, and other religious communities of Asian-Americans and others.

2. I define the Black Church to include all black Christian congregations, most of which are in the historically black denominations (see Lincoln and Mamiya 1990). It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider the understandings and practice of the entire spectrum of American religious communities. I focus in this section on the Black Church. The faith based section highlights the Catholic Church, although mainstream (white) Protestant denominations are also involved. Mainstream Protestants and Jewish congregations are often important allies to community revitalization, providing funds and support. But their own congregations have largely abandoned the inner city. There are one million Muslims in the United States, a small proportion of whom are in the Nation of Islam. Often directly active in community based efforts, they require an entirely separate treatment.

3. A similar assessment can be made of the efforts of Black pastors and their congregations to establish broad-ranging service programs out of the churches, or in collaboration with other community organizations. These services provide critical support to the neighborhood, but they do not provide a basis for a broader transformation of societal institutions.

4. The four networks are the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO), Gamaliel Foundation, and the Direct Action Research and Training Center (DART). The figures presented here are my best estimate, drawing from Appleman (1996) and other reports.

5. I am most confident about the description of the IAF, and less confident about my discussion of the other three networks. Appleman’s data comes primarily from self-reports by the three networks. Case studies, which attempt to collect and verify data independently, include my own study of the IAF (book in progress), focusing primarily on its Texas network; a dissertation by Katie Day (1996) on the IAF in Philadelphia; a dissertation by Timothy Ross (1996) on the IAF in New York; and a dissertation by Richard Wood (1995) comparing PICO to the Center for Third World Organizing. There is little published research on the fourth network, the Direct Action Research and Training Center (DART).

6. For a detailed account of Alinsky’s life and work, see the excellent biography by Horwitt (1989).


8. Less directly, faith-based community organizing also drew from the role of churches in the civil rights movement, which Morris (1984) discusses in detail. This heritage played a particularly important role for African-American participation in faith-based efforts.


10. These figures are drawn from Appleman (1996), my own research, and a variety of case study and published accounts.

11. In the past 25 years, several organizing efforts by the Southwest IAF network never resulted in establishing an affiliate. But once founded, none of the 16 or so affiliates have folded.

12. Even COPS, which is virtually entirely Mexican-American, insists it is not an Hispanic organization.
13. I refer here to opposition by leaders. Organizers have substantial influence over organizational direction too. But, in the Texas IAF at least, local leaders united in their position have over-ruled opposition by organizers on a number of important occasions.

14. The original school in Fort Worth, Morningside Middle School, experienced rapid improvement. See Shirley (1997) for a detailed discussion of Texas IAF education work.

15. Asian Hindus and Muslims are quite centrally involved in the IAF’s sister network in Great Britain, the Citizens Organising Foundation.

16. No systematic research has been conducted to assess the extent of these criticisms. I rest my claims upon my own research and informal discussions.

17. Affiliates of the Gamaliel Foundation and DART are collaborating in Columbus, Ohio, the first time any of the 4 networks have worked together to my knowledge.

18. In one case, a white IAF regional supervisor fired the Hispanic organizing staff in the South Bronx affiliate. Some observers argue the move was racially motivated, but the IAF asserts that the organizers were ineffective.

19. In fact, several junior organizers in the Southwest IAF expressed to me the desire to be assigned to COPS in order to be trained by the Hispanic women leaders of the organization.