

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AS EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL WITNESS
A Position Paper

The Report of the Ohio Synod Study Commission clearly indicates that both evangelism and social witness are basically the proclamation of the good news of God's act of reconciliation through Jesus Christ. One of the means of this proclamation is the corporate body of the Church, both to individuals and to the total society.

As one means of proclamation, the Department of Evangelism and Social Witness will deploy resources of staff and program funds in support of ecumenical programs and projects that will give a total Church witness and the seeking of justice and equality for all men.

It is the contention of this Position Paper on Community Organization that community organization is an appropriate means of expressing the judicatories' concern for justice and its challenge to minister to persons as individual children of God.

Community Organization Defined

Community Organization as it was originally developed in America, was defined as a process of developing democratic organizations through which all citizens and groups in a geographical area might determine the priority of their need and influence the decisions being made about them and their area.¹

In recent years, Community Organization has also been defined as a process whereby community resources are organized to meet community needs. This more recent definition of community organization lays stress on joint action by existing agencies and groups in a geographical area to better coordinate, plan, finance and initiate services for the people living in the area. Usually, on the policy level at least, a majority of the participants are professional social workers, businessmen, political leaders and social agency board personnel.² Frequently, and usually intentionally, this form of community organization has led to both the paternalistic management of the lives of community residents by non-resident professionals and the subsequent increase of dependency and intensification of alienation on the part of community residents.

The original definition of Community Organization as democratic organizing of community residents is intended in this Position Paper.

¹Dodson, Dan W., "Does C. O. Process Preserve and Enhance Dignity of the Individual?" National Council of Churches.

²Stroup, Herbert H., Social Work, New York American Book Co., 1948, Ch. 14.

The Situation of Excluded People

Large numbers of people living in the State of Ohio are not fully sharing in the decisions made about matters which affect both their lives and the lives of their communities. These persons, who are the cultural and ethnic minorities, are immobilized in ghettos with either no hope or a festering frustration of hoping in vain. These are the problem communities, the pockets of poverty. These communities have high rates of almost everything we measure statistically, but not success or affluence.³ Frequently, these communities do have leaders, but these leaders are accountable to outside interests rather than to the people who live in the community.

The people living in the communities are often outside of any social, business, labor, political, welfare or even religious establishment. They are "counted, served, recruited, planned for, discussed and talked to, but are not involved in any meaningful way in our society."⁴ They have no power for self-determination. They are, in effect, excluded communities where residents have little voice in the decisions that affect their lives. Usually, these communities have the high crime rates, high rates of mental illness, sometimes widespread violence, and other forms of social pathology. These are the symptoms: the primary cause is their lack of power for self-determination. It is worth noting that the 1966 riots in Ohio occurred in areas of cities where there was little or no opportunity for people without hope to have the power to express their just grievances and achieve social change through their own community organizations.⁵ It is also worth noting that recent riots in Chicago, Detroit, and other cities did not occur in the worst slum areas where effective community organizations, spawned by Christian churches, have been able to provide structure through which powerless people are gaining power to create for themselves a new climate.

Community Organization: Fulfillment of the Democratic Tradition

In scores of communities throughout the United States, the development of broadly based community organization has helped thousands of people to pass from apathy to meaning, from tragedy to vision. These are community organizations where previously excluded citizens have begun, in the democratic tradition of America, to have a voice in the decisions that determine their lives through citizen participation within the democratic process. The organizations provide structures through which despairing people can themselves begin to build a life of dignity and hope.

The value of effective community organization goes beyond its potential success in fighting injustice and achieving better housing, schools, jobs, etc. Another significant value is its potential for radically changing the lives of people. It can be a means by which excluded persons can gain a new self-

³Ramage, David J., "Community Organization with Indigenous Neighborhood Groups," Board of National Missions.

⁴Ibid., p. 2

⁵Cleveland Plain Dealer, September 3, 1966---The Assistant City Manager of Dayton, Ohio noted that "Significantly, there are no active council groups in the riot neighborhoods."

image of dignity and worth and can gain a new posture by which to evaluate themselves. Community Organization can be a means by which voiceless persons can enter into the main stream of American life as creative contributors to their lives as well as the society in which they live.

The Church as Initiator

The responsibility of the Church of Jesus Christ, in obedience to the Gospel, has always included involvement with the poor, the oppressed and deprived.⁶ Corporately, Christians have been able to respond to the love of God in Christ and God's concern for justice by expressing love of man and concern for justice among men through the Church.

Community Organization provides the Church with the opportunity to both aid in the process of social change to achieve justice and help people to "come closer in fully developing the potential which the Creator has placed in each human being. Through the use of the community organization process people are able to grow, to gain a new dignity, and to become effective participants in the decision-making process which affect their own lives."⁷

The Church has a unique opportunity to serve as initiator of many community organization projects in under-represented communities. The Church is the one institution which can be most self-critical of its motives as it helps people organize themselves around their own concerns and goals. Other forces in our society are able and eager to organize people; however, they initially or eventually begin to become self-centered and use people to achieve their own ends. Really effective community organization must be initiated and supported with "no strings attached." Church support of community organization activities can and should be motivated by a desire to respond to human needs rather than to serve its own institutional interests.

Dr. Joseph Haroutunian, of the Chicago Theological Seminary has clearly explicated the necessity for the churches support of efforts which succeed in gaining influence for the under-represented and generally exploited citizen:

"...The Churches, severally and through Federations or Councils, have cooperated with the 'secular agencies' in improving the lot of the unfortunates among us. Such work shall doubtless go on, and it shall remain a major expression of humanity among Christians. However, humanitarian zeal is a perilous affair. Insofar as the humanitarian excels in pity and prudence rather than in self-criticism, he is less than just and therefore less than human. Insofar as his benevolence presupposes a right to his material advantage and even his moral superiority, it confuses his duty as understood in the light of the commandment 'Thou shall love thy neighbor as thyself!' Thus, while the poor are fed and sick provided with medical attention, human dignity suffers and community life remains impoverished and diseased.

⁶Luke 4: 18f, etc.

⁷Schaller, Lyle E., Community Organization: Conflict and Reconciliation, Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1966, p. 25.

The distinction between the privileged and the under-privileged become sharp and permanent, and the latter are continually frustrated in their yearning for freedom and opportunity. Thus, good is turned into evil, and authentic community and personal life alike are thwarted.

Hence, 'social service' cannot be separated from cooperation with the 'lower classes' toward the increase of economic and political power among them...the 'lower classes' in our country are as determined as those anywhere to achieve the power requisite for their freedom and prosperity. They are being organized for their welfare and have already achieved great gains toward equality. It must be obvious that in principle the organized power of those who have in the past been underprivileged is salutary for the whole of our society. Community means common dignity, which means common freedom and power. The Christian must therefore be in sympathy with the extension of power into all of our society, and he must cooperate with any movement toward a maximum distribution of political and economic power. The chronic antipathy of many Christians in our land toward underprivileged minorities making a bid for power is a sign of failure in the churches to realize both humanity and community. It is time that this antipathy be overcome and that Christians strengthen the arm of all those who are seeking to escape inferiority among us. It is needless to add that unless humanity be exercised at home, it cannot be exercised abroad."⁸

The Role of the Judiciary

The Department of Evangelism and Social Witness, Synod of Ohio, recognizes the community organization process as a method of evangelism and social witness in the State of Ohio. It is an appropriate means of expressing the judicatories' concern for justice and its challenge to minister to persons as individual children of God.

The Synod of Ohio, Department of Evangelism and Social Witness, proposes to use a portion of its resources to help initiate and support democratic community organization projects in communities of the State where the need is most acute. These resources may include staff time, program monies, institutes or community organization and public support for attempts by excluded people to organize, to help themselves, and to have their voices heard.

Principles of Support

The Department of Evangelism and Social Witness will deploy available resources to support democratic Community Organizations and to encourage Church involvement in the process of ways consistent with the following principles:

⁸"The Person in the Community", Joseph Haroutunian, in The Church and Social Responsibility by J. Richard Spann, Abingdon Press, 1953, p. 53.

1. We give priority for our support to community organization which is supported ecumenically.
2. We believe that community organizations should seek to be fiscally independent of all outside support, including Church support, within a few years.
3. We support community organization that is in the fullest sense democratic in that it allows the people most directly affected to state their own priorities and concerns rather than rely on others to state them on their behalf.
4. We believe in community organization that places a high priority on personal values as distinct from those chiefly preoccupied with efficiency, order and technological progress.
5. We support action which deals with the fundamental ills of modern life, particularly the uneven distribution of such fundamental needs as education, employment, and housing, rather than action which deals only with symptoms of social failure.⁹
6. We give priority for our support to community organizations that seek to organize intensively in a specific geographical area, rather than in a total metropolitan area or urban region.

Adopted by Synod of Ohio Dec. 2, 1966

⁹ Principles 3, 4, and 5 are excerpted from "The Church and Community Organization", a position paper of the General Department of Mission Strategy and Development, and approved by both the Board of National Missions and the 178th General Assembly.