

# Getting Organized

## *Catholics & Community Activism*

Richard L. Wood, Brad Fulton, Christine Doby

These are days of hope for American Catholics, following years of despair for too many. The new winds blowing through Rome thanks to Pope Francis signal an important opening to renewal, yet the Catholic Church in the United States and elsewhere is struggling to recover an effective voice in public affairs and a semblance of moral authority in the lives of the people in the pews. This struggle occurs in the wake—dare we hope that it *is* the wake?—of the clerical sex-abuse scandals, and amid a deepening sense that young people had mostly just stopped listening. Both hope and despair thus shape the experience of laypeople in their everyday lives; of priests, religious, and lay ministers in their various pastoral works; and of bishops in their episcopal office. All are searching for ways to uncover the “treasure in earthen vessels” that is the church.

New research conducted by us and by others suggests that part of that treasure lies all around us, in cities and towns throughout the country, in the form of Catholic involvement in faith-based community organizing. Such work has been supported by the bishops and local parishes for decades—and today it offers a critical route for reclaiming Catholicism’s public voice and moral authority. Unfortunately, however, the recent institutional environment in Catholicism has led to waning Catholic participation in faith-based organizing, just when American society and American Catholicism need it most.

In our research, we have met many U.S. Catholics whose lives and commitments illustrate the life-changing importance of community organizing. Jesusa Rivera, a leader in the Indiana Organizing Project (IOP), told us that through

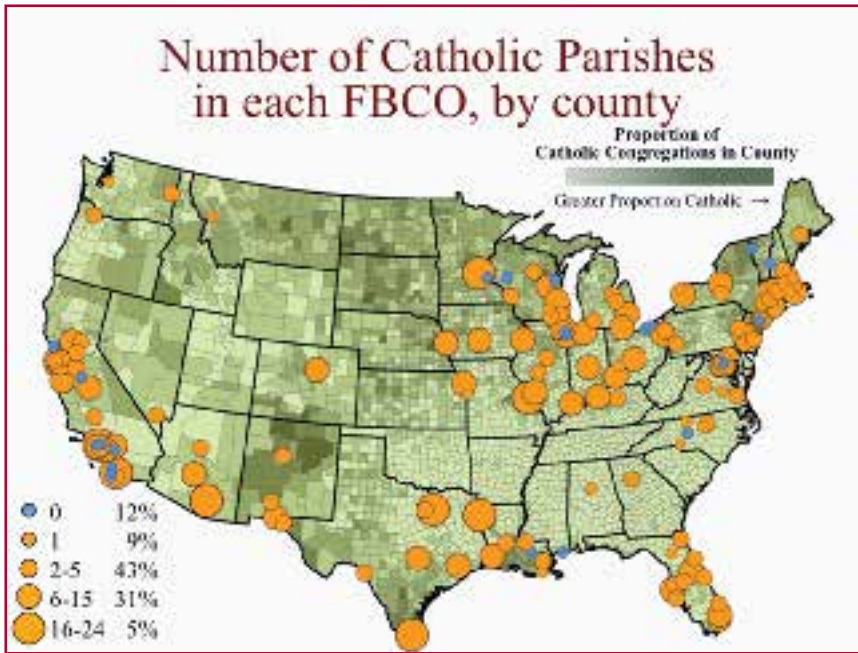
---

**Richard L. Wood** is associate professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico and founding director of the Southwest Institute on Religion, Culture, and Society. **Brad Fulton** is a PhD candidate in sociology at Duke University and was the lead researcher for Interfaith Funders’ 2011 State of Organizing study. **Christine Doby** is a program officer at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation and serves on the board of Interfaith Funders. This article was funded by a gift from Michael Vertin and the late Margaret O’Gara in honor of Jim O’Gara, former editor of Commonweal.

her work she has formed relationships with many people of different backgrounds—relationships that have enriched her prayer life and her faith, even as her faith and presence influence IOP. “What my church believes, what my pastor teaches, what my parish stands for—all of this must be reflected in our organizing so that I and all Catholics can authentically participate,” she says. Rick Carter of Flint, Michigan, had been minimally involved in his parish for years when his pastor asked him to attend a meeting with a community organizing group. That meeting changed Carter’s faith life and career. Finding himself drawn into prayer and worship in a new and deeper way, Carter saw how his Catholic values intersected with the values of others, and he found inspiration and hope in the group’s prayer and reflection. Gradually he came to believe that faith-based organizing just might be the last, best hope for troubled communities that are “crying out for a moral voice and moral leadership.” Carter now works as a full-time professional organizer.

Our research allows us to place these personal stories within the broader experience of individual Catholics around the country and of the church itself. We serve as research director, lead researcher, and a key adviser, respectively, for the Interfaith Funders’ State of Organizing study, a major national research project investigating dynamic changes occurring in the grassroots empowerment movement variously termed “faith-based,” “broad-based,” “congregation-based,” or “institution-based” community organizing. The almost two hundred faith-based community organizations (FBCOs) in this country have played key roles in local empowerment for decades, and the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has been one of the most important and consistent sources of funding. In recent years, it has provided about \$7.2 million annually to support local leadership development and public engagement with issues consonant with Catholic social teaching.

Our research shows just how crucial Catholic parishes and individuals are to this effort. Catholic institutional sponsorship and individual leadership drive faith-based community organizing even as Catholic social teaching and priorities inform the field itself; a Catholic ethos undergirds the spiritual practices of the movement; and Catholic money has been and remains central to the field. But we also see ways



in which the church still fails to embrace Catholic involvement in faith-based organizing—and thus squanders a golden opportunity to reclaim a Catholic voice in the public realm.

**F**aith-based organizing rests on a foundation of institutions; a total of about 4,500 faith communities, schools, labor unions, neighborhood associations, and other local institutions sponsor this work as members. Of these institutional members, about 3,500 are religious congregations—hence the term “faith-based community organizing.” These faith communities—large numbers of Roman Catholic, historic black, and mainline Protestant churches, along with smaller numbers of synagogues, mosques, and Unitarian-Universalist, Evangelical, and Pentecostal churches—constitute the heart of faith-based organizing. Almost 950, or 27 percent, of these are Catholic parishes—an impressive figure, given that only about 5 percent of American congregations are Catholic. The map above shows where these FBCOs are located, and where Catholic involvement is greatest.

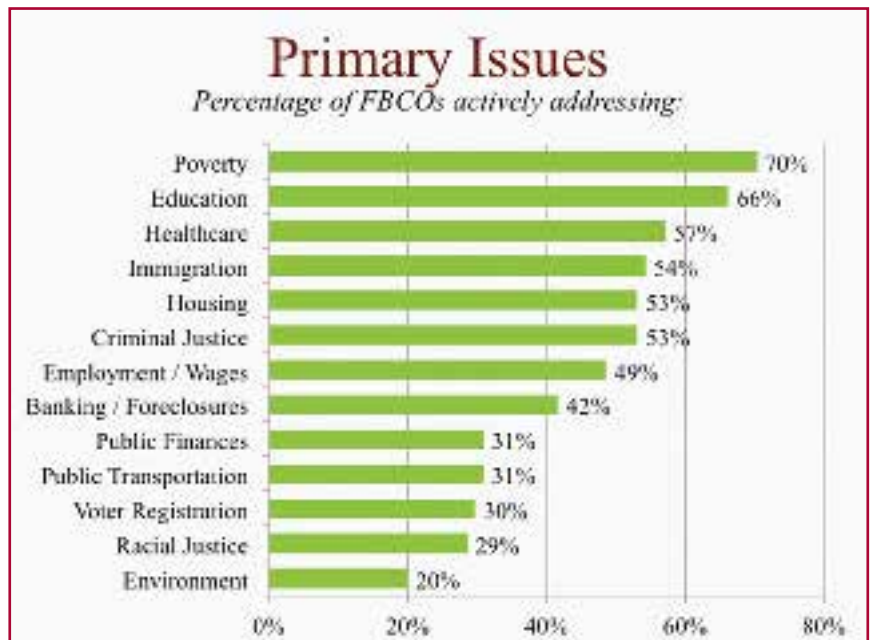
Catholics are heavily represented on the governing boards of these FBCOs. Of the almost 3,200 board members who govern the nearly 200 FBCOs, 1,044 (33 percent) are Catholics, by far the largest contingent of any single religious tradition. These Catholic board members are more likely to be laypeople (79 percent) than clergy; this should be a source of real Catholic pride in light of the Vatican II

teachings regarding the responsibility of the laity to provide leadership in the secular world. Catholics also make up by far the largest group of the professional organizers who train others to do organizing work (34 percent) and of the directors and “lead organizers” that head up each FBCO (43 percent).

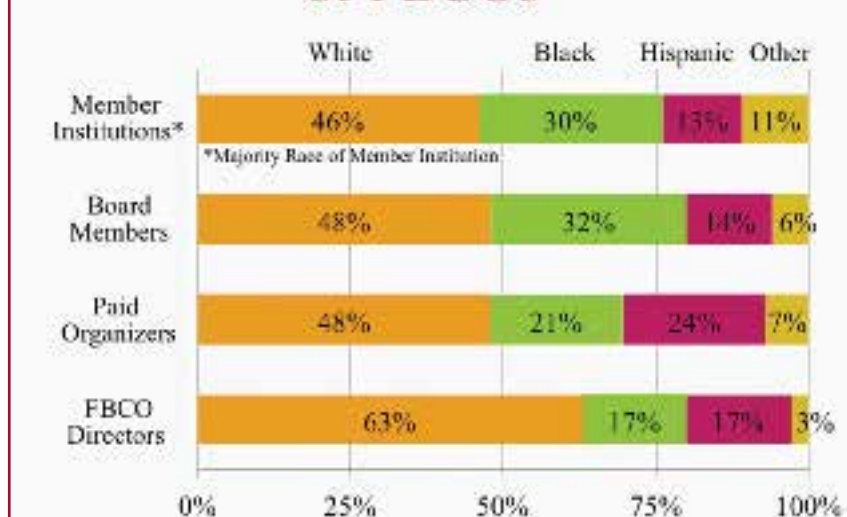
What does all this mean? It means that if you attend the monthly meeting of your local FBCO, you are very likely to hear lay Catholics articulating the social implications of their faith and discussing specific issue priorities. Rather than waiting for the church’s hierarchy to define the public agenda, they are discerning how best to engage politically together, which is exactly what the Second Vatican Council intended—as well as what democratic ideals would seem to require.

FBCOs embody the teaching priorities of the Catholic Church in a variety

of ways. The figure below ranks the issues on which these organizations report working. Given their base in low-income communities, these organizations prioritize socioeconomic issues that have been consistent emphases within Catholic social teaching for decades. The groups stress economic issues not for ideological reasons—whether liberal or conservative—but simply because American families face struggles in these areas day in and day out. When the FBCOs work on these issues, they do so via one-to-one meetings with parishioners, neighbors, and friends, and the emphases they bring to bear often reflect Catholic values—for instance, working to ensure that children, poor families, and immi-



## Racial/Ethnic Composition of FBCOs



grants have access to the full benefits of health-care reform; or promoting humane immigration reform, foreclosure protection for vulnerable families, and financial reforms that hold Wall Street accountable for practices that hurt Main Street.

FBCOs have been careful to avoid the “red areas” laid down by the bishops. Our data show that almost none of them—and particularly none that receive funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development—work on reproductive rights or same-sex marriage. That is *not* to say that no FBCO leaders care about those issues on one side or the other; but their priorities reflect the social and economic pressures on low- and middle-income families in America today, when rising inequality and stagnant or falling working-class and middle-class wages have made the church’s social teaching more obviously important to American families.

Perhaps most impressively, these organizations actually embody the value placed on diversity and racial justice by Catholic teaching since the civil-rights movements. This commitment is reflected in the work for racial justice reported in the figure above (explicitly as work on “racism” and implicitly via “poverty,” “criminal justice,” and other categories), and even more concretely in the actual diversity of membership within FBCOs, as the figure above shows.

In comparison to the ethnic composition of FBCOs, the U.S. population as a whole is 64 percent white, 13 percent black, 16 percent Hispanic, and 8 percent other. Our nation is rapidly diversifying; current projections suggest that by mid-century America will be a “majority-minority” society, with more than half of Americans identifying as something other than “white.” Faith-based organizing thus leads to more civic engagement on the part of growing minorities—and does so while *also engaging* white Americans on these issues,

thus creating the coalitions across racial divides that are crucial to winning changes in public policy.

Some FBCOs are based solely in religious congregations, while others include secular institutions such as labor unions or public-school PTAs—thus at least potentially embodying the church’s mission to evangelize the wider society. But does the Catholic presence really make a difference in how these groups work? Or do Catholics in faith-based organizing engage solely on secular society’s terms?

While the answer varies by location, our on-the-ground experience suggests that Catholics who undertake this work often do so in ways deeply informed by their faith—as illustrated by the lives of Jesusa Rivera, Rick Carter, and other faith-based

organizers we spoke with. Indeed, one national FBCO, the Gamaliel Foundation, has recently posted monthly profiles of Catholics whose faith motivates their public work.

But anecdotal evidence goes only so far. In our research we asked whether a Catholic presence matters for the spiritual practices within the field. We found that the larger the share of Catholic parishes involved in a local FBCO, the more often prayer and spiritual reading are incorporated into the organizing work—and the more often participants discuss the organizing work in light of their faith. These are core elements of the Catholic spiritual ethos, and having Catholic involvement infuses them more fully into the work of organizing.

A second way to address the Catholic impact on organizing is through Catholic institutional involvement: Does Catholic institutional sponsorship and funding increase Catholic involvement? Our study found that merely having more Catholic congregations in the local area does *not* do a lot to drive Catholic participation in organizing—perhaps because such involvement depends greatly on the will of local pastors and the tone set by the local bishop. But our study did find that Catholic parish involvement correlates with more Catholic staff in the organizing work. It also found that receiving funds from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development correlates with more Catholic parish involvement. While the causal direction is no doubt complex—more Catholic staff and funding is likely both a cause *and* an effect of more Catholic parish involvement—these data certainly suggest that Catholic sponsorship *does* shape the field of faith-based organizing in practical ways.

Catholic institutional sponsorship matters in other ways as well—ways that speak precisely to some of the fundamental challenges facing American society. One of the unique policies of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development is

a requirement that the governing board of the organization receiving funds must include majority representation from poor people themselves. In keeping with Catholic teaching on subsidiarity and participation, CCHD was founded with the intention of empowering poor communities to advocate for themselves rather than promoting dependence—on government or on “liberal elites” who make their living by claiming to represent the interests of poor people. Our study shows the impact of this policy, which reinforces the field’s own commitment to less privileged communities: 58 percent of FBCO board members have household incomes below \$50,000 per year. This figure closely approximates the U.S. population as a whole, and though no data on incomes of nonprofit boards appear to exist, we believe low-income governing boards to be quite rare. Good data do show that nonprofit boards generally are 86 percent white, whereas FBCO boards are less than half white on average. Clearly, Catholic commitment to subsidiarity and the participation of people in the political decisions that affect their lives has helped shape the entire field. Some people will portray this commitment as “liberal” for its emphasis on the poor; others will portray it as “conservative” for its resistance to dependency. In fact, it is simply deeply Catholic and democratic.

A second area in which Catholic teachings matter is that of immigration policy and immigrants’ rights. Not long ago, reforming immigration policy was unimaginable, given the hostility to immigrants that pervaded public discourse. But in recent years FBCOs at national, state, and local levels have pressed forward in advocating for immigration reform and the rights of all immigrants within the United States. We believe that Catholic involvement has been crucial in two ways. First, the church has longstanding ethical teachings on this subject; its emphasis on human dignity has consistently led it to argue for immigrant rights. In addition, our data show that Catholic institutions provide the bulk of immigrant participation within the organizing work.

Finally, Catholic involvement in faith-based organizing may help America confront an odd dilemma. We are living in a period in which economic inequality has skyrocketed and millions of families have lost the wherewithal to sustain a dignified life. Yet the national political discourse has failed to address either this inequality or the institutional corruption of economic life that underlies it. Scandalously, some “conservatives” have turned a blind eye to this inequality—or advocated for policies that exacerbate it—even as they speak of protecting the family, while some “progressives” have advocated for other issues while too often ignoring the inequality that drives poor, working-class, and middle-class families to desperation. In this context, it matters greatly that Catholic parishes and CCHD have consistently engaged in and supported work that prioritizes the issues shown in our second chart.

This work, and the kinds of leaders and organizers profiled here, should be the pride of the Catholic Church in the United States today, held up as the moral voice of Ca-

FORDHAM CENTER ON RELIGION AND CULTURE

## Spiritual and Religious: What Can Religious Traditions Learn from Spiritual Seekers?

Monday, December 2, 2013 | 6 p.m.

Pope Auditorium | 113 W. 60th St.  
Fordham University | New York City

**Organized religion faces a critical challenge: Americans increasingly identify as “seekers” who are not bound to a single tradition but are open to insights from multiple religious and spiritual sources. Some call themselves spiritual but not religious; others, multireligious. Still others are grounded in one faith tradition, but embrace spiritual practices from another.**

**Regardless, spiritual seekers are taking a lead in shaping the future of faith. What accounts for this surge in spiritual seeking, especially among younger generations? Are institutionalized traditions to blame for these developments? What can traditional religious organizations learn from sustained engagement with spiritual seekers?**

### FEATURING

**Nancy Telore Anagnoston, Boston University, author of *Secret Stories: Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life***

**Peter Phan, Ignacio Ellacuría Professor of Catholic Social Thought, Georgetown University**

**Lauren Winner, Duke Divinity School, author of *Atulose Sabbath: An Invitation to a Life of Spiritual Discipline***

**Serene Jones, President, Union Theological Seminary**

**FREE AND OPEN TO THE PUBLIC**  
RSVP: [cccvent@fordham.edu](mailto:cccvent@fordham.edu) | 212-636-7347  
[www.fordham.edu/ReligCulture](http://www.fordham.edu/ReligCulture)

**FORDHAM**  
The Jesuit University of New York

---

## Might not the Catholic Church benefit from directing more attention to its involvement in faith-based organizing—especially in light of the church’s eroded position in American life?

tholicism in a time of unprecedented inequality and greed in American life. The Catholic bishops have funded this work for four decades, and can rightly claim moral authority far beyond the bounds of the church for having done so. Equally important, tens of thousands of lay Catholics and their beloved parishes, dozens of religious orders, and thousands of Catholic diocesan priests have participated in faith-based organizing, with many dedicating their ministries to it. Partly as a result, FBCOs have been instrumental in saving homes from foreclosure, winning more humane criminal-justice policies and practices, expanding health care to children and other vulnerable members of society, creating job training and employment opportunities, improving public safety, addressing the needs of the poorest members of our communities, influencing state and federal budgetary decisions, and protecting needed public services.

**Y**et Catholic sponsorship also means that internal dynamics in the Catholic Church affect the field greatly. And while some unfairly charge that the church has abandoned the fight against poverty, there is no doubt that the sectarian tenor of official Catholic discourse in recent years has de-emphasized the denunciation of poverty and injustice in favor of other issues. Unfortunately this de-emphasis has occurred just as inequality has skyrocketed, and despite the fact that many of the faithful of all stripes (“Vatican II liberals,” “traditionalists,” and “evangelical Catholics” alike) find the denunciation of poverty and injustice central to Jesus’ ministry.

A new report by Faith in Public Life—endorsed by a broad array of Catholic leaders and institutions whose faithful commitment to Jesus and the church is beyond question—highlights how deeply the sectarian tenor has divided the U.S. church. The report states its premise in its opening paragraph, which charges that

conservative Catholic activists and their ideological allies on the political right have worked to undermine the U.S. Catholic bishops’ most successful antipoverty initiative—the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD).... A small but well-financed

network has emerged as a relentless opponent of the bishops’ social-justice campaign, which has long been recognized as one of the most influential funders of grassroots community organizing.... Using guilt by association and other tactics from the McCarthy-era playbook, these activists are part of an increasingly aggressive movement of Catholic culture warriors who view themselves as fighting for a smaller, “purer” church.

Warning of “a corrosive and growing impact” on FBCOs and their work, the report asserts that “the stepped-up campaign against CCHD is draining resources from critical social-justice advocacy at a time when more than one in five children live in poverty and income inequality is the most severe it has been since the 1920s.” Indeed, our own data show that participation in faith-based organizing by Catholic parishes declined by nearly a fifth over the past decade. Especially hard hit were Hispanic Catholic parishes—the very parishes that probably benefit most from this work. Such parishes made up fully 20 percent of *all* organizing congregations in 1999, but only 6.5 percent of those joining between that year and 2011.

Today Catholic faith-based organizing is largely a light hidden under a bushel basket. It is there, but rarely seen and rarely trumpeted, except by those pastors and lay leaders engaged in it—and by the dedicated bishops who have faithfully led CCHD over the years. Is this low profile simply the result of other concerns taking priority, or is it due to fear of the kind of attacks described above?

Might not the Catholic Church in the United States benefit from directing more attention to its involvement in faith-based organizing—especially in light of the church’s eroded position in American life? It is worth recalling Pope Benedict XVI’s emphasis on “the institutional path of charity”—which he also called “the political path of charity.” “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them,” Benedict wrote in *Caritas in Veritate*. “Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *polis*.”

Perhaps Catholic leaders—laypeople, priests, religious, and bishops—can draw new confidence and inspiration from Pope Francis’s renewed emphasis on the church’s service to the material needs of the poor, and his denunciation of unjust economic structures. Whatever one makes of Francis’s recently published interviews, it is clear that the pope views the narrowness of culture-war preoccupations, and the partisanship they entail, as a distraction from the church’s broader mission as a light to the nations. In one interview Francis lamented the prominence in the church today of what he called “small-minded rules,” and made it quite clear what he was referring to. “We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage, and the use of contraceptive methods,” the pope said. “The proclamation of the saving love of God comes before moral and religious imperatives.” No bushel basket covers the light of the gospel. ■