

## Reflecting with the Scripture on Community Organizing

By Reverend Jeffrey K. Krehbiel

*(The following is an excerpt from Reflecting with Scripture on Community Organizing (c) 2010 by Rev. Jeffrey K Krehbiel. Used with permission of the publisher, ACTA Publications, [www.actapublications.com](http://www.actapublications.com), 800-397-2282. All rights reserved. Copies of the 60-page booklet are available at \$5.95 with discounts for multiple copies from the publisher or as an ebook from all ebook sellers at \$4.95.)*

### Introduction

I have a friend who calls himself a “community-organizing fundamentalist.” By that he means that community organizing offers the best hope not only for the renewal of American democracy, but for the renewal of the church itself.

This phrase speaks to me. I have been involved in community organizing for over twenty-five years and have come to know firsthand more than a dozen groups organized on a “broad-based” or “faith-based” model. Together, these organizations have fought to build thousands of units of affordable housing, reform troubled public schools, put police on the streets, and invest millions of dollars in city neighborhoods.

What I have learned from community organizing has helped me understand not only how any congregation or religious institution can effectively impact its local community, but also how it can strengthen its own membership at the same time. This is the unique gift that I believe church-based community organizing offers to the church.

Despite this truth, the basic vocabulary of community organizing—power, self-interest, anger, politics—is troubling to many church leaders. How often at a presbytery worship service, during the corporate prayer of confession, we are asked to disavow our preference for “the currency of power” and our “selfish ambition” while being exhorted to consider our own interests last. Jesus is understood by many church people to be a model of self-effacing humility and powerlessness, while community organizers exult in the virtue of self-interest and the necessity of power. For many Christians, the vocabulary of faith and the vocabulary of organizing seem to be at odds, if not in outright contradiction.

Over the years, not only has my faith influenced the way I organize, but organizing has influenced the way I read the Bible. If Karl Barth is right, that preaching is the art of holding the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, then the interpretive task of the preacher involves bringing the experience of our daily lives to bear upon our reading of the Bible and vice versa. As I have done so, while engaged in the nitty-gritty work of organizing—conducting one-on-one individual meetings with members of my church and residents of the community, researching issues like code enforcement and tax increment financing, negotiating with public officials for affordable housing and community investment—I have discovered vistas in the Biblical text that I had not noticed before,

and over time have come to see the task of organizing not only as compatible with my Christian faith, but deeply rooted in the Biblical narrative.

### **Mark 6:30-44**

*[When they returned] the apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As Jesus went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.*

*When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat." But he answered them, "You give them something to eat." They said to him, "Are we to go and buy two hundred denarii worth of bread, and give it to them to eat?" And he said to them, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." When they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish."*

*Then he ordered them to get all the people to sit down in groups on the green grass. So they sat down in groups of hundreds and of fifties. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all. And all ate and were filled; and they took up twelve baskets full of broken pieces and of the fish. Those who had eaten the loaves numbered five thousand men.*

### **From Crowd to Community**

You can hardly blame the disciples for being a little irritated with Jesus. Here they have just returned from their first missionary adventure, weary yet bursting with energy to share with him "all they have done and taught." In response, Jesus invites them to go away with him "to a deserted place by themselves" (Mark repeats this twice for emphasis). The first-ever-recorded church retreat is interrupted, however, in part because of the success of their own outreach. The crowd sees them going, recognizes them, and follows them. The disciples, together with Jesus, have begun to establish relationships with the people, and they are no longer anonymous.

When Jesus sees the throng amassed on the shoreline, he is moved to compassion and cancels (or at least postpones) the retreat. For him, it is time to get to work. We can imagine that the disciples had a somewhat different reaction. By the time night falls, they are both frustrated with Jesus and fatigued by the work. In context, Jesus' response to their rather sensible suggestion to send the crowd away seems almost incomprehensible: "You give them something to eat." The crowd has now become a burden.

Their burden.

Yet that seems not to be what Jesus has in mind. The disciples assume the resources for this repast must come only from them. Jesus instead sends them into the midst of the people to assess what resources might be available from those they are called to serve. They are not impressed by what they discover, but Jesus is not dissuaded. What they have will be enough.

Then, in a move that is often overlooked in the retelling, Jesus prompts the disciples to act in a way that they must have found mystifying at the time. He directs them to have the crowd sit down in groups on the green grass. Not just any size groups, but groups of fifty and one hundred. In that moment, the crowd becomes a community. Then, to reinforce their role as leaders, after blessing and breaking the loaves and the fish, Jesus gives the food to the disciples to set before the people. It is they, not he, who feed them.

Without diminishing the miracle, notice how fundamentally this move alters the dynamic of the narrative. You can visualize the significance of the transformation. I picture a supply truck arriving in a refugee camp, the hungry crowd gathering as a frenzied pack to get their share of the scarce resources before they quickly disappear. In community, the dynamics are altogether different. Sitting in a circle, you connect with those around you. As you pass the bread from person to person, aware of how many people it has to feed, you are less likely to take more than your share, both because you can see the faces of those around you and because the collective will of the group would not allow anything else. You can imagine—though Mark does not say it—that those who might have had a little extra tucked away, afraid to share with the hungry crowd, now are more willing to add theirs to the collective pot, knowing that there will be enough for them, too.

Everyone in the story learns something before the day is done. The disciples assume that the hungry crowd is helpless and must either be dispersed with their needs ignored or become dependent on the social service of the disciples. Jesus teaches them instead how to organize the crowd into a community and how to look more deeply to discover the abundant resources already present—resources the crowd itself may not have known existed. From the outset, the disciples see the crowd as *their* burden, a drain on *their* energy, and a responsibility beyond *their* capabilities. Jesus demonstrates how even the disciples' own needs are met when they trust the resourcefulness of those with whom they are in ministry. Lest this point be lost, Mark drives it home in the final verse. The weary and hungry disciples, who at the start “have no leisure even to eat,” at the end collect twelve baskets full of broken pieces of bread and fish—one basket for each of them!

This is the basic dynamic of organizing.

The Quaker writer Parker Palmer has suggested that the tension in the story—and the tension in our culture—is between what Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann calls the “myth of scarcity and the liturgy of abundance.” The worry over scarcity drives the disciples to doubt their own leadership, to discount the crowds' resources, to want to send the people away, and to imagine that their needs will be met only if each person fends for himself or herself. The myth of scarcity leads to isolation.

The liturgy of abundance is celebrated in community. Jesus pushes the disciples into relationship. Their leadership is still critical; it is they who organize the crowd into groups. But it is in relationship in the context of community that the resources flow.

So it is in organizing: Leaders learn the art of the “individual, one-to-one, relational meeting,” leaving the safe confines of hearth and home to forge relationships across social divides. And, as happened to the disciples, out of community comes common action. Whereas in social outreach ministries, churches often meet neighbors at the point of their need—through food pantries and soup kitchens and shelters—in organizing, relationships are formed at the point of strength.

The Iron Rule of organizing is “Never do for others what they can do for themselves.” Organizers enter a community not to catalogue a litany of the community’s deficits, but to identify and train leaders. A fundamental assumption of organizing is that every community has within it leaders capable of acting on their own behalf in relationship with others. The goal of organizing is to find and cultivate those leaders.

This is a lesson that leaders, in and out of the church, must learn and relearn again and again.

Most church leaders know the experience of feeling as if everything depended on them, and all have had moments at least when the needs of the congregation feel like a burden. Leaders and managers in the corporate and nonprofit world know the same experience. The myth of scarcity leads us to imagine that we are the only ones with leadership skills, and—again like the disciples—to assume that the only options are to send people away with their needs unmet or to have them depend upon us alone.

Perhaps in a misguided attempt to please those we serve, clergy are often the worst violators of the Iron Rule. We are constantly doing for others what they are fully capable of doing for themselves. Congregations do the same thing. We assume that the most “Christ-like” thing we can do in the community outside our door is to identify a need and then meet it.

For most congregations, organizing requires a fundamental reorientation of our approach. The community around the church has resources, not just needs, and our role in organizing is to help identify them.

Mark’s narrative invites us to abandon our assumptions of scarcity and trust the abundant resources of the communities in which we serve, both inside and outside the congregation. While there are certainly times when going on retreat is appropriate and getting away to a deserted place by ourselves is just what the doctor ordered, Jesus refuses to let the needs of the crowd be ignored because that is our need. If we come to feel that it all depends upon us, then the recourse is not to escape for a time, only to return so that once again we can be the sole provider of leadership in our congregations and communities, but to look more deeply, to “go and see” what resources are present

that we have not yet discovered. The promise of community, and the testimony of organizing, is that we will discover resources in such abundance that not only will the community discover its capacity to meet its own needs, but our own spirits will be fed in the process. At the end of the day, there is a basket for each one of us, too.

In Mark's story, Jesus gives the disciples the authority to organize the crowd. He tells them to have the people sit down in groups on the green grass. In our communities today it is not always clear who has such authority. There was a time in American culture when many groups—political parties, unions, community associations—were at work organizing people for collective action, identifying and developing leadership. Today, in most of our urban areas and increasingly in our rural and suburban communities as well, organizing work takes place in a vacuum. In the majority of our communities, no one is fulfilling the basic mandate of Jesus' task to "go and see what you have."

In this vacuum, faith-based community organizing dares to claim for itself such authority to act. In hundreds of communities across the country, leaders of church and synagogue are sitting down in church basements, in neighbors' living rooms, in neighborhood coffee shops to ask the most basic questions out of which community may emerge: "What are your dreams for the community in which you live? What would you do to make things better? Are you willing to join together with others so that we might work to change the way things are?"

We do so not to advance the agenda of the church, but to discover and actualize the agenda of the community. At the start of such work, resources often appear meager, like the five loaves and two fish. The liturgy of abundance invites us to trust that out of such meager resources miracles can happen.

### **Reflection Questions**

*Where do you see the tension between scarcity and abundance involved in your church and community work? Describe it.*

*How, specifically, would things change if you operated on the liturgy of abundance instead of the myth of scarcity?*