

Community Organization BIBLIOTECA
COLEGIO DE MEXICO
Implications for Mission Policies

David W. Barry

It seems fairly clear that urban America is moving rapidly toward some new forms of social and political organization where social policy can be thought through and threshed out in the local community and in some degree implemented there as well, rather than by large and remote city-city wide structures of officialdom, public and private. In New York City we are witnessing the beginnings of what might be called the suburbanization of the inner city, not that Harlem is going to be like Scarsdale, but that Harlem and East Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant and the Lower East Side and the South Bronx are feeling their way toward new semi-political structures that are as close to and as responsive to the local citizenry as is suburban politics, and can make and enforce decisions on matters as wide-ranging as school curriculum, police protection, welfare policies, type of housing to be built, garbage collection and employment practices in local business. A great deal of the impetus for this comes from the indignant victims of city policies that have worked to the disadvantage of the poor and has been sparked by the demonstration by civil rights groups that it is possible for powerless people to influence powerful social structures. A new ingredient, however, is the deliberate support of such experimental community based approaches by the federal government, which seems to have recognized both the national dimensions of the urban problem and the essential role that local community leadership must play in the solution of their own problems. The role of the city government has been one of timid permissiveness, with a careful eye on where the old and new political winds might be blowing.

While these new neighborhood forms are still extremely young and experimental, some city officials are looking so far ahead politically that they are planning how to deal with the situation that will exist when the communities of the poor are so well organized that they have quick and easy access to those who determine city policy and allocate resources, while the communities that up to now have considered themselves favored find themselves low on the priority list for public services, and there results a new kind of backlash. I cannot be this sanguine about the rapid success of these new efforts, but at least the politicians now take them seriously.

It is yet to be seen whether the church will take them seriously. That the church is and will be involved in what is happening is inevitable and not a matter of choice. The church is involved because it is the most universal form of neighborhood-based voluntary institution in our society, and whatever happens to the neighborhood (parish) affects the life of the church, as thousands of studies have shown. We have tended to think of mission strategy in communities of poverty as the strategy of the intervening do-gooder from outside, but that has never been an effective strategy in community "uplift" and today is being consciously rejected by the communities themselves. The real question for mission strategy is how neighborhood churches, singly or together, will relate (or fail to relate) to emerging community strategies and how the mission structures of the

church will equip clergy, staff and parishioners to make the gospel relevant to what is happening. It is a question of equal importance to those communions who believe the church is called into the world and those who believe the church must call its people out of the world, for in either case it sets the terms on which the encounter of church and world takes place.

I would like in this session, then, to ask some questions and suggest some answers.

Question 1. Should the national agencies of the churches develop specific policies in regard to the role of the church in community organization and community development?

Most emphatically yes. This is too important a matter for the churches to fly blind, and so far as I know no major group has stated policy here, unless drift and hand-wringing can be described as policy. We seem to agree that the churches have something to say about national, state and city policies. They have the same responsibility when it comes to the polity of community life. And policy must deal both with the question of the worth of different kinds of community organization and the specific role a communion should expect its local institutions to play.

Question 2. What kinds of community organization should the churches support?

This of course is a major part of the explicit and implicit agenda of this consultation, and I shall only reveal my own biases in descriptive terms. I think we should support community organization that is in the fullest sense democratic in that it allows the people most directly affected to state to their own priorities and concerns rather than have others state them on their behalf. I think we believe in community organization that places a high priority on human humane values as distinct from those chiefly preoccupied with efficiency, order and technological progress. I think we support methods which deal with the fundamental ills of urban life, particularly the uneven distribution of such fundamental needs as education, employment, and housing, rather than methods which deal with symptoms of urban failure, I think we support organization which fulfills individual human needs rather than that which only keeps people in line. I think we support variety and heterogeneity and individual initiative and voluntary effort rather than neatly packaged conformity. I think we work toward reconciliation, even if we must accept and be involved in conflict along the way as a necessary ingredient of change. All these may be falsely stated alternatives, but they reveal how I for one would stack the deck in evaluating differing forms of community organization. And it should be said, of course, that communities are as unique as individual men, and there can be no rigid universal formulas that apply to all communities.

Question 3. If we have clear policies, how do we equip the churches to implement them?

The answers to this question are all at hand in the present

life of the church, but have never been systematically applied to this question. Seminaries need to take account of the need for training prospective clergymen to be alert and informed in this aspect of their ministry. Research departments should study this field as vigorously as they do new housing developments. The whole gamut of tools for the "continued education" of the minister are applicable here -- seminars, workshops, conferences, refresher courses, convocations, in-service training. We could use numerous internes. Judicatories need to put this matter into committees and on judicatory agendas. And all the same comments apply to the training of the laity, with all the methods we now use in evangelism, stewardship, Christian education. And no form of education is as effective as involvement, especially involvement informed by regular reflection on the theological meaning of what is happening.

Question 4. Do the churches need specialized staff in community organization, as they have in social work or research or medical missions?

My personal answer to this is yes, but this needs to be spelled out. Active as a local church and its ministry might be in community organization, it seems very doubtful that the church itself should be the organizational vehicle of community organization, and by the same logic, a parish minister in his vocation can be supportive of community organization, but should not himself be the community organizer in a staff sense. It seems equally doubtful that a denominational office should staff a local process of community organization, except as a contribution to a community without strings attached, for a denomination has an inevitably limited capacity to represent a community. Further, the denominations with mission budgets to provide staff are typically small minorities in the inner-city communities where most of today's ferment is occurring. Councils of churches are also a somewhat questionable locus for such staff, because control of councils is characteristically exerted from the top down, or from the center outward, rather than from the geographic community whose interests are at stake.

Community organization staff, I think, should be strictly accountable to the community, in all its aspects, including the churches, which should be one among a number of kinds of groupings helping to support community organization. Beyond this, however, there promises to be a real need for a new kind of staff who should be supported by mission funds or local church budgets, and this is staff specifically delegated the responsibility of relating the programs of the churches to programs of community organization and development in specific communities. I have no name to propose for such staff (we have called them church-community co-ordinators), but it is clear they should be church-related, financed independently of community development programs, and working full-time on the problem of making the ministry and mission of the church relevant to what is going on in the community. "Relevance" may mean participation in some programs, critically evaluating others, mobilizing the laity, or many other yet unperceived functions. It certainly means getting the church involved, as a body of people who care for their neighbors and are hopefully without a vested interest other than that God's redemptive activity shall go forward in this community. It is also clear to me that such staff should be primarily

responsible to whatever is the indigenous leadership of the churches in that community, even if their paychecks come from a mission organization with another denominational label.

I am sure this sounds confusing, and I need to illustrate. In Central Harlem, for example, the community development program is under the auspices of HARYOU-ACT, a government-funded agency. I believe we urgently need a highly competent staff person to relate the Harlem churches to HARYOU-ACT and ARYOU-ACT to the Harlem churches. I believe that his salary should be paid by the churches, not by HARYOU-ACT. An finally, I believe that even if his salary should come from the Presbyterian Board of National Missions, he will need to spend the largest segment of his time with churches of the National Baptist Conventions and take his directives from the most effective Harlem churches, whatever their denomination.

Question 5. What will this kind of involvement do to our traditional patterns of mission work?

It may destroy some of them. It will certainly hasten the day when the unrealistic distinction between missionary and service programs on the one hand and Christian social action programs on the other will disappear. There will be less emphasis on program that bind up wounds caused by unjust social patterns and more on making urban society work as God intended it to for human fulfillment. People who have been solely the objects of missionary concern will begin to have a voice in policy-making. The focus of mission policy may begin to shift away from institutions to people, to families in homes and citizens in neighborhoods. The church may find itself much more deeply involved in political life, because so many decisions about community polity are now being made by government and tax-supported services are bound to increase. Concepts of charity and benevolence will continue to give way to concepts of elementary human rights in an affluent democratic society. And the churches will more and more be required to state their Christian beliefs about how society can be best ordered to serve human dignity and decency, and their actions will be tested against these statements.

And obviously all this opens up tremendous new vistas for evangelism. For to move in this direction means to move into the center of human life where it is lived and will be lived in tomorrow's urban world, to move from preoccupation with institutions and forms to humanity's daily preoccupation with life and purpose, to serve rather than cajole or entice, to bring the sacramental role of the church into the life man lives with his neighbor. The servanthood of the church becomes part of the community's experience at the most critical points in community life, and not words about what some one else is doing. The church thus moves to where the decisions are made about man's life in this world, and takes all the risks that this move entails.

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