

## Lost Among Christians?



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### Mike Miller

For the past ten years, I have spent more than half my working hours with a small, influential, and growing band of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Holiness (EPH) Christians who have gathered under the umbrella of the highly decentralized Christians Supporting Community Organizing (CSCO). Many of my friends worry that I'm teaching the religious right how to pursue its agenda more effectively. Not a few funders have raised the same question.

What is a fallen-away Jew from a radical labor-movement family doing in this world? My initial interest was raised by the absence of these Christians from the faith-based community organizing work with which I've been engaged for many years and their apparent capture by the religious right.

From a pure "people power" point of view, their numbers are important. I wanted to see if this large constituency might become involved in faith-based community building, including action on issues of economic and social justice and democratic participation. I wondered if they could be persuaded to work on these issues within community organizations that include Catholic churches (with whom these traditions are sometimes in conflict), theologically "liberal" Protestant churches, Jewish synagogues, and others who disagree with them on many "individual morality" issues. While the jury is still out, the arrows point in the right direction.

About 50,000,000 Americans call themselves Evangelical, Pentecostal, or Holiness (EPH) Christians. While theologically "liberal" portions of mainline Protestantism have shrunk both in size and in the commitment of its believers, EPH churches are

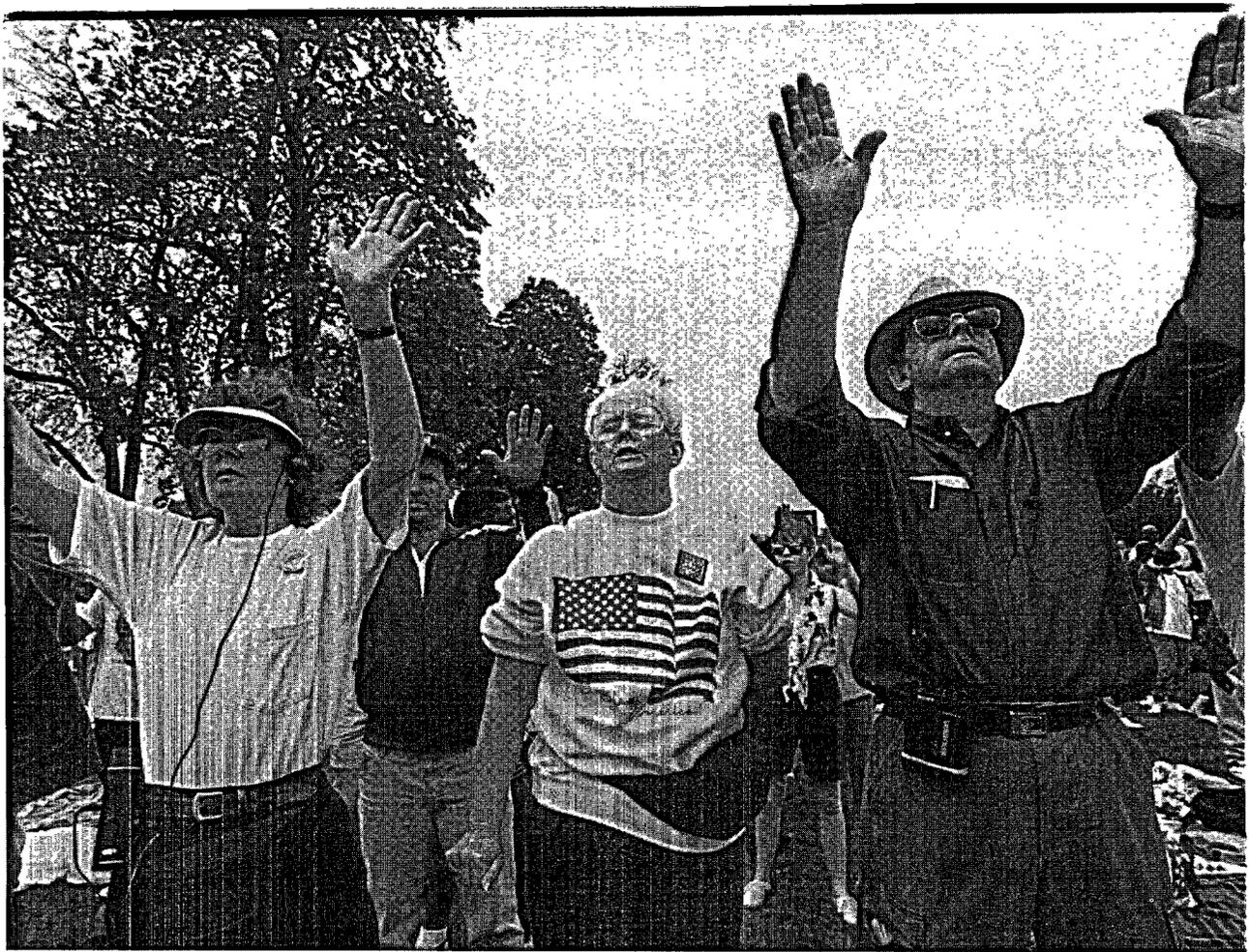


Photo by Jerome Friar/Impact Visuals

often vibrant and growing. So are caucuses of Evangelicals within mainline Protestantism. These believers are in Anglo middle-class and ethnic working-class suburbs. Their storefronts are growing in Latino, Black, and Asian inner-city neighborhoods. They are a strong presence in Appalachia and the Appalachian Diaspora. For them, faith isn't a Sunday-only affair. It is not unusual for them to spend ten, fifteen, or more hours a week in church and church-related activities. Many of them tithe—giving ten percent or more of their income to their church.

Denominations like the mostly white Assemblies of God or mostly African-American Church of God in Christ are larger in number in the United States than Episcopal, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, or Lutheran bodies. In Africa, Asia, and Latin America, they are growing rapidly. The intensity of their commitment is measured by what a Brazilian Catholic Bishop told me: “We

[Catholics] are 80% of the believers in Brazil and the Evangelicals are only 20%, but, on any given Sunday except for Easter and Christmas, we are 20% of the people in the pews and they are 80%.”

Adherents in this part of Christendom share these core beliefs: They have been “born again,” personally know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, and they have a high regard of Scripture. The Pentecostals among them lay special emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit, known to them experientially by speaking in tongues and other intense spiritual/emotional experiences. Their view of Scripture makes them theologically “conservative.”

Liberal mainliners are likely to view Scripture as allegory, metaphor, or myth, and to give tradition, experience, and reason roughly equal weight to Scripture. As I was soon to learn, EPH believers hold Scripture as their authority for faith and practice. This “high view” of Scripture calls them to become

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engaged with issues of justice, to stand against consumerism, and to struggle to build meaningful communities in which interdependence rather than "me first" individualism is a central value.

In the 19th century, the spiritual antecedents of EPH believers were at the center of social reform; they provided leadership and a base for the abolition of slavery, child labor reform, women's suffrage, labor, temperance, and other movements of the day. Late 19th/early 20th century Pentecostalism was interracial and had both

men and women in prominent leadership roles. In what has been called "The Great Reversal," many early 20th century believers came to identify the "social gospel" with secularism—though its origins are in the same revival movements from which EPH traditions come.

The famous Scopes "monkey trial," in which the merit of Charles Darwin was debated by Clarence Darrow and William Jennings Bryan, is emblematic of what the faithful saw growing in modern society. In the face of a judicial affirmation of Darwinism, confirming their worst fears about science's growing influence in the world, their strategy was to retreat and circle the wagons.

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Increasingly, faith became chiefly a spiritualized, ephemeral relationship to God. The best way to deal with a corrupt world was to withdraw from it and live as pure a life as possible. For believers, salvation began with conversion, to save others from a corrupt world. But the world wouldn't leave believers alone. A relatively small number of them became engaged with the world during the civil rights, anti-war, and poverty program period of the '60s. With issues like school prayer and abor-

tion, many began to return to their roots, but with a very important modification—the structures of evil (like slavery or corporate exploitation) were not challenged; the focus was instead almost entirely on individual sin.

Currently, many white EPH believers are joining a massive movement within their churches to apologize for past racial prejudice and discrimination and move toward racial reconciliation. But there is little talk and no collective action to end redlining or predatory lending in inner-city neighborhoods or to achieve health care coverage for all. According to most of the EPH faithful, converting lenders, educating potential borrowers, and volunteering in health clinics is the way to

address these issues—assuming they are even seen as part of the Christian moral challenge.

### **Christians and Community Organizing**

Christians Supporting Community Organizing (CSCO) began with a feasibility study that asked EPH leaders, “Would you be interested

in exploring faith-based (or congregation-based) community organizing as a vehicle for mission and community building in our parts of the church?”

The group's national organizer, Denver-based Marilyn Stranske, has met with more than 400 individual leaders of these faith perspectives. With those expressing interest, she has met

### **Leaders Speak about Christians Supporting Community Organizing**

CSCO supporters include nationally respected Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Holiness leaders.

*Eldin Villafane*, founding director of the Center for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME), executive director of the Contextualized Urban Theological Education Enablement Program (CUTEEP) and professor of Christian social ethics at Gordon-Conwell Seminary: “[Congregation-based community organizing] is a powerful instrument for the church's involvement in nonpartisan politics—‘politics’ defined as the struggle for the shalom of the community....[It] is a God-given opportunity for Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and other faith perspectives to get involved seriously in community or societal transformation. It is a key tool for effective and faithful urban ministry.”

*Janet Furness*, assistant professor of social work at Roberts Wesleyan College and past president of the North American Association of Christian Social Workers: “Community is the central issue of our time—can we be each other's neighbors or not? Christians in social work must increasingly look to community organizing as one of the principal ways in which we work with people. However

important our individual services and group work might be, they alone cannot overcome the fragmentation, isolation, and powerlessness faced by so many of the people with whom we work.”

*Stephen Mott*, social ethicist and author of *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* and *A Christian Perspective on Political Thought* (Oxford University Press): “Power is the chance to realize one's own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others. Power is a gift from God, the creator and sustainer. It provides each of God's creatures with the ability to be what God wants each to be. It sustains individuals and families in community.”

*George McKinney*, pastor of St. Stephen's Church of God in Christ (COGIC) and bishop of his denomination's Second Jurisdiction, serves on the board of directors of Pacific Institute for Community Organizing (PICO) and is a leader in PICO's San Diego Organizing Project: “[Community organizing] is a blessing that provides an opportunity for the church to mobilize its resources to address social, economic, and spiritual problems. It provides an opportunity for the church to reach unchurched people through works of compassion and efforts to bring about justice.”

many times. Most had never heard of this kind of community organizing. But the concerns they expressed in the in-depth visits are precisely those addressed by community organizing: discrimination, poverty and growing pressure on the middle class, and powerlessness to influence public decisions that affect their lives. Some grieved over the failure of EPH parts of the

church to be engaged in these issues. There was also concern about consumerism, "me first" individualism, exploitation of sexuality, and how the church might combat these trends. While some were uninterested and a few critical, the overwhelming response was positive. Several hundred respected EPH leaders have participated in CSCO-led workshops.

*Robert Linthicum*, formerly co-director of the Office of Urban Advance of World Vision International, now executive director of Partners in Urban Transformation and author of *Empowering the Poor* and *City of God, City of Satan*, has been deeply involved in congregation-based community organizing in the US, Africa, Asia, and Latin America: "When I began in urban ministry 44 years ago, I found I had been ill-prepared by my Evangelical tradition to deal with the political and economic exploitation of my poor parishioners. As an Evangelical, I had to go outside my tradition to find the means for seeking the transformation of my city's injustices as well as the salvation of its people's souls. That means was community organizing. I am thrilled now to see many Evangelicals embracing community organizing as a most effective way for seeking the shalom of the city. Now we can really make a difference!"

*Timothy Tseng*, professor of church history at American Baptist Seminary of the West and chair of the American Baptist Asian-American Caucus: "Being raised in a Chinese evangelical church in an urban setting made me sensitive to concerns for social justice. At Eastern Baptist and Union (NY) seminaries, my expo-

sure to Christians who combined their passions for evangelism and social justice cemented my commitment to encourage the Church to speak up and act on its historic obligation on behalf of the poor and oppressed. But until I became acquainted with church-based community organizing, I was unable to break through social service and public policy activism as approaches for justice ministries. While these approaches enable Christians to work on behalf of the disempowered, organizing requires us to work in solidarity with them."

*Vernon Grounds*, president emeritus of Denver Seminary: "The root of Biblical faith ought to bear the fruit of love for God and love for neighbor. As the apostle Paul succinctly put this basic evangelical tenet in Galatians 5:6, 'The only thing that counts is faith working through love.' But love of neighbor surely includes more than evangelistic concern for our neighbors, the people among whom we live. It includes as well concrete concern for the needs and problems of our immediate communities....Community organizing focuses on enabling Christian churches to make needed changes in their neighborhoods by prayerfully utilizing people-power."

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People with a high view of Scripture must take seriously a Biblically-based theology of "systems." In its workshops, that is precisely what CSCO presents. In this Biblical view, God has created economic, political, and cultural/religious systems. While their forms vary, no society is without them. God's intent is that the economic system provides for the fair and equitable distribution of goods and services; people

act as stewards of the earth's resources that are "owned" by God. Human societies are judged by how they perform as stewards and how they treat the poor. The greater the disparities of wealth and income in a nation, the less it fulfills God's intent.

Political systems are to provide order with justice. Cultural/religious systems are to provide meaning in people's lives, which, for Christians, means leading them to know God through His son, Jesus Christ. But there is a contest between the city of God and the city of Satan: systems become corrupted and go awry. When they do, according to CSCO's theologians, the economic system becomes one of exploitation, with the rich getting richer and the poor poorer. The political system becomes one of oppression, and its decisions favor those with wealth. Most debilitating, the cultural/religious system rationalizes it all.

Instead of loving God and neighbor, people love to consume, to be part of the status race,

to make idols of material things. In these times, prophets arise to call the systems to account and to challenge the people to return to their faith. But the prophets may be seduced. All armies are told, "God is on our side."

"Prosperity theology" says that wealth is a sign of God's blessing. Those not seduced may be imprisoned or

killed—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Oscar Romero. It is then left to the people to rise up in direct action against the "principalities and powers" and return the systems to their Godly intent. But the systems can penetrate deeply into the consciousness of everyone. The people themselves may be seduced and become complicit in systemic evil. Groups seek more than their share of the resources available; they exclude some, stigmatize others, and believe in the superiority of their group—"my country right or wrong." God then turns His head and lets the system as a whole destroy itself—as it did when the Jews were exiled into Babylon, as it collapsed in the Roman Empire, and, more recently, as it fell in the Soviet Union.

### **Radical Biblical Prescriptions**

As I sat in the workshops, listening to a presentation by CSCO's principal theologian, Dr. Robert Linthicum, and as I watched the reac-

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tions of "theologically conservative" Christian leaders, I was amazed. Linthicum was not "proof-texting" (the practice of picking what you want from the Bible to prove a point of view you had to begin with). In most of his sessions, small groups engaged in exegesis of Biblical passages. General sessions were highly interactive. Questions were invited. When the day was done,

participants were convinced. I was especially struck by the radical ("radical" meaning going to the root) nature of Biblical prescription and analysis as presented by Linthicum.

In some workshops, my job was to present the theory and practice of community organizing. To provide quick exposure to community organizing's strategy and tactics, we role-played confrontations with public decision makers. Workshop participants began to see the possibilities of such community organizing for themselves, their churches, and their neighbors. I often asked, "If you listen to the people in your pews, what are they concerned about? What are the pressures on their lives?" The responses were unsurprising: inadequate income, lack of affordable housing, no health care coverage, failing public schools, no child care or after-school programs for young people, crime and drugs, fear about the moral state of the nation and how it is affecting their children, and a general sense of powerlessness

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to do anything about any of them.

Every community organizer is familiar with the list. These concerns arise repeatedly when people are asked about the things that press them in their daily lives. Community organizers I know who work in Catholic parishes where they face the hostility of religious-right laity say they have little difficulty organizing around them.

The reason is simple: community organizing addresses what people care enough about to become ongoing participants in a community organization as distinct from voting for a candidate or ballot initiative or signing a petition (in organizing parlance, the first is "organizing" and the second "mobilizing"). This distinction is central. Repeatedly, I have seen people with one or another prejudice change their views when they meet "the other" in a broadly-based community organization. In these contexts, over time, mutual respect and a search for common ground substitute for stereotyping and scapegoating.

In the CSCO workshops, using action and reflection, we integrated faith with action in the world, and, in so doing, enriched the meaning of faith. I have discovered in much of my "on the ground" organizing work that many mainline Protestant and Catholic churches paid relatively little attention to the task of integrating life with faith and faith with life—

and connecting both to a Biblically-based theology. The power of religious belief, the source of values for the vast majority of Americans, was not tapped.

Often clergy lacked the tools to make deep connections between their church's teachings and the lives of the people in the pews. Those connections are what Linthicum and other CSCO leaders help people make. And when people are exposed to their teaching, there is tremendous energy in the results. The basic message is clear: the Bible not only permits, but demands, individual and group action on behalf of justice and community. Love your neighbor as yourself means just that. And if

your neighbor is abused by systems and structures, action is demanded here and now.

Linthicum and other CSCO members are now being asked to present their Biblical and historical material to local community organizations. Organizer friends and colleagues rave about the teaching and testify to the power of its impact on their mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy and lay leaders. I think the reason for this impact is simple.

The problems of our time are social, economic, and political. But they are also profoundly spiritual. If this spiritual dimension remains untouched, people are not likely to be moved to act. In its work, CSCO is tapping the

### **The Work of CSCO**

In the Fall of 1999, after two years of participant-observer study, the University of Southern California's Center for Religion and Civic Culture published a report, *Christians Supporting Community Organizing: A New Voice for Change among Evangelical, Holiness, and Pentecostal (EPH) Christians*. CSCO "is a bold national attempt to change the relationship between the theologically conservative parts of the Protestant church and community organizing." At its 1963 founding meeting, CSCO adopted a clarion call for its parts of the church to become engaged in faith-based community organizing. (Full texts of the report and the *CSCO Proclamation and Call To Our Churches* are available from the author at 442-A Vicksburg Street, San Francisco, CA 94114.)

CSCO's work includes:

- **Moving denominations.** The Southern California District of the Assemblies of God and the Second Jurisdiction of the Church of God in

Christ are leaders of efforts within their respective denominations to move these denominations to support community organizing. Such work is also under way in the Church of God, American Baptist Church, First Evangelical Church Association of Los Angeles, and in Evangelical caucuses within the Presbyterian and United Methodist Mainline denominations.

- **Moving churches toward membership in local community organizing projects.**

As a result of CSCO work, Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Holiness churches in Boston, Worcester, New York City, Rochester, Chicago, Spokane, the San Francisco Bay Area, Los Angeles/Orange Counties, San Diego, and Denver now belong to or are exploring membership in local organizing efforts.

- **Workshops and other activities with community organizing networks to establish the Biblical basis for organizing.**

CSCO-member and endorser scholars, academicians, and practicing clergy have made pre-

spiritual, the search for meaning beyond that offered in the twenty minutes of advertising that punctuate every hour-long TV show. CSCO theologians and leaders are making a direct connection between the spiritual and what goes on in everyday life. There is power for good here.

It just may be that this relatively small band of Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Holiness Christians will provide the moral compass for which Americans are desperately looking. The compass points to what Martin Luther King, Jr., called "the beloved community." It is a guide leading us to act against social, political, and economic injustices, as well as a map to identify the abuses of power by cor-

porate and government decision makers.

Ironically, among these people so different from me, I found what I knew in my days on the staff of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: a band of sisters and brothers in a circle of trust committed to building the more humane, just and democratic society for which we all hope.

*Further information about EPH and justice can be found in a publications list, "Publications Covering the World of Mission," and Walking the Poor, Bryant L. Myers. Both are available from Marc, at World Vision Publications: 800-777-7752; marcpubs@wvi.org; www.marcpublications.com*—

presentations to organizers and leaders from faith-based community organizations. Participation in these sessions clearly increases the level of commitment to organizing by clergy and lay leaders. As a result, there is a growing demand from the organizing world for these presentations.

- **Creating an intellectual foundation for EPH participation in organizing.** Scholarly and popular articles have been published in *Soujourners*, *American Political Science Association Review* and the forthcoming reader, *The Social Gospel Today*. Seminary, college, and university courses at Gordon-Conwell's Center on Urban Ministerial Education, Roberts Wesleyan's Department of Social Welfare, Wheaton, Vanguard, Claremont, Golden Gate, Pepperdine, and Eastern now include community organizing as a result of CSCO work.

- **Legitimizing and teaching organizing by using mass media tools.** A 27-hour video production on organizing and its Biblical foun-

dations, to be used in distance learning, international development, and mission work, and for local Christian education classes was released in August, 2000. The video is sponsored by major EPH institutions.

- **Fieldwork placements in organizing.** Seminarians and college students in Rochester, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles/Orange now do internships in community organizations in their areas.

- **A national resource center on organizing** has been established at Roberts Wesleyan's Department of Social Welfare.

- **Inspiring and recruiting talent.** In Chicago, Los Angeles, and Miami, professional community organizers, recruited through CSCO, are being trained to work for local organizations. All the national organizing networks see the availability of organizing talent as the most important ingredient to expanding their work.