Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes

REMARKS – “Faith, Power, and Possibility Conference”

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Let me start by thanking the planning committee of this conference, the Board of the Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes and the staff people who were so helpful leading up to today. Special thanks to my friend and colleague Janet Broderick for the invitation to be with you today. When I arrived yesterday, I was given the VIP treatment by the hotel. As a working organizer, this is an unusual, even unsettling, experience. Tension, conflict, agitation – that’s my world; and I’m thankful for it. I’m reminded of a wonderful short poem – part prayer and part anti-prayer -- by A. R. Ammons.

“Dispossess me of belief

Between life and me obtrude

No symbolic forms; ………….

Grant me this black rich country,

Uncertainty, labor, fear: do not

Steal the rewards of my mortality.”

I’ve lived and worked in this black rich country. I ‘ve written elsewhere that being an organizer is like having a New York City Transit Metro Card – it’s a pass to move through this black rich country -- through every kind of community, class, constituency, crisis, and opportunity – through times of uncertainty, labor, and fear as well as times of clarity, impact, and joy. One of my core beliefs is that this is all a gift. And I believe that this gift has been given to you as well, that it’s something that organizers and clergy and lay leaders have in common.

I know that the theme of the conference is Faith, Power, and Possibility. And I’m going to get to those eventually. But I’m going to start in a different place, the opposite place. I’m going to start with powerlessness – the inability to act effectively, to make an impact, to create lasting change.

And this theme crystallized for me about six months ago in the most unlikely of settings. I was sitting in a conference room in a very high end design thinking consulting firm in Manhattan. Like the VIP treatment last night, this was an unusual place and experience for me. I had gotten a call a few weeks before from one of the members of this firm. She explained that the firm had been hired by a billionaire to help formulate ways to use a donation of $100 million dollars targeted for a specific social change. The caller said that she had checked around and tried to find out how to ‘mobilize’ people, because that’s what they needed now: tools to mobilize people, to start a movement, in the name of this cause. She asked if I’d stop by and talk to her and four of her colleagues for an hour.

So that’s how I got into the spectacular, glass-enclosed conference room in Manhattan. I was told that Oprah had been in this very room the day before. I had to adjust to the fact that I was sitting in the same space that Oprah had occupied just 24 hours before.

When we sat down, they asked me the same question: how could they start a movement? How could they mobilize people?

I asked if I could just lay out some basic ideas about organizing for 15 minutes or so, just so that we were all clear on what we in the IAF do and don’t do.

The first thing I said was that we don’t build movements (although our work has been deeply influenced by movements), and we don’t mobilize people in the way that they were contemplating.

We build power organizations, power institutions, not movements.

Now I’m glad to see the word ‘power’ in your title, but I know and appreciate that many people still have trouble with that word and reality. I grew up in a world and have organized in a world where power is a constant presence. Neibuhr wrote about this: “….the less privileged classes developed a realistic appreciation of the factor of power in social life, while the privileged classes tried to preserve the illusion of classical liberalism that power is not an important element in man’s social life. They recognize the force of interest; but they continue to assume that the competition of interests will make for justice without political or moral regulation. This would be possible only if the various powers which support interest were fairly equally divided, *which they never are.”*

Whenever I hear the notion of “bringing all the stakeholders together,” a favorite among some in the funding world, I think of these lines from Neibuhr. Bringing all the stakeholders together, without an appreciation of the often-gross inequalities in power, is an updated attempt to preserve the illusion of classical liberalism, to assert that power is not an important element in people’s social lives.

So is the assertion that knowledge is power. Knowledge is NOT power. It’s knowledge. Or that information is power. It’s not. Or that celebrity or rock star status is power. It’s not. (And those of you now saying to yourselves, “Oh, yeah, then how did the current occupant of the White House get elected?” To which I would answer: “He got elected because of the endless reactions of his opponents and their inability to switch gears and get HIM to react.” But I’ve written that elsewhere – starting nine months ago.)

Only power is power. And the leaders we work with all across the US and other countries live this and know this in their bones.

So we organize for long-term power rather than mobilize for a short-term turn-out.

Many of you have been around one of our organizations, or have been to one of our trainings, so you have heard what I’m about to summarize in just a few minutes at much greater length. In this region, my colleague Martin Trimble is working with Dean Markham and Dean Hollerith and Bishop Budde and Fr. Luis Leon. But for those that haven’t, let me make the distinction a little bit clearer, just as I tried to do with the five young and talented design thinking consultants.

Instead of looking for charismatic figures, or charismatic moments, or celebrity spokespeople, we look for talented leaders who work in and through existing congregations and associations, or who are contriving to create new congregations and associations. These leaders have followings, institutional memories, know how to build and sustain relationships across all the lines of race, culture, denomination, faith, and class. You know or knew some of them – the late and truly great Reverend Mary Laney of Philadelphia, the late Reverend Goldie Sherrill of Brooklyn, the very-much-still-present Reverend Geoff Curtiss in New Jersey (who helped lead a team that won one billion dollars of clean up settlements from two chromium polluters in New Jersey; when I think of Geoff, I also see Erin Brockovich, who won about $250 million in a settlement; actually, I see four Ern Brockovichs), Reverend Bert Bennett in the South Bronx, the father-daughter team of Bill and Amy Totsch in Chicago, and so many more from your ranks, so many that I could spend the rest of this talk just listing them. They aren’t big names. They aren’t widely known; but they are deeply, profoundly connected and grounded. Great organizing is spiritual – fueled and sustained by the spirit of leaders like these.

Instead of starting with outside money or soft money or major donations, we start with local dues –the surest sign of ownership by local leaders and local institutions.

Instead of depending on outside experts and advisors and consultants, we search for all of the talent and wisdom and experience that reside in the leaders who live in the cities and counties we work in. And then we invest in the training and developing of those leaders.

Instead of relying on one of the two national political parties or leadership from the market sector, we challenge the third sector – religious, civic, labor, yours – to design its own strategies, its own priorities, its own solutions.

Instead of picking a cause or a theme or an opponent at the start, we start with a process of deep listening – thousands of individual listening sessions, hundreds of group listening sessions to find the issues that leaders care the most about and are willing to commit time and energy to.

And instead of rushing out and trying to generate activity from the start, we build a powerful base – institutions, dues, leaders, training – and then prepare for the day when we can act with great impact and with a much higher chance of success.

So, organizing, as we see it, is all about depth and power, leadership and ownership.

As I talked, the five were silent, even a little somber. Finally, one of them asked, “Well, then, is what we have been asked to do by the donor even possible?”

And I answered the way I often do – with a story:

About 25 years ago, I was on a panel with the late Jim Rouse – the man who built the planned community in Columbia, Maryland, and Baltimore’s Harborplace. Jim Rouse was a wonderful and accomplished guy. He was a Presbyterian layman who constantly worked to connect his work as a builder and developer to his religious values. He and his wife Patty were close to our leaders and staff in Baltimore, who worked in the BUILD organization there. Jim and I were on a panel. And Mr. Rouse was laying out his newest idea – investing up to $100 million in the Sandtown area of Baltimore, an area of about 5,000 residents in extreme poverty. He argued that he would prove that, if all of the service needs of the residents of that area could be addressed, the conditions of poverty and violence could be overcome. The foundation heads and program officers in the audience were very enthusiastic. Finally, one asked me my view. I had to say that, with all due respect to Mr. Rouse, that I didn’t think it would work. Then Jim Rouse and I had a lively and relational discussion in front of 100 people about the entire matter.

A few years later, Jimmy Carter, also someone we had the privilege to meet after his presidency, when he devoted himself to homelessness, started something called the Atlanta Project – an attempt to invest scores of millions in multiple social service and housing needs in impoverished Atlanta communities.

Once Mr. Carter got that started, a major foundation replicated the approach in seven other cities.

About the same time, Walter Annenberg committed $500 million to education reform.

More recently, Mark Zuckerberg donated $100 million toward school improvement in Newark, New Jersey.

There are other examples, but I sensed my five young listeners (and maybe many of you) had heard enough. I ended with this:

All of these efforts were sincere attempts by well-intentioned people, backed by enormous resources.

And not one of them worked.

The young woman asked, “Why not?”

And I said to them what I want to say to you: because there was no appreciation of the need for local ownership, local power, local leadership. These are the great multipliers of any investment.

If someone else chooses the neighborhood, chooses the cause, chooses the amount, chooses the time it starts and the time it runs, then all of the ownership is centered in the donor or funder, not the community or neighborhood or constituency that desperately needs and wants to see meaningful social change.

So Baltimore, which had 800,000 souls living there in 1980, when Harborplace opened and about 700,000 people in 1995 when Jim Rouse was experimenting in Sandtown, has 600,000 residents today. And only today, because of the incredibly hard and dangerous work of our affiliate there, BUILD, is the tide beginning to turn, and the city beginning to rebuild.

We say that power still comes in two forms – organized people and organized money.

Not just money. ‘Just money’ is relatively powerless. Organized money means money organized on both ends – by the giver and by the receiver. It means money linked to legitimate and proven leaders who own their priorities and issues.

I had this same discussion with another major foundation recently – again at its request. They funded in a number of specific issue areas and had essentially hit a wall of sorts, in spite of the fact that their level of funding was enormous.

So they wanted to talk about that. I said to them that they had to make a decision. Did they want to continue funding in their pre-selected issues areas – which they, like you, as the source of the funds, had every right to choose – or did they want to shift gears and doing something very different.

That different thing was funding talented leaders.

In other words, instead of scouring the country and the world for groups or individuals who operated in the spaces that they had chosen to fund, could they see themselves looking at cities and counties and communities and identifying the best, deepest, strongest, most proven and tested leaders in those places?

Could they fund talent, not issues? Could they fund existing or emerging institutional leaders and groups, rather than causes?

Now, the problem with that is that those leaders and groups might well not think that the priorities of the funders are the most important. They might well think that other priorities – priorities that have emerged out of a credible and disciplined process of listening, testing, experimentation, trial and error – are more urgent and compelling. So that foundation would have to let go of its pre-selected issue areas and consider leaders who could have other goals.

What does this look like – finding the great multipliers of ownership, leadership, and power and supporting them? This is where I try to turn the corner from describing the powerless of money to the still-largely-untapped or under-tapped power of organized money.

I’ll describe two examples now and some of you will visit a third example later this afternoon when we tour a senior citizen building built by local leaders led by Reverend Lionel Edmonds of Mt. Lebanon Baptist Church, who is a key figure in our organization in DC, Washington Interfaith Network. The 82 unit building which you will see today represents 11% of the 743 homes and apartments already built by WIN. Another 1,278 units are in the pipeline right now. And that’s in addition to the 1,700 units of supportive housing built because WIN was able to use its power to deliver sites and subsidies for this desperately needed shelter.

Waukegan, Illinois, is a struggling blue collar city of 90,000 people about 30 miles north of Chicago. It’s about 60% Hispanic, 20% African American, and 20% white. It’s located in Lake County, which also includes some of the wealthiest suburbs in the nation. The IAF has built an organization there – Lake County United – which is made up of the full range of institutions in the area – from the richest to the poorest. In 2008 and 2009, a process of individual meetings and house meetings in Waukegan revealed a very widely shared concern among Hispanic parents: very few of their daughters and sons were going to college and, of the few that went, most were not prepared.

A team of leaders looked at the state of the town’s only high school – Waukegan High. It had 4,500 students and 0 full time college counselors. It had 10 part-time guidance counselors, of whom, at the start, only one spoke Spanish – the first language of the parents of two-thirds of the students.

The school’s administration and the AFT local representing the teachers and staff of that school were very resistant to any changes in this situation – citing budget constraints constantly.

After much probing and experimentation, the team of leaders came to two conclusions: the first being that Waukegan High would was built AGAINST the interests of Hispanic students and parents – a fortress of resistance and inertia; the second being that perhaps a high-quality charter school, geared toward the needs of Hispanic and African American students in the city, would be a better option.

So, as you can see, here’s where things get sticky. A deep and broad group of parents, mostly Hispanic, after a well-thought-out listening process and a year of initial action and research whose goal was to improve the college and guidance counseling systems in the high school, concluded that that was a dead end and opted for another strategy. Episcopal Charities and Community Services, led by Georgianna Gleason, had begun funding Lake County United’s work with these parents. When the parents and organization opted for the charter school option, ECCS stuck with the effort.

A very strong campaign developed to support the introduction of a high-quality charter school – capped by a major assembly of 1,000 parents and county-wide leaders with the board of education and other county officials. It was remarkable to walk into a church hall and see that diversity and energy in Lake County, with hundreds of leaders from Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe, scores from Holy Spirit, scores from local mosques and synagogues, hundreds more from both Hispanic and white Roman Catholic parishes and associations. In spite of this effort, the board of education voted the charter issue down.

The ad hoc leaders’ team went back to the drawing board and re-imagined another option – something called Waukegan 2 College – an effort to link mentors, tutors, and volunteers to students from middle school on who would be encouraged to consider college as a very likely goal. Parent training and engagement were built into the effort. Local congregations were engaged in promoting this effort, identifying families, and supporting them as the effort moved forward. Fifty students were identified in the first year, now 2011. ECCS continued to support this effort – INVESTING IN LEADERS, EVEN AFTER THEIR FIRST OPTION FAILED – with yearly grants that now total $400,000. Waukegan 2 College grew – from 50 students in year one to 146 students today. Nineteen students have graduated from college and another 50 are in college today. This is still not anywhere near what SHOULD be in place, but it has begun to change the culture in the city. Hispanic families can now point to daughters and sons who are succeeding in college because of this effort. Other parents and students can see their peers moving in this new direction. ECCS, because it stayed focused on the quality of these leaders, can rightly point to growing impact in Waukegan and a tangible and wonderful return on its investment in the talent of these women and men. It took patience by ECCS. And it took courage, because everyone knows that there are very mixed feelings about charter schools among many. By the way, since this effort started, several religious schools and a new and very high-quality charter school have flourished in Waukegan, giving minority parents a range of options and giving minority students more pathways to college and much fuller lives.

The second example comes from East Brooklyn and the South Bronx. In a few minutes, we’ll show a short five minute video about this effort.

But the long and the short of it is that Trinity Church and the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island made pivotal contributions three different times to this effort.

Like the Waukegan effort, the contributions were bets on the talent and capacity of local leaders. Thanks to Fr. Jamie Calloway, Trinity made one of the largest initial grants to the emerging effort in Brooklyn – East Brooklyn Congregations – in the early 1980’s. The leaders there had already spent two full years identifying leaders, recruiting institutions, and creating a dues base. You’ll see from the clip that these were very rough days – very similar in tone and feel to the state of our nation today. In about one-third of New York City, abandonment, arson, violence, and hopelessness were dominant. The establishment had already written these communities off – using terms like ‘planned shrinkage’ and ‘benign neglect’ to sugarcoat a total retreat. Neglect is only benign if you are not the one being neglected. Trinity responded to the foundational work already done by the local leaders and institutions with a three-year grant. Then, when the EBC leaders, in 1982, decided to try to rebuild all of the vacant acres with affordable homes, the Episcopal Diocese of Long Island, led by Robert C. Witcher, not known as a progressive, joined with the Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn and the very conservative Lutheran Church Missouri Synod to create an eight million dollar no-interest revolving loan fund to trigger construction of the new housing. The Long Island Diocese’s loan was for one million. Then ten years later, Trinity Church committed another no-interest loan of one million to a similar effort in the South Bronx.

Thirty years later, East Brooklyn and the South Bronx have been largely rebuilt. The initial one million dollar loans have all been paid back. Five thousand seven hundred Nehemiah homes have been built or are under construction, along with 2,000 affordable apartments. Our groups were by no means the only groups that helped rebuild these walls. But they were among the first groups to project this vision of totally rebuilt communities owned and resided in by local families. And others followed. The market value of the homes built is approximately 1.5 billion dollars. The market value of the apartments another 500 million dollars. The value of the new schools another 500 million dollars. The increase in property values for scores of thousands of local residents who hung on through all the bad times – incalculable.

Are there new problems? You bet. Affordability is the issue now, not survival. Gentrification that no one ever imagined could reach central and east Brooklyn and the South Bronx is now a real pressure.

But the initial investments in East Brooklyn and the South Bronx have paid off. And it’s a testament to the willingness of one diocese and one large congregation to take a risk based on their assessment of local leaders and local institutions.

Let me conclude with some warnings and some possibilities.

The two efforts I’ve described and the one some will see later today are not “models.” In my view, there are no models. There are only experiences that provide lessons and some universals and many cautions. What works in Brooklyn doesn’t work the same way in Chicago or Dallas or Oklahoma City, and vice versa.

The universals that I think are critical are the ones that I started this talk with, the ones I tried to describe to the very talented design thinkers in Manhattan last year. The most important is the quality and depth and breadth of the leadership involved. We say that organizers are, above and beyond everything else, talent scouts. We are searching for the team of leaders that can take the field and play with savvy and smarts and power. When we find it and assemble it, the sky’s the limit. When we can’t, no matter how desperate the need in a community and how urgent things seem, no matter how elegant the policy proposals or how much money is invested, progress is very severely limited.

A second universal is that lasting social impact and social change take time. If anyone had told me that it would take us thirty years to rebuild East Brooklyn and the South Bronx, in 1982, I might have fled and resumed a career in teaching or market research or writing. But it HAS taken thirty years. Now, if someone would say that it will take thirty years to rebuild Cleveland or Detroit or Jackson Mississippi or a hundred other places, I’d say this, “Great. Let’s get started. Time’s a-wasting.” With the right leaders and the right amount of targeted financial support, we know it can be done.

A third universal is that it’s incredibly hard to do one thing well – like rebuild the housing stock of two large and devastated communities, like creating a college-bound culture in a city where the central educational institutions are hostile and defensive. So watch out for those who want to do too many things, who talk about systemic change in multiple issue areas, or who don’t want to start until all needs are to be addressed. I know that they are sincere, but I also believe that they are mistaken.

They don’t see that something like a large-scale Nehemiah housing effort creates a new critical mass, as we like to say. And that new critical mass generates a new chain reaction. And that new chain reaction reverses and replaces the old chain reaction of violence, abandonment, and decline with a new chain reaction of greater safety, improved parks, upgraded schools and a new spirit.

I remember an Episcopal priest in East New York named Efraim Goorahoo, at St. Barnabas Episcopal. His church was on a street so violent that he had a bullet-proof heavy metal door installed on the church office. When I would visit, I would pound hard on the metal door and look through a slit to see if anyone was answering. Ten years later, the blocks once filled with burned tires and broken glass and rubble were all rebuilt – with sharp new homes. The iron door was taken down at some point. The conditions radically changed. And the spirit of people like Fr. Goorahoo and his congregants changed as well. The leaders who pioneer the Nehemiah efforts and Waukegan 2 College type efforts attract other leaders with other interests who propel other issues to successful resolutions.

But the fourth and final critical universal is to make sure that there IS a critical mass – of local power first and then of momentum built by a leading edge of action and impact.

Those critical masses and those chain reactions are already happening in many places in this country.

We have started to rebuild much of Baltimore – a terribly hard and dangerous job right now – with partners like Johns Hopkins. But the struggle is in the balance. And timely and targeted support would help.

We have started to build not far from the killing fields on the south side of Chicago and begun to see a turnaround already. But that struggle is very much in the balance. And timely and targeted support would help.

We have identified a set of reforms that can transform the criminal justice and mental health cultures of this country – with great work done in the Chicago metro area, Cleveland, Baton Rouge, Dallas, New York, Bridgeport, New Haven, Northern Virginia and many other places. But that struggle is really at an early stage.

We are working closely with the nation’s finest Muslim institutions and leaders and Hispanic and other immigrant leaders. But that struggle is very much up for grabs right now, as you well know.

This is a way of saying that the kinds of leaders and organizations that I’ve tried to describe throughout this talk are out there – prepared, grounded, clear, focused, engaged in meaningful action and ready for more. I know that I’ve mentioned three IAF efforts. I’m most familiar with them, obviously, and most confident of their impact. But there are other groups that have done fine organizing work as well. Find them. Study them. Support them. We’ve got a whole nation that needs revitalizing. And it’s the third sector, the voluntary sector, the sector of parishes and congregations and other associations, your sector, you, that is going to have to help lead that rebuilding effort.

I began with a poem that was part prayer, and I’ll conclude with a verse that is profoundly poetic. It’s Psalm 60, verse 3, “Thou hast shewed thy people hard things; thou hast made us to drink the wine of astonishment.”

Americans of all parties and classes and races have been shown hard things, have been made to drink the wine of astonishment.

But now it’s time, with faith and focus and power, to pursue the possible, to reknit our relationships, to rebuild the communities and the country that we love.