

APPENDIX TWO

Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing

By Rev. Louise Green

We owe it to our congregants and colleagues in social justice action to create a culture in the church or organization that is dynamic, life-giving, and fulfilling for all participants. Voluntary groups are an elective choice that people make in order to add something positive to their lives. Many people eventually elect out as they become tired and de-energized working in repetitive ways. This article is about another approach to organizational life, a way that seeks to find new leadership and encourage new campaigns: relational organizing.

Relational organizing is working with and beyond the bureaucratic culture of a congregation or organization. What is a bureau, literally? The word “bureaucracy” comes from a chest of drawers, where everybody has a proper compartment and place. This kind of organization is necessary in a large group, but it often works against close relationships between people. Sometimes there is very little communication between or within the drawers and no change in the overall structure for very long periods of time.

The idea of organizing relationally does not preclude the standard mechanisms we need to function in large groups--rather, it adds a dimension that can transform the culture of bureaucracy. Instead of a bureaucratic culture dominated by fixed activities that endlessly repeat, a relational culture is flexible, dynamic, and responsive to growing or changing needs.

In most congregations, bureaucracy reigns. We are so accustomed to group meetings, collective agendas, and task-oriented activities that it is easy to perpetuate a system that creates only very minimal relationships between people. Communication happens via worship bulletins, newsletters, email and phone calls, and we rarely meet with someone individually unless we have a job to do or crisis to address. Talented leaders are recruited for many tasks, and attend multiple group meetings until they risk burnout and loss of interest. Congregants may meet for months or even years, and never have a conversation about anything but what is on the agenda page for their committee night.

How can congregations and organizations break out of this constraining, de-energizing, and often depressing situation? The solution is to create a culture of relationships that is served by the bureaucratic apparatus rather than dominated by it.

The primary tool of relational organizing is the individual meeting, an encounter with a person that is rare in our culture. Individual, or One-to-One Visits are critical to create bonds between existing teams, find new talent, identify new issues, or develop a new constituency. There is no short-cut around them, and they produce results that nothing else can. Very simply, doing individual meetings is the strategy that is essential in order to create a relational culture over time.

What are the hazards of operating in a bureaucracy that has no relationship-building initiative? The same people do the same things in an unexamined way. New talent and energy is not discovered or engaged. Group meetings get certain tasks done, but only use the skills of folks which apply to the set agenda. Leaders and followers grow fatigued over time and echo the perennial complaint: why do the same people do everything around here?

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ONE-TO-ONE VISITS

What a One-to-One Visit IS:

- A 30-45 minute meeting of face-to-face conversation with one person.
- Getting to know the other person and being known
- An inquiry into what matters to a person and why.

- A chance to go outside of the repeating tasks and small group activities that dominate congregational and organizational life.
- An opportunity to know the private motivations each person has for doing public action such as congregational volunteerism or social justice work.
- A search for leaders and participants with the talent, motivation, initiative, energy, or anger to change a situation.
- A way to identify issues that need to be addressed and are not on the current action plan.

What a One-to-One Visit IS NOT:

- An interview of non-stop questions or survey.
- Going through the whole life story or resume of an individual.
- A recruitment device that fits someone into a set agenda or committee.
- An intellectual conversation about policy or strategy on issues in the congregation, neighborhood or city.
- Search for personal friendship or a social encounter.

What do you need to do a One-to-One Visit?

- A firm decision that you will make the time to engage in this important leadership task. You must invest time and energy for this to succeed.
- A clear context for your introduction on the phone and in person, and a reason for doing this that you can explain to others simply.
- Regular phone call time set aside to ask for and schedule visits.
- Patience and persistence to work with people's availability and possible resistance.
- Curiosity about other people and an ability to listen.
- Willingness to practice this skill over and over again, in multiple settings.

How do you do a One-to-One Visit?

- Have a clear introduction and ending: the middle is improvisation that is particular to the person with whom you are talking.
- Talk more deeply about a few things instead of covering 20 topics.
- Ask "why?" much more often than "what?"
- Ask the person to tell stories and personal history, talk about important incidents, time periods, or mentors—not just recite facts and dates.
- Offer back conversation and dialogue: it's not just for the purpose of the other person answering your questions.
- Close by asking the person who else they think you should be visiting with, and what questions they have for you.

How do you use One-to-One Visits?

When you decide to do a One-to-One Visit campaign, it is important to establish a context: Are you the only one doing visits, and for what reason (i.e. committee chair, task force/study leader, leading on developing a new project)? Is a team going to agree to do them with a particular list (i.e. new members, youth, seniors, religious education teachers)? Is staff preparing to do them with a certain constituency (i.e. people of color in the congregation, young adults, worship associates)?

Keep track of each visit by making notes on each individual, deciding ahead of time what kinds of things you want to remember. Just write down important items, not everything you heard. However, don't ever take notes while you are having the visit itself: this makes you a surveyor or interviewer, which is not the right purpose or tone for the conversation.

Create a process for evaluating what you learn once you have a significant number accumulated. This may be your individual work, or involve a meeting with the team that is working on the campaign. It's important to go into the visits with an open mind: you can test for certain interests or issues, but if you have one specific purpose in mind (need to recruit teachers, for example) you won't be finding out what you need to know. Your goal is to ask questions and listen, without fitting the person into any

fixed spot. One-to-One Visits are an exchange about what is important to each of you, not a session where you work to get the person to do something.

After you have met your goal for a certain number of visits, either individually or as part of a team, evaluate what you learned. This may lead to various choices:

- additional visits with new people,
- some kind of different group action,
- second visits with especially interesting or strong leaders,
- a new project or event,
- revising how you have been operating based on what you heard,
- asking people to take some sort of new initiative based on what you discovered about them.

The entire process is improvised and created out of what you actually hear and how you decide to respond. You can't plan this response until you have a number of One-to-One Visits.

What are the benefits of building a relational culture of organizing?

- Leaders who come to know each other beyond a task-oriented agenda and can do new things in new ways.
- New people who can be engaged around their own interests, not an existing plan.
- The capability to do a new project or campaign based on people's real energy and motivation, not an annual or monthly repetition of activity.
- A network of people who know and trust each other, able to take action in a variety of ways over time.
- A stronger, more dynamic, more creative congregational or organizational life.

Ways to do better One-to-One Visits:

- Have a clear beginning and end: the middle is improvisation.
- Ask people to tell stories and history, not recite facts.
- Ask "why?" much more often than "what?"
- Talk more deeply about 4 things instead of covering 20 things.
- Offer back conversation and dialogue – it's not just about the other person answering your questions.

Use the One-to-One Reflection Form (next page) as a place to write notes after visiting with someone. This will help you remember key details and stories that were shared in the visit.

ONE-TO-ONE REFLECTION FORM

Guest _____

Phone _____

Email Address _____

Group or community within Congregation _____

Questions for reflection:

Relationship:

- What do we have in common?
- What might be the basis of a relationship?
- What is their relationship with LGBT issues and people?

Self-Interest/Passion/Vocation:

- What does this person care most about? Why?
- What do they get excited talking about?
- How do they spend their time?
- What talents and abilities does this person have?
- How is LGBT inclusion part of their vocation/discipleship?
- What difference do they want to make given that vocation?
- How and where are they using them?
- What relationships does this person have?
- What specific concerns or ideas does this person have? Why?
- What is this person's story?
- Why is this person a member of this church?
- Is there a potential role in the church that would really get them excited?

A. Important things I learned about this person:

B. Talents, background, and/or gifts this person has to offer:

C. What are this person's areas of passion and vocation?

Self Evaluation

Questions for reflection:

- As a host...
- What did I do well?
- What can I do differently next time?
- Did I establish a relationship?
- Did I listen for the stories behind people's facts and opinions?
- How courageous was I? What was the riskiest question I asked?
- Were there "leads" that they gave me that I didn't follow up? Why?

Adapted from Rev. Louise Green for specific use in the Welcoming Process.