



Congregation-based Organizing Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

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Vital Congregations – Just Communities

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Biblical and Theological Reflections

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Vital Congregations – Just Communities
Biblical and Theological Reflections

An introduction to this resource from
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The materials in this resource are intended as thought-provokers or session-starters for those who will prepare and present the biblical and theological sessions at the *Vital Congregations – Just Communities* 3-day events in synods. These reflections were first presented by “practitioner-theologians” at an event held in February of 2008, where a group of leaders gathered to begin to create a body of work that could be adapted for the *Vital Congregations – Just Communities* events around the country. Each contributor is a theologically trained Lutheran who does ministry through a congregation-based organizing lens.

As you will see, the sessions in this resource come in various forms, some essay-like in nature and some in outline mode. Whichever form they take, you, as the biblical or theological presenter at your event, are free to use and adapt them to fit your own style or theological approach. You are also free to start from scratch, so to speak, to create biblical or theological sessions from your own experience as a Lutheran in ministry who is also a practitioner of congregation-based organizing principles.

Keep in mind that a main intent of this *Vital Congregations – Just Communities* initiative is to give participants a clear and strong sense that congregation-based organizing fits squarely within the framework of Lutheran theology and a Lutheran way of interpreting scripture. This is the intent within which the following sessions were developed, and it should be yours as well, whether you use and adapt these materials or create your sessions without them.

This resource will be most useful if and as it continues to develop and grow. So, as you prepare and present your sessions at your particular *Vital Congregations – Just Communities* event, I hope you will send me at least your outlines, if not full manuscripts. I will add them to this resource, giving you full credit, of course. You can be sure that what you contribute will be helpful to your colleagues across the country as these 3-day events happen throughout 2008 and into early 2009.

Ideally, the sessions on biblical foundations will be 20-25 minutes in length and immediately *precede* the “organizing basics” training sessions of the same title. The sessions on theological underpinnings, also 20-25 minutes long, should immediately *follow* the “organizing basics” training sessions of the same title. Those basic training sessions will, for the most part, come straight out of the national organizing networks’ training “playbooks.” However, in the best-case-scenario, the professional organizers providing the basic training sessions will be in lively conversation with the biblical and theological presenters well ahead of time, in order for both you and them to tailor your sessions to be in sync with each other and with the larger purposes of the 3-day event.

I hope you will have fun with the task you have agreed to fulfill. At the same time, realize that you are participating in a grand undertaking: contributing to the articulation of a biblically and theologically sound foundation for doing congregation-based organizing in, as former Metro NY Synod Bishop Stephen Bouman puts it, “the key of Lutheran.” Grateful for your partnership: *SLE*

Before moving to the presentations, let us begin with some lists of matters certainly worthy of exploration at these 3-day *Vital Congregations – Just Communities* events. Although a determination was made by initiative planners that the four main areas of focus for each event will be **Power, Self-Interest, One-to-one Relational Meetings, and Going Public**, additional organizing basics are also worth discussing. In any given synod event, if the leaders can make additional time in the agenda for consideration of any of these matters, they certainly ought to do so.

Organizing basics to consider

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Charity vs. Justice | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Power |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Creating a culture of integrity & accountability | <input type="checkbox"/> Propositioning vs. recruiting |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Issue cuts inside (the church) & out | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public vs. Private |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> One-to-ones | <input type="checkbox"/> Qualities of a leader |
| | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Self-interest |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> World as it is/world as it should be |

As Lutherans, we are grounded in several key theological principles. The presentations in this resource reference a number of these and relate them to the principles of organizing. Here is a list of key Lutheran theological principles to have in mind and perhaps “unpack” as you are formulating your own biblical and theological presentations.

Fundamental Lutheran theological considerations

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> The Canon within the canon | <input type="checkbox"/> The Means of Grace |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Created in God’s image | <input type="checkbox"/> Inclination toward the Neighbor |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Theology of the Cross | <input type="checkbox"/> The Now and the Not Yet |
| <input type="checkbox"/> God Hidden and Revealed | <input type="checkbox"/> Paradox vs. Dualism |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Incarnational ministry | <input type="checkbox"/> Priesthood of all believers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Justification by Grace | <input type="checkbox"/> Simultaneously Saint and Sinner |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Two Kingdoms | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctrine of the Trinity |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Law/Gospel Dialectic | <input type="checkbox"/> Doctrine of Vocation |

In this resource, some of our presenters draw connections between the following organizing basics, applicable biblical passages, and corresponding theological concepts.

<u>Organizing principle</u>	<u>Biblical passage</u>	<u>Theological concept</u>
Power	John 1	Law/Gospel Dialectic
Self-interest	John 9	Doctrine of Vocation
One-to-ones	John 3 vs. John 4	Priesthood of All Believers
Public/Private	John 18	Two Kingdoms Theory

Finally, **a word about “Going Public”** in the context of this initiative. Certainly it will be important to educate participants about the differences between our public and our private lives, and the wisdom of drawing careful boundaries between them. However, for our purposes it is especially important to emphasize the move for church leaders, as well as congregations, to “go public” with their faith values, and to find or found powerful vehicles through which to express their public faith. The “Going Public” sessions of these events should go beyond the “Public vs. Private” trainings normally offered by the organizing networks. These sessions should challenge participants to consider the world as it is, the world as our faith and our hope tell us it could and should be, and the power we have within our grasp to bring the two closer together – when we choose to operate within the context of communities that are centered in God and serious about building power for the sake of the common good.

A Reflection by Rev. Steve Sylvester

(Our Savior Lutheran, Circle Pines MN.)

In organizing parlance, power is defined as “the ability to act”. Nearly everyone would agree that being able to act is a good thing, but *power* is a word that makes Christians nervous. Is power good? Is it bad? Does it corrupt those who have it? Should we want it? And if we want it and get it, what should we do with it? These are serious questions, but the reality is that it is not only OK to want power, it is our calling as Christians to have power and to use it. So let’s take a look at power.

We tend to see power as *power over*. “In the beginning” this was the kind of power that God used, what might be called *unilateral* power. God spoke and things came into being. God decreed and it was. And when God looked at creation God saw that it was *good*. This appraisal of good was God’s assessment of creation, but it was also more than that. It was God’s *promise* to creation. “You are intended for good,” God was saying. “Whatever supports your goodness I will support, and I will resist and oppose whatever gets in the way of your goodness.”

And something did get in the way. But let’s backtrack a bit. Genesis 1:27 tells us that we were created “in the image of God.” Does this refer to the fact that we are sentient beings or that we have a soul? Does it mean we have divine attributes or that we resemble God physically? The biggest hint concerning the meaning of this statement is that it is at this point that the language makes an unexpected shift from third person singular (God did, God said...) to first person plural: “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness (1:26). God is about relationship. To be created in the image of God is to be created for relationship, specifically to be created for relationship with God, with others and with creation. The goodness of creation is in large part about relationship.

And now to that *something* that got in the way. We call that something *sin*. Augustine defines sin as *Incurvatus in se, to be curved in upon oneself*, to be the center of one’s own universe. In other words, to be out of relationship. This is easy to see as we move through Genesis. Adam and Eve were dissatisfied with being creatures (And we don’t have to get in an argument here about Adam and Eve as archetypes or first historical humans, because the story tells the same truth about us regardless). Adam and Eve wanted to be like God. So they covered the parts of themselves that showed how unlike God they were and how much they were like the other creatures. In other words, they stepped aside from their proper relationship to God—creature to creator—and their proper relationship to the rest of creation—creature to creature.

When God came looking for Adam and Eve they hid. When God questioned them they turned on one another. And God responded with unilateral power. God threw them out of the garden. But that exercise of unilateral power did not have the desired effect—it did not bring back goodness to creation. In fact, things got worse: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts

of their hearts was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart.” (Genesis 6:5-6) The solution? Ratchet up the use of unilateral power: “The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.’” (Genesis 6:7) And so God decided to drown them like rats and start over.

Have you ever been in a forest after a rainstorm? Everything is a bright chartreuse green, birds are singing, there’s the soft sound of drops falling from the canopy above and sun light beams through glistening needles or leaves. It’s beautiful. It’s a fresh start, like the beginning of creation. That’s the Sunday School picture we have of the earth after the deluge, but it’s not what God saw.

What God saw was what we saw in late summer of 2005 when the waters of Katrina subsided: devastation everywhere and bloated bodies decomposing under the hot sun. God saw this and God said, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done. As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.” (Genesis 8:21-22) And like a multicolored post-it note on God’s bathroom mirror, God put the rainbow in the sky as a reminder to God (not so much as a sign to us, but as a caution to God!) of the love that God bears for creation: “When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” (Genesis 9:16)

Very soon after the flood we see God tested. Genesis 11 relates the story of the decision of people to storm heaven. It’s the old Adam and Eve temptation, to be like God. Perhaps the answer is to be where God is. So the people begin to build. They build their tower higher and higher. God sees it and it angers God. God draws back a hand to smite the wrongdoers. But as God does so there’s this flash of color, this rainbow-hued reminder that has been tied to God’s finger. And God remembers. So instead of mashing the people like bugs God frustrates their plan by confusing their language. It works... kind of. Why kind of? Because the goodness of creation has not been recovered.

The BIG FIX—throwing Adam and Eve out of the garden, flushing the whole mess down the toilet to start over, keeping the stormers of heaven at arm’s length—hasn’t worked. Unilateral power hasn’t worked. Power over hasn’t worked. What now?

A bit of a detour. This way of depicting God is disturbing to some. I am not suggesting a befuddled or inept God. What I am suggesting is that God was learning about God’s creation, a creation that was in many respects free to define itself apart from its creator. Such a creation is not always predictable, even for God. Think of God as a jazz musician, a creator who knows the general flow, but who must account for other musicians who add in, who take the piece here or there. This also does not suggest a God who is not omniscient, all-knowing. It does, however, redefine omniscience. In our day and age we think of knowing as the apprehension of details. But what if we are talking about relational

knowing? “The man [Adam] knew his wife Eve.” Looking at it this way, an all-knowing God is a God who is intimately in relationship with all of creation. So omniscience is not a flat appropriation of all the facts. It is rather an intimate and developing engagement.

But back to the BIG FIX. It didn’t work. God decided instead of using power *over* in a big way to pursue power *with* in a small way. So God restarted things with a childless old couple, Abram and Sarai. You don’t get much smaller, but we see in the Abraham story a different kind of relationship between God and humanity, a relationship of creator and co-creator. Beginning with Abraham God makes the commitment to work with humans to deal with the brokenness of our relationships.

The entire Old Testament is about the covenant God makes to pursue goodness in partnership with humanity, to use relational power instead of unilateral power. And God is surprisingly willing to work with what we give. When a loose confederation of tribes doesn’t satisfy the people and they request a king (1 Samuel 8:6) God decides to see where it will go. There are some good kings and mostly bad kings. So the prophets are sent as a counterbalance. All of this goes back and forth, back and forth.

Finally God decides to follow the old maxim that if you want something done right, do it yourself. So God comes to earth, and God comes, again, small, this time in the person of a human child. Jesus is utterly dependent on human relationships in his infancy, dependent not only on the girl who agrees to partner with God as his mother, but dependent on the goodness of her fiancé, the wisdom of foreign astrologers, etc.

As he begins his ministry Jesus uses the words of the prophet Isaiah to announce why he has come: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” (Luke 4:18-19) The things Jesus announces—release of captives, recovery of sight, freedom of the oppressed, bringing in the Lord’s Jubilee—require power, the ability to act. But he chooses to have power not by doing unilaterally. Jesus chooses to have power by gathering, teaching and sending, by organizing a body to take his place in the world.

So what do you think? Is it true? Is it indeed our calling as Christians to have power and to use it? That’s what Jesus thinks. We must certainly be aware that we are called to have relational power. We must certainly take care that we use our power to pursue the goodness of creation. But those things should not make us shy away from power. Power is good. God wants us to have it. Indeed, God has chosen to work in this world by partnering with us to act.

What follow are seemingly random references which arose from a brainstorm session of practitioner/theologians. You may find these helpful in terms of sparking additional ideas as you adapt the previous material and develop your own session on the **Bible & Power.**

The Power of the Spirit

Creating order out of chaos

The Spirit of God fills God's agents

The Spirit gives ability to confront other powers

Acts & the Spirit's ongoing work through us

Jesus' claim: "You will do greater things than I"

Parables of the kingdom that start with smallness but still affirm power

Those who "see" Jesus aren't the ones we'd expect, but are the powerless in the world's eyes

Jesus recognizes "the least of these" and their intrinsic power

You don't get crucified if you haven't challenged power!

Theology & Power

A Reflection on Power, Law & Gospel by Rev. Mark Wegener

(Woodlake Lutheran, Richfield MN)

"Power" = "ability" to get something done. Did you buy that? It's not "power over" but "power with" and "power for."

"Power" is considered a dirty word by many; except that it is so biblical! "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes." The Gospel is "the power of God for salvation."

Main issue: not "what to do with it" but "how to get it." Either it's derived from others, e.g. client/benefactor, or it's self-acquired, often in covert, grasping ways.

For us Christians, power is a "God-given" thing, a gift, more to be received rather than to be acquired.

The familiar Lutheran distinction between law and gospel is helpful here, born in the arguments with the radical reformers (1521-22) and the antinomian controversies (1527 & 1537.)

Law and Gospel names a dialectical relationship of mutuality, not two separate things operating in different spheres.

Law and/or Gospel parallel similar antithetical concepts: hidden God and/or revealed God; judgment and/or grace; divine wrath and/or love and mercy; faith and/or law; Satan and/or God; flesh and/or spirit; eros and/or agape.

From a Law perspective, power is demeaning and domineering, e.g. Lord Acton: "power corrupts; absolute powers corrupts absolutely."

From a Gospel perspective, the power we enjoy comes as a gift from baptism, and inevitably results in works, which help our neighbor.

To be agents of transformation: self-interest / vocation....power / a gospel gift.

A Reflection on Lutheran Theology and the Concept of Power, by Rev. Susan Eng

Overarching Doctrine for the 3-day gathering: *Imago Dei* – the belief that all of us are created in God’s image. I introduced my first presentation with this doctrine and this brief explication of it. In each theological session I referred to this overarching theme before moving on to introduce and unpack a particular doctrine that pertains to the organizing principle under inspection.

After introducing the Imago Dei theme and definition, I asked participants to give short responses to how they saw this theme applying to the concept of Power as they had dealt with it in their session with the organizer/trainer.

I then introduced the very Lutheran idea “*Finitum capax infiniti*” or “the finite’s capacity to bear the infinite” as a framework for legitimizing the faithful’s embrace and building of one’s own (individual and corporate) power. It’s a good pairing with the Imago Dei doctrine. It was used by the reformers to talk about how Jesus, being fully human, could also be fully divine, bearing the very fullness of God. It’s also key to Luther’s belief in the indwelling nature of Christ in the church, in creation, in the believer. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, in her little book “A Public Church” does a really nice exposition of this in her chapter on power, which I referenced briefly in my presentation.

What follow are references from a brainstorm session of practitioner/theologians. These may be helpful in sparking additional ideas as you develop your session on **Theology & Power**

- Use of baptismal language: power comes as gift through baptism
- Stewardship (use) of the gift: “You have it. Now use it.” Power as gift and responsibility.
- Sustaining and nurturing power through reception of Lord’s Supper
- Power of liturgy (especially confession & forgiveness)
- Power of blessing (the peace)
- Claiming power by expression of creed
- Claiming of power in the liturgical sending
- Reminder that the Word is powerful and that we are people of the Word
- Use a variety of ways of presentation – visuals can be powerful beyond words
- Power coming through our being created in God’s image – claiming that reality
- What does the Gospel spawn when it is activated in us?
- Affirming others’ gifts of power

A Reflection on Exodus 3:10-11, Leviticus 19: 18, and Matthew 19:19, by Rev. Dennis Jacobsen (Incarnation Lutheran, Milwaukee WI.)

[See also chapter 6 in Jacobsen's book *Doing Justice: congregations and community organizing*]

I see Andre Rublev's icon of The Holy Trinity ["google" this to see it for yourself] as a visual for the exploration of self-interest in the story of the visit to Abraham and Sarah at the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 18:1-15). The visitation engages the hidden God with the short term self-interest of Abraham and Sarah (the longing for a child) and their long term self-interests of sustaining hope for pregnancy beyond child-bearing years and of sustaining trust and belief in God who has not delivered on promises made long ago. The magnificent icon of Rublev depicts our eucharistic relationship with the relational Trinity. The lines between the three divine figures in the icon are somewhat undefined and flowing. Each person of the Trinity is distinct yet not distinct.

So it is with us. ***Self-interest in organizing, biblically speaking, is distinct for each of us but must engage us with the self-interest of others. Mutuality, not some battleground over self-interests, is the biblical goal.*** In the icon, the shape of a chalice is clearly seen and clearly replicated, reinforced. We visit the God who visits us in the eucharist. We bring our self-interests, our longings and needs, to God in the eucharist, just as Abraham and Sarah did in their meal with the three visitors at Mamre. As a pastor, I am sometimes moved to tears as members of the congregation I serve come forward to the altar for communion. I am privy to some significant struggles going on in many of the lives of those who gather around this sacred meal. There is a holy weaving together of lives, of self-interests, as people seek relationality with God and with each other in Holy Communion.

I want to focus briefly on two texts: “*So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.*’ But Moses said to God, ‘*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?*’” – *Exodus 3:10-11* and “*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*” – *Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 19:19*

Self-interest is a central concept of organizing. We organize around self-interest. We clarify self-interest in one-to-one conversations. We act out of self-interest. This is also a concept that is troubling to many Lutherans who mistakenly equate self-interest with selfishness, egoistic impulses, self-centeredness. Let's look briefly at the story of the call of Moses to see if we can get some clarity on a biblical understanding of self-interest.

The story distinguishes between two kinds of self-interest. What we might call short term self-interest and long term self-interest. Here are some examples of short term self-interest in the story: Pharaoh needs a cheap labor force; the Israelites want out of slavery; Moses wants to play it safe in exile, escaping the wrath of Pharaoh for his killing of an Egyptian taskmaster.

My perception is that some churches find it in their short term self-interest to side with Pharaoh (Faith-Based Initiative grants; jobs from mayor's office). Most are like Moses at this point of the story, seeking self-preservation while hiding from the public arena. Some churches see their short term self-interest in public arena engagement (e.g., Incarnation and the MICAH Banking Campaign, which originated with members of our church, or Incarnation's involvement in Holy Ground and the Peoples Campaign of MICAH).

What makes the story particularly interesting to me is its engagement with long term self-interest, which has to do with values, faith, the lifelong journey towards becoming an authentic self. ***The deepest form of self-interest is the authentic self, the discovery of the image of God within***, which is only encountered in relationship with God and with others. Thus, Lev. 19 and Matthew 19: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." But more about that later.

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?" Not just a self-deprecating ploy. An honest question about confused identity. Here is Moses: born Israelite, Egyptian name; born a slave, raised a prince; born a Hebrew, married to a Midianite; a fugitive murderer, now a shepherd; liberator or recluse? The burning bush is about Moses' confrontation with himself. Who indeed is Moses?

The struggle of Moses at the burning bush for his identity also issues in the revelation of the divine identity: YHWH. "I Am Who I Am." God knows who God is. But who are you, Moses? Given the *imago dei*, the discovery of the authentic self means also a discovery of God.

"I Will Be Who I Will Be." A God in process. A God who shapes the future. A God eternally becoming. The process of self-becoming is not a solitary matter between a person and God. Moses needs the Hebrew tribal community to make possible his own self-becoming. We cannot discover ourselves, find ourselves, in isolation. We can't do this by exclusively hanging around other Lutherans, or by being privatistic in our faith and church work. Biblically, no "self" is possible apart from the tribe, the community, the nation, the church, the kingdom. Long term self-interest, the journey towards the authentic self, is engaged through multi-colored, multi-ethnic, and multi-class relationships, the rich tapestry of life we encounter in congregation-based organizing.

Long term self-interest has also to do with faithfulness to the commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. Moses grew to love his people, to abandon his self-preservation for the sake of his vocation and the destiny of his people. Consider this excerpt from "The Ecstasy" by John Donne:

When love with another so
Inter-animates two souls,
that abler soul
which thence doth flow
defects of loneliness controls.

Organizing around self-interest inter-animates two souls, creating an ethereal and yet real new being that emerges between two persons and is “abler,” a manifestation of love. Something new emerges, a kind of bonding and relationality. This “abler soul” is a kind of extension of oneself, which intermingles with the extension of the other’s self. Moses encounters the abler soul inter-animated between himself and the Hebrew people. I experience something like this in my relationship with MICAH clergy and lay leaders as we operate out of a mutuality of self-interests. Self-interest, biblically, I think, is about love. Learning to love one’s authentic self. Learning to love one’s neighbor as oneself. Learning to discover the “abler soul,” a God-created form of love between persons.

A Reflection on Self-interest and John 9, by Rev. Stephen Sylvester

(Our Savior Lutheran, Circle Pines MN.)

*“As Jesus walked along, he saw **a man blind from birth**. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.’”*

[On newsprint, draw a stick figure. Ask: At this point in the story, what do we know about this man? Answer: We know that he’s blind.]

So this is a **Blind** man. Note that “man blind from birth” is simply a description of him.

*“When Jesus had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man’s eyes, saying to him, ‘Go, wash in the pool of Siloam.’ [The man] went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, ‘Is this not **the man who used to sit and beg?**’ Some were saying, ‘It is he.’ Others were saying, ‘No, but it is someone like him.’ He kept saying, ‘I am the man.’ But they kept asking him, ‘Then how were your eyes opened?’ He answered, ‘The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, “Go to Siloam and wash.” Then I went and washed and received my sight.’”*

So now he is no longer “a man blind from birth”. What is he now? He’s “the man who used to sit and beg.” Still a description, right?

And one more thing. “How were your eyes opened?” his neighbors asked him. His response? “The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, ‘Go to Siloam and wash.’ Then I went and washed and received my sight.”

Is that answer coming from here (*head*) or here (*gut*)? It’s from the head, isn’t it? It’s flat narrative. “First **this**, then **that**.”

“[So his neighbors] said to him, ‘Where is he [Jesus]?’ He said, ‘I do not know.’”

And now, from the story, we know that this man can see! So a lot has changed. **But what hasn't changed?** Does the man know **why** he can see? Does he know **what it means** that he can see? Does he have any understanding of **who** gave him the ability to see, or why? So **a lot** has changed, but at the same time, **not much** has changed. The man is still kind of a flat stick figure. The only change is that he's a stick figure who can see.

*"They brought to the Pharisees **the man who had formerly been blind**. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.'"*

Same question as before: is the man's answer **head** or **gut**? In fact, it's even more head than before, isn't it? Before it was, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." Now it's not even full description, it's just shorthand. "He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see."

*"Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to **the blind man**, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'"*

And now the man is getting pushed a little bit. He doesn't know exactly what to say, but he kind of spits out the first thing that comes to his mind: "The man is a prophet."

*"The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of **the man who had received his sight** and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'"*

*"So for the second time they called **the man who had been blind**, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I **was** blind, **now** I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.'"*

*"The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet **he opened my eyes**. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard*

that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.’ They answered him, ‘You were born entirely in sin, and are you trying to teach us?’ And they drove him out.”

Now let’s take another look at this stick figure, this **man born blind**, this **formerly** blind man, this man who used to **sit and beg**. At this point in the story the man is no longer defined by other people, he’s no longer just narrating events. He’s gone down into his gut. [Arrange below around the stick figure]

- My neighbors think I’m a freak.
- My parents have disowned me.
- The religious authorities hate me.
- I’ve been cast out of the synagogue.
- Before, I was nowhere and I didn’t see it. Now I’m on the outside looking in.

He’s begun to **engage** his narrative, hasn’t he? He is beginning to **think through** the bare facts of his narrative, what those facts mean, how they speak to him, the position they put him in. He’s starting to participate in the world and he wants to define **himself**.

Jesus **heard that they had driven the man out, and [he went looking for him.]**

Why do you think Jesus waits until this point to search the man out? Do you think it was because he felt sorry for him that he’d been tossed out of the synagogue? Did he want to hold his hand and say, “There, there, poor little formerly blind man”?

[So after Jesus found the man] *“he said, ‘Do you believe in the Son of Man?’ The man answered, ‘And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.’ Jesus said to him, ‘You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.’ He said, ‘Lord, I believe.’ And he worshipped him.”*

- My neighbors think I’m a freak.
- My parents have disowned me.
- The religious authorities hate me.
- I’ve been cast out of the synagogue.
- Before, I was nowhere and didn’t see it. Now I’m on the outside looking in.

The man wanted to be a human being. He couldn’t get that here, or here, or here, or here. But he recognized Jesus’ voice, and he knew where he could get it. He knew he could be a human being with Jesus. **That’s self-interest.**

And one last quick thing. Notice how the story ends.

“Jesus said, ‘I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.’ Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, ‘Surely we are not blind, are we?’ Jesus said to them, ‘If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, “We see”, your sin remains.”

So we end right back where we began. We began this chapter with a man born blind. It ends with men who have become blind and who are determined to remain blind.

A Reflection by Rev. Amy Reumann

(Assistant to the Bishop, Greater Milwaukee Synod.)

Some thoughts on Self-Interest and Sanctification.

Who Am I?

In his poem entitled “Who Am I?” martyred theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer asks the same question from his prison cell where he spends his final days. He contrasts the brave, clear and calm outward self that inspires his jailors and fellow prisoners alike with the powerless, weary and empty self he experiences privately. At the end of the poem he asks:

Who am I? This or the other?

Am I one person today, and tomorrow another?

Am I both at once? A hypocrite before others

And before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling?

Or is something within me still like a beaten army,

Fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?

Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine.

Whoever I am, thou knowest, O God, I am thine.

Self-interest is the congregation-based organizing term that asks the question, “Who am I?” Discovering self-interest is a key component in defining our personal aptitude and appetite for public leadership and in discerning that potential in others. Self-interest is discovered primarily through relational agitation and surfacing the tension that often exists between the self we present to the rest of the world and our internal reality. Self interest can be an effective tool in defining what truly matters to us so that we will then act on it in the public arena.

Lutheran suspicions of self-interest

In organizing, self-interest is often understood as a corrective to a religious culture that promotes and rewards self-sacrifice or selflessness as the preferred means of self-expression. There is often an ‘aha’ moment for participants who recognize the limitations of this culture. While it offers a valid critique of self-denial as a supposed superior way of being, most training approaches the matter using over simplistic models, without addressing the centrality of the Christian call to self giving in order to love and to serve one’s neighbor. This oversimplification needs to be addressed if self-interest is going to be understood and embraced from a Lutheran theological perspective. We need to ask, “What does self-interest have to do with self-giving?”. How do we distinguish between narrow self-interest that serves the individual and a broader self-interest that is defined through service to others.

The language around self-interest used in organizing can come close to sounding like yet another self-help or self-improvement method that reflects the individualism of our society. There is an assumption that if an individual can just receive the right agitation, or become clear enough about who they are and what they want, that they can achieve whatever they set out to do. Self-interest becomes a matter of the will and the desire to know oneself, in conjunction with having others invested in agitating you.

Most importantly, in order to present self-interest to a Lutheran audience, there needs to be deeper attention to the reality of sin, which will always distort our self-interest. When and how can self-interest become self-justification that distorts our relationship with God. Perhaps we can begin to address this by asking first about God's self-interest, and become clearer about how self-interest is shaped through community and a communal, rather than an individual, sense of self.

For example, when I first attended anti-racism training I was convinced of the evil of racism and the importance of combating it on behalf of those who are victimized by it, for the sake of our entire society. My self-interest became dismantling racism because it was the right thing to do and because it hurt other people. Only more recently I've become aware of how racism has damaged me as a white person, too. Coming to this point has necessitated deeper wrestling with institutional as well as individual racism. My self-interest has deepened and changed as a result.

Enlightened Self-Interest

The first time I went to organizing training in 1986, the session on self-interest included reference to the importance of enlightened self interest, but I've rarely heard of it since. We have theological work to do on the concept of 'enlightened self interest'. Enlightened refers to the sort of self identity that is shaped first by relationship to God, as expressed by Bonhoeffer's poem, and by the values, convictions and imperatives that flow from that relationship. We can read Scripture with an eye to identifying God's self interest and how that becomes clear through agitation and provocation by human activity. The Word of God has its own self-interest, as expressed in Isaiah 55:

*For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there until they have watered the earth,
Making it bring forth and sprout,
Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
So shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
It shall not return to me empty,
But it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
And succeed in the thing for which I sent it.*

Human self-interest should be understood not only as the willful act to better understand the self and the world. It must also be shaped by the word of God and one's relationship with Christ. In the book Christ the Center, Bonhoeffer describes the Christ as the address that places us in truth before God, through a personal appeal to take responsibility (Bonhoeffer speaks of 'response and responsibility'). How can we enhance our understanding of self-

interest as an encounter with this Christ who tells us the truth through agitation that comes not only through human questioning but through engagement with God's Word?

Self-Interest and Sanctification

Enlightened self-interest may not be the best term to describe this a self-interest that is forged out of relationship with Christ at the center. Enlightenment already carries with it a variety of meanings from religious and world history. I want to float out there the possibility of talking about 'sanctified self-interest' as a way to get to a deeper, more communal and God's centered approach.

Some regard the doctrine of sanctification as underdeveloped or at least under appreciated in Lutheran theology. Sanctification is life lived as described in the definition of the third article of the Creed, in which we cannot come to know Christ by our own understanding or strength but instead God comes to us through the power of the Holy Spirit, which "calls, gathers, enlightens, and makes holy" the whole Christian church. For Luther, God's justification and sanctification were one and the same thing. In God's gracious forgiveness and justification, we are given the Holy Spirit to guide in living a holy life.

Much of the popular understanding of sanctification is shaped by Christian pietism, which understands it as a linear process in which right living makes one holier, a progression towards a more perfect state of being and believing. Self-interest is also usually understood as a kind of process and progress in becoming more self-directed and therefore better able to organize and to lead. Luther, however, did not understand history or time as linear. He maintained a world view in which time is cyclical, in which creation or resurrection are not fixed points but acts of renewal that occur over and over again in history and in the Christian life. Could the clarification of self-interest necessary for organizing be understood also as a cyclical process, a commitment to constant and continual self-renewal, grounded not just in what matters most to me, but in God's justifying grace that bring renewal and new life.

A Reflection by Rev. Susan Engh

I began this session by referring to the Imago Dei overarching theme and asking participants to give brief responses regarding how they saw this theme coming into play as they explored the concept of self-interest.

I then introduced the Lutheran *Doctrine of Vocation*, and asked lay people in the room to offer their thoughts on what this doctrine might refer to (barring clergy members from responding!)

I went on to suggest that to uncover, develop clarity about, and pursue the fulfillment of one's own self-interest is an important way to honor God's call in our lives – our vocation. We talked together about the fact that we all have a variety of vocations in

life, ranging from our careers to our family commitments, to the role we play in church and in civil society.

A Reflection on Self-interest and Vocation by Rev. Mark Wegener
(Woodlake Lutheran, Richfield MN)

For how many of you is this your first exposure to community organizing? Are you experiencing any tension, any discomfort?

"Self-Interest" = "our mutual self-interest, based on our shared values" It's not "selfishness" – everything for me; nothing for you. It's not "selfless" – everything for you; nothing for me.

One issue: organizing language vs. religious language

Another issue for mainstream Lutherans: Organizing originates in distressed communities, where churches are only remaining institutions. Therefore we have a lot of Black Baptist rhetoric, plus Roman Catholic social justice theology.

So we are intentionally combining biblical agitation and theological reflection in a Lutheran mode.

Q: Do we want to be agents of transformation in our congregations and communities? If so, why?

A: It's in our self-interest, which for us means it's part of our vocation, our calling as pastors and church leaders.

Luther's teaching on Beruf/vocation developed in connection with the conviction that monastic vows are not binding. The emptying of the monasteries & convents in 1520s "religious orders"....are not higher than secular stations.

Key is the conviction that vocation is not just for ourselves, but "for others" (e.g. Freedom of a Christian, 1520).

Thus: "mutual self-interest....shared values" fits well within our understanding of vocation as service to others.

The Bible and One-to-One Relational Meetings

A Reflection on Exodus 3:1-15 and John 4:4-42 by Rev. Christopher Becker

(Amazing Grace Lutheran, Inver Grove Heights MN.)

Ask each participant to remove their shoes. Have someone read the text from Exodus 3:1-15. Why was Moses told to remove his shoes? Answer: It was *Holy Ground*.

1 to 1 relational conversations are “holy ground”. They are intentional conversations that lead us into a deeper understanding of another person. These conversations will take both curiosity and courage.

[Story of member from the congregation (an engineer) who resisted these types of conversations because he was only interested in finding solutions to problems and not needing to understand another person.]

What are some of the reasons we would ever be curious about another person?

[Group response.]

There are many examples of 1 to 1 relational conversations in the Bible. Today we will examine one of the longest in the New Testament from John 4:4-42.

Key points to make are:

- a. Although the text states that Jesus “had to” go through Samaria, it seems in actuality that this was God’s plan. God was strategic and intentional about this conversation. *For what reasons?*
- b. Where is there evidence of either the woman or Jesus being curious? Of showing courage or taking risks?
- c. What change took place in this woman as a result of this conversation?

John 4:4-30; 39-42 ⁴But he had to go through Samaria. ⁵So he came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. ⁶Jacob’s well was there, and Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well. It was about noon. ⁷A Samaritan woman came to draw water, and Jesus said to her, “Give me a drink.” ⁸(His disciples had gone to the city to buy food.) ⁹The Samaritan woman said to him, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.) ¹⁰Jesus answered her, “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” ¹¹The woman said to him, “Sir, you have no bucket, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water?” ¹²Are you greater than our ancestor Jacob, who gave us the well, and with his sons and his flocks drank from it?” ¹³Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” ¹⁵The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this

water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come back.”¹⁷ The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’;¹⁸ for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband. What you have said is true!”¹⁹ The woman said to him, “Sir, I see that you are a prophet.”²⁰ Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”²¹ Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem.”²² You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews.”²³ But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him.”²⁴ God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”²⁵ The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.”²⁶ Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you want?” or, “Why are you speaking with her?”²⁸ Then the woman left her water jar and went back to the city. She said to the people,²⁹ “Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?”³⁰ They left the city and were on their way to him.³¹ Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me everything I have ever done.”⁴⁰ So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them; and he stayed there two days.⁴¹ And many more believed because of his word.⁴² They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is truly the Savior of the world.”

Through this 1 to 1 relational conversation, what self interests of the woman’s were revealed?
[Get responses from the group.]

Through this 1 to 1 relational conversation what self interests of Jesus were revealed?
[responses...]

We speak about “having a relationship” with Jesus a lot in the church. How can we understand this apart from experiencing relationships with one another?

When and how has a 1 to 1 relational conversation changed your life? OR the life of the other person you were talking to?

If not, perhaps we have not taken these conversations as seriously as they were intended for us. How is being “known” by God and by others freeing for you?

A Reflection on 1 to 1's and John 3 and 4, by Rev. Stephen Sylvester
(Our Savior, Circle Pines MN)

The One-to-One (1-1) relational conversation is unique. It is built around **curiosity** and **courage**: curiosity, because the conversation is wholly about the life and passions of the person being *interviewed*; courage, because a successful 1-1 requires that the *interviewer* courageously follow the breadcrumbs that will invariably be dropped by the *interviewee*. Church folk often have difficulties with 1-1s, problems that are both practical and conceptual. Our practical difficulty is that it is uncomfortable for us to follow bread crumbs because we feel that we are prying. With practice this sense of unease can be set aside. Our bigger difficulty is that we suspect that the 1-1 conversation is manipulative and self-serving, that we are taking something *from* someone—information, stories— without giving anything back *to* them. This unease can be set aside as well when we understand that Jesus engaged in 1-1s, and did so in such a way that the 1-1 became a holy gift that was given to a person, a gift of self-knowledge and of deep and gracious acceptance.

The worst and best 1-1's in Scripture happen to be in consecutive chapters in the Gospel according to John. Nicodemus' attempt at a 1-1 with Jesus was a complete and utter failure. Jesus' 1-1 with the Samaritan woman at the well was a stunning success. How did the two differ so radically?

John 3

Note that Nicodemus starts not with a question, but with a statement: “Rabbi, we know that...” Nicodemus appears to enter into his conversation with Jesus already knowing what he needs to know. We can't say what Nicodemus' agenda actually is, but by the middle of the second verse, we see no sign of curiosity (and there's little courage either, because verse 1 tells us that Nicodemus “...came to Jesus by night...”) Note too that Nicodemus presents himself as someone who is speaking to Jesus on behalf of a group (“Rabbi, we know...”). Instead of being an *I-Thou* conversation, this is shaping up to be a *talking to* by a group representative.

What happens after this opening is not pretty. Jesus essentially says, “All right, you come in telling me what you know. I'll tell you what I know!” And he takes Nicodemus down side trails in the night that leave the poor Pharisee utterly confused. HE finally starts asking questions, but because he is bewildered, not because he is honestly curious. And Jesus, for his part, is in no mood to be understood: “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus' words come at Nicodemus not as clarification, not as a window into who Jesus is and what he intends, but as a stick beating on Nicodemus to drive him back out into the night. And Jesus succeeds. Nicodemus came in the dark and he leaves in the dark.

John 4

There is literally a night and day difference between the conversations in chapters three and four. (“Nicodemus came to Jesus by night,” vs., “It was about noon.”) Light and dark figure prominently in John's Gospel, nowhere more than in these two chapters.

It's hot in the Middle East, and noon to three is the hottest part of the day. Most women will come to the well early in the morning and/or in the evening to draw water, yet the Samaritan woman comes to the well at noon. Why? We find out later in the reading, but it spoils nothing to jump ahead. The woman is at the well at noon because she is considered the town trollop, and she would rather suffer the heat than be confronted by the whispered remarks and sideways glances of the other women.

Now to the 1-1. This woman has courage. She could have said nothing to Jesus' request. She could have just given him water. She could have said, "It's not appropriate for you to speak to me." Instead she asks Jesus a question, and you can almost hear Jesus think to himself, "This woman is made of stronger stuff than Nicodemus." The upshot is that Jesus engages the woman. So this is a courageous woman! She parries Jesus' odd statement with a question that seems to be half serious, half challenge. It's the fifteenth verse of the chapter before we get to the first statement by the woman, and it's a statement that invites further engagement.

And then Jesus gets personal. Jesus knows these details about the woman because he is the Son of God, but it is certainly worth mentioning that these are details that are known by everyone in the woman's neighborhood, perhaps by everyone in the city. IT is these details that keep the woman from drawing water in the cool of the morning or in the evening. And how does the woman respond? She responds in the way people often respond when they are spoken to directly about something personal: she retreats into generalities and starts talking about religious concepts. Jesus pursues her and she invites him back in. When she invites him in he says, "I am Messiah."

It's fascinating that when the disciples return they all wonder why Jesus is talking to this woman, but they do not turn to him and say, "What do you want?" or "Why are you speaking with her?" The woman returns to the city (leaving her water jar at the well!) It is then that we understand what a gift it is to be known. Here neighbors "know everything [she has] ever don," but their knowing is very different from Jesus' knowing. They know things, details, facts, but Jesus knows *her*. There is a tremendous difference between this knowing *about* and knowing as *communion*. When someone knows *about* us, we run and hide. When someone knows *us* and accepts us, we are drawn in.

With the back-and-forth that starts with verse 31, we see that the disciples lack courage. They do not address Jesus directly, and this comes the heels of the woman speaking to him openly and plainly.

A 1-1 can be, should be a holy thing. A 1-1 is about engagement, about relationship. It is not about struggling to extract information from another person. Relationship is a gift from God, and the 1-1 conversation is a tool we have at our disposal to unwrap that gift. All it takes is curiosity, courage, and practice.

Theology and One-to-ones

Reflections by Revs. Christopher Becker, Ralph Baumgartner, & Steve Sylvester

(Amazing Grace Lutheran, Inver Grove Heights MN; Bishop's Associate, St. Paul Area Synod;
Our Savior Lutheran, Circle Pines MN)

Notes: Luther's understanding of Law and Gospel.

“It is impossible for someone who does not first hear the law and let himself be killed by the letter, to hear the gospel and let the grace of the Spirit bring him to life. Grace is only given to those who long for it. Life is only a help to those who are dead, grace only to sin, the Spirit only to the Letter. No one can have one without the other. (LW 39.185)

“The law says, ‘do this,’ and it is never done. Grace [the gospel] says, ‘believe in this.’ [because] everything is already done.” (LW 31.56)

“Thus man recognizes himself in the mirror and in the face of the letter of the law – how dead he is and in what disgrace he is with God. This knowledge makes him afraid and drives him to seek the spirit, who makes him good, godly, holy, spiritual, brings all things into accord with the law, and leads him to God's grace.”

(LW 39.189)

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Key point for understanding the theology of 1 to 1's.

In Law and Gospel, God discloses two truths about us.

Law: Who we are not: God (even if we want to be).

Gospel: Who we are: God's loved and forgiven ones, named and claimed by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ alone.

Leader: Many of you remember confirmation classes. Perhaps some of you would want to forget the experience! Here we actually learned about the power of 1 to 1's without calling them that. We learned about the “mutual consolation of brothers and sisters” in what Luther called the “priesthood of all believers.”

But we also learned the Apostles' Creed and Luther's explanation of each article. That third article about the power of God's Spirit and the work of the church speaks to us about how deep relationships form new communities.

1. Building community is the most radical thing that we can do, even more so than peace-making or fighting for justice (Greg Galluzzo, Gamaliel Foundation).
2. The meaning of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed in Luther's Small Catechism, i.e. the Holy Spirit creates community.

3. The Biblical image of the New Jerusalem, which is a city transformed by God (Revelation 21).

- It has no temple, for God is present everywhere in that city.

4. The theological doctrine that encompasses all of this is The Communion of Saints.

Such a radical new community can be heard in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians when he speaks about a community where there are no slaves or free, males or females, poor or rich. It is a community that Walter Brueggemann says is an "alternative reality".

But there is more.

The 10 commandments are not just about "do not do..." Luther understood them to call us to do the "right thing". Let's explore this.

The Ten Commandments and Positive Theology

"Thou shalt not..." At first glance the Ten Commandments are a bunch of "Thou shalt nots," a laundry list of bad things not to do. It would certainly be a better world, wouldn't it, if everyone were to stay away from doing the wrong thing? It would be a better place, perhaps, but it certainly wouldn't be community. Congregation Centered Community Organizing is about creating community. That's also what the Ten Commandments are about. The earliest "practitioners" of Judaism knew that. Martin Luther rediscovered that truth. And in our time it would certainly be well for us to rediscover that as well.

Think about the book of Genesis. Everything goes haywire when Adam and Eve desire to be "like God." The rest of that book is about the characters after Adam and Eve making that same mistake (And it's actually not a "mistake." It's bigger, it's different. It's what we call sin.). Abraham does not believe that God will protect him in foreign lands among "strange" peoples when they lay eyes on his 70-year-old babe of a wife, so he decides to take over for God and protect himself by telling the half truth (and half truths are almost always whole lies) that Sarah is his sister. When Sarah loses her confidence that God will make good on the promise to deliver an heir she turns to her husband and says, "Time for us to be 'like God,' Abe. Go in to Hagar and give me an heir." God gives Rachel Esau as her first born, but she and her number two son Jacob decide that the blessing of the patriarch should be his. When Jacob finds himself wrestling with God on the banks of the Jabbok River he demands to know the name of his adversary so that he will be like the one who can call him out from a crowd.

There are certainly more examples of this in Genesis, a book that is in large part about our (often willful) misunderstanding that God is God and we are not. And time and again you can feel God sigh and wonder why we can't get it that we aren't God. As the book wraps up we have the story of Joseph and, finally, near the end of that story someone finally gets it right! After Jacob dies Joseph's brothers, fearful for their lives now that the old man has died, approach Joseph and tell what is probably a lie: "Our father asked that you forgive us." Joseph's response? "Do not be afraid!

Am I in the place of God?" Somewhere in the heavens there is the sound of clapping. "Finally," God says. "Finally." But then there's a surprise, something God didn't expect and perhaps had not dared even to hope: "So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."

Did you catch what happened? "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?" "I will not take revenge," Joseph says, "because I am not God. I will not do the wrong thing." Since Adam and Eve God has been waiting to hear this. But then Joseph springs the surprise: "So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In other words, "I will **not** do the wrong thing, and I **will** do the right thing." From *negative theology*, staying away from doing the wrong thing, to *positive theology*, entering into life to do the right thing.

This is precisely what Luther rediscovered in the Ten Commandments. "Thou shalt not kill." What does this mean? It means we should fear and love God that we may not hurt nor harm our neighbor in his body, **but help and befriend him in every bodily need**. "Thou shalt not steal." What does this mean? It means we should fear and love God that we may not take our neighbor's money or property, nor get them by false ware or dealing, **but help him to improve and protect his property and business**. And Luther does the same with nearly every other commandment. It seems like a small move, but it's not. It's the difference between, "Stay away from for your own sake," and, "Enter into the life for the sake of another."

Why is this important today? Because negative theology is the Christianity people see on TV, in bookstores and in many, many churches. "Stay away from the wrong! Don't do *this*, don't do *that*. Stay away from *these* people, don't become like *those* people." That's not relationship or community. It's self-righteousness.

Congregation Centered Community Organizing is not about staying away from, it's about entering into. It's about entering into relationship for the sake of the other. In a way, it's the Priesthood of All Believers in vignettes, which tells us that it's not about each of us having direct access to God, but is rather about each of us being called to be priests for one another. So, we are not individuals **not** doing, but we are rather communities **doing**.

Even within our liturgy we discover the vision of deep relationships as we hear God offering us a "glimpse of the foretaste of something yet to come." Within community we discover not just our own self as God's child but what it means to be connected to other brothers and sisters in Christ and that becomes the glimpse we receive of what is yet to come.

A Reflection on One-to-ones and the Priesthood of All Believers by Rev. Mark Wegener
(Woodlake Lutheran, Richfield MN)

"Power" & "self-interest"are hardest concepts to buy into "relationships" are easiest to acknowledge....as Christianand hardest to accomplish!

I enjoy doing them....and hate scheduling them....so I'm always behind....and feeling guilty about that.You, too?

Note the logic: If we want to be agents of transformation:self-interest....vocation
....power....law & gospelby building 1-1 relationships....priesthood of all believers

POAB....grew out of controversies over church's civil authorityand how/whether evangelical preachers can minister, etc.

1520 tract To the Christian Nobility....Reformation of Christian Estates....the secular estate should reform the spiritual!

....all the baptized are priests / sacerdotsbut not all are pastors/ministers / ministerii
....Contrary to some church bulletins!

In Luther's early years:ministry is authorized by baptism and one's "call" is paramount

In his later years....ministry is authorized by Christ's commandand "ordination" is more paramount.

Ordination is not a sacrament....but is necessary for the church.

POAB....is intensely relational....and interpersonal:not: "I don't need a priest....I can go directly to God." ...but: "We are all priests....and intercede for each other."

What makes 1-1s different....from pastoral calls....or friendshipsis that they are "unwanted"and riskycontra e.g. hospital calls....pastoral visits.... where we are needed....and appreciated

Real POAB entails intentionality....and determinationto Care Enough to Be Curious and Courageous!

A Reflection on One-to-ones and the Concept of Incarnational Ministry by Rev. Susan Engh

Once again I asked participants to respond to how they saw the Imago Dei theme playing out in their understanding of the value of the 1-1 conversation.

Then I introduced the Lutheran value around *incarnational ministry* as a unique take on doing one-to-one's. People who struggled with the term incarnation seemed to appreciate an earthy reference point that one pastor offered up. He said he remembers what it means by thinking "chili con carne" – chili with meat. So we can think of God's coming to us in Christ as coming with meat on – enfleshed. When we do 1-1's we meet our conversation partner on the most earthy and human of levels, just as God did by coming to us in human form in Jesus.

What follow are seemingly random references which arose from a brainstorm session of practitioner/theologians. You may find these helpful in terms of sparking additional ideas as you adapt the previous material and develop your own session on **Theology and 1-1's**

- Buber's "I & Thou" relationships
- Kings 'Beloved community' concept
- Kelly Fryer's book – *Understanding the "L" Word*

The Bible & Going Public

A Reflection by Rev. Terry Boggs

(Retired; former ELCA Director for Congregation-based Organizing.)

[This material has not yet been submitted by Rev. Boggs.

However, in order to offer something while we wait, what follows is a very sketchy outline of a biblical reflection that Rev. Boggs led at a J-term course on organizing at LSTC.]

Read out loud Luke 5:17-26

In plenary, ask for responses to the following:

- Is this story about a private or a public event?
- What is being organized in this account?
- Who is doing the organizing?
- What are the self-interests of the various characters in the story?
- Where are the places of tension or agitation in the story?
- What is announced?
- What is/are the response(s)?

Next, in small groups, reflect together on the following:

- What would it look like to tear a hole in the roof of our religious assemblies so that the paralysis of this world can come before the healing presence of the Body of Christ?
- What would “rise, take up your bed and walk” look like in our communities? Our congregations?
- When you think about your congregation going public, what worries you? What gives you hope? What excites you or gives you a sense of power?

Next, in one-to-ones, use the following to shape your conversations:

- When was the church remarkably there for you?
- At our church I am most proud of...
- The thing I am most concerned about in our community is...
- I think God is calling our congregation and community to...
- One good idea (money is not an object) for what our congregation could be doing five years from now...

Back in small groups:

- As you think about your congregation, who is missing?
- Describe the communities that sustain you.

- Talk about the tables of your life (kitchen table, altar table, soup kitchen table, office, deli, etc.)
- For what do you give thanks?

Gleanings on Going Public from Chapter 3 of “Doing Justice” by Rev. Dennis Jacobsen
(Incarnation Lutheran, Milwaukee WI.)

Read Matthew 28:19-20 and Luke 3:18-19

“Biblically speaking, the preeminent activity of the church is in the public arena, not in the sanctuary... The explosive outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the subsequent narrative of the book of Acts are powerful descriptions of the emerging church engaging in the public arena, witnessing to the resurrected Lord Jesus amidst principalities and powers, and paying dearly for its witness through persecution and imprisonment...

“The church enters the public arena because it is mandated to do so by the Great Commission of Jesus... The primary concern of the church in the public arena is not to find more members to fill the pews of the sanctuary. The church is sent into the public arena with the ethical imperatives of Jesus...

“The Spirit of the Lord who anointed Jesus ‘to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free’ sends the church into the public arena with the same mission as its Lord. The evangelistic proclamation of the church must be liberative, must offer good news to the poor, must be faithful to the ethics of Jesus...

“[W]hat does it signify for the church to be concerned only about its growth and prosperity amidst growing poverty and escalating violence? How can the church be concerned only with its own growth and not publicly engage and confront those forces that oppress the people of God?...

“The church enters the public arena in order to be the church, in order to be true to itself, in order to be faithful to its Lord, in order to heed the summons of the Holy Spirit. When the church faithfully enters the public arena, it enters what Bonhoeffer calls a ‘this-worldliness... living unreservedly in life’s duties, problems, successes and failures, experiences and perplexities... Jesus was born not in a church but in a stable. Jesus died, not of a heart attack from too many high cholesterol church dinners, but of crucifixion as an enemy of the Roman empire. The public arena is God’s arena...

“What is the nature of the church’s work in the public arena?... [W]orks of mercy are considerably limited if they are done without regard to systemic injustice... Advocates with savvy who know how to work their way through systems are a great resource... They are able to create individual justice for the moment but lack the power to create the systemic justice that is lasting... Action by resolution is another means by which some churches seek to engage the public arena... The problem is that such resolutions usually state what others should do, whether it be government or corporate America, without setting forth what the church will do. They normally hold no substance, no leverage, no strategy beyond having a

bishop or presiding church official communicate to some agency the intent of the resolution...

“The same holds true for church social statements... All too often the church deludes itself into imagining that it has now taken a bold and courageous stand. For people of faith who are alert to the limitations of direct service, advocacy, church resolutions, and church social statements, a vital alternative remains. Congregation-based community organizing offers a faithful and effective vehicle for seeking justice in the public arena.”

Theology and Going Public

A Reflection on Going Public and the Means of Grace, by Rev. Terry Moe (Redeemer Lutheran, Portland OR.)

The Means of Grace shape God's People in Empire

Primary Questions:

What are the public/private dimensions and tensions of Word and Sacraments?

How do Word and Sacraments shape God's people in empire?

What are the public/private dimensions of living faithfully in empire?

Thesis:

Biblically and theologically the sovereignty of God is primary and exclusionary:

"Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is ahad (ie singular, w/o peer)"

Jesus is God's agent bringing an alternative to the world's empires.

The church is the Risen One's ongoing presence and power as an alternative to empire.

God's claim on God's people is fully public and private, and supersedes other allegiances. The Means of Grace form God's people privately and publicly to live as God's people in response to God's gifts of grace and freedom. Empire shapes God's people in conformity to human values often at odds with God's purposes. For Luther, Bonhoeffer, and the ELCA today, Word rightly preached and sacraments rightly administered shape the church to live resistive, alternative lives individually and corporately in the midst of empire.

For Luther, empire came in the form of the Roman Catholic Church conjoined with the Holy Roman Empire. The structure and practices of empire impeded the freedom of the Gospel. Luther resisted and organized in order to let loose the power of the Gospel to free and shape God's people. The Reformation disorganized and reorganized the church around Word and Sacrament more inclusively and meaningfully. Putting the Scripture in the language of the people and offering the sacraments freely and meaningfully cut through empire's stranglehold, the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, to set free a public church in a fledgling nation-state.

Luther opened access to the means of grace and taught that, in Word and Sacrament, "forgiveness of sins, life and salvation" were given freely. Baptism and Eucharist connect the faithful to the personal and public benefits of forgiveness, life and salvation:

<u>Private</u>	(more-or-less)	<u>Public</u>
Forgiveness of sins		Truth and Reconciliation
Life individually (power w/I)		Life in Community (power among)
Salvation, eternal life, healing, liberation, recovery, justification		Food, health care, freedom, treatment Justice

For Bonhoeffer empire came in the form of the rise of the Third Reich. NAZI ideology replaced the freedom of the Gospel. The message of Life and Salvation was displaced by “God is German” and “The German Spirit will heal the world”. It was taught that Holy Baptism did not erase one’s Jewishness excluding Jewish Christians from the church and all other public offices, and relegating them to the concentration camps. How is it that Bonhoeffer was able to see over the top of the NAZI empire’s claims on the German people and offer an alternative? How did Gospel shape him privately and publicly for the role he would play in history? How is it that when nearly the whole culture was nazified, he founded an alternative seminary, taught relationally and engaged in a conspiracy to assassinate Hitler? Empire taught: The church has no right to criticize the state no matter how evil it seems. A position he once held. How did he move to the “Three Options”: To call the state to its duties; To aid the victims of the state; To put a spoke in the wheel?

“In Christ we are invited to participate in the reality of God and the reality of the world at the same time, the one not without the other. The reality of God is disclosed only as it places me completely into the reality of the world. But I find the reality of the world always already borne, accepted, and reconciled in the reality of God. That is the mystery of the revelation of God in the human being Jesus Christ....What matters is participating in the reality of God and the world in Jesus Christ today, and in doing so in such a way that I never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world, nor the reality of the world without the reality of God.” (Bonhoeffer’s Ethics, p 55)

“The ultimate question for a responsible man to ask is not how he is going to extricate himself heroically from the affair, but how the coming generation is to live. It is only from this question, with its responsibility towards history, that fruitful solutions can come, even if for the time being they are very humiliating.” (from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, by Eberhard Bethge, p 797)

CHART ONE: The Formation of Dietrich Bonhoeffer

- Upper Middle Class/Aristocratic upbringing;
- Extremely intelligent and well educated;
- Culturally astute and politically engaged;
- Strong, rooted, conservative German family;
- Experienced other cultures: Spain, England and America (Union Sem/Harlem);
- Didn’t go to church in Germany;
- Genuine spiritual seeker;
- Strong relationships:
 - Family (Father, Mother, siblings and in-laws) (Brother Walter killed in WWI)
 - Collegial
 - Ecumenical
 - Cross cultural
 - Jewish colleagues and relatives
 - Connected to the Abwehr
 - Independently wealthy

Primary questions for us:

What are the public/private dimensions and tensions of Word and Sacraments?
How do Word and Sacraments shape God's people in empire?
What are the public/private dimensions of living faithfully in empire?

CHART TWO:

<u>LUTHER</u>	<u>BONHOEFFER</u>	<u>US</u>
Empire: Babylonian Captivity of the Church	Nazification of the Church/European theater	Market domination of the world
Roman Catholic Church	Rise of the Third Reich	Globalization
Holy Roman Empire Indulgences/abuses ideology	Deification of NAZI	Separation of rich/ poor;
Freedom of the Gospel shackled	War and Holocaust	global climate change
Response: Reformation	Resistance	Organizing

As an alternative to imperial domination, God invites an alternative vision which Jesus named the “Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God”.

CHART THREE: Barmen Declaration

What is affirmed:

What is denied:

(8:10) Jesus Christ as one word of life

Other events, powers, figures and truths

(8:13) Jesus id's God's mighty claim upon our whole life

Areas of life which do not belong to Jesus Christ

(8:16) The Church is where Jesus Christ is present in word and sacrament

The Church permitted to abandon its message according to prevailing ideological or political convictions

(8:19) Offices of Church are not for dominion

The Church could give itself to special leaders with ruling powers

(8:22) Acknowledgment of divine appointment of the State

The State should become single and totalitarian; the Church should become an organ of the State

(8:25) The Church's commission is delivering the message of free grace to all people

The Church could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans

“Claimed, gathered, and sent by God's grace for the sake of the world, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in and through its churchwide expression will:

Step forward as a public church that witnessed boldly to God's love

A Reflection on Going Public and Luther's Two Kingdoms, by Rev. Mark Wegener
(Woodlake Lutheran, Richfield MN)

Going public, social, political can get you in more hot water than "self-interest," "power" & 1-1's combined! So you need to be clear about why you would do this. And you need to have powerful relationships to accomplish it.

Objection: too "political"yes, but not "partisan"... the issues grow out of human oppression

Objection: too scary. We are indeed living in a clash of values:
....scarcity....fear....isolation....versusabundance....hope....community

Objection: separation of church and state:1st Amendment: "gov't. shall not hinder religion
....no religious test....to hold govt. officenothing about church not influencing state!

Luther's "Two Kingdoms"better: "Two Governments"articulated when Duke George tried to confiscate copies of L's German NThad precedence in Augustine's Two Cities
....and the Investiture Controversy

....not....just "church and/or/vs. State....because "state" includes all areas: ...government, arts, science, education, economic welfare, etc.

e.g.....Saxon Visitation...sent out teams of four:two for religious evaluation....led to Small Catechismplus two for "economic" evaluation....i.e. local govts.

The gospel has not abrogated secular justice....but gives a new perspective....which defines its limitations ...thus, .church influences state...not vice versa

Christian's / Church's public voice....is not for selfish gainbut way of "loving one's neighbor"!

Reflection on Going Public & Our Inclination Toward the Neighbor, by Rev. Susan Engh

For a final time, I asked participants to offer ways in which the Imago Dei concept plays itself out when considering this “going public” proposal.

I introduced two final Lutheran themes for the “going public” section; first, the faithful’s *inclination toward the neighbor*. Because we are called out of sin (as Luther understood it, a turning in on oneself) into the world on behalf of the neighbor, so we are called to become public people and a public church for the sake of the world God so loves.

But because this inclination toward the neighbor can have a patronizing character to it if left unchecked, I suggested that our *Theology of the Cross* provides a needed corrective. In the cross Christ not only gave himself away for others, he also was transformed by his suffering, death and resurrection. So we who would be for the neighbor must also be vulnerable and open to the need for our own transformation, both through the pain and suffering we will endure and through the changes we must each embrace within ourselves on the path toward a new way of life, for us and for the people and communities we live among.

What follow are seemingly random references which arose from a brainstorm session of practitioner/theologians. You may find these helpful in terms of sparking additional ideas as you adapt the previous material and develop your own session on **Theology & Going Public**.

- Cynthia Moe-Lobeda book as key resource:
“Public Church for the Life of the World”
- Vitor Westhele papers on Two Kingdoms
- The Gospel within the Gospel (Scripture as the cradle for Christ; read it all through the lens of Christ and his own behavior and teachings.)
- Liturgically, add accountability and resources: ask people each week, how did we “Go in peace and serve the Lord”?
- Oscar Romero’s works
- “Agent of Grace” movie re: Bonhoeffer
- CBO is practical for “feeding” a certain segment of the congregation, people who have a more outward-focused sense of their faith and are looking for vehicles

- It's also up to us to provide an environment where people can be shaped toward a more publicly-expressed spirituality (not just target the "usual suspects" but also create them!)
- Agitation also can play a role – to move people to different levels.

Addendum 1 (assuming more will be added over time!)

Congregation-Centered Organizing: A Strategy for Growing Stronger Communities

Rev. Mark I. Wegener, Woodlake Lutheran, Richfield MN

We used to call it "church-based organizing." The idea went like this: if churches would form ecumenical coalitions they could be powerful agents for addressing such issues as crime and drugs, substandard schools, lack of jobs, eroding housing stock, and the like.

When churches and other neighborhood groups band together, they can hold public officials accountable, confront antisocial elements, encourage citizen participation, and in general build stronger communities.

Now we are calling it "congregation-centered organizing." The idea goes like this: the most valuable gift a church can give its neighborhood is its own presence as a robust, lively spiritual community.

So we focus as much on building the internal strength of our congregations as we do on building stronger communities in our neighborhoods. Congregational in-reach goes hand in hand with community out-reach.

Many of the strategies are the same, of course, because whether our organizing is church-based or congregation-centered, both are built on the premise that we need to foster a sense of community based on our shared values.

And the basic way of doing that is by creating a network of public relationships with our fellow members and our fellow citizens. In this way we can build powerful organizations that will promote our self-interests for the good of our communities.

"Power" Is Not a Bad Word

Some people are put off by the blatant appeal to power which is an integral part of congregation-centered organizing. We tend to think of power as manipulative, as domineering, as too political, as "power over" someone else, and we suspect such power is out of keeping with our Christian values. We recall Lord Acton's famous dictum: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely."

More recently, however, we have come to recognize that power in and of itself is neither good nor bad. Power is nothing more than the ability to accomplish something.

Whether the goal is to accomplish something helpful or harmful is another question, but power itself is a necessary ingredient for any action. Power is constitutive of life.

Think of some of the positive ways power is treated in our scriptures. Whether the technical term is exousia, sometimes translated as "authority," or dynamis, usually rendered as "power," the New Testament often uses the concept in a positive and godly manner.

Thus Jesus is said to have had a reputation for ministering "with authority and power" (Luke 4:36), and he gave his disciples "authority ...over all the power of the enemy." (Luke 10:19)

After his resurrection, according to Matthew (28:18), he reminded them that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," and then he assured his followers that he will be with us to the very end. And before his ascension, according to Luke (Acts 1:8), he promised his followers that "you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."

St. Paul was not afraid to admit to the Philippians (3:10) that he wanted "to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his suffering." When he described his ministry to the

Thessalonians, he insisted that "our message of the gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with full conviction." (1 Thess. 1:5)

And years later he could assure the Romans (1:16) that the Gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."

You can't frame an entire theology of power on a handful of selected texts. But these examples should demonstrate that the concept of power is a respected and valuable scriptural concept.

More to the point is the question whether we will accumulate power in God-pleasing ways and for God-pleasing purposes. We need to focus not on "power over" but on "power with."

And Neither Is "Self-Interest"

Such power is generated by and expended on behalf of our mutual self-interest. Which can be another off-putting phrase. At first glance a phrase like "self-interest" looks too much like "selfishness," and we all know that Christian people are not supposed to be selfish.

If Jesus taught us anything, it is that we are to be self-giving; we are to promote the welfare of others, if necessary even at the expense of sacrificing ourselves.

Self-denial, self-giving, selfishness, self-love, selflessness, self-interest—it may not be easy to sort these concepts out clearly.

For starters, imagine that "selfish" is at one end of the spectrum and "selfless" is at the opposite end. Clearly, selfishness is not in keeping with our Christian principles, because if you are selfish you want everything for yourself and nothing for your neighbor.

On the other hand, selflessness may not be commendable either. For if you were completely selfless, you would try to take everything away from yourself and give it to your neighbor.

Ultimately, if one were entirely self-less, there would be no self left! It would be a kind of suicide.

Think of "self-interest" as the middle term between "selfish" and "selfless," and recognize that our self-interest is never a personally private matter. Our self-interest is always formed in the context of the people around us whom we respect and admire.

So what we are promoting is our mutual self-interest, which is a product of the values we share together. When Jesus and Paul commanded us to "love your neighbor as yourself," (Mark 12:31, Romans 13:9) they were appealing to an appropriate form of self-interest, one that respects both our own and our neighbor's needs.

Thus in the context of congregation-centered organizing, "self-interest" is always a short-hand term for "our mutual self-interest based on our shared values."

So when Christian people and responsible citizens can work together on the basis of their shared values and mutual self-interest, we can more powerfully and effectively strive for the common good of the communities and neighborhoods in which we live and work and play. In short—and properly understood!— self-interest is the key to effective organizing.

How and Why We Organize: People

Furthermore, congregation-centered organizing is a grass-roots movement. If an organization is to become powerful, it must learn to organize money and people.

Most of our churches and community groups do not have a lot of money, but we do have access to people. In fact, we are in the people business, and we intend to grow stronger and stronger by intentionally establishing relationships with more and more people.

The basic tactic is to make one-on-one visits with our neighbors. We make an appointment to visit with them for half an hour or 45 minutes. As we talk together we make every effort to hear their concerns and to determine what values they hold dear. We look particularly for the issues that are most important for the health of our communities and congregations.

We know that when we find many people sharing the same concerns and values, then we are in a position to work and act together. And we know that these are the people we can enlist to support us in our actions.

One-on-one visits are a method for establishing public relationships. These are not attempts at making personal friendships; rather, they are for building public power for effective action.

The entire process has a decidedly democratic flavor; it is bottom-up, not top-down. It assumes that the people who live in a community are the ones who should determine its values and set its agenda.

Oftentimes, however, other powerful forces determine the agendas of our societies. Sometimes these are anti-social criminal forces.

Other times they are the vested political and business interests. If ordinary people are to sit at the table with representatives of the establishment, we too must be able to represent powerful coalitions of like-minded people.

Power speaks to power. And when committed individuals and congregations and other groups can band together in powerful organizations, they are in a position to take significant action on the issues that reflect their values and affect the lives of their communities.

Actions Where Everyone Wins

Church-based organizations do not try to solve problems. Problems will always be there, and we cannot afford to waste our energy fixing unending problems. We do, however, take specific actions on clearly defined issues.

The distinction is important. Drug abuse, for example, is a "problem" that promises never to go away; however, a crack house at a particular location in our neighborhood is a specific "issue" we can address.

Before we undertake a public action, first we need to be sure that a victory will be an assertion of our shared values. The issue must be black or white, not muddied and grey. For if we are not agreed on the goal, we don't do it. We do not dissipate our power by indecision.

Second, we make sure we can identify some individual who is in a position to make a decision or effect meaningful change and with whom we can establish a public relationship. So in one case the person may be an elected official; in another case it may be a landlord; in another case, a business owner; in another, a corporate officer; in another, a political bureaucrat.

In every case we focus on some responsible individual with whom we can reach an agreement and with whom we can establish mutual accountability.

Third, we don't bite off more than we can chew. We do not undertake actions unless we are confident we can win. For we refuse to waste our power by tilting at windmills. And in the end every successful action will help build the power base of the organization.

But most importantly, we work for win-win solutions to all the issues we address. For example, suppose residents on a block discover that one of the rental properties on their street has become a crack house. Reporting the drug dealing to the police may or may not be an effective way of dealing with this issue.

Another approach is for the residents to organize and confront the owner of the property and hold the absentee landlord responsible. Specifically, they might negotiate with the owner to

help screen the next renters, in which case everyone wins: the people on the block get better neighbors, and the landlord gets responsible tenants.

In short, congregation-centered organizations address specific issues by devising ways in which everyone wins, in ways which respect the self-interests of all responsible parties.

A Handful of Caveats

We expect that some people will object to organizing church people for such public, powerful, even political purposes. Occasionally such objections are raised by politicians and business leaders, who sometimes feel challenged or even threatened when the voices of ordinary citizens demand a hearing.

More often the objections come from within church circles: Why should we expend our people's energies on such "outside" efforts in the public arena? Won't that dissipate the resources we will have available for our more traditional ministries?

Those of us involved in congregation-centered organizing have discovered that responsible action in the public sphere tends to raise up new leaders and tap otherwise unused resources. People who would never consider participating in regular church committees and programs get excited when challenged to try a non-traditional approach to ministry.

Clearly, organizing in powerful and public directions is not appealing to everyone, but for some it taps a strong desire to let their faith values impact their public lives.

More importantly, objectors question whether such blatant appeals to power and self-interest are compatible with our scriptural principles and our Lutheran ethic.

Those who reflect on Martin Luther's doctrine of "the two kingdoms" must wonder whether church-based organizations are confusing God's left-hand kingdom of political reality (which is ruled by Law) with the right-hand kingdom of divine grace (which is ruled by the Gospel).

In 1523 Luther touched on this subject as he reflected on how far one should obey temporal authority. He insisted that "one must carefully distinguish between these two governments. Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds." (LW 45:92)

But he also recognized that in this world Christians are seriously outnumbered, and therefore Christian people are required to use the normal political processes in order to fulfill the command to love one's neighbor! "No Christian shall wield or invoke the sword for himself and his cause," he admitted. But then he added, "In behalf of another, however, he may and should wield it and invoke it to restrain wickedness and to defend godliness." (LW 45: 103)

When congregation-centered organizations wield power in the political arena in order to foster the shared values of their neighbors, that is a good example of living out Luther's agenda. More importantly, it's a good way of embodying solid New Testament principles.

When Jesus got serious about calling his followers to true discipleship, he made it clear that he would not tolerate any self-aggrandizing schemes. "If any want to become my followers," he said, "let them take up their cross and follow me." (Mark 8:34)

When translated into our own lives, the call to follow Jesus to the cross is often a summons to funnel our personal agendas into a cause that will benefit a larger number of our neighbors.

And when St. Paul reflected on Jesus' principles he recognized that true power does not come from one's own strength; it comes from Christ. "I came to you in weakness," he told the Corinthians, "and I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Cor. 2:2-3) And later he added, "So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." (2 Cor. 12:9)

In the Twin Cities, and Nationwide

In Minnesota over 80 churches collaborate in a major ecumenical coalition of congregations known as ISALIAH and use the principles of congregation-centered organizing to further their ministries. ISALIAH (which is affiliated with the Gamaliel Foundation) includes the Interfaith Action Organization in Minneapolis and its first-ring suburbs, the Saint Paul Ecumenical Alliance of Congregations (or SPEAC for short), and the Great Rivers Interfaith Project (or GRIP) in the St. Cloud area.

Four major organizing networks work through-out the United States: the Gamaliel Foundation, the Industrial Areas Foundation (both headquartered in Chicago), the Pacific Institute for Community Organizations (in Oakland) and the Direct Action Resource Training group (in Miami).*

They include churches across the ecumenical spectrum: Lutheran, Catholic, Methodist, UCC, Presbyterian, Baptist, Episcopal, AME, COGIC, independent, etc. And not all are white.

In most locals our organizations are racially mixed, with white, black, Hispanic and Asian constituents. It's a healthy mix. It's good for our churches. It's good for our people. And most importantly it is good for our communities.

*For helpful introductions to the work of Gamaliel, IAF, PICO, and DART, see:

Gordon E. Simmons, "Rules for Radical Pastors," Lutheran Partners (January-February 1998) 20-23;

Helene Slessarev, "Saul Alinsky Goes to Church," Sojourners (March-April 2000), 22-25;

Mark Wegener, "Investing in Strong(er) Communities," Lutheran Partners (July-Aug. 2000) 15-19;

Robert S. Bachelder, "Building Communities from the Inside Out," Christian Century (August 2-9, 2000) 802-804;

Stephen Hart, "Getting Organized: Faith-based Alliances Make a Difference," Christian Century (November 7, 2001) 20-25;

Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing*; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.