**NEW LIFE COMMUNITY CHURCH: THE DYNAMICS OF BUILDING A FAITH COMMUNITY**.

Mike Miller & Marilyn Stranske

The church appeared to be dying. The handwriting was on the wall, though members were trying not to read it. Sixty-five people, median age 55, remained in New Life Community Church, located in a near inner-city, largely Latino, neighborhood in American City. The church had been slowly losing members. But a new pastor made a commitment to try to build a loving and faithful community, one that would act on its values, and to use congregation-based community organizing as the vehicle for the renewal effort. He made this decision after a number of careful conversations with a skilled community organizer on the staff of the American City Community Organization (ACCO), a federation of congregations in the metro area.

As a first step the organizer visited many respected members of the congregation. He listened and probed--determining from them their vision for the congregation, hopes and fears, problems they faced in their lives and problems faced by the church and its surrounding neighborhood. He listened for sources of real pain, problems that were personally affecting the members and their families. Concerns fell in two areas. First, there was grief over their declining church, a body that had been "home" to many of them for much of their lives. Second, crime and the fear of it, with their accompanying sense of powerlessness to do anything about it, were common themes. The organizer asked if they would be willing to attend a meeting with others who shared their concerns to determine what they might do together about them. Most leaders agreed, coming to an exploratory meeting. As they gathered, they discovered the first community building lesson. By sharing their pain, they overcame a sense of isolation; it was a healing process. The respected members then visited still more members, until almost the entire congregation had been visited in personal meetings.

The organizer also challenged leaders to act on their faith and do something about the problems--something that would be realistic and would powerfully impact the things of concern to them. Small meetings were convened; leaders were trained to do research; a neighborhood canvass was undertaken--but an unusual one. Going two by two, they knocked on doors, saying, "Hi, we're your neighbors from New Life Church, but we haven't been very good neighbors because we haven't been talking with others who are here. We're concerned about crime in the area. We're wondering how it is for you and your family." People were eager to pour out the problems they were experiencing in the increasingly crime-ridden neighborhood. Energized by their conversations, the canvass team made more than four hundred visits. Many indicated a desire to do something about the crime situation. Six "drug houses" repeatedly came up as concerns in the neighborhood. Unlike a survey or census, people were invited to be part of solving the problems, and no expectation was created that the church visitors would do it alone.

The canvass teams met frequently to review their experiences. Every meeting began with a reflection led by one of the members. During reflections, group members discussed how a passage of scripture related to tasks and problems at hand. Many had never before reflected on how Bible passages about community, justice or relationships with neighbors related to their daily life as a community of faith. Each meeting was a "report in" time as well as a training and education session. Participants discussed questions such as, "What did we learn?" and "What did we accomplish?" The education began to deepen as members initiated a research phase, visiting all agencies and officials who had the authority to do something about the drug houses. More training took place, now specifically aimed at questions like, "How do we get the precinct captain to meet with us?," "What do we want from him?," "How do we deal with him when he comes?" and "What if he won't agree to what we want?" Leadership rotation in these meetings created many opportunities for individual growth, as well as allowing members to assess who they might later select as more permanent officers.

The time for action arrived. The visiting teams reached out to everyone who had initially been contacted. They were invited to the public meeting. The meeting opened with a reflection and testimony was given by many of the people present. Then the key spokesperson, a middle-aged Latina who had never done anything like this in her life, asked the Captain the critical questions: "Will you commit to investigate and close down the offending houses--'yes' or 'no'?" and "Will you report back to us on your progress within a month--'yes' or 'no'?" When he answered affirmatively, the spokeswoman almost fainted with relief and the crowd was jubilant. A post-meeting evaluation (open to all who attend a larger meeting) was led by the organizer. Here lessons were drawn from the experience. Many people from the neighborhood participated. A celebratory note was struck when one of the church members said, "Now our church has a face in the neighborhood, and the face is mine."

Another man said that he had been initially critical of the approach, urging that an evangelistic message should be included. The pastor responded, "Come with me. I'll show you how I tell people about Jesus." As they visited neighbors together, the man began to be touched by the pain he heard in people's stories. He realized that if he was going to talk to others about a loving God, he needed first to demonstrate his own willingness not only to listen but to struggle together with his neighbors to heal some of their common sources of pain.

The spokespeople for the meeting described their fear in dealing with the Captain, especially as they asked sharply focused questions. This moment of confrontation was critical to the development of people taking responsibility for their community and learning to hold their officials accountable. In the process, people shift from either internalized oppression (denying they have problems) or victim hood (complaining about but not acting on their problems) to active assumption of responsibility to bring about change. Everyone talked about how well they had organized themselves and how the precinct Captain had finally treated them with respect and agreed to work with them. The mood was one of celebration.

But the celebration was premature. The Captain refused to answer calls from the group and described their meeting with him as "confrontational" and "disrespectful." Now the group had to take action or return to its previous state of powerlessness. Had they done anything wrong in asking the Captain for direct and timely action? A time for public accountability had arrived: the Captain had to be held accountable for his action or lack of it. Again there was deep reflection in Scripture to see what the Lord called upon the people of faith to do.

A six week campaign, including going over the Captain's head to his superiors, led to results. First one, then another, then all six drug houses were closed by police action. And police patrols in the neighborhood increased.

Within the congregation, a new sense of community developed. The pastor used the themes of action to inform his sermons. Neighbors now greeted people on the way to services. The leaders felt a new sense of competence and self-confidence. The campaign made faith real. The people had acted on their faith in a way that directly connected their spiritual lives with their and their neighbors' everyday problems. Had someone come to them in the beginning, in their discouragement over their dwindling numbers, and said, "You must do something substantial about the crime in the neighborhood," or, "It's your Christian responsibility to visit with hundreds of families in the area," would they have done it? Their despair, inertia, lack of skills and sense of powerlessness made such action seem impossible. But they had begun by sharing with one another their own pain, their real concerns and then had taken logical steps to reach out in wider circles to their neighbors. Beginning with the life experience of the people in the congregation, the organizer helped them construct a believable vision of something they could do that connected their faith to action in the world. On the scale of things, the action was small. For the people who took part in it, it was huge. They actually confronted "the system," and when it refused to be responsive they continued the confrontation until they achieved accountability. Had they lost, their experience of failure would have confirmed the common view that "you can't fight City Hall." With their success came the first taste of the power of acting together in reflective, purposeful ways. Using a cycle of action and reflection, "ordinary people" did extraordinary things.

The congregation now began to reach out to the other congregations in ACCO--and to look at the bigger problems in American City. The process continues at this writing. A larger vision is developing as Latino, African-American and "Anglos" are meeting and working together. They are Catholics and Protestants. They increasingly see their diversity as a source of strength. It is united on a common faith in a God of justice and compassion and in a new vision of the capacity of the church--one able to act skillfully and powerfully in the midst of darkness and despair to bring change in the world.

The victory in closing the drug houses was the end of a campaign. But it was just a beginning in the process of community building/congregational renewal. The comfortable insulated family feeling that had characterized the congregation was in the process of being discarded for the challenge of reaching out, engaging with neighbors and acting on (and in the process deepening) faith. In this congregation, as in most, a relatively small group of people held most of the positions of church authority and did most of the work. While they complained about the work they had to do, they also made it difficult for new people to be part of the real decision-making part of congregation life. They would have to change or be pushed aside by a new leadership with a commitment to growth and faith-based action. Such a change is difficult, requiring patience and leadership from the pastor and other respected people within a church. At the church, the old guard resisted. A struggle ensued; the old guard wanted the church to withdraw from ACCO, but failed in their effort to pull the congregation out of the larger community organization. The emerging new leadership rose to the occasion. Even with a change in pastor, the new leaders held their own. A community is being born.

"Community," as we define it, is a group of people who support and challenge each other to act powerfully, both individually and collectively, to affirm, defend and advance their values and self-interests." Many congregations fail to function as communities in this sense. Most congregants come to worship services as "consumer members" of the church--not as co-creators. There is little challenge of one another--instead a polite, "how's it going?" style of relationship characterizes most interactions. Perhaps the pastor serves as a counselor when people are in trouble and pain, but real sharing with one another of the concerns that trouble members and that daily affect their spiritual and material lives rarely happens.

In building a new life in the congregation, a new culture must be built as well. The essential element of that culture is reaching out. Faith is lived by reaching out to neighbors, involving them in common struggle against the "principalities and powers." In the process, relationships with neighbors deepen. This approach calls on the congregation to take a special kind of responsibility for its neighborhood. It is the responsibility to activate one's neighbors, challenging them to shift from passivity to participation and to move from victim hood and powerlessness to self-empowerment. It is not to provide them with services (though in some circumstances these may be appropriate) or to speak in their behalf. It is a relationship-building process in which members of the congregation act in community with their neighbors, becoming partners, friends and real neighbors. Evangelism becomes one aspect of this relationship. It is natural in relationships for people to talk with one another about their faith. Members of the congregation can invite unchurched neighbors to share a worship service. If the church provides a spiritual home, they will join. Thus church growth and mission are two sides of the same coin.

Our story is about the beginning of a deeper community. People listened to one another to determine their deep concerns. They reached out and involved most members of the congregation, and further reached out to their neighbors. They decided to act, and they held each other, as well as political decision makers, accountable for their action. In their celebration, reflection and evaluation they learned and grew--deepening their trust in themselves and one another, their faith and their knowledge. Such communities of faith have the greatest possibility of growth. They serve as beacons in a world with little hope. As Proverbs says, "Without a vision, the people perish." In this time, many people are perishing. The question is whether religious congregations will build the kinds of communities that offer hope. Those who do will both grow and be true to their faith.

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*July 6, 1994 (The story of New Life Community Church is true. The names and places are disguised.)*