



“Parish” based Community Organizing

United Methodist
Church – North
Carolina
Conference

Board of Church
and Society

This series provides congregations and individuals the skills to build and deploy justice ministries and advocacy methods. Other methods in this series include:

*Building a relationship with your elected representative

*Writing a letter or email to your elected representative

*Writing a letter to the press, blog or website

*Organizing a rally or protest meeting

*Building a congregational justice ministry

*Proposing legislation

*Parish based Community Organizing

*Creating a Conference Resolution

*Asset Based Community Development

*Challenging legislators

*Community Listening

The Board of Church and Society provides advocacy and justice programs for congregations.

<https://nccumc.org/christianformation/church-and-society/>

Historical Roots

This strategy has deep historical roots. The early church, even right up until the 16th Century and the Reformation years, was the heart of every village and town. Most people lived in small hamlets and towns in a class system of haves and have nots and few were literate. The priest was the protector of the faith and had a strong influence over the civic life of the community. Where abbeys and religious orders existed, they too exerted strong influence over civic life. The Reformation changed much of that. In the British Isles, the reign of Henry VIII virtually eliminated the role of the Abbey's and stripped the church of its economic power.

As large cities emerged between the 10th and 16th Centuries, the role and structure of the church changed in those cities as well as this was the period of the growth of central political power of the kings and elite. Often the church was complicit with these powers, leaving the poor to suffer without pastoral oversight from the church. City growth and the rise of the Industrial Revolution placed poor people under more pressure as cities did not provide the food sources plus employment conditions were more punitive.

The Parish

The concept of the parish and the paternal role of the priest as the “father of the community” existed for centuries, and the priest had oversight over everyone in the community, regardless of their religious beliefs. The Reformation, the growth of urban life, the rise of Protestant evangelism and the rising power of secular governance reduced the “parish” role of the local priest. However the concept of a shepherd tending to his flock is a strong one and the “flock” is now defined not by close geographic boundaries but by faith allegiance and practice. Today people come to church passing many others. Membership of a religious community is now more important to a church than the surrounding community itself as the costs of running the institutional church have risen. We don't want poor people in our churches because they don't contribute financially.

The Parish today and community organizing.

Churches today, whether in urban, sub-urban and even rural settings can redefine their ministry focus away from their membership to include those in their immediate surroundings. A key driver of this approach is Biblical, Nehemiah was called by God to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and his strategy was to empower the inhabitants of Jerusalem to do it themselves. He organized them into groups by neighborhood to do this. (Nehemiah ch. 2 & 3) Using the membership resources of a church, its ministry focus can be turned to the community around the church building. This will connect the church community with the local community, and provide a direct connection with the travails of the “world” in the immediate vicinity of the church.

Community Organizing in the USA was formalized by the work of Saul Alinsky who created the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) and its work focuses on organizing local communities to solve their own problems through strong advocacy methods.

Parish Based Community Organizing

This form of justice engagement with a congregation's adjacent community must include understanding every element of that community. The intent is to learn about every category of the people and resources within this boundary and seek ways for this “community” to be enhanced and all forms of injustice, inequity,

Phase 1 Congregational Commitment to the Parish Model

Make congregation aware of and educate them in the characteristics of the Parish Model. Get commitment and explore the implications for the life of the congregation. Build the organizational infrastructure, create the vision for this initiative, define the values of the congregation, define the scope and build the implementation plan.

Phase 2 Study and collect data about the surrounding community

Step 1 Establishing the territory of engagement

Obtain a large map of the area and draw a set of boundaries half way between your congregation and any other UMC's in your town. Make sure the boundaries link up with each other so that you have a clear segment of the town fully enclosed by these boundaries. Use natural boundaries if those make sense, like a major highway, or a natural boundary like a river. If there is more than one UMC in the town, make sure that the boundary between your church and theirs is halfway between the two or whatever natural boundary makes sense.

Step 2 Establishing the community assets and resources.

Describe every element of society within that boundary and mark them clearly on a map. These are the typical types of community assets, retail space, commercial/business space, residential space (differentiate between high density and low density) education resources, industrial space, public space like parks, local government space, public services and so on. The key is to be specific in defining these elements as they all impact on the "health" of the community. [The way to gather this information is to create a color coding system for each community asset type and use highlighters of those colors to mark those assets on the map itself. So parks and open community spaces would be marked green, industrial areas red, residential areas yellow and so on.](#)

Step 3 Establish the population demographics within this territory

Typical demographics include, population size living within this boundary, and those commuting in for whatever purpose; age; ethnic/race; employment; socio/economic status; crime rates; education levels; community tensions and conflicts; and so on. [The sources of this information are found at local city and county offices, local libraries, Chambers of Commerce, and state information services. Contact Michelle Saxon of Missioninsite a community engagement organization that has software and a system for gathering and providing community demographics and other data. The UMC has bought into this system and every congregation can sign up. Write to \[msaxon@missioninsite.com\]\(mailto:msaxon@missioninsite.com\). To sign up to this free community demographics tool that will help to map out the data you need.](#)

Step 4 Listen to and engage with this Community.

Start with small groups simply walking around the area, break it up into smaller segments, making notes about the condition of the area, its resources, problems and attributes. Where you can speak to the locals where you bump into them, keep the conversations informal and don't sound like you are on a mission. One congregation formed walking groups and they invited locals to join them in this exercise routine, and by doing this they got to know them and build relationships.

From your observations and informal data gathering discern the biggest and most urgent community concerns, then call a community meeting and simply ask the attendees to list their biggest concerns. Keep an eye out for people who are most passionate about their concerns, these people make good leaders at the meeting

ADVOCACY BUILDING

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Phase 3 Reflect on the Data and Discern the appropriate Advocacy strategy

Keep listening to the needs of the community, build community leadership and engagement, find allies and resources for action. Discern with the community the most appropriate strategies and tactics that will increase their power to accomplish the justice goals appropriate to their needs.

Phase 4 Proclaim the strategy and declare the goals and intent.

It is important to make sure that everyone is clear about what needs to be accomplished. This includes those institutions and people who are intent on not acceding to these goals. They have power, so do you, and your initiative needs to demonstrate resilience, diligence and relational power to ensure a sustained effort. If the cause is important to the community and its needs for equal resources and justice, then it must be sustained. Now some tactical approaches may need to be kept hidden, and alternative tactics need to be created in case they are needed. It is important to make sure that the public at large are kept fully informed with data that shows that the current situation is not fair and equitable, and that the solutions your initiative are seeking are.

Phase 5 Deploy the advocacy strategy.

A sustained, resilient and disciplined approach to deployment and execution is essential. Look for continuous small victories and declare them. This sustains community support. If the cause is lost then re-evaluate one's strategy and start again.

This strategy binds the congregation to the surrounding community, and the evidence is that the local community will begin to see this congregation as part of itself. This strategy is viable in inner city, suburban, urban and rural settings.

Where the issues faced by the local community are affected by laws and governance structures outside of local governance, such as the county, state and even the Federal Government, then the organizational structures of the initiative must evolve to embrace new people and other resources to develop advocacy strategies to deal with those other forms or levels of government.

This approach will also uncover numerous community concerns and issues from public education, utilities, racism and social prejudice, immigration, criminal activity, public transport, health care, social services and so on. Organizationally it will be necessary to choose one's battles, unless you have unlimited resources. Develop priorities, and even make easier choices to get easier gains, this motivates everyone to succeed, plus it provides important learning skills in all advocacy processes.

The major skills required include learning how to expose injustice using every communication method know, take advantage of the press, social media and stories of harm and injustice. Building relationships with elected officials is critical. They are elected to represent your interests and they need to be reminded of that. Keep them honest and on task. Learn about all the different legislative processes that are designed to ensure public accountability.

This approach is decidedly Wesleyan. He and his early Methodist colleagues engaged the poor where they were, and he addressed many issues in public life, education of children and adults, health care and especially the plight of the poor. This was his greatest evangelical legacy, for most of those this approach touched became Methodist.

This document was created by Brian Heymans while he served on the Board of Church and Society.

