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Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God's work. Our hands.

Study guide

Bearing witness through community organizing

By Robert C. Blezard

Many established Lutheran congregations face the challenge of reconnecting with their communities, which have changed dramatically since the churches were founded. And nearly all need to work harder to not just preach the gospel to their neighbors, but to embody and reach out with the daring, liberating, countercultural gospel of Jesus Christ in spirit and deed. Community organizing offers a model of achieving both.

Exercise 1: Connection

Jesus perplexed the religious authorities of his day in his dealings with people. In Matthew 9:10-11 (and elsewhere in the Gospels), the Pharisees question why he chooses to hang out with sinners. Discuss:

- What does it say about the Pharisees that they *didn't* associate with sinners, or even see any reason why they should?
- If a religious group chooses not to associate with certain types of people, how can God's people know their stories, needs, hopes, desires and challenges? By necessity, what will God's people's relationship with those excluded folks be like?
- In walking with "sinners," how does Jesus establish connection? How does this connection exemplify the gospel?
- Who are the people your congregation needs to reach out to? What are the barriers that have kept you separated? How can you break down those barriers?

Exercise 2: Liberation

Everywhere he went, Jesus worked to free people from oppression, not only from the power of sin and death, but also social constraints, economic systems and especially religious ideas. Read John 8:1-11 and discuss:

- What is the central issue in this story? Why do they want to stone the woman? The woman was found "in the very act" of adultery, so her partner is known. Why is *he* not brought forward for stoning too?
- Why does Jesus give the Pharisees an answer that skirts the Bible's



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legal remedy for adultery? What case could the Pharisees credibly make that Jesus is anti-law of Moses, anti-Bible, anti-religion, anti-authority and a heretic? Describe the ways in which the woman is the victim of religious oppression. How did Jesus free her not only from her sin, but also from that oppression?

- Who are the people in our country and in your community who may feel oppressed and excluded by social norms? By some Christian groups? Why might they feel this way? How can your congregation reach out to them?

Exercise 3: God's concern

Using an online Bible concordance, search the keywords "widow," "orphan," "foreigner" and "poor." Discuss:

- What is the consistent message that God gives about how faithful people are to regard and treat these groups of people? What do these groups of people have in common? Do they tend to have power? Money? Status? Are they more or less likely than others to be victims of oppression and despair? Why does the Bible repeat these messages again and again? What does it say about God's priorities?
- Who are the forgotten, powerless and poor people in our country and your community? Who are the least of those among us? How and why are they often forgotten and powerless? How can your congregation reach out to them?

Exercise 4: Partners

Many congregations are finding they can get more done when they partner with others—whether it's running a vacation Bible school with a neighboring church, building homes with Habitat for Humanity or teaching English as a second language with a refugee agency.

Why are these partnerships good for the community? Good for the congregation? Good for the partner agencies? How do they help the congregation to be a stronger, more integrated part of the community?

Make a list of the religious and civic organizations in your community. What kind of work do they do? How could your congregation collaborate to help them with their mission? How could they collaborate with your congregation to help with its mission? What's holding you back? Make an action plan and give it to your church leaders for consideration.

Exercise 5: Ministry with

Some congregations and organizations have wonderful ministries that



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serve the needs of others, but the ministries don't promote interaction or deeper relationship between the people serving and those being served. This model is a "ministry for" others. By contrast, ministries that serve others while also promoting interaction and relationship follow a model of "ministry with."

Brainstorm the benefits of "ministry with" as opposed to "ministry for." How is it good for both those who are serving as well as those who are served? Which model did Jesus exemplify? Can you give some examples from the Gospels?

List your congregation's ministries. Which are "ministry for" and which are "ministry with"? How could your congregation do a better job orienting yourselves to "ministry with?"

Exercise 6: God's work

Every September the ELCA encourages Lutherans to spend one Sunday doing community service projects under the theme "God's work. Our hands."

- How has your congregation joined the effort? (What are you going to do *this* year?) What kind of projects have other Lutheran congregations in your synod done?
- How do these projects help build community connections? Why is that good?
- Looking at the theme, why is all we do "God's work"? Why does God need or desire "our hands" to achieve it?

Exercise 7: Three great listenings

The ELCA teaches that mission planning begins with "three great listenings": listening to God through Scripture and prayer; listening to the community outside your doors; listening within the household of faith. Discuss:

- How would you rate your congregation on how well it achieves each "listening," and why? What evidence or stories support your rating? How can it do better?
- Why is it important to listen to your community? How do you best do that? What are some action steps that can help your congregation listen better or more fully to your neighbors?

Exercise 8: Intentional listening

To get and keep in touch with its community, Luther Place in Washington, D.C., did an "intentional listening campaign"—going out to meet



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people to hear their concerns, hopes, dreams, challenges and joys. One way to do this is to empower and train members of your congregation to seek out and spend time with people from your wider community. The emphasis is not on getting them to come to church, but rather learning their stories, challenges, hopes and dreams. Luther Place used that information to help its congregation reconnect with the community and neighbors.

- How would it affect church life if your congregation ran such a campaign?
- What are some other ways you could listen to your community?

Exercise 9: Love our neighbor

In Mark 12:28-31 (and elsewhere), Jesus identifies loving God and loving neighbor as the two most important commandments. Discuss:

- Why is love for neighbor so important?
- How can you love your neighbors if you don't have a relationship with them?
- How does community organizing help us establish, maintain and strengthen relationships with our neighbors?
- How can the command to love our neighbors as ourselves be a principle to guide, inspire or direct your congregation's efforts for community organizing?

Exercise 10: Community needs

From the quality of public schools to the effectiveness of local government, from the safety of our streets to the cleanliness of parks and playgrounds, every community faces challenges and needs. And, of course, some neighborhoods of our community have more challenges than others.

- What are the most pressing needs or challenges of your community? Think of these areas: education, crime, policing, infrastructure (roads, bridges, water, sewer, etc.), transportation, cleanliness, water quality, air quality, access to medical care, jobs, availability of quality food (fresh fruits and vegetables), blight, graffiti, litter, recreational opportunities, and availability and condition of parks and other public spaces. In which neighborhoods are those needs most evident (and why)?
- What are the most pressing relational issues in your community, including acceptance of people of other religions, racial or ethnic tensions, language barriers, immigration and presence of gangs?

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- How can your congregation walk with those who are facing these issues?

Exercise 11: Collective action

It's one thing to know the needs and problems of your community, but it's another to work together to solve them. Given the discussion of needs above, how can your congregation work with the community to solve them? For which problems would the following solutions work?

- Band together to demand that local (or state) government do something to fix the issue.
- Form work groups to put time and toil into solving the issue.
- Use the church as a community center to bring people together for education, training, fellowship and organizing.
- Form a coalition with civic groups, government agencies and business leaders to work together on the issue.

If you did any or all of these things, as appropriate, what would that say about your congregation? How might it affect congregational life? How might it improve your neighborhood? Your congregation?

In the rapidly changing
landscape in which
the church finds itself,
congregations and leaders
are looking for strategies,
practices and tools to live out
our mission of being church
for the sake of the world.

In attempting to relate the liberating power of the gospel to the devastating effects of racism, economic inequality, the environmental crisis and other forms of structural injustice, congregations are drawing on and adapting the principles and practices of community organizing to build relationships with their neighbors to transform their communities.

ELCA congregations have a long history of involvement in congregation-based organizing as an effective way for people of faith to take collective action to address the larger causes of the pressures they and their communities face each day. Those involved in community organizing who are motivated by their faith see it as a way of bearing witness to the transforming power of God's love through Jesus.

Scholar and social activist Cornel West reminds us that justice is what love looks like in public, and those involved in faith-rooted organizing take their cue from Jesus' public and prophetic ministry in Galilee.

The story of Jesus most of us learned and internalized early in life is an abbreviated version that says he died for our sins and was raised from the dead so we might have eternal life. What is missing from this account is context. The canonical Gospels provide the context for interpreting the significance of Jesus' life, death and resurrection by connecting them to his ministry in Galilee and his trial and execution in Jerusalem. Jesus emerged initially in his own Galilean community as a prophet concerned with the renewal of village life.

Bearing witness through community organizing

By Raymond Pickett

In the language of community organizing, the Gospels portray Jesus' proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God in terms of the world as it is versus the world as it should be, ordered according to God's purpose. For a variety of reasons we have come to interpret the story of Jesus through an individualistic lens as the saving of souls and deliverance from personal sin. But throughout Scripture salvation refers to rescue from present danger or liberation from oppression, and the language of sin in many instances refers to structural evil.

The numerous healings and exorcisms show Jesus restoring bodies and minds suffering the effects of colonization. Although the exorcisms are performed on individuals, they were symptomatic of internalized oppression that was the consequence of the domination and control of social and political space. From a community organizing perspective, these accounts raise the question of the cause(s) of such profound human suffering and social disintegration.

The fact that from the outset of Jesus' ministry these "deeds of power," as they are referred to in the Gospels, bring him into conflict with religious and political authorities indicates that he posed a challenge to a status quo that benefited a small ruling elite at the expense of the majority of people. Reading the Gospel narratives through the lens of community organizing requires that we pay close attention to the contextual issues that people struggled with both then and now, and ask questions about the dynamics of power at work.




“Jesus Teaching by the Seashore” by James J. Tissot (1836-1902); French watercolor on paper.

As a prophet, Jesus challenged bureaucratic authority because the needs of the people were neglected. But the more constructive aspect of his prophetic ministry was gathering and galvanizing people around the compelling vision of justice first articulated by the Hebrew prophets.

In his classic book on the prophets, Rabbi Abraham Heschel observed that the prophets “do not speak of a divine relationship to an absolute principle or idea called justice. They are intoxicated with the awareness of God’s relationship with the people. Justice is relational, and injustice is condemned not

because the law is broken, but because a person has been hurt.”

Justice can be defined in a variety of ways, but in Scripture it’s a relational term that connotes being rightly related to God and neighbor. Jesus identified the two greatest commandments as love of God and neighbor (Deuteronomy 6:5, Leviticus 19:18, Mark 12:28-32). Those involved in faith-rooted community organizing see it as a practical strategy for building relationships with our neighbors so, through the power of the Spirit, we can act together in concert to work for a world ordered according to God’s purpose. 



Pickett is a professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Taking on issues that matter

By Susan Engh



Photo: Keyron Augutyw

Members of Shekinah Chapel in Riverdale, Ill., partner with the Greater Chicago Food Depository to provide nutritious food to residents through monthly Producemobile visits.

Every time it rains in Riverdale, Ill., the basements of homes, churches and schools are filled with sewage, overflowing into the streets and alleys. The sewer systems on the city's north side, which haven't been replaced since before the Great Depression, don't meet the demands of the current population.

Shekinah Chapel, an ELCA congregation, helped start a community organization to hold elected officials accountable for the sewers and other quality of life issues in Riverdale. Due to Riverdale Organizing for Change, residents were finally able to say, publicly and collectively, "We deserve better."

Shekinah moved from Chicago's South Side to Riverdale in 2006. At first the congregation offered a variety of its signature ministries in hopes they would appeal to Riverdale residents: contemporary and hip hop worship, arts programming, food and clothing pantries and youth mentoring. But these generated little interest.

It was only when Shekinah's leaders started to collaborate with a community organizing network that change started to happen. Together they conducted a door-to-door listening campaign and invited neighbors into one-on-one conversations.

"In a six-month period we did about 250 relational meetings, and we learned something very valuable about the community," said Yehiel Curry, Shekinah's pastor. "We learned that they didn't care about our contemporary worship service, about our love for the arts, about our knowledge of food pantries, about our dedication to youth mentoring,

about our community meals. What they cared about were the sewers in Riverdale."

Since moving to Riverdale, Shekinah's worship attendance has increased from the original 35 people to an average of 125. Membership from the immediate neighborhood has grown from 5 to 30 percent. Shekinah leaders credit this growth with a willingness to engage with the neighborhood, taking on issues that matter to residents' daily lives.

Today Shekinah provides residents with access to nutritious food through monthly Producemobile visits in partnership with the Greater Chicago Food Depository. With the help of volunteers, the bus distributes fresh produce to 200 families each month.

But this program is just a temporary fix in a neighborhood that lacks access to nutritious food options. Curry dreams that one day residents will open a food cooperative that would give them a sense of ownership and self-determination in a community that is otherwise subject to the whims of outside ownership.

Shekinah leaders understand that the ministry they do in Riverdale is right in line with Jesus' ministry. They, like Jesus, put themselves into relationship with their neighbors by listening, naming and taking collective public action on the injustices that diminish their lives. The congregation gathers for worship and organizes, so the abundant life God intends might be realized in their community.

Doing what Jesus wants us to do

When Lynn Hauger Anselm, a member of Trinity Lutheran Church in Palmer, Alaska, attended a four-day training in community organizing conducted by Anchorage Faith & Action Congregations Together (AFACT), she left feeling energized and inspired. She especially liked connecting with people from diverse geographic contexts and faith traditions.

Anselm said she participated because “these principles are in keeping with our congregation’s genuine concern for the surrounding community. It’s not a church that is content with simply catering to its existing membership.” This is what attracted Anselm to her congregation in the first place.

Trinity members like Anselm, along with their pastor Diane Krauszer, recently helped launch a faith-based community organizing effort in the Mat-Su Valley region of Alaska. They did so in partnership with 11 other churches of various denominations.

Since Trinity members are so new to community organizing, they’ve been focusing on working with a newly hired community organizer to put together their Local Organizing Committee (LOC).

This team will help the congregation put the principles of organizing into practice for the sake of congregational vitality and renewed engagement with their community.

Krauszer said an organizing approach to ministry “means doing what Jesus wants us to do: [to] empower people, make life better for us and our neighbors, and build authentic relationships.”

So far members of Trinity’s LOC have conducted more than 40 one-on-one relational meetings, mostly with other members of the congregation but also with some residents. The issues cropping up in conversations have to do with inadequate housing, senior services, mental health resources and handicap accessibility at their church building. Next they plan to discern which issues they might be able to address. Then, as a congregation and with community partners, they will work to determine how best to take action, Krauszer said.

Anselm and Krauszer hope this effort will create a greater sense of vitality in the congregation. In a broader sense, Krauszer said she hopes people—members and neighbors alike—will recognize an alternate narrative about the church.

The current narrative tends to convey a restrictive, exclusive, judgmental attitude, she said. Instead, through congregation-based community organizing, Trinity hopes to bear witness to God’s abundance, inclusion, caring relationships and action for the greater good.

Photos: Pastor Diane Krauszer



Left: Members of Trinity Lutheran in Palmer, Alaska, harvest potatoes from the church’s community garden. Vegetables are harvested weekly and delivered to the local food pantry.



Right: Trinity member Shirley Platt prepares to spend the night in her cardboard home during Cardboard City, a national event to increase awareness of homelessness and to raise funds for local organizations.

Photo courtesy of Luther Place Memorial Church



Ministry with neighbors

Working with the Washington Interfaith Network, Carol Ann Newgent (left) and Amanda Lindamood go door-to-door in their ward to find out what issues people care about and to increase voter turnout in the upcoming election.

Four summers ago, Luther Place Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., developed an arts-based summer camp for Latino families. Intentional listening in their neighborhood connected the congregation with parents and members who planned, dreamed and ultimately led a successful camp that continues today.

The idea of doing ministry with neighbors as opposed to doing service for them has been embedded in this congregation's way of operating from its beginnings, said its pastor, Karen Brau. Because of this, a less hierarchical leadership model emerged at Luther Place. This year the congregation will add a worship component to its camp, realizing the dreams of a core group of members and neighborhood leaders.

Luther Place is part of a historically working-class community that is now changing in economics and demographics. Those moving in are mostly young, affluent Caucasians, but there are still significant numbers of Latino immigrants and African-Americans who traditionally have lived there. For longtime residents, the pace of development means less affordability, disappearing community institutions and an inability to benefit from the fruits of development.

Brau said a prevailing cultural trend promotes a rapid pace, independence-oriented, do-it-yourself approach in this area, but this doesn't build community or the body of Christ. Instead it tends to perpetuate white privilege and racial inequity in terms of who makes decisions and who is at the center of communal life, she said. This is where the congregation's adherence to the principles of community organizing comes into play.

Luther Place doesn't want to lose the vibrancy of its neighborhood, nor do members want their neighbors' access to the abundant life that God intends to be compromised. So they seek relationships and partner with people being pushed to the margins. They also know that relating to and

engaging with new residents is part of God's call to the church. These challenges led the congregation to begin leadership development and intentional listening campaigns.

One of those partners is resident Silvia Inez Salazar. "When my affordable housing co-op achieved our goal of purchasing our building, we realized that gentrification in Logan Circle had quickly passed us by. For the 83 diverse working families that have lived in the building for decades, we questioned whether or not we still belonged in the neighborhood," she said. "Along the way we were blessed enough to meet members of Luther Place ... and explored ways to partner and reaffirm our sense of belonging.

"Events such as SoulFiesta, summer camp, holiday celebrations and the craft collective proved instrumental in our organizing work. We now have a renewed sense of community fellowship and are partnering with Luther Place on organizing a child care cooperative that is led by Latina immigrants."

In her work, Brau said she adheres to the prophetic tradition that runs throughout Scripture, in which Jesus also operated. "True prophets are always exposed to conflict. Organizing provides guidance through such times," she said. "Organizing fosters a community of prophets that identify with a particular time and place around which they are operating. But while prophets often can be right, making something new and good happen out of the truth they proclaim, that's harder. That's what organizing gives us the capacity to do."

The congregation plans to continue organizing around immigration issues and their neighbors' legal status, struggles that limit people's access to basic and quality-of-life resources. They also will continue working through the Washington Interfaith Network (WIN)—their community organizing group—which is addressing homelessness and the lack of affordable housing in the area.

Called to redemptive, resurrecting activity

Leaven Community members join with their organizing network at city hall to advocate for affordable housing in Portland.

Photo: Melissa Reed



Like many cities, Portland, Ore., grapples with a lack of affordable housing. Members of Salt and Light Lutheran Church recently worked with the Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good (MACG), a community organizing group, to address the issue. Their efforts included listening sessions in their neighborhood, inviting worshipers to share their stories related to housing, attendance at city council meetings and phone calls to city commissioners.

As a result, Portland officials voted to increase the percentage of tax increment financing used to create affordable housing from the proposed 30 to 45 percent. Over the next 10 years, \$67 million in government funds will be used to build 670 units of affordable housing in the city.

This is just one of several organizing campaigns members of the Salt and Light have participated in through MACG.

Melissa Reed, Salt and Light's pastor, believes organizing activates people's imaginations around what's possible. It starts when they hear about or participate in the small and large victories won by ordinary people like them who come together to act collectively, she said.


The congregation is the "Lutheran, Christian, liturgical component" of a larger nonprofit organization called Leaven Community, Reed said. The congregation shares its leadership and physical space with Leaven Community and Reed works closely with LaVeta Gilmore-Jones, its community organizer. Together they continue a long tradition of involvement with faith-based community organizing started by the former Redeemer Lutheran Church, out of whose building and legacy the current community now operates.

For these two groups, community organizing is vital, its leaders contend, because they listen to and

address the broad and deep questions that people around them are asking about their day-to-day lives.

"We need to come home and learn to live here and now. It's not enough to tolerate or live next to folks, but we must continue to engage with and accompany one another," said a resident and Leaven participant who goes by the name Murph. "As [we] continue to listen, observe, discern and act, I plan to show up when I can, in the capacity I can, because we all need and deserve to be known, held and feel that folks have our backs."

Two principles of community organizing have had a deep impact on the faith community, both of which have helped them be about systemic change: The first is creating a relational culture through one-on-one meetings. People are comfortable with and accustomed to sharing their stories. The other is intentional leadership development. Each identified leader in the community has a ministry partner. Usually one person is more experienced and the other is newer in the role. The community constantly looks for and creates opportunities for people to lead.

For Reed, community organizing intersects with her theology since "organizing offers a framework and processes by which relationships can happen and be sustained. God dwells profoundly with the wounds of the world, bringing redemption to those wounds and resurrection to the death-making ways of the world. We are called ... to join God in this redemptive and resurrecting activity." 

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Engh, an ELCA pastor, serves as ELCA director for congregation-based community organizing.