

# PEOPLE OF POWER

*How community organising  
recalls the Church  
to the vision of the Gospel*



THE CENTRE FOR  
**THEOLOGY  
& COMMUNITY**



We believe churches in deprived and diverse areas have a vital role to play in the transformation of their communities and of wider society. We equip churches to transform their communities – through community organising, theological reflection and prayer. We also help them to use their resources more effectively for this mission. To support this, we undertake research and share the lessons through publications, training and consultancy.

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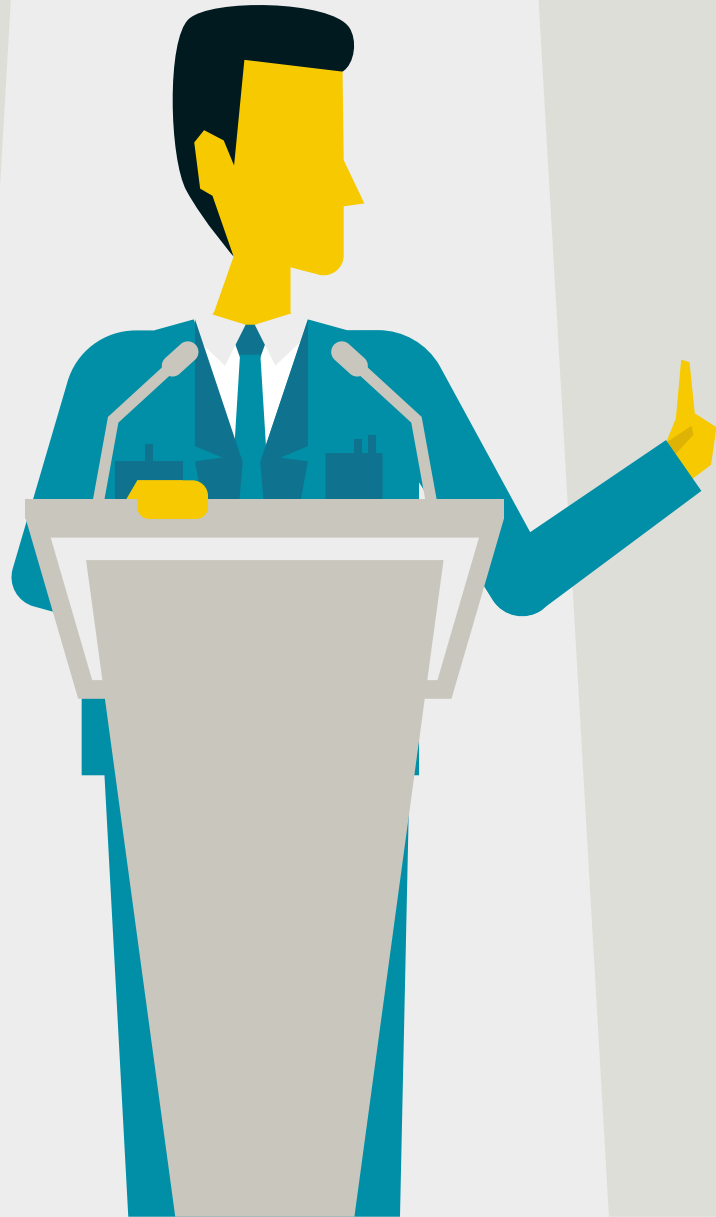
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# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	2
1. THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL .....	8
2. WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANISING?.....	16
3. HOW DOES ORGANISING STRENGTHEN CHURCHES?.....	24
4. JOIN THE MOVEMENT!.....	38



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# INTRODUCTION

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On both sides of the Atlantic, churches are at the heart of community organising alliances. This booklet explains how the movement can contribute to the renewal of the Church, by

- firstly, showing how organising recalls Christians to some central (and often overlooked) **insights of the Gospel**;
- secondly, outlining the central practices of **community organising**;
- thirdly, describing the ways in which these practices can **strengthen local congregations**, and
- fourthly, explaining how you and your church can find out more and **get involved**.

In *People of Power*, I draw on two decades of ministry in congregations involved in The East London Communities Organisation (TELCO) – and on the experience of many other lay and ordained Christians in TELCO and the wider Citizens UK alliance.

The Centre for Theology and Community was founded by Christians from a range of denominations in east London. We equip churches to transform their communities through community organising and missional enterprise, rooted in theological reflection and prayer. This report explains in more detail why and how organising is so central to our work.

*Angus Ritchie*  
*August 2018*



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# 1 THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

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In the Bible and in the history of the Church, God raises up leaders from and not just for those who are oppressed. From Moses and Miriam to Rosa Parks and Desmond Tutu, God chooses the people who experience injustice to bring it to an end.

This goes to the very heart of the Christian Gospel. Where Jesus was from – a labouring family in Nazareth, forced to flee to Egypt as refugees – is a crucial part of what he reveals. Jesus tells us that if we are to speak of God we must adopt this perspective. He prays:

I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. (Matthew 11.25)

It is a point echoed by St Paul:

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. (1 Cor. 1.26-7)

It's not enough to be a Church with a "heart for the poor". Rather, according to the New Testament, the poor are the heart of the Church.

Christians engage in community organising because it recalls us to that vision, placing those who experience injustice at the heart of the struggle for social justice. Organising can recall the Church to two further dimensions of Jesus' practice which we often prefer to evade – namely, his use of tension and his attitude to power.

Jesus' ministry generated a huge amount of tension. He denounced King Herod as a "fox" and the religious leaders of his day as "vipers." He cleansed the Temple with a whip of cords, and a few days later was brutally put to death. Jesus' taught his disciples to love their enemies, but this teaching implied that there would be enemies to love. In the Beatitudes, he clearly indicates that faithful discipleship will generate resistance:

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5.11-12)

Moreover, Jesus' ministry built a people of power. This may sound strange to our ears, because we usually focus on the many ways in which power is used to dominate and exploit. Jesus' ministry challenges the people and institutions which oppress the most vulnerable, and proclaims a Kingdom founded on a very different kind of power. Jesus commissions St Peter to build his Church and promises that "the gates of hell will not prevail against it." When he calls the disciples, Jesus gives them "power and authority" (Luke 9.1) and promises they will be "clothed with power from on high" at Pentecost (Luke 24.49). Likewise, St Paul tells the early Church that the kingdom of God "depends not on talk but on power" (1 Corinthians 4.20) and later writes that "the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1.7).

All too often, Christians imagine Jesus to be gentle and inoffensive and regard tension and power as things to be avoided. Yet, in the Gospels, Jesus is powerful and disruptive. He is able to both love his enemies and confront them – precisely because his Spirit is one of power, love and self-discipline.

For Christians, the measure of any practice is whether it helps us to be faithful to the Gospel. In placing the poor at the heart of the Church; in being unafraid of tension and confrontation; and in building a movement that is powerful, loving and disciplined, community organising helps us to be more faithful followers of Christ.



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## 2 WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANISING?

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Community organising is a structured process which brings together grassroots institutions like churches, mosques and schools in a particular town or city to work, to act on issues of common concern. It originated in the USA in the 1930s and has been growing in the UK since the 1990s.

From outside, community organising is best known for its campaign successes: such as winning a real Living Wage for 150,000 low-paid workers (as of 2017); helping to secure the first anti-usury laws in the UK for over a century (the cap on pay day loans); ending the detention of children in the asylum process...the list could go on and on! But when a church joins its local community organising alliance, it doesn't begin with this kind of action. Organising starts with listening and the building of relationships.

## COMMUNITY ORGANISING: AN OVERVIEW?

There are **community organising alliances** in a growing number of towns and cities across the country – for example, there is an alliance covering east London called TELCO (The East London Community Organisation). They are all part of the national community organising movement, which is called Citizens UK. The number of alliances in the UK is growing. An alliance is a formally constituted organisation consisting of churches, mosques, schools, trades unions and other membership-based civic organisations which have agreed to work together for social change in a particular place.

Each member institution pays a modest annual membership fee which is used by the alliance to employ some trained community organisers to help identify and mentor local leaders, and to organise training for them.

In practice, community organising involves the leaders (both formal and informal leaders) within each institution undertaking “**one-to-one**” meetings within and beyond its walls. A ‘one-to-one’ is a 30 to 40 minute face to face meeting between two people where the purpose of the conversation is to learn about the other person and their aims and to help identify any common agendas. In organising, action emerges from the shared interests of local people.

Out of these many conversations come the **actions and campaigns** which deliver change. Member institutions join together at regular intervals in ‘**assemblies**’ to share the results of their conversations and to agree shared priorities for action. The actions may start small: a campaign for a sign outside the church, a zebra crossing in a housing estate, or lighting in a park. As well as being valuable in themselves, these actions build a community's confidence to imagine more substantial changes.

While an organising alliance will consist of diverse groups – Christian, Muslim, Jewish, secular – that does not mean they need to leave their distinctive beliefs at the door. A Christian congregation that takes organising seriously will root this external action in the vision of the Gospel, so **regular reflection** is essential.

## COMMUNITY ORGANISING: KEY PRINCIPLES?

The roots of this form of community organising lie in the slums of 1930s Chicago, where Saul Alinsky pioneered this particular form of social action. He was a secular Jewish activist, who discovered churches and synagogues were vital allies in the struggle for justice. He began his work in the 1930s in some of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods. Jay MacLeod sums up his unique approach:

Alinsky's breakthrough was to reverse the logic of paternalistic reform by wresting control away from the professional do-gooders and handing it over to the people they were supposed to help. Alinsky transformed community activism from the liberal, elite-led endeavour it had become around 1900 into something he hoped would be more hard-headed and democratic.<sup>1</sup>

His model of organising had **eight key characteristics**, which continue to characterise the work of community organising movements worldwide – including Citizens UK.

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<sup>1</sup> J. MacLeod, *Community Organising: A Practical and Theological Evaluation* (London: 1988).

Firstly, there is a **relentless focus on relationships**. At the heart of community organising is the ‘one-to-one’ meeting. Both community organisers and the leaders of churches and other institutions which are in the alliance should be conducting ‘one-to-ones’ on a regular basis. The purpose of these one-to-ones is to identify and build relationships between grassroots leaders. Community organising regards someone as a leader if they have the appetite and ability to do two key things: take action for justice and identity and develop other leaders.

Secondly, organising **identifies and acts on the interests of local people**. In the language of organising, “self-interest” is not a synonym for “selfishness”. Rather, the “self-interest” of an individual or organisation is the interest that actually animates its work.

Participants in community organising are taught to identify their own and others’ “self interest” by asking:

- What relationships are central to this person’s life?
- How do they spend their time and money, and why?
- What are the motivations for key decisions they have made?
- What institutions are they involved in, and why?

These are the questions at the heart of a one-to-one, and are questions Christians ought to be comfortable asking. Organising around citizens’ “self-interest” does not involve organising around their selfishness. Rather, it honours their actual values and concerns – focusing on the realities of their lives and commitments, rather than talking in the language of vague and abstract ideas. And in the process of building relationships with our neighbours, and taking action with them for the good of our families and communities, we discover our hearts are expanded, and our “self-interest” becomes less and less self-absorbed. In losing our lives, we find them.

Thirdly, organising is **built around institutions**. Instead of mobilising individuals to campaign together on single issues, organising uses those issues to build a long-term alliance between the religious and civic institutions within a neighbourhood. There is a focus of campaigning on ‘winnable issues’ so that people unused to any kind of successful action in public life (let alone action with neighbours of other

faiths and cultures) begin to have confidence that common action is worthwhile. (The story of organising in Manor Park, below, expresses this well.) The alliance develops at the speed they develop. That way, they remain in the driving seat.

In London Citizens, the earliest campaigns were on relatively local issues (e.g. the low quality of cleaning and catering at a local hospital in east London), and as the alliance grew through modest campaign successes, it became able to address some of the root causes of the smaller-scale concerns (e.g. in the impact of the Living Wage Campaign, as it restored a sense of dignity to workers in the National Health Service whose pay and conditions had been cut through outsourcing) and was also able to respond when new challenges and opportunities arose (e.g. securing a Living Wage for all involved in the construction of, and work on, the 2012 Olympic Park, and a Community Land Trust on the park as part of the legacy.)

As in Alinsky’s day, community organising continues to be built around institutions rather than individuals.

Institutions attract a lot of suspicion, some of it justified. But an institution just is the set of structured relationships which emerge when human beings agree to be faithful to one another across time. That is what a Scout group, trade union, marriage and mosque have in common. It is one of the characteristic myths of our culture that such commitments restrict our freedom. In fact, our institutions are vital to our freedom. They enable us to build relationships of solidarity and trust across boundaries of age, race and religion. Without them, we are isolated individuals, and our lives and communities are dominated even more by the power of the market and the state.

Fourthly, organising builds local alliances which are **financially independent**. Their costs, including the pay of salaried professional organisers are funded as far as possible from annual dues paid by member institutions (‘hard money’) topped up by grants from charitable foundations (‘soft money’). Funding from government – whether federal, state or local – was never accepted. Every year, Citizens UK seeks to increase the proportion of ‘hard money’ funding its work, so that action is determined by members’ priorities, rather than those of external funders.

Fifthly, organising **teaches through experience and action**. Problems, once identified, are analysed to identify tangible, winnable demands. Action is not only engaged in to win on the specific issue, but to develop grassroots leaders, give the most excluded and often disillusioned communities the confidence that public engagement could be successful and indeed enjoyable, and build relationships of solidarity and trust across diverse communities. In each new campaign, a community organiser will be considering how the next action could develop capacity in leaders, and evaluation is a key part of their approach to training – teaching the principles of organising through reflecting on the experiences of success and also the mistakes.

This feature of community organising makes it particularly attractive to the institutions of civil society – for the process of intentional leadership development means that the practice strengthens participating institutions, rather than simply recruiting their members as volunteers. We'll read more about this in the next section.

### ***Principle 5: organising teaches through experience and action***

#### **Father Sean's story**

Fr Sean Connolly's ministry in east London exemplifies this slow, patient process of leadership development: engaging in one-to-one meetings, discerning self-interest, developing the confidence of worshippers who had never previously acted in the public sphere.

Fr Sean arrived in the Catholic Parish of Manor Park just before the London Olympics of 2012. (This was the parish, in the London Borough of Newham, which contained the main Olympic Park.) That year, one of the churches in his parish was celebrating its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Because of the impending Olympics, the local council was unwilling to put up any new road signage. However, Fr Sean's parishioners felt strongly that their church needed the same public recognition that many other local institutions had already received – and hence that this prohibition was arbitrary and unfair.

These parishioners led a community organising campaign called "We Don't Want A Miracle, We Just Want A Sign." The good-humoured action they took at a meeting of Newham Council got significant local media coverage, and led on to an agreement by councillors (the "target" of the "action") to provide the road sign.

While it was a small victory, it was a very tangible one. Every time parishioners attended the church, they were reminded of what could be achieved by collective action. People who had never before had any experience of successful action to change the behaviour of either government or corporate bodies began to envisage greater possibilities. Five years later, the seemingly trivial victory around a sign has led on to successful campaigns against unjust housing evictions, and in favour of new affordable housing in the area. By beginning with the motivations and concerns of parishioners, and moving only at the pace at which those motivations changed, Fr Sean has managed to achieve far more than if he had rushed into action on a more obviously strategic issue without first developing grassroots leaders.

Sixthly, organising recognises the vital role of tension, teaching that power is never handed over without a struggle. Dramatic tactics might be used to apply moral or practical pressure to the 'target' of an action. (In Alinsky's words, the aim was to "polarise and personalise".) They would be legal, peaceful and respectful, but would seek to embarrass the 'target' - often into living up to his or her own rhetoric. An example of the dramatic use of tension was the 'tie-up' of a bank in the London Living Wage campaign (see Inset Box).

## ***Principle 6: Organising recognises the vital role of tension***

### **The Living Wage Campaign**

Despite sending his office a number of letters from religious and civic leaders, London Citizens had been unable to secure a meeting with Sir John Bond (the Chairman of HSBC) to discuss the poverty wages of those who cleaned the bank's new international headquarters in east London.

The nuns at St Antony's Catholic Church in Forest Gate came up with an idea. The 2000-strong congregation had an account with HSBC. Each Tuesday they deposited a large number of coins in their local branch, because of the many visitors who came in to church each week to light candles.

The nuns decided to save up these coins for a few months, until they filled a small van. Just before Christmas, with a wider team of London Citizens leaders, they drove to HSBC's Oxford Street branch (in the heart of the capital – and near to BBC Broadcasting House). In full view of the national media, with placards saying “SIR JOHN BOND – SCROOGE” and “PAY HSBC CLEANERS A LIVING WAGE”, the nuns tied up the branch completely by paying in their coins one by one.

The tension worked: within an hour, Sir John had agreed to meet a team of London Citizens leaders, and in due course, HSBC became one of London's first Living Wage employers.

Like its focus on ‘self interest’, the use of tension in organising sometimes worries Christians. But it is striking that tension is very central to the practice of Jesus – who, though he loves everyone, is happy to denounce those who abuse their power as “vipers” and “foxes”, and whose journey from Palm Sunday to Good Friday includes the cleansing of the Temple with a “whip of cords”. The claim that Christian love is incompatible with tension and conflict does not stand up to any serious examination of the Gospels. In my experience of organising (for

almost twenty years in churches in east London), the practice makes us more and not less faithful followers of Jesus – and challenges our own unwillingness to live with forms of tension and conflict which he seemed happy to use.

Seventhly, however, organising **avoids the “wedge issues”** which divide people in the poorest neighbourhoods from one another. While Alinsky sought to generate tension with those beyond the alliance, it was understood that action would only be taken on issues where the interests of diverse groups led to a common desire for action. Issues on which those groups could not agree were left to one side.

This is an important feature of building an alliance across different religions and beliefs. Organising does not seek to water down the distinctive convictions of the groups who take part – and so action is only taken on issues that they can all agree on. No-one is asked to do anything that would compromise their deepest convictions.

What is surprising is just how much diverse groups can agree on – and also how different groups can learn from one another without diluting their own core beliefs. For example, the seriousness with which Muslims take Qu'ranic teachings on usury has inspired Christians to engage at a greater depth with Biblical teaching on these issues – and so churches and mosques have been at the heart of a successful community organising campaign for a legal cap on the interest rates of pay day loans.

The decision to avoid “wedge issues” does not imply that they are less important. However, the solidarity and trust which is built on the issues where we can work together often leads to a better conversation on those where there is disagreement.

Finally, the eight principle is that mass meetings – **assemblies** – are at the heart of community organising. The power of the local broad-based alliance comes from its ability to gather organised people. Regular assemblies bring thousands of members together, to hold the ‘targets’ of an action to account. This is participatory democracy in action - grassroots leaders calling elected officials and business and governmental managers to account on issues of local concern. Often, a deal will be brokered in advance of the assembly - but it is the knowledge that he or she would be faced by thousands of organised local residents that focuses the mind of the ‘target’.

## **Principle 8: Assemblies are at the heart of organising**

### **A Community Organising Assembly**

The importance of the community, of the sense of ‘being and doing together’ is crucial at each stage of the work of broad-based community organising. It is not the individual who is trying to make changes on behalf of his or her community, but the whole community who participates in the changes.

These words of a woman whose parish is a member of TELCO (The East London Communities Organisation, which is the East London chapter of London Citizens), best describe the functioning of broad-based community organising: *“First, we acknowledge the problems of the local community together. Second, we address these problems together. And third, we take actions together to solve the problems. We take actions united around a common cause.”* Another churchgoer described her involvement with TELCO as a way of *“promoting justice for the underprivileged, and doing this with people of my own Church and others, as a community.”*

At one TELCO assembly, the opening address was given by the guest speaker, the Rt Revd Thomas McMahon (then Catholic Bishop of Brentwood), who summarised the whole ethos of broad-based community organising: *“It is better together. [...] We are responsible together. [...] We can bring more transformation in this world if we can do it together.”* And this was the theme that ran throughout all the major speakers of the assembly, individuals working together, as a community, can achieve more than alone.

Among the achievements that broad-based community organising has achieved are securing a living wage, affordable housing, cleaner and safer streets, a better environment. When asked about what TELCO is doing in the community, a churchgoer passionately replied: *“Have you come here in Canning Town ten years ago? It was smelly, full of pollution, nobody wanted to live here. Now, with Telco it’s clean, you can live here, and want to live here.”* TELCO had run a successful campaign aiming at

closing down a soap factory that was making the air in Canning Town unbreathable. A Roman Catholic priest summarises Telco’s achievements as follows: *“That TELCO makes people economically better off is very small. One of the biggest achievements of TELCO is that people have a sense that they can make a difference rather than letting things happen for them.”*<sup>2</sup>

Taken together, these eight characteristics of organising –

1. focusing on relationships
2. identifying and acting on interests
3. building around local institutions
4. seeking financial independence
5. teaching through experience and action
6. recognising the vital role of tension
7. avoiding “wedge issues”
8. gathering regularly in assemblies

– have enabled community organising to grow into a unique movement. A powerful alliance is being built upon the very citizens who are usually marginalised and ignored. These are the people whom politicians often say are “hard to reach” – whereas, in reality, our political and economic systems keep power out of their reach.

Our account of community organising explains the vital role of civic institutions. They are the building-block of the alliance in every neighbourhood, precisely because they are the places where people are already in relationships across difference, coming together around shared beliefs and values. By deepening relationships and developing leaders through action, community organising does not simply harness the existing power of these institutions. It strengthens them – and ensures that within these institutions, power is shared more fairly.

<sup>2</sup> Séverine Deneulin, Dilwar Hussein and Angus Ritchie, *“Faith communities in public action: Community organising as a British case study”* available online at [www.theology-centre.org.uk](http://www.theology-centre.org.uk)



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### **3 HOW DOES ORGANISING STRENGTHEN CHURCHES?**

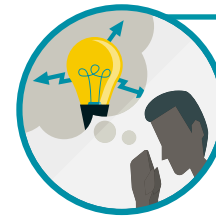
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Many churches like the idea of organising, but are worried that it will be too much work. That's understandable: in today's culture it is hard enough to keeping an institution going, without increasing the workload through more and more external projects and partnerships.

This is a problem churches share with other organisations. Just ask anyone who runs a Scout or Girl Guide group! People are less able and willing to volunteer their time than they were a decade or two ago. The growing power of both state and market puts more and more pressure on voluntary organisations, and churches in the inner city feel this more than most.

If community organising is seen as an external activity – an add-on to the core business of the church – your congregation may never find time to get involved. However, as a growing number of inner-city congregations are discovering, community organising can actually renew the life of the local church. Many of the practices that help community organising to run such effective campaigns (most obviously, its focus on developing relationships, and its development of leaders through action) can also strengthen the internal life of its member organisations.

Over the last ten years, the Centre for Theology and Community has been working with churches involved in community organising in east London. Across very different denominations and traditions, we have identified **seven hallmarks of an organised church**. These are habits which enable a local congregation to harness the potential of organising for both the renewal of their internal life, and taking action with their neighbours on issues of common concern. Our experience is that, when these habits are cultivated, internal renewal and external action reinforce one another. In doing so, they fulfil St Paul's injunction to Timothy – moving from timidity to discover a new spirit of “power, love and self-discipline” (2 Timothy 1.7).



Firstly, an organised church **integrates theology, spirituality and action**. In many congregations, community engagement and social action feel like “foreign affairs” – the passion of a small number of church members, but not part of the institution's “core business”. If social action is to move from the periphery to the core of a

church's life, worship and teaching will need to express the connection between the two.

What will this mean in practice? In preaching, faith will be connected with life, including public life. The congregation will see the reality celebrated in their liturgy as deeply connected with their community-building during the week. They will pray for public concerns and celebrate public victories in their worship.

The teaching and prayer ministries of the church will help church members integrate doctrine, prayer and practice in their daily lives – so that public action takes its rightful place part of a holistic understanding of the mission of the Church and the vocation of each Christian.

It is important that this is not simply a top-down process, in which the clergy tell the congregation why community organising matters. An organized church will be developing the ministry of all of its members. It will understand all disciples of Jesus to be “doing theology” as they deepen their relationship with the Lord and discern his will for their lives and their communities. That will be reflected in the liturgy of the church. The liturgy will truly be the work of the whole people of God. There will be space in public worship for story-telling and testimony, so that a wide range of lay people can share their experience of God's presence and activity in their lives – including their engagement in public life through community organising campaigns. And the practices of organising – one-to-one meetings, leadership development, teaching through experience and action – will not only shape the church's external campaigning, but the way in which disciples are formed.

When organising is rooted in prayer, Christians are reminded that ultimately this is God's work, and not our own. The ministry of Jesus is one that shows both urgency and patience. Before Jesus begins his public ministry, he spends thirty years immersed in the life of a

town on the margins of Jewish society, working as a carpenter. While his public ministry involves a great deal of action and agitation, it is interspersed with times of retreat when he communes with his heavenly Father and teaches his small group of disciples. An organized church will reflect these rhythms: acknowledging the danger of a rush to action, before there has been a deep listening to God (whom it hears through Scripture, liturgy and the work of the Spirit in the lives of the congregation).



Secondly, an organised church has a **relational culture**. Many churches consider themselves to be friendly. However, it is usually the case that some people feel more welcome than others. This is not always intentional. If a church is dominated by one or two cultures, age groups and/or social classes, it is easy for those who are different to be (more or less subtly) marginalised. An organized church needs to cultivate relationships across difference in an intentional way. That is what is meant by the term “relational culture”.

It is striking that Jesus built diversity into his choice of apostles – from former tax collectors (who had worked for the Roman empire) to former zealots (who advocated its violent overthrow). He understood the need for a range of temperaments, and was open to the insights and challenges of people beyond his “in-group” – most notably in his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7.24-29).

What will this look like in the life of an organised church?

There will be several “one-to-one campaigns” each year, in which church members will schedule one-to-one meetings with people they know less well and with visitors before they leave church each Sunday. There will be simple training offered to church members in how to conduct such meetings – so that they are deep without being intrusive, and are genuinely mutual conversations.

As well as one-to-one meetings, the church will regularly arrange “house meetings” (small group meetings, often in people’s homes) where people can listen to each other, connect their faith with their lives, and move from conversation into practical action.



Thirdly, such a church is **constantly reorganising, to renew its focus on people**. “All organising is disorganising and reorganising.” A congregation which has taken community organising to its heart is in perpetual process of being transformed. Relationships require constant care and maintenance, and churches always need to guard against the tendency to become bogged down in bureaucratic processes or dominated by unrepresentative cliques.

An organized church will constantly be evaluating whether its meetings allow every voice to be heard; whether people from different cultures, age groups and classes are involved in leadership, and whether the activities of the church genuinely reflect the concerns and values of the whole membership – and whether they are accessible to those on the fringes of the church community.



Fourthly, **leaders are being developed through public action** – and the pace is sustainable. Developing leaders is as important as any other institutional goal. The process of preparing for, executing and evaluating a church council meeting, for example, is as important as anything the council decides. Community organising encourages congregation to see every part of their life as an opportunity to develop new leaders. Rather than a small band of people doing everything, an organized church will have a growing number of members clearly gaining confidence about their leadership capabilities – both in the congregation and in the public arena.

Activities within the church, and community organising campaigns beyond its walls, will be selected with the development of new leaders as an explicit goal. An organised church will not despise the small campaign – to persuade the council to light a park, put in a zebra crossing, or even just put up a sign which lets neighbours know where the church is. These humble “actions” are often the process by which members of the congregation who have never been involved



in public life take the first step into active citizenship – and discover both an appetite and aptitude for leadership. Many of the east London Christians who became crucial leaders in successful campaigns for a Living Wage and affordable housing began their organising journey in this way.

Precisely because organized churches are focused on developing new leaders, they will not over-work any of their leaders but will support their private as well as public commitments. This expresses their focus on people, not projects: what happens to each person is more important than getting this or that done. A church that values its leaders does not burn them out – whether they are lay or ordained.

### ***Hallmark 4: Leaders are developed through public action***

#### **Lucy's Story**

Lucy Achola from the Catholic Parish of Manor Park became a key leader in the housing campaign after the community organising team prevented her eviction. She told her story at a recent TELCO assembly as follows:

*My name is Lucy Achola. I live in a three bedroom house where I live with my children aged 11, 7 and 5, all in full time education in the local area. We belong to St Stephen's Parish Church where we pray and feel part of the community. I was given the above accommodation through Newham Council.*

*The property I am living in belongs to Newham Council. It was leased to the housing association who is my current landlord. The lease period has come to an end and the housing association is returning back the property to the rightful owner, which is Newham Council. When I contacted the Council regarding the case, they responded by offering me a Private rented property run by Estate Agent which is more expensive than their own Council property which is affordable in terms of rent.*

*I requested the Council to let me continue to occupy the above property with my family due to the fact that the rent is affordable, we have formed a strong bond with the community where we live, and the children can go to school easily in terms of transport.*

*My request was rejected by the Newham Council Housing Team. They sent one of their staff to view the property while I was there. The man was very open to me. He told me that the reason why the Council is not giving me the property is because they are afraid to lose the right to buy to me, they would rather keep the property and sell it in an open market which will bring them good profit. I was left with no words as this story clearly shows that the financial interest of the Council comes before the essential need of the community they serve, which includes offering affordable housing.*

*I really did not know what would happen to me as the process of getting rid of me and my family from the house was still going ahead. It was so painful not to be listened to, to be forcefully removed from a place you call home, a place you can afford in term of rent.*

*So, I joined the Housing Team at my church, St Stephens, because I was sick and tired about my housing situation. Our team had hundreds of one-to-ones in the Parish. We heard lots of horror stories and invited our local Councillor to a meeting to listen to them. I shared my story, along with Nadine, Simeon and Chris. I was facing eviction from my home of 7 years. I was so stressed about my family becoming homeless. Days after the Councillors visited, I got a letter of eviction. I called on my Councillor to intervene and he did, using his power as the Cabinet Member for Housing. I am no longer facing eviction! I can now plan for the future, and I have peace of mind.*



Fifthly, in an organized church, **power and responsibility are shared.** If a congregation is serious about developing a wide team of leaders who take responsibility for its life, it will have to be patient. New activities will only develop at the pace that trained lay leaders own them. They won't happen on the whim of the clergy alone. When

power is shared in this way, responsibility and ownership are also shared. This creates a resilient team of leaders, less vulnerable to staff turnover.

An organised congregation understands holding each other (and others) accountable as a basic form of respect. They hold each other accountable for worship attendance and for the keeping of stewardship pledges, as well as the faithful accomplishment of ministry tasks. Both within the congregation and in public life, members will be expectantly and appropriately agitational, prompting one another to expanded horizons, accountability and growth. As one American Pastor put it, community organising “understands agitation to be a form of love.” This is an evident feature of Jesus’ ministry, but one churches find it very difficult to replicate.

Sharing power and responsibility involves honest and accountable discussion of money. For this reason, an organized congregation desires to “pay their own way” and to give to others. It will pool information about individual as well as communal income and investments on a confidential basis and using those totals as clout when dealing with banking, insurance and investment institutions. Again, while such openness about wealth is evident in the New Testament church, it is rarely a feature of contemporary congregations.



Sixthly, an organised church has **an instinctive readiness to work with those beyond its walls.** One question neighbours ask of any church is this: Is the congregation basically “head-hunting” or is it truly interested in and committed to the full wholeness of the community?

Organised churches engage in holistic mission, demonstrating the integrity of their commitment to the common good. They understand the need for collective power in order to realise that common good, and so sees to act with other congregations of faith and institutions of civil society. Its members are willing to be acted upon by, as well as to act upon, those beyond its walls.

As Pope Benedict XVI observed, this unconditional and practical love is a powerful witness to the Gospel:

Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends... Those who practise charity in the Church’s name will never seek to impose the Church’s faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. He knows that God is love (cf. *1 Jn 4:8*) and that God’s presence is felt at the very time when the only thing we do is to love.<sup>1</sup>



Finally, in our seventh hallmark, we see that such a congregation **tells and embodies the Christian story.** Both telling and hearing one another’s stories, within the congregation and in the public arena, are at the heart of the church’s culture - connecting its stories wherever possible

with the Biblical story.

In our increasingly privatized and individualistic world, this congregation is confident, both at telling the Christian story and in embodying it – in the way it reaches out and the way it welcomes others in.

Research by the Centre for Theology & Community shows how organised churches are doing this – and suggests it may lead to numerical growth. A study of evangelical church plants in east London found that

<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (Catholic Truth Society, 2005), S31

There is more ‘social transformation’ work than traditional evangelistic outreaches being done, although it is clear that the social transformation activities can also sometimes lead to people finding faith and contribute to church growth. It is interesting that the churches in this study which have the highest proportion of attendees who are new/returning to church are also the churches with the most active community work...<sup>2</sup>

There was a similar outcome in a study of growing Anglo-Catholic churches. In both cases, the sample size is too small to draw definitive conclusions. But a striking number of the churches at the heart of community organising are growing – because they are porous (welcoming, easy to join, keen to help people move from attendance into public leadership) without being predatory (willing to work with neighbours for the common good, whether or not they show any interest in coming to worship).

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<sup>2</sup> Tim Thorlby, (2016), *Love, Sweat and Tears* (CTC)



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# 4 JOIN THE MOVEMENT!

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The best way for a church to find out more is to come and see community organising in action! If there is a church in your area which is involved, ask them what their experience has been. Or contact Citizens UK ([www.citizensuk.org](http://www.citizensuk.org)) to talk to one of their trained community organisers. If you are in an area where a Citizens UK alliance exists, they can talk to you about the process of exploring membership. If there isn't a local alliance yet, you might be able to get involved in starting one.

The Centre for Theology and Community (CTC) grew out of the work of churches involved in community organising. These churches – from Anglican to Salvationist and from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal – wanted to root their organising work more deeply in prayer and theological reflection. They also wanted to harness the potential of organising to renew the life of their institution as well as to transform the wider community.

These two aims go together. A church which has been renewed internally (with deeper internal relationships, a growing congregation, and a culture of constantly developing new leaders) will be a more powerful agent of change in the wider community. By the same token, the process of acting for change in the wider community is key to the development of leaders and congregational growth.

CTC helps churches to organise for justice in four key ways:

- **We equip congregations through Action Learning Communities.** Over the last three years, twenty churches in London Citizens have taken part in our Action Learning Community on Congregational Development through Community Organising – a year-long programme built around the seven hallmarks of an organised church. In the text box below, Vanessa Conant describes the impact of this programme on her ministry in east London.
- **We are training a new generation of Christian leaders in church-based community organising** through our Urban Leadership School. Since 2005, over 100 young leaders have taken part in this programme – for periods ranging from a month to a year. Many have gone on to long-term ministry in the inner city,

as community organisers, teachers and priests. An increasing number of these young leaders are drawn from these inner-city communities.

- **We are helping congregations to use their buildings and income more effectively** – harnessing the potential of these assets to fund the renewal of church life, in a way that is sustainable for the long term, as well as sometimes using enterprise as a response to social need
- **We research and share our experiences** through published reports. We want more and more inner-city congregations and individual Christian leaders to discover the potential of organising, when rooted in theological reflection and prayer, to renew their ministry and transform their communities.

### Vanessa's Story

The Revd Vanessa Conant is Team Rector of the Anglican Parish of Walthamstow in east London. As she began ministry in the parish, she joined an Action Learning Community run by CTC built around the seven hallmarks. She says: *“Coming new to a parish and beginning the programme almost immediately meant that straight away, I had a framework through which to view the parish and make sense of it. The ‘seven marks of an organised congregation’ were a helpful foundation from which to build and to approach the task of giving direction and focus. I used those marks as the foundation for our vision and strategy in 2016 and so our activity is being shaped by the programme.*

*I have learnt the value of one-to-one conversations in building congregations and that they are a vital part of work – meeting Roman Catholic Priests who have congregations of thousands, yet who have hundreds and hundreds of one-to-ones has been inspiring and encouraging (and a bit of a challenge) when it sometimes feels as if the parish is too busy and*

*demanding to fit them in. Reading about the difference that these one-to-ones has made has also been profoundly encouraging.*

*The one-to-ones have helped me discover people's gifts, passions and concerns. They have enabled me, out of that, to build new teams within the church and to develop new relationships. They have helped me to know the people in the congregation and to begin to think where we can grow. They have also encouraged me to think of new things – the organic nature of the process and the search for people's 'self-interest' has meant that I can't control the conversation or the activity.*

*Daniel [the Citizens UK organizer in Waltham Forest] has been consistently supportive, encouraging and inspiring. He has been thoughtful, insightful and very compassionate. The church had been grappling with vision and direction. Now we have a clear direction for the year (based on the CTC model of an organised church). I feel there is a more empowered congregation, leadership is being shared across the congregation, people are beginning to express interest in wider Citizens' actions and some people who have never participated in anything are gradually being drawn in. I think it's a slow work – but I trust in the slow work of God!"*

If what you have read makes you want to get involved – or simply to find out more – we would love to hear from you.

- You can contact us at **hello@theology-centre.org**
- You can also follow us on Twitter **@theologycentre**
- You can sign up to receive our monthly news email via our website **www.theology-centre.org**
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*Equipping churches to transform  
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