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RULES FOR RADICAL PASTORS

Using the learnings of community organization to lead a congregation

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The congregation is a community organization. Clearly, being a community organization isn't the whole story of a Christian community. Much remains to tell and reflect upon. But community organizing is a key part of the story. After all, isn't a congregation an organization that seeks to bring people together around a common vision in order to build a base of power so that its goals can be reached?

The grandfather of the community organization movement, Saul Alinsky, was born in Chicago in 1909.

After graduating from the University of Chicago, he went in the 1930s to a neighborhood in that city called the "Back of the Yards." As a professional organizer, Alinsky was cocky, irreverent, crude and sometimes belligerent.

But Alinsky built a strong organization which tackled many of the community's problems. In the 1940s, he founded the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) with the intention of training others in community organization. The organization developed among African Americans in Rochester and then among Mexican Americans in California. By the late 1960s, IAF began organizing in middle class communities. Alinsky assumed that if you want to build power, you have to build where the power is — in the middle class. Today, IAF has about 40 organizations in cities across the country, with dozens of trained professional organizers and thousands of people who have learned its principles of community organization. Most of its organizations are church-based.

Some people like IAF and others don't. The organization is confrontational. Once when a group Alinsky was working with couldn't get the attention of Mayor Chicago's Mayor Daley (the first Mayor Daley), they decided to attack something they knew was dear to the Mayor — O'Hare Airport. Alinsky planned to take several hundred people to the airport, and whenever a plane would arrive, he would send them all into the rest rooms. When hoards of passengers would scurry off the planes, they would find themselves entering facilities that were jammed.

Alinsky actually never carried out his plan because the threat of the scheme was enough to get a meeting with the Mayor. Whatever you think of Alinsky and the IAF, its influence has been monumental. Dozens of other institutes have taken and adapted their principles. And thousands of organizations, including churches, have (knowingly and unknowingly) followed some of Alinsky's teachings.

Alinsky's handbook on community organizing was called "Rules for Radicals."

Four organizing principles

Four principles of community organizing have been crucial to me in my ministry.

- Build an organization through individual meetings.

Building and sustaining an organization requires a great deal of time meeting with people one-on-one. The reason for this is to discover where your leadership is and to develop relationships of trust so that you may call upon that leadership. Mike Gecan, one of IAF's regional organizers, once told me how the organization trains organizers. They begin with a three-month internship during which interns do 25 "one-on-ones" every week. Find the leadership in the community, sit with each leader and begin to build relationships.

After spending three months at this, the interns often ask, "Now what do I do?" And Gecan tells them, "That's it. Just keep doing it." Community organizers meet with people individually, build relationships, and out of these meetings comes the motivation to build an organization. Good organizers do thousands of meetings of this kind.

Several assumptions are part of this strategy. First, the people you have, and the potential people you find, are your most important asset. It is the people — in the Church we would say under the guidance of the Holy Spirit — who will build the organization. The organizer begins with the "radical" idea that people need to be empowered. If they are, then in the long run they will make the right decisions.

Within the congregation I serve, I call these one-on-one meetings by the "radical" term "pastoral visits." I spend a lot of time with the present and potential members of our church. I listen to them, try to establish relationships of trust with them, teach them, assess their leadership capabilities and look for networks

which may extend to others. From my point of view, these are the primary aims of pastoral visitations.

When I started at Reformation Church 10 years ago, I spent a lot of time visiting. To make sure this would happen, I committed to myself and the church council that I would spend 30 hours each week in visitation. This was not a commitment to work day and night. I don't think I work more than the average pastor. Sometimes I think I work less. For example, during Christmas

programs, so I cut back to 20 hours a week. But I always get the 20 hours in. You never get done building an organization.

What I've discovered is that people are willing to do things for their church when they have a relationship of trust with their church, and one-on-one visits are an important ingredient in developing trust.

In our church, people are coming forward as leaders. They are responding to requests for help. I now have four people who assist me

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week, Holy Week, and the week of the synod assembly I didn't get much else done. But I did the visiting. When a church is starting out, or when you are starting over, which is what most churches need to do, you need to establish relationships with people — lots of them — in order to build an organization. You can have the neatest looking newsletter, but without the meetings, you can't grow an organization.

We had about 60 families when I came to Reformation. I visited most of them the first two weeks. Then, I wondered how I would fill up my time. Some days, I just went out onto the street. If I ran into someone, I'd start a conversation. I began a process of doing initial visits, going door-to-door in the community to introduce myself. What I was really doing was looking for potential leaders.

I kept to that schedule for three-and-a-half years. By that time the membership had grown considerably, and we had developed many

with the task of volunteer recruitment — four volunteer coordinators — and people are responding. They respond because they have a one-on-one relationship with the person who does the asking.

A side benefit exists for preachers here. When I talk to preachers who don't take the time to do much visiting, I often ask, "What do they preach about?" If a preacher doesn't sit down and listen to people, how can they know what is on people's minds? If they are not spending a significant amount of time listening to people who don't go to church, how can they preach about their mission field? And more importantly, even if they think they know what is on people's minds, if people think a preacher hasn't listened to them, they won't listen to the preacher.

I always understand the time I spend visiting as part of my sermon preparation time. Visiting is how I communicate to people that I know where they are.

At least four barriers exist to successful visiting. Television, computers, work schedules and sex. Before television, people talked to other people. At night, they sat out on their porches or stoops conversing. People don't do that anymore.

Most people's experience of sitting down in a conversation with someone other than a family member or intimate friend is limited to a seller of insurance or new windows that leaves them hoping the conversation will soon end.

While television has changed the time people spend in one-on-one meetings, other barriers are computers and church offices in general. Reformation Church, like many such structures built in the 1940s or earlier, was constructed without offices. Pastors had studies in their homes. Why would you need an office in the church? If the pastor wasn't studying, then visiting was taking place. Now, churches have large and well-equipped offices. Even old churches like ours find spaces to create them. Now, many pastors consider it their job to go to the office. That's where they do their work. I don't mean to say the things pastors do in offices are unimportant. But the office can become a barrier to visiting.

"The organizer's biggest job is to give people the feeling that they can do something."

Work schedules are a barrier. It used to be that men worked 9-5 during the weekday and women spent the day at home. The pastor could visit almost anytime and find someone home. Now, pastors contend with a hundred different schedules. People have more than one job. Part-time jobs. They've gone back to

school. They commute great distances. Things could change some more. Futurists predict people will work more out of their homes in the future. People may be home more frequently again, but right now finding someone at home is a challenge and barrier to successful visiting.

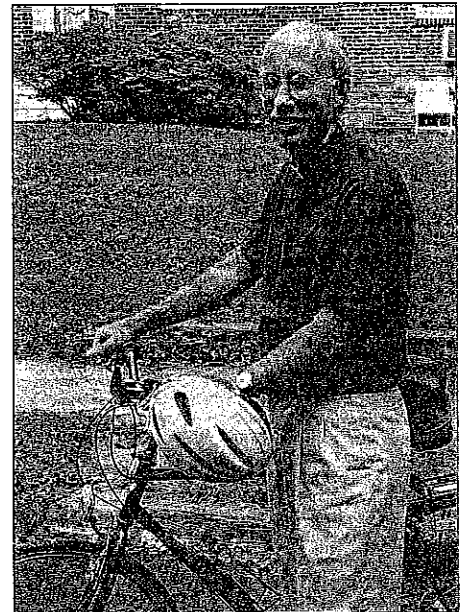
Heightened awareness of sexual misconduct has become a barrier to visiting. Some pastors have carried one-on-one visiting to an unfortunate extreme. This practice is not the number one barrier to visiting, but it has become an impediment.

The point is that we have to find ways around these barriers because visiting needs to get done. Visiting is incarnational — the way you grow an organization.

* Second, build an organization by presenting a vision of where you are going and moving toward it. Saul Alinsky said that people were to have the power, that their ideas and programs should come to the surface. But he also understood that the organizer had to capture the best of those ideas and present them as a vision so that people could move toward them. Alinsky wrote, "The organizer's biggest job is to give people the feeling that they can do something."

Most organizations start with nothing. The organizer comes on the scene with nothing but a few people who would like to build an organization. The organizer has a vision. It is a vision of a strong organization, one with power that brings people together to work on common goals. The details need to be worked out, but the organizer says, "This is where we are going. Let's go."

About 15-20 churches in Philadelphia began meeting to form Philadelphia Interfaith Action. I was on the steering committee. After constituting ourselves in 1992, we began interviewing for our organizer. We decided on an IAF-trained person from Baltimore named Gary Rodwell. We were getting started on our own, but we knew we really needed a strong organizer to get



The Rev. Gordon Simmons finds riding his bicycle through Reformation Church's neighborhood gives his pastoral ministry an "incarnational" aspect.

going. The first time we met with Rodwell, only five of 15 steering committee members showed up. I felt terrible. I wondered, "What must he think of us?"

Well, I don't know what Rodwell was thinking in the privacy of his home, but I know how he conducted himself at the meeting. He brought us hope. He told us the organization was going to happen. The only question was who was going to be part of it. The problem was we didn't have the right people — yet. No one in the room doubted that Rodwell knew where we were going and that he would take us there.

This task is key for the radical pastor — presenting a vision. Understanding your people and the Word of God, you say, "This is where we are going." And you start moving.

This strategy is not about running over your people with your own ideas. You begin by listening. It is certainly not about assuming an adversarial role among your members. You are there to work with them. But it does involve presenting a vision, having some idea of where you are going, and finding the people who will help you get there.

The third sermon I preached at Reformation Church was, "This Church is Growing!" That title was not a description of reality. Rather, my sermon was a statement of faith, a vision of where we were going. A priority quickly became to find others who would commit to the vision as well.

My second month at Reformation was Lent. We launched a plan that included 10 outreach events. One event every four days. Some events were worship services. Some were classes. Some were social activities. The event details had grown out of the ideas I had heard while making my first round of member visits. The leaders for these events also came out of those visits. Ten events during Lent. Most of them happened. Not all. Most went pretty well, but not all. Each event attracted some new people to the congregation. But the main effect of the schedule was to communicate that something was happening. The vision was com-

without much vision is looking for a pastor, and that part of the pastor's task will be to help the congregation see what the vision is. And, if that doesn't work (and sometimes it doesn't), the task is to help raise up new leaders who can get excited about the vision.

• Third, build an organization through leadership development. Alinsky had a strong notion that leaders are made and not born. He believed that people's leadership skills could be developed. He started working among the poor, people among whom some would say leadership skills are lacking. He didn't let that deter him.

Remember the "iron rule"

IAF has a principle called the "iron rule" of organizing. It goes like this: "Never do for others what they can do for themselves." This approach is not about the organizer taking a passive role. Rather, organizers under-

takes place during actual activities and events. Whenever Philadelphia Interfaith Action has a meeting, it has a pre-meeting. The leaders get together perhaps 30 to 60 minutes ahead of time and discuss their roles in the meeting. They help each other understand what to do and how to do it. After each meeting comes an evaluation. The organizer leads the leaders through a review of the meeting. What happened? Each person's role is reviewed. How did he or she do? Was each speaker clear? Forceful? Visionary? Did anyone talk too long? As relationships of trust, people feel they may be outspoken toward one another. A code is established. We will help you to be a good leader, but we will not tolerate bad leadership.

You build an organization through leadership development. It's true in the church, too. You don't have a strong congregation unless you have strong lay leadership. And we can't use the excuse that we don't have strong lay leaders. Leadership skills may be learned. Leaders can be encouraged. New leaders can be found.

Something I learned during my first years at Reformation was that since I was spending so much time visiting, I didn't have much time left to run the church's programs. What I discovered was that it was better if I didn't run most of them. If I didn't run them, someone else did. That someone else assumed a leadership position. My best role was to agitate (to get people thinking what might happen), to encourage, to train. In those first years, I think the only program that I started, which I had to attend, was the Wednesday night Bible study. The other new activities — and there were many — developed on the assumption that I was not normally going to be in attendance. I met with the leaders, and I encouraged them. But I also tried to make it clear that the activities are "their thing." You build an organization not by working harder to do more things yourself. I know this is a radical model for pastors, since most of us are doers. But you build an organization through leadership development.

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ing into view. That's part of the pastor's task — in preaching, teaching or personal conversations, present a view of where you are going.

I was amazed, when I was on a synod staff, that we would frequently get resumes from pastors who wanted to move to a church where the people were "mission-minded, where they are always open to new ideas, where they tithe, where they don't expect the pastor to do everything, and where it's never a problem getting volunteers." But pastors need to understand that churches like that aren't just sitting around waiting for a pastor. It's more likely that a church

stand that ultimately their role is not to do things, but to teach, lead, train, stimulate and agitate others so that they will do things. IAF spends a great deal of time training people to be leaders. Much more time than we spend in the church. I'm afraid we in the church too often ask people to assume leadership positions, watch while they fail, and then write them off as bad leaders.

Some leadership development happens through one-on-one meetings between an organizer and a leader. Some leadership development happens during training sessions. And a lot of such development

• The fourth principle is that teaching happens best through an action-reflection model. Alinsky felt strongly that the best model of education is not one of training people and then sending them out to do their work. Rather, the best model involves sending people out to do their work and then helping them to learn about what they are doing. For Alinsky the meetings, the one-on-ones, the confrontations, the sessions with the Mayor, the sit-ins at the school board, the evaluations were the educational program.

Too many churches, with little or no mission going on, say that they're just not ready yet. Their members aren't very mission-minded. And what are they doing about it? Well, they are preaching. They are teaching. But that is a strategy that has been used for decades, and it hasn't had any noticeable results yet. What's to make them think that it's going to work now?

Alinsky was very intolerant about taking a long time to get things started. He hit the ground running. Get going. Then do your learning through reflection upon what has happened.

People are seldom ready to do mission. You've got to start doing the mission anyway. As you do it, you learn what it is about. It's called an Action-Reflection Model. If you wait for your church to be ready for mission, it may never be ready.

Sometimes people are apologetic about what their church has to offer. They think they've got to get things together before they invite new people. If you wait for your church to be a true reflection of the Kingdom of God, you'll wait forever. Lutherans ought to understand that. When someone starts a new mission church, there is nothing to offer. No programs. No building. No worship services. All they have to offer is a vision. If it's a good vision, that's all you need. That's how new churches get started. I thought about this on February 1, 1987, the day I started at Reformation. It was a Sunday, and I was determined to get out that afternoon and start initial visiting, door-to-door. I knew we had to

"If you wait for your church to be a true reflection of the Kingdom of God, you'll wait forever."

identify some new people. I didn't have much to take along. In those days we were still making use of a mimeograph machine, and I quickly ran off something with the church's name on it. But more importantly, I didn't have much to offer. A poorly attended worship service. A Sunday School with three children in it. Once a month a group of older women got together to do crafts. That was about it.

I made up a list of things we might do. There were a lot of things we could do. I gave the possibilities list to people I met and asked, "Would you be interested in any of these things?" Some people said yes. I began to collect their names, and when we had enough of them, some emerging leaders agreed to start something, and I would go back to the people with names on the list and gather them together. If I met new people along the way with similar interests, I tried to involve them in the new program. That first summer we started a summer day camp. That fall an afterschool program. Did we know what we were doing? Not really. But we learned along the way.

Recently, I began to think that some of our members had learned these lessons too well. They have learned to be impatient with inactivity. Some people began to talk about the possibility of expanding our very overworked facility. At an annual meeting there was a proposal to appoint a building exploration committee. They are supposed to report back what they learn about the feasibility of building. But at the annual meeting someone got up and moved

to amend the motion to say that while we're talking about the options, we ought to start raising money. And the motion passed! We have no idea what we'll do or if we will do anything. But the feeling was that while we're talking about this, we ought to be doing something.

What does all this mean for pastoral ministry in the future? I have no doubt that some things will change more than any of us can imagine. Certainly new technology is going to continue to have significant impact on the ways we do our ministry. But technology won't be the primary means for carrying out a mission. That work will require something more basic.

The word radical comes from the word "root." In many ways the keys to effective ministry for the future will still be to get back to basic ideas. Many of these ideas sound radical only because we have forgotten them. The parish pastors of all but the super large churches will, if they are effective, see some of their roles as community organizer. In that capacity, they will build their organizations through individual meetings, through presenting a vision of where they are going and moving toward that vision, through leadership development and through the use of an Action-Reflection Model.

Years ago, people joined organizations out of loyalty. They stayed loyal to a denomination that was connected to their families. Today, the methods I've described are key to renewing the church and fostering such loyalties that we once could take for granted. Such methods will be crucial to enabling us to be faithful to the mission God has given us to do.

The Rev. Gordon Simmons is a 1971 graduate of the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Philadelphia. He is grateful to a previous editor of Parish Practice Notebook, the Rev. Jack White, for introducing him to the principles of community organizing in the days when Simmons attended White's classes at the Seminary.