

## Interfaith Community Organizing: Emerging Theological and Organizational Challenges

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### Abstract

Interfaith work in the United States takes diverse forms: from grass-roots collaboration on projects such as feeding the homeless, to locally-sponsored interfaith dialogues, collaborations sponsored by national denominational bodies and shared work on federal 'faith-based initiatives'. This article profiles the characteristics and dynamics of a particular type of interfaith work, done under the rubric of 'broad-based', 'faith-based' or 'congregation-based' community organizing. For reasons detailed below, we term this form of interfaith and religious-secular collaboration 'institution-based community organizing'. By drawing on results from a national survey of all local institution-based community organizations active in the United States in 2011, this article documents the significance of the field, its broadly interfaith profile, how it incorporates religious practices into organizing, and the opportunities and challenges that religious diversity presents to its practitioners and to North American society.<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

interfaith, organizing, institution-based community organizing, United States, national survey, religious practices

Contemporary community organizing in the United States draws from a variety of figures in the history of grass-roots American democracy, including Jane Addams, Saul Alinsky, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King Jr, and from union organizing and the movements for civil rights of African Americans,

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<sup>1</sup> The 2011 census study was sponsored by Interfaith Funders and carried out by researchers at Duke University, USA and the University of New Mexico, USA.

women and Hispanics. Ed Chambers of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) pioneered early elements of organizing based explicitly in community institutions, primarily but not exclusively religious congregations.<sup>2</sup> Today, most institution-based community organizing efforts in the US are affiliated with a sponsoring network; nationally, these include the IAF, the PICO National Network, the Gamaliel Foundation and National People's Action (the last of which practices both institution-based and individual-based organizing). Important regional US networks include Direct Action Research Training (DART) in the southeast and mid-west, Inter-Valley Project (IVP) in New England and the Regional Council of Neighborhood Organizations (RCNO) in California. A smaller number of organizations doing institution-based work exist independently of the networks.<sup>3</sup> Although each of the above efforts, whether network-affiliated or independent, has developed its own organizing model, they remain sufficiently similar to justify treating them as a field; all having been built with institutions as their foundation, and their 'toolkits' of organizing practices overlap considerably.

Institution-based community organizations (IBCOs) demonstrate a growing capacity to produce outcomes that deviate from major social trends. Amidst evidence that North American society is becoming increasingly fragmented, IBCOs bring people together across racial, class, religious and ideological lines. As rising inequality and deteriorating quality of life continue to diminish the power of disadvantaged people, IBCOs provide a vehicle for reducing inequality by consolidating power among the people. As elites and lobbyists dominate the political arena, IBCOs generate substantial political power among under-represented communities. Finally, even though the media often highlight conflicts between (and within) religion traditions, IBCOs provide numerous examples of positive outcomes achieved by interfaith efforts aimed at addressing shared concerns via the public arena.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See Heidi Swarts, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008) and Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) for fuller history of institution-based community organizing. Note that the institution-based model is one among a variety of approaches to community organizing that emerge from overlapping roots, for more information see <<http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/tcn/valocchi.htm>>.

<sup>3</sup> Some additional organizing structures have recently emerged alongside the networks and independent organizations among which the Ohio Organizing Collaborative has played a prominent and innovative role.

<sup>4</sup> See Claude S. Fischer and Greggor Mattson, 'Is America Fragmenting?', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 35:1 (2009), 435–55 and Kathryn Neckerman and FlorenciaTorche, 'Inequality: Causes and Consequences', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33 (2007), 335–7. On the work of the IBCO field to

Although this article does not delve into the political achievements and potential of this field, we note that IBCOs collectively constitute a social movement dedicated to building democratic power, strengthening public life and improving social conditions in low income and working class communities. IBCOs contribute to North American democracy by grounding democratic action in the social institutions that structure the daily lives of individuals, families and communities. In addition, IBCOs bolster public life by identifying leaders and developing them into effective advocates for their communities; in so doing, they help communities organize and generate power that can be channelled toward shaping public policy to meet needs at the local level, and increasingly at the state and national level as well. Through this evolution, the IBCO field has become a strategic partner in nationwide efforts to build democratic power, reverse rising inequality and strengthen public life. Further, IBCOs current and potential future impact on specific issues and the public arena in general is being recognized.<sup>5</sup>

In this article, we briefly characterize the field as a whole then focus primarily on its interfaith profile. In so doing, we aspire to promote public understanding of institution-based community organizing, discuss the interfaith dynamics and spiritual practices that underpin it, and highlight the contributions it makes to interfaith relations and bridging social capital in North

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counter some of those trends, see Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling*; Swartz, *Organizing Urban America*; Richard L. Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kristina Smock, *Democracy in Action: Community Organizing and Urban Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); Janice Fine, *Worker Centers: Organizing Communities at the Edge of the Dream* (Ithaca: ILR Press/Cornell University Press, 2006) and Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> See Richard L. Wood and Mark R. Warren, 'A Different Face of Faith-Based Politics: Social Capital and Community Organizing in the Public Arena', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, 22: 9/10 (2002), 6–54; Stephen Hart, *Cultural Dilemmas of Progressive Politics: Styles of Engagement among Grassroots Activists* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Michael Gecan, *After America's Midlife Crisis* (Boston: MIT Press, 2009); Paul Osterman, *Gathering Power: The Future of Progressive Politics in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003) and Robert D. Putnam, David E. Campbell and Shaylyn Romney Garrett, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010). On its ability to project power at the state and national levels, see Richard L. Wood, 'Higher Power: Strategic Capacity for State and National Organizing', in Marion Orr, ed., *Transforming the City: Community Organizing and the Challenge of Political Change* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2007), pp. 164–92 and Richard L. Wood, Brad Fulton and Kathryn Partridge, *Building Bridges, Building Power: Developments in Institution-Based Community Organizing* (Denver: Interfaith Funders, 2012).

American society. We hope, too, that this discussion can provide sociological underpinnings to ongoing theological reflection on the work of community organizing.

### **Interfaith Funders' 'State of the Field' Study**

In 1999, Interfaith Funders conducted a national census of IBCOs to provide a detailed portrait of the work characterized as 'faith-based community organizing' and to establish a baseline for understanding the scope and scale of this community organizing model.<sup>6</sup> Over the last decade, however, both the societal context and the IBCO field have changed substantially: economic inequality has risen, money now flows into electoral campaigns virtually uncontrolled and political institutions have become more polarized. The three religious sectors that comprised the membership core of the field in 1999—urban Catholic, mainline Protestant and historic Black Protestant churches—have each dealt with declining members and internal struggles (see below).<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, the IBCO field itself has evolved by extending its geographic reach, both beyond the urban core and into new states and cities. Moreover, the IBCO field has also developed a more diverse base of member institutions and has increased its collaborative work with other kinds of organizing efforts. Finally, over the last decade a greater proportion of the IBCO field has begun leveraging its power beyond the local level to address issues at state and national levels.

In light of the rapidly changing socio-political context and the significant developments within the IBCO field, we collaborated with Interfaith Funders to conduct a follow-up of the 1999 census study. Through the 2011 study, we aimed to provide a thorough assessment of the field by mapping its growth and development, documenting its external political work and identifying the key internal dynamics that underpin that work including, as reported here, how

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<sup>6</sup> See 'Faith-Based Community Organizing: The State of the Field 1999', as well as later reports from a major study of the impact of this kind of organizing upon congregational development, published by Interfaith Funders and available at <<http://repository.unm.edu/handle/1928/10664>> and <<http://repository.unm.edu/handle/1928/10678>>.

<sup>7</sup> We use the term 'mainline Protestant' in deference to its wide usage to refer to those liberal and moderate Protestant denominations once considered the 'mainline' of north American religions. It includes those denominations of historic Protestantism usually listed as theologically liberal or moderate, including the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, American Baptist Churches, United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ and the Disciples of Christ.

IBCOs navigate religious differences and incorporate religious practices into their organizing activities.

### Research Design

Our study was designed to replicate and build upon the 1999 study by surveying the entire field of IBCOs. It defines an IBCO as a local organization that practices the institution-based model of organizing (that is, it has institutional members), has an office address and has at least one paid organizer on staff. Based on these criteria, we identified 189 active organizations using databases from organizing networks, IBCO funders and denominational bodies, as well as IRS 990 Forms. Based on the exhaustive search and extensive cross-checking, we are confident that this study contains the entire universe of IBCOs active in the United States in 2011.

In formulating the goals and content of the study, we drew on the counsel of local organizers, national organizing staff, foundation programme officers, denominational funders and scholars. In addition to asking identical questions from the 1999 study, several new items were added to better assess the work on specific issues, collaborative relations and religious practices within the field. The survey instrument was composed of two parts: part one was an online survey that gathered extensive data on each IBCO's history, constituents, collaborators, activities, finances and issue work; part two consisted of customized spreadsheets that respondents used to provide detailed demographic information about their organization's member institutions, board members and paid staff.<sup>8</sup>

The survey was distributed electronically to the director of every local IBCO during the second half of 2011, and the directors were informed that their responses would be kept confidential and that nothing would be published that identifies specific characteristics of their organization unless they provided consent.<sup>9</sup> The survey achieved a response rate of ninety-four per cent, gathering data on 178 IBCOs and demographic information on 4,145 member institutions plus 2,939 board members and 628 paid staff involved in the IBCO field.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>) See appendix for the core survey instrument. The full online survey instrument can be accessed at <<http://www.soc.duke.edu/~brf6/survey>>.

<sup>9</sup>) Each director who completed the study received an honorarium that ranged between \$25 and \$100 based on the size of their organization.

<sup>10</sup>) Our assessment of the key characteristics of those IBCOs that did not respond to the survey suggests that no systematic patterns of non-response are likely to have produced a biased profile

The structure of the study enables the data to be analysed at two levels: the field level, which demonstrates patterns in the field as a whole, and the organization level, from which it is possible to assess similarities and differences among individual IBCOs. In addition, since we replicated items from the 1999 study and included the IBCOs surveyed in 1999, we can assess changes in the field (and in individual IBCOs) over the last decade; thus, offering a more dynamic view than possible with a one-time snapshot.<sup>11</sup>

### **Overall Profile of the IBCO Field**

A comparison of the 1999 snapshot with the current state of the field reveals the developments that have taken place over the last decade. In particular, the field experienced an overall growth rate of forty-two per cent: 102 new IBCOs were established and forty-six had become inactive (see Figures 1, 2, and 3).<sup>12</sup> In most areas where an IBCO had become inactive, another IBCO still exists.<sup>13</sup> Among the organizations that had become inactive, twenty-three had dissolved, eight are rebuilding, fourteen had merged into another IBCO and one had stopped using the institution-based organizing model.

Further, the overall growth of the field corresponds with an increase in its geographic spread. In 1999, thirty-three states had active IBCOs; today, IBCOs are active in forty states, with new IBCOs having been established in nine new states (Alaska, Alabama, Maine, Montana, New Hampshire, Nevada, Oklahoma, Virginia and Vermont). As the field extended into new areas, it also deepened its presence in former areas. The states in which the number of IBCOs at least doubled include Hawaii, Indiana, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, New Mexico and Wisconsin. Meanwhile, half of the organizations reside in six states (California, Illinois, Florida, New York and Wisconsin), and the highest concentrations are in major urban areas.

Most IBCOs are formally affiliated with a national or regional organizing network, and over the last decade each of these networks increased the number of IBCOs they serve. The largest relative growth occurred among three networks

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of the field. Hence, when providing total numbers for the entire field, we multiply values by a factor that accounts for information not provided by the non-responsive IBCOs (that is, we project figures from the 94% of respondents to the entire field).

<sup>11</sup> However, in some instances limitations in the 1999 study make complete comparisons impossible; we flag such instances below.

<sup>12</sup> Some of the 'new IBCOs' existed in 1999, but did not meet the criteria for being included in the 1999 study.

<sup>13</sup> The one exception is Tennessee which had three active IBCOs in 1999 but no longer had any active IBCOs as of 2011.



Figure 1: The State of the Field in 1999 (N = 133)

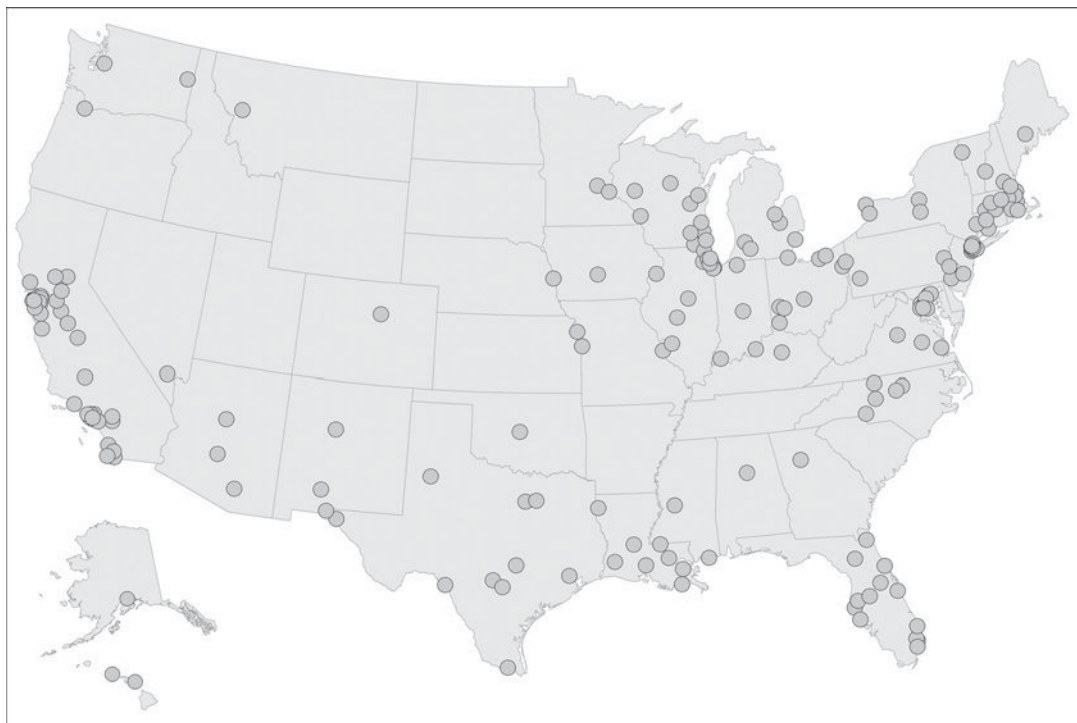


Figure 2: The State of the Field in 2011 (N = 189)



that were comparatively smaller in 1999; this has made the field more evenly distributed among the various organizing networks. In addition, during the same period, the number of organizations not affiliated with any formal organizing network also increased.

The base of the IBCO field is its member institutions. In 1999, the field was comprised of roughly four thousand formal member institutions of which eighty-eight per cent were religious congregations and twelve per cent were non-congregational. Even though the number of IBCOs increased by forty-two per cent over the last decade, the total number of member institutions increased by only 12.5% (to approximately 4,500).<sup>14</sup> Thus, the median number of member institutions per IBCO declined from twenty-three to twenty-one. The composition of member institutions also shifted: since 1999, the number of member congregations has remained the same (approximately 3,500), while the number of non-congregational members has doubled (increasing from approximately five hundred to one thousand, most of which are not faith-based institutions). As discussed below, this growth in the secular side of

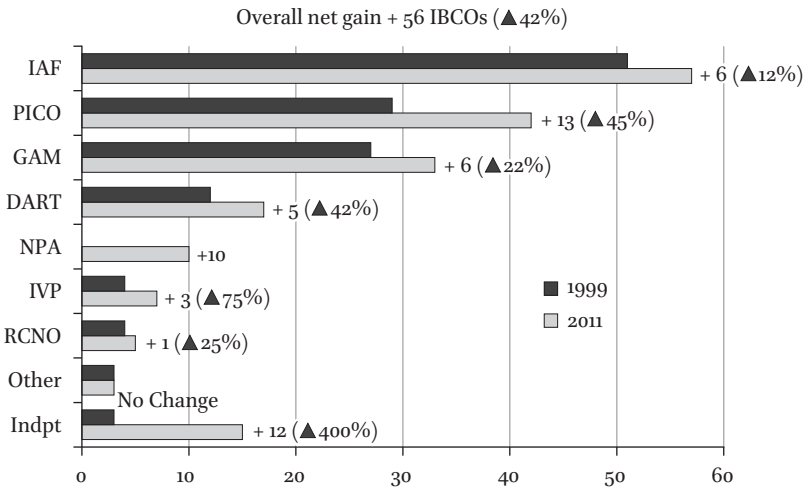


Figure 3: Growth of the Field

<sup>14</sup> The 1999 data include one IBCO that reported having 230 member institutions, by far the largest reported membership base (ten times larger than the median IBCO). This IBCO now has forty institutions. The 1999 study did not properly account for this outlier and probably over-estimated the total number of member institutions in the field. A more accurate estimate accounting for this outlier suggests that the field had approximately 3,900 member institutions in 1999; this would mean the field has increased by fifteen per cent since then.

the IBCO field presents opportunities and challenges, both theologically and organizationally.

The non-congregational institutions, which include schools, faith-based non-profit groups, unions and neighbourhood associations, now make up over twenty per cent of all member institutions, while seventy per cent of IBCOs have at least one non-congregational member. Twenty-three per cent of IBCOs have at least one union as a member institution, and roughly one quarter have a school, faith-based organization or neighbourhood association as a member institution. Among all of the non-congregational members, schools represent eighteen per cent, faith-based non-profit groups make up sixteen per cent, unions account for fifteen per cent and neighbourhood associations amount to thirteen per cent.<sup>15</sup> A wide variety of other community-based organizations make up the remaining thirty-eight per cent. This diverse category includes community and economic development corporations, immigrant associations, social service programmes, civic organizations and so on (see Figure 4).

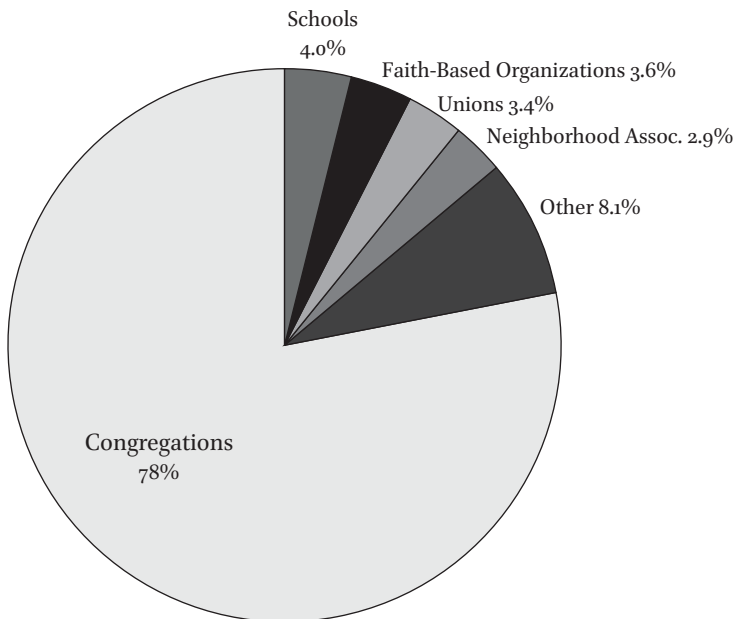


Figure 4: Types of Member Institutions

<sup>15</sup> Nearly all school members are 'public schools' in the American sense; their funding comes almost exclusively from the government and they serve the vast majority of youth in the United States. (That is, 'state schools' in Britain.)

This shift in the composition of members has warranted changing how the field is referenced. That is, the phrase ‘congregation-based community organizing’ no longer represents the field as a whole; the phrase ‘institution-based community organizing’ provides a more accurate representation. Likewise, as more secular institutions have become members of IBCOs, the phrase ‘faith-based community organizing’ does not adequately capture the mix of cultural dynamics operating within the field. Most IBCOs draw on the faith components of their members’ religious traditions along with secular principles rooted in the North American democratic tradition.

Notwithstanding, congregations remain the large majority of member institutions and thirty per cent of IBCOs have a member base comprised exclusively of congregations (which has gone down from forty-five per cent in 1999). Furthermore, the members’ shared religious beliefs provide the cultural glue that holds these organizations together. Most IBCOs continue to incorporate religious practices systematically into their work, and the networks have developed initiatives specifically designed to use organizing as a means to strengthen member congregations.<sup>16</sup> Thus, although we use the term ‘institution-based’ to distinguish this field of organizations within the ecology of community organizing in the US, congregations and their faith commitments remain central to the IBCO organizing model.

### Religious Composition of the Field

In the early days of institution-based organizing, religious congregations were the primary constituency that organizers recruited. While the proportion of non-congregational member institutions has since increased, religious congregations still make up the large majority of members. One per cent of all US congregations are involved in institution-based community organizing.

Mainline Protestant, Catholic and Black Protestant congregations are the core constituents of IBCOs, while Evangelical, Jewish, Pentecostal, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist congregations represent a much smaller constituency. In the last decade, however, the religious composition of the IBCO field has become more evenly distributed among the various religious traditions

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<sup>16</sup> See *Renewing Congregations* (New York: Interfaith Funders and The Ford Foundation, 2003) and *Faith and Public Life* (New York: Interfaith Funders and The Ford Foundation, 2004). See especially the work to strengthen congregations using tools from community organizing within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Unitarian Universalist Association and Jewish faith community at <<http://bendthearc.us/>>; <<http://www.interfaithfunders.org/Inter-Religious-OrganizingInitiative.html>> and <<http://www.uua.org>>.

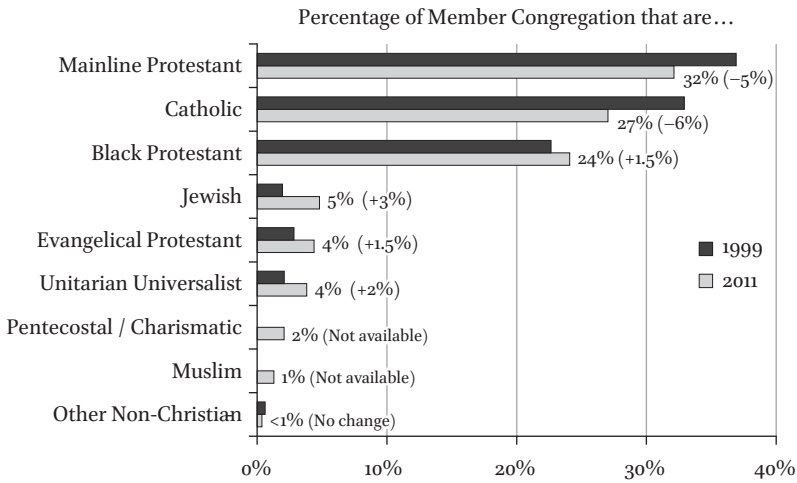


Figure 5: Religious Affiliations of Member Congregations

(see Figure 5). The proportion of mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations decreased.<sup>17</sup> This decrease corresponds with the overall decrease in the number of mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations in the United States: because fewer congregations exist, there are fewer available to participate in community organizing. In addition, many mainline Protestant denominations have decreased their funding for community organizing, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has de-emphasized community organizing in the training and promotion of clergy.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile Evangelical, Jewish, Muslim, Pentecostal and Unitarian Universalist congregations have all increased their representation within the field, and a growing number of IBCOs have at least one member congregation from these traditions.<sup>19</sup>

Comparing IBCO member congregations with the profile of all congregations in the US shows how the field compares and contrasts with its broader

<sup>17</sup> The proportion of Black Protestant member congregations has remained basically the same.  
<sup>18</sup> Despite these actions, some mainline Protestant denominations—most notably the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—have placed new emphasis on engaging their pastors and congregations in community organizing, and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has continued to provide approximately \$8 million per year to fund community organizing efforts through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development—their primary domestic anti-poverty programme.  
<sup>19</sup> The participation patterns reported here are at the level of member congregations; however, congregations vary in size and in the number of people they can turn out for a public action. For example, participating Catholic parishes are, on average, much larger than other participating congregations and thus have the capacity to mobilize more individuals.

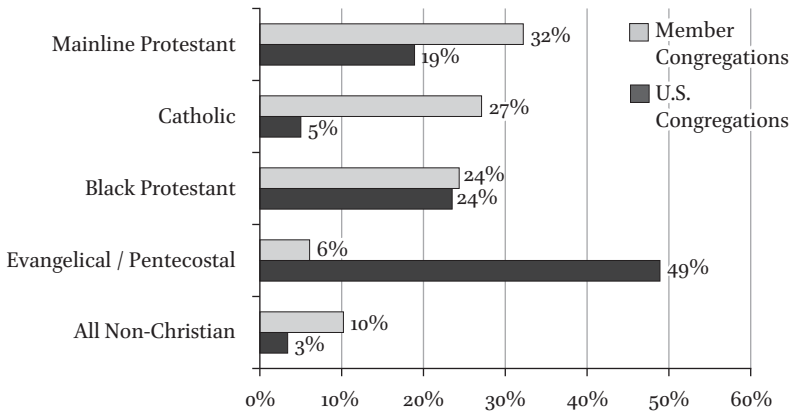


Figure 6: Member Congregations compared with all U.S. Congregations

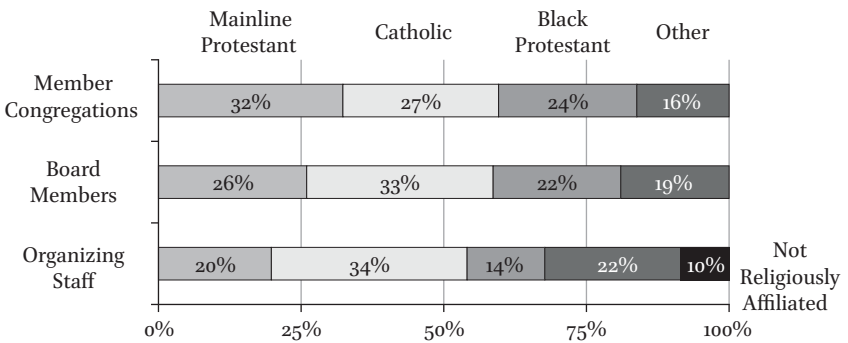


Figure 7: Member Congregations compared with Board Members and Organizing Staff

religious context. Even though congregations from every major religious tradition are involved in IBCO, the participating congregations do not closely reflect the religious composition of congregations in the United States (see Figure 6).<sup>20</sup> Mainline Protestant and Catholic congregations represent a majority in the IBCO field; however, they represent a minority among congregations in the United States. On the other hand, almost fifty per cent of US congregations are Evangelical and Pentecostal, but these faith communities represent a small

<sup>20</sup> U.S. congregation data based on: Mark Chaves and Shawna Anderson, *National Congregations Study: Cumulative Data File and Codebook* (Durham, NC: Duke University, Department of Sociology, 2008).

minority in the IBCO field. Black Protestantism is the only religious tradition in which the proportion of congregations in the IBCO field matches its proportion of US congregations. The minority religious traditions—Jewish, Muslim and Unitarian Universalist congregations—are relatively well represented in the IBCO field. Jewish synagogues, for example, make up roughly two per cent of US congregations whereas they make up five per cent of all IBCO member congregations; Unitarian Universalist congregations make up less than one per cent of US congregations but four per cent of all IBCO member congregations.<sup>21</sup>

At the individual level, the religious composition of the IBCO field experienced a similar shift (see Figure 7).<sup>22</sup> Among the organizing staff, the proportion of mainline Protestant, Catholic and Black Protestant organizers decreased, while the proportion of organizers from other religious traditions increased. In particular, the percentage of Evangelical and Pentecostal organizers doubled and the percentage of Jewish and Unitarian Universalist organizers increased slightly. In 1999, the entire field had only one Muslim organizer, now the field has nine Muslim organizers. Furthermore, the percentage of organizers identifying as being not religiously affiliated increased from two per cent to ten per cent (still less than in the US population as a whole, which has risen sharply to eighteen per cent).<sup>23</sup> The religious affiliations of the IBCO directors shifted in almost the exact same ways, except that the number of Muslim directors decreased from one to zero and only three per cent of IBCOs are led by a person that is not religiously affiliated.<sup>24</sup>

As shown in Figure 8, faith-based sources of funding have become less central to the field over the last ten years. The proportion of IBCO financial support obtained via member dues (mostly from congregations), the Catholic Campaign for Human Development and other faith-based funders have all declined, while the proportion of funding from secular foundations and from corporations has increased.

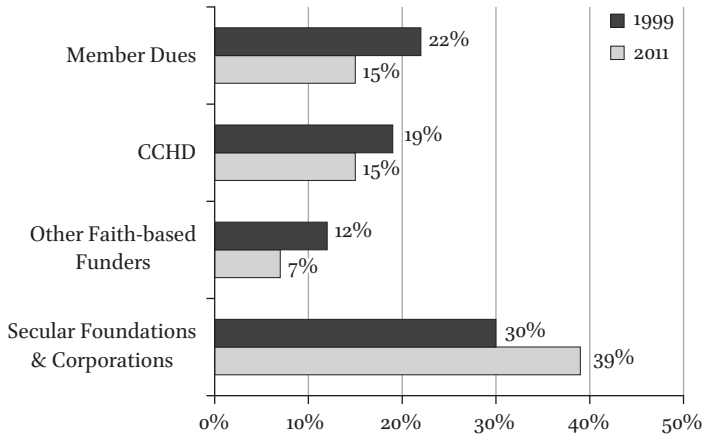
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<sup>21</sup> In both cases, denominational bodies in these faith traditions have made concerted efforts to encourage their congregations to participate in institution-based community organizing.

<sup>22</sup> Information on the board members' religious affiliation was not collected in the 1999 study.

<sup>23</sup> For current data on the religious affiliation of North Americans, see '2010 U.S. Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study', Collected by the Association of Statisticians of American Religious Bodies (ASARB) and distributed by the Association of Religion Data Archives at <<http://www.theARDA.com>>.

<sup>24</sup> Religious professionals continue to be active in the IBCO field. Roughly thirty per cent of board members, twenty per cent of directors and ten per cent of organizing staff are clergy/ordained ministers.



Note: figure does not include all sources, thus percentages do not add to 100

Figure 8: Sources of IBCO Funding

Overall, the IBCO field has become more religiously diverse. Even though mainline Protestants, Catholics and Black Protestants continue to maintain a strong majority presence, the greatest increase in participation is occurring among Evangelicals, Jews, Muslims, Pentecostals, Unitarian Universalists and the religiously unaffiliated.

### Religious Diversity among IBCOs

The growing religious diversity of the field, however, does not necessarily mean that each individual IBCO reflects this diversity. Four per cent of IBCOs are mono-religious (that is, all of their member institutions are affiliated with the same religious tradition). Among the mono-religious IBCOs, four have only Black Protestant congregations, two have only Catholic congregations and one has only mainline Protestant congregations.

On the other hand, the majority of IBCOs are religiously diverse. The percentage of IBCOs that have only mainline Protestant, Catholic and/or Black Protestant congregations—the historic religious core of IBCOs—decreased from twenty-five per cent to fifteen per cent. Almost half the IBCOs have at least one congregation from the Evangelical, Jewish or Unitarian Universalist traditions; twenty per cent have at least one Muslim congregation; fifteen per cent have at least one Jewish and one Muslim congregation. Furthermore, over fifty per cent of IBCOs have at least one secular member institution and twenty per cent of the members of a typical IBCO are non-congregations. Through its

diverse member base, the field is bridging the divides that separate religious traditions from one another and from secular institutions. Moreover, religious diversity within individual IBCOs indicates that this bridging is occurring on the ground locally. Since IBCO participants typically spend most of their organizing time at the local level, being involved in an IBCO includes developing interfaith relationships which can enrich their perceptions and experiences of other religious groups.

### The Effects of Religious Diversity on Organizing Activities

Even though many IBCOs are religiously diverse and leaders are often encouraged to draw on their specific faith traditions, participants seldom focus on their religious differences. Most IBCOs reported discussing religious differences ‘rarely’ or ‘sometimes’ and most indicated that religious differences had a minimal effect on their planning meetings.<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, those IBCOs that do frequently discuss religious differences were more likely to report that those differences affected their planning meetings (the direction of causality is not clear). Yet, an IBCO’s propensity to discuss religious differences is unrelated to its degree of religious diversity. Furthermore, the directors of religiously diverse IBCOs did not report it to be any more difficult to accommodate different faith traditions in their organizing work than did directors of less diverse IBCOs.

As IBCO members from diverse faith traditions work together to improve their communities, they appear to navigate their religious differences by downplaying them.<sup>26</sup> Instead of focusing on potentially divisive differences, they seem to leverage their shared beliefs to address common concerns. In an increasingly polarized political culture, in which religious differences are often used to amplify political disagreements, IBCOs are strikingly counter-cultural. Rather than using religious differences to pit faith communities against each

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<sup>25</sup>) Likewise, more religiously diverse IBCOs were no more likely to indicate that religious differences complicated, prolonged, or hindered their planning meetings. One exception: IBCOs that had at least one Jewish or Muslim member congregation were more likely to report that religious differences complicated their planning meetings.

<sup>26</sup>) The way IBCOs deal with religious diversity contrasts sharply with how many IBCOs handle racial/ethnic diversity within their organization. Most IBCOs reported discussing racial/ethnic differences much more often than religious differences, and racial/ethnic differences were more likely to affect IBCO planning meetings. Historically, IBCOs typically downplayed racial/ethnic differences. This shift in approach is partly due to network-led efforts to foster such dialogue in response to concerns articulated by African American and Latino leaders and clergy. See Wood, Fulton and Partridge, *Building Bridges, Building Power*.



other (or to advance one strand within a particular tradition over other strands), IBCOs seek to transcend religious differences by focusing on shared values and pursuing common goals.

### Religious Practices of IBCOs and Their Directors

Despite the field’s tendency to de-emphasize religious differences and the growing proportion of member institutions and organizers that are secular, drawing on religious faith continues to be an integral part of the IBCO ethos. Sixty per cent of IBCO offices contain objects with religious references and eighty per cent of IBCOs reported that their promotional material contains religious content. Furthermore, the directors of IBCOs are, on average, more religious than the general US population (that is, they pray, read sacred texts, and attend religious services more often than the average US adult) (see Figure 9).<sup>27</sup>

Most IBCOs continue to actively integrate religious practices into their organizing activities (see Figure 10). Over ninety per cent of IBCOs report that they often open and close their meetings with a prayer, and over seventy-five per cent often have discussions about the connection between faith and organizing. Most IBCOs incorporate some form of religious teaching into their organizing activities; however, it is less common for their activities to include people singing or reading religious-based content together. The least common practice

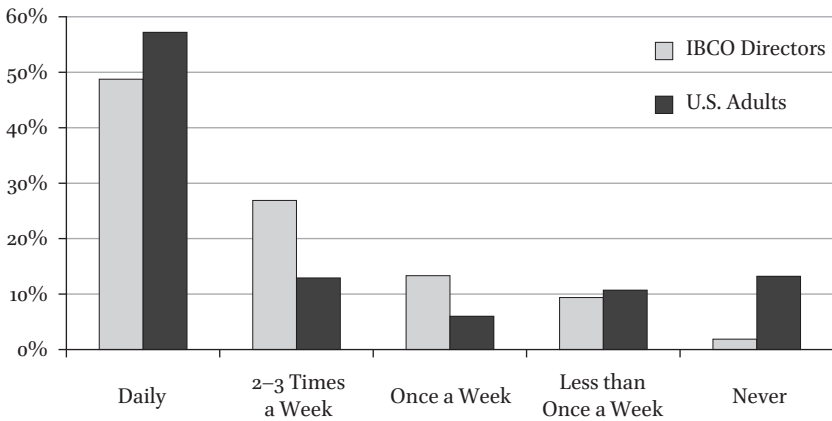


Figure 9: IBCO Directors and Private Prayer

<sup>27</sup> US adult data based on the 2010 *General Social Survey* (Chicago, IL: National Opinion Research Center).

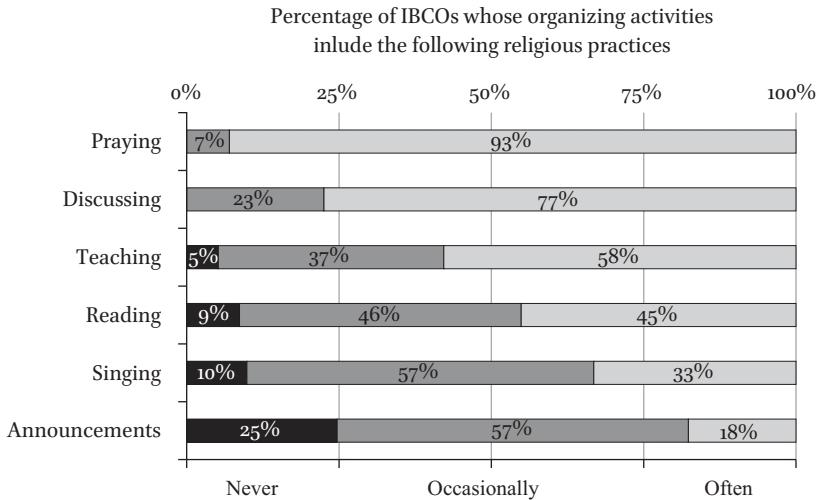


Figure 10: How Often IBCOs Incorporate Religious Practices

is people making announcements about upcoming religious events, presumably reflecting the tendency in IBCO culture to focus on shared commitments and avoid giving preference to or promoting specific faith traditions.

Increasing the religious diversity of an IBCO does not seem to dampen the influence of religious faith in the organization. In fact, religiously diverse IBCO’s are more likely to incorporate religious practices into their organizing activities, and the directors of religiously diverse IBCOs reported being more comfortable with this.

While IBCOs led by people who engage in the spiritual practices of their tradition tend to incorporate religion into their organizing activities more often, religiously active directors were also more likely to report that religious differences enhanced their organization’s planning meetings. It appears either that religiously active directors help to cultivate an organizational environment that is at ease with religious differences and comfortable with incorporating religion into their activities, or that IBCOs more grounded in religion tend to recruit directors who reflect that orientation. In either case, this finding reflects significant comfort with the role of religion in the public arena. Yet, that comfort with public religion combined with IBCOs’ strong interfaith cooperation contrasts sharply with both radical secularism and religious intolerance. Hence, this grounded public religion of the IBCO world bears further theological reflection, such as that provided in this issue of *IJPT*.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> See also Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and *Resurrecting Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming). From

## Discussion

Institution-based community organizing intersects with religion in complex ways. Each network and individual IBCO adopts its own practices, but an overall pattern exists. While many IBCOs tend to ignore religious differences, they do not ignore religion altogether; rather than being venues for interfaith dialogue, IBCOs are vehicles for interfaith action. In addition to employing non-religious principles rooted in the American democratic tradition, IBCOs incorporate faith into their organizing efforts, by drawing on various religious teachings, narratives, prayers and symbols. Such practices serve to motivate and mobilize the faith-oriented members around issues of common concern, while building relationships between leaders of differing faiths. Moreover, these effects are amplified among IBCOs that are more religiously diverse and led by religiously active directors.

In addition, all IBCOs in the US face the challenges presented by declining numbers of urban congregations from the field's three core religious traditions. As the number of mainline Protestant, Catholic and Black Protestant churches declines, IBCOs must develop ways to retain current congregational members and recruit new members. The IBCOs that are responding to these challenges have generally adopted one of three strategies. First, some organizers and networks are investing organizing resources to help member congregations strengthen their congregational life in an effort both to re-invigorate existing members and reverse denominational decline. Secondly, some organizers are actively recruiting congregations from other religious traditions and/or secular institutions to become members. Thirdly, some IBCOs see congregational decline as being irreversible and have decided to dedicate their organizing resources to starting new kinds of institutions in poor and middle-class communities; essentially striving to create their own institutional members. None of these strategies are fundamentally theological, but if they are successful they may heighten the salience of the theological issues identified below.

These dynamics, when combined with IBCOs' rich interfaith (and secular) membership base, raise a variety of opportunities and challenges. As the religious diversity of the IBCO field more closely matches North American society, it will broaden the base of organizing, heighten its political credibility and increase its strategic capacity. Although the work of using shared religious commitments as cultural glue within IBCOs has never been particularly easy,

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a mainline Protestant theology of organizing, see Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

organizers have become adept at bridging religious differences across the mainline Protestant/Catholic/Black Protestant divides, which has helped to create the internal bonds within IBCOs that have undergirded their political success.<sup>29</sup> However, as a more diverse set of congregations become involved, new challenges will emerge and increasingly complicate the work of institution-based organizing. Most obviously, the increasing religious diversity of the field means that participants must navigate both longstanding and emergent religious differences. To address these challenges, which some IBCOs appear to be doing quite effectively while others appear to be struggling, will demand theological work within each tradition and reflection across traditions. Other contributions to this issue of *IJPT* engage in this kind of theological reflection.

In addition to theological work, the challenge involves organizational work, in part because IBCOs primarily use religious practices rather than interfaith dialogue as their cultural glue. Thus, they are constantly forced to decide which prayers, whose songs and stories, and how to incorporate religious elements and spiritual insights into their work. Some of these organizational dilemmas are resolved by rotating through the various traditions represented or by choosing whatever religious teaching best frames a given political event or a given issue. Yet this still leaves the question of how to handle cultural elements and theological beliefs from differing traditions that are not mutually acceptable (for example, praying in the name of Jesus when non-Christians are in the room, asking for the protection of Mother Earth among monotheists, invoking mitzvoth when non-Jews are present, invoking Mary's intervention among non-Catholics, or asking the audience's submission to Allah when many non-Muslims are in attendance). One approach to these decisions involves asking speakers to eliminate any language that might not resonate with other traditions, thus leading to generic religious imagery considered acceptable to all. A different approach releases speakers from having to eliminate exclusive theological references and encourages them to use freely whatever ideas and imagery from their tradition will contribute most meaningfully to the organizing work in a particular political moment. The latter approach demands a significant level of trust between individuals across traditions: trust that is not always in existence, but which instead must be built. Meanwhile, the former approach risks a 'thinning out' of theological depth that, in the name of acceptability, ultimately fails to sufficiently motivate anyone to be effective in the public arena. The organizational choices involved in balancing these competing

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<sup>29</sup> See Wood, *Faith in Action*, pt 2 on the role played by cultural dynamics rooted in religion within the political success of this form of organizing.

factors carry significant theological implications, particularly regarding the role each tradition will choose to adopt within the democratic public arena (which may differ across traditions and in different national contexts). These choices will provide continuing grist for future work in public theology.

Other facets of the intersection between organizing and religion generate additional challenges. First, the increasing incorporation of secular organizations—labour unions, public schools, immigrant organizations, neighbourhood associations—raises questions about whether to de-emphasize religion altogether within organizing culture: doing so may make the secular-oriented participants more comfortable, but it may also weaken the faith-based organizational glue. A downplaying of the role of faith may also provoke objections from the religiously affiliated, especially those who are engaged in organizing precisely as an expression of their faith commitments. Decisions about how to balance these concerns are necessarily context dependent; thus, few generalizations can be made. Nevertheless, such decisions can be improved with theological reflection on: the appropriate role of religion in the public arena; the nature of collaboration with people of goodwill who are not faith-oriented and may be highly critical of religion; the ways that religiously-grounded commitment to the common good may moderate or relativize claims to exclusive religious truth. Typically, to be credible, such reflection must occur using the language and analytic tools of each tradition, since answers cannot be easily exported from one tradition (or secular viewpoint) to another.

Secondly, given that Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations constitute nearly half of North American congregations but only six per cent of IBCO member congregations, organizing faces a fundamental organizational decision of whether to reach out systematically to Evangelical and Pentecostal leaders. These traditions clearly represent a terrain of large potential growth for organizing, but they have historically been less inclined to collaborate with other traditions or engage in the public arena (legacies both of their more sectarian origins and of disappointment with political efforts in prior decades). Clearly, some segments of the Evangelical and Pentecostal sectors have overcome much of this reticence, given their influence in North American politics via their involvement as the organizational base of the religious right. Thus, IBCO leaders at the national and local levels must decide whether to invest resources to identify and involve Evangelical and Pentecostal congregations that are open to addressing the kind of issues that IBCO work prioritizes. The opportunities may be especially attractive among Latino, Black and immigrant congregations with Evangelical or Pentecostal affiliations, given their generally lower socio-economic status. If IBCO leaders choose to pursue this, as some

already have, success will require theological work both within the organizing world and within these traditions.<sup>30</sup>

Thirdly, to whatever extent organizing does incorporate religious traditions that advocate more conservative positions on social issues (not only Evangelicals and Pentecostals, but also some elements of participating Muslim and Jewish congregations), this will preclude or at least inhibit IBCOs from addressing some issues (such as same-sex marriage or other gay rights, pro-choice issues and possibly even immigrant rights). Perhaps an even greater constraint on such issue work comes from the increasingly conservative and outspoken stance among elements of the religious core of organizing: the Catholic bishops and African American church leaders. Together, these dynamics will produce some pressure on IBCOs, on the one hand, to avoid collaborating with the 'progressive' side of so-called 'culture war' issues, or conversely, to actively work on the 'conservative' side of such issues. On the other hand, the political culture of 'progressive' constituents and allied organizations does produce some pressure on the IBCO world to address these issues from the opposite side. Of course, all of this represents a constraint only if IBCO leaders want to address these issues, which varies by organization, but IBCO culture generally remains focused on socio-economic issues affecting middle-class and poor communities.

The strong association between Christianity and socially conservative politics across broad segments of the North American public represents a final theological and political dynamic that we must consider. Such an association may present the most serious challenge to the long-term viability of institution-based community organizing to draw on religion as its organizational glue, at least in so far as that glue has been drawn partly from the Christian tradition. The association has been built via decades of work by the religious right and their subsequent alliance with the Republican Party. Certainly nothing about Christianity makes this association inevitable, as shown by Christians' deep involvement in struggles against inequality at various times in history and around the globe. Yet the association currently persists, in reality and in public perception, perhaps nowhere as strongly as among youth and young adults. Since the future vigour of community organizing presumably depends on its ability to recruit participants from people currently within the younger demographic, shifting this perception represents a key challenge facing the IBCO world. Such a shift will involve both continued on-the-ground

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<sup>30</sup> The organization Christians in Support of Community Organizing has been doing such theological reflection from within the Evangelical/Pentecostal tradition for years.

organizing that presents a different public face of faith-based political engagement, as well as continued theological, scriptural and interpretive work within religious traditions to make sense of such commitment, and to reflect critically upon it.

## Conclusion

In facing these challenges, strategic leaders within institution-based community organizing (and theologians and social scientists sympathetic to its goals) can draw upon significant strengths within the field. Most notably, four decades of rich collaborative work with diverse religious traditions to address inequality in North America has created deep resources of expertise within the IBCO field. Professional organizers throughout the country know how to build bridges between congregational life and the work of community organizing, and to draw on the expertise of clergy and lay leaders within that work.

Although IBCO culture commonly distinguishes between congregational life and public life, a better way to think about the relationship of organizing and religion recognizes that ‘public life’ includes every setting in which people come together to reflect on their shared life in society.<sup>31</sup> Thus, congregations themselves represent part of the public arena, and ‘public life’ spans both the religious and political dimensions of IBCO work. Those doing ‘public theology’, including the readers of this journal, are thus well positioned to offer the kind of reflection grounded in real-world experience that will help sustain and renew such work for the future. Further, that kind of reflection, to the extent that it is not disconnected from reality but rather deeply embedded in actual political experience and lived religion, will advance democratic public life and the renewal of faith communities in the years ahead.

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<sup>31</sup> See Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).