

A LAYMAN'S GUIDE TO
COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

Saul Alinsky and his methods

BY Stephen C. Rose
Editor of Renewal

BIBLIOTECA
EL COLEGIO DE MEXICO

Few topics have caused more controversy in ecclesiastical circles than community organization. Neither community nor organization is alien to Christian vocabulary, but taken together they form a phrase that can sunder old friendships, induce denominational in-fighting, and spawn unusually doctrinaire souls in an age that is reputed for its lack of ideology.

Since community organization applies generally to inner-city work, an introduction may be necessary for those whose bailiwick is elsewhere. Perhaps it was not until the New Deal era that the plight of the poor in America could be traced not only to unemployment but to dependency as well.

The dilemma facing men like Hopkins and Ickes during the depression can be expressed in the following question: Is the function of welfare to bandage the wounds of the poor or to perform drastic surgery to enable the poor to walk right into the mainstream of society, if not in Horatio Alger style at least with a certain dignity?

The New Deal was half successful. It was able to tide over those who had been in (or had ready access to) the mainstream but who were temporarily hit by depression. It was relatively unable to life up persons who were already at the bottom of the heap. The quarter century that has passed since the New Deal heyday has strengthened this dichotomy. In depressed rural areas and urban ghettos there is now a mass of persons who have been "on welfare" all their lives. Indeed, some families have been on the receiving end of subsistence checks and various services from public and private agencies for three generations.

It was to be expected that conservative middle and upper middle class burghers would cry out at this practice (even though, in a sense, they supported it through their donations to charitable causes). The typical resentment might be expressed in a statement like this: "My forebears worked to earn their way. They didn't have the government meeting their every need. But now you see these mothers having children with no means of support. You see men more interested in

picking up their social security, unemployment, and disability checks than in standing on their own two feet. If those people were willing to assume civil obligations, they might deserve civil rights."

The unusual extension of this argument would be for similar remarks to come from the poor themselves. Suppose the poor were to look at the established order and determine that present welfare programs are designed, however unwittingly, to increase the downward spiral of dependency, to perpetuate a sort of "welfare colonialism." Suppose that the poor determined to do something about it.

The first step would be to demand control over their own destiny. This would involve the power to make basic political decisions at the local level, as well as a broad range of social decisions on matters such as schools, housing, recreation, and employment. What conservative soul could object to the notion of the poor themselves taking the responsibility for their own progress? Is this not part of the great American Dream?

Well, the poor are making just such statements. In urban ghettos and rural poverty pockets the sincerity of the establishment's insistence on individual responsibility is being tested. Is it not true, ask the poor, that the rich have a stake in keeping us down? War-on-poverty legislation encourages indigenous expressions of this sort by including the provision that local poverty programs must be "developed, conducted, and administered with maximum feasible participation of residents of the area and members of the group served." John Lindsay, New York City's new mayor, has gone even further. The right of communities to guide their own destiny carries with it the implicit right to organize politically to fight city hall.

Now there are few within the church who would question the logic of a new emphasis on local, individual responsibility, at least in the abstract. But how is this responsibility to be achieved? We must introduce another element into our brief history.

Well, before President Johnson began talking of a war on poverty, before the government began to question the welfare concepts of the New Deal, the issue of community organization confronted the church.

The confronting was largely due to the good offices of one Saul D. Alinsky, executive director of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a Chicago-based community-organizing venture. Alinsky is a superb organizer and tactician; he enjoys controversy; and, presently, he spends much of his time lecturing to ministers on the techniques and aims of community organization.

The IAF is perhaps best known for its work in Chicago. Before the establishment of the foundation in the early 1940's, Alinsky himself organized labor groups and Roman Catholic parishes into the powerful Back of the Yards Community Council on Chicago's South side. Here is where the basic principles of Alinsky-style organization were first developed. They can be outlined as follows:

- (1) The only effective organization is one that unites disparate elements of a community.
- (2) The only way to unite these elements is to appeal to their immediate self-interest, whether it be the church's in maintaining justice or a homeowner's in maintaining property values.
- (3) Only a mass organization is capable of achieving the goals of its disparate membership.
- (4) The organizing effort depends on three primary elements: professionally trained organizers who can locate and train the true leadership within a community (true leaders "have a following"); willingness to support the costs of organizing from within the community; and, perhaps most important, the cultivation of latent and manifest community resentments in order to make the idea of organization an attractive one. In a sense, what we find is the application of the principles of union organization to local communities.

In addition to Alinsky's pioneering work in the Back of the Yards area (which subsequently changed from a warring jungle to a well-kept, somewhat conservative middle-class neighborhood), the IAF in Chicago had developed organizations in two lower middle-class, largely white communities and an all-Negro ghetto area called Woodlawn.

The Woodlawn Organization provides an example of the Alinsky principles in action. The "enemy"--against which IAF organizers sought to organize Woodlawn--was the University of Chicago, directly to the north. The university, at the time, was seeking to expand into Woodlawn, an act that would result in the tearing down of much substandard housing and a displacement of many of the residents.

The Woodlawn Organization united churches, business groups, and local block clubs on the basis that the university's intended action would be merely another assertion of what is scornfully called "urban removal," a substitute for "urban renewal" which has often been a means by which the powerful interests within Chicago clear off substandard land and erect buildings which the former residents neither want nor can afford. This helps the tax base, but not the poor.

The Woodlawn Organization put pressure on the mayor by sitting-in at his office and other direct actions and won an agreement that no move could be made by the university until adequate new housing which displaced persons could afford was erected in Woodlawn. At the present time, this new housing is being built, although there still remains some controversy as to whether it will be cheap enough for the displaced persons.

Beyond the conflict with the university, the Woodlawn Organization has waged war on slum landlords by picketing their suburban homes and conducting rent strikes. TWO also was one of the first local "grass-roots" organizations to get direct grants from the federal government to conduct a locally administered attack on poverty-- a job retraining project. Regardless of its shortcomings (some have called TWO too militant; others see it as too middle class!), there is no question that TWO has become known as a model for other independent community organizations.

And, significantly for the churches, much of TWO's financial support has come from religious groups, including local congregations in Woodlawn, the Chicago Archdiocese of the Roman Catholic Church, and the Board of National Missions of The United Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.

Largely because of the Woodlawn performance, the IAF was called to organize the frustrated Negroes of Rochester, N. Y., in the wake of the bitter summer rioting of 1964. The Rochester

project was initiated and is supported largely by the local churches of the city, acting through the local council of churches.

It has also been proposed that Alinsky begin work in the ghettos of Buffalo, N. Y. Here, however, a handful of Presbyterian laymen successfully sponsored a court action to enjoin the Buffalo Presbytery from supporting the IAF. This will prove a highly significant case as it makes its way through successive appeals. Both the Presbytery and the opposing laymen have expressed a willingness to fight the issue to the U. S. Supreme Court level, if necessary.

How, then, is a Christian to respond to the notion of community organization which rests on the cultivation of controversy? Before answering, I must make a personal observation: I suspect that opposition to Alinsky and the IAF is less because of the "rudeness" of the IAF than because of a suspicion of anything that openly speaks of power and conflict.

The Methodist Church, for example, has centers of considerable power within its domain, but the notion of using that power openly is frowned upon. Of course the power is used, but polite society devises a polite vocabulary to describe its life and death battles.

The fact that Alinsky has forthrightly stated that the only objective of any community organization is the gathering and effective use of power is possibly enough to offend those who like to practice politics under assumed names. And the fact that IAF-brand community organizing has resulted in the effective use of power by those whom we like to regard (however subconsciously) as unworthy--because they are poor, black, and unfamiliar with the proprieties of politeness--may also explain why Alinsky and his house have elicited strong criticism from some Christian quarters.

For the Christian, there are three issues involved.

First, there is the tactical question of whether IAF-type community organization is an efficacious means of moving the poor into the mainstream of American society. The only useful answer to this question is to explore the work of Alinsky at considerably more length than is possible here. I would argue only that the current war on poverty is beginning to look like a sophisticated way to buy off "trouble makers" (with well-paying poverty jobs) and thus perpetuate the war on the poor that we have waged for years in this country.

And in the face of this potential distortion of poverty legislation, I know of no indigenious urban community that has gotten anywhere without something approximating the sort of community organizing I have described.

The second question is whether churches ought to be sponsoring such organizing efforts. If the answer to the first question is affirmative, I see no reason to withhold support. For years churches have supported all sorts of benevolent programs designed to help the poor. I think we can say, with the best will in the world, that these works of mercy were not adequate. If one is seriously interested in helping the poor, there will have to be a recognition of the need of the poor for more than bread alone--the need of the poor for a hand in their own destiny.

I do not believe that a church should join a political party except in drastic cases (compare the resistance against nazism). But a community organization is not a political party. It is closer to being a union and one certainly could wish that the churches had given as much support to the earlier union movement in America as it has traditionally given to the business interests. If a minister in Suburbia, USA, finds it helpful to support the good offices of the Rotary International, he should carefully examine his conscience before denying his inner-city colleague the right to participate in organizations appropriate to the inner city.

The third question involves the church's role within a community organization. It seems to me that the churches can be a leavening element within such organizations. They need not in every case approve of the tactics, even as those who support the United States government may not exactly applaud when innocent children are killed by our troops in Viet Nam. In fact, within IAF-type organizations there is a representative, constitutional government which makes dissent possible.

The Church can never be a leaven if it is separated from the loaf. To disassociate from a community organization on the grounds that the tactics are not what one would celebrate in the church basement may be perfectly justified. But Methodists who take a negative view of the whole operation--who advocate total disengagement--should apply the same criteria to the institutional church. There are many who remain in Methodism, or in other

