

Sustainable Action: Planting the Seeds of Relational Organizing

By Rev. Louise Green

Louise is currently Director of Social Justice Ministries at All Souls Church, Unitarian in Washington D.C. She is a community organizer and UCC minister who worked for 10 years with the Industrial Areas Foundation, a congregation-based, multi-issue power network with over 60 affiliates around the country. The ideas below come from her IAF experience and training, particularly through Michael Gecan, National Staff for the Metro IAF in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. For an in-depth look at this method of community organizing, read Gecan's Going Public, published by Beacon Press.

The first principle in Unitarian Universalism is to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person and the second is to promote justice, equity and compassion in human relations. Yet sometimes it is our own congregations that treat our most precious resource—our people—with a bureaucratic disregard. This is not intentional, but results from perpetuating static structures that drain leaders of life and initiative. We don't mean to drain the energy of our top talent, but the way we do business can be far from just or compassionate.

If we say we respect the inherent worth of each person, we owe it to our congregants to create a culture in the church or organization that is dynamic, life-giving, and fulfilling for all participants. Voluntary groups are an elective choice that people make in order to add something positive to their lives. The reason why so many people eventually elect out is that they become tired and de-energized working in repetitive ways. This article is about another approach to organizational life, a way that seeks to find new leadership and encourage new campaigns: relational organizing.

Relational organizing is working with and beyond the bureaucratic culture of a congregation or organization. What is a bureau, literally? The word "bureaucracy" comes from a chest of drawers, where everybody has a proper compartment and place. This kind of organization is necessary in a large group, but it often works against close relationships between people. Sometimes there is very little communication between or within the drawers and no change in the overall structure for very long periods of time.

The idea of organizing relationally does not preclude the standard mechanisms we need to function in large groups--rather, it adds a dimension that can transform the culture of bureaucracy. Instead of a bureaucratic culture dominated by fixed activities that endlessly repeat, a relational culture is flexible, dynamic, and responsive to growing or changing needs.

In most congregations, bureaucracy reigns. We are so accustomed to group meetings, collective agendas, and task-oriented activities that it is easy to perpetuate a system that creates only very minimal relationships between people. Communication happens via worship bulletins, newsletters, email and phone calls, and we rarely meet with someone individually unless we have a job to do or crisis to address. Talented leaders are recruited for many tasks, and attend multiple group meetings until they risk burnout and loss of interest. Congregants may meet for months or even years, and never have a conversation about anything but what is on the agenda page for their committee night.

How can congregations and organizations break out of this constraining, de-energizing, and often depressing situation? The solution is to create a culture of relationships that is served by the bureaucratic apparatus rather than dominated by it.

The primary tool of relational organizing is the individual meeting, an encounter with a person that is rare in our culture. Individual, or 1-to-1, meetings are critical to create bonds between existing teams, find new talent, identify new issues, or develop a new constituency. There is no short-cut around them, and they produce results that nothing else can. Very simply, doing individual meetings is the strategy that is essential in order to create a relational culture over time.

What are the hazards of operating in a bureaucracy that has no relationship-building initiative? The same people do the same things in an unexamined way. New talent and energy is not discovered or engaged. Group meetings get certain tasks done, but only use the skills of folks which apply to the set agenda. Leaders and followers grow fatigued over time and echo the perennial complaint: why do the same people do everything around here?

What is a 1-to-1 meeting?

- A 30-45 minute meeting of face-to-face conversation with one person.
- Getting to know the other person and being known
- An inquiry into what matters to a person and why.
- A chance to go outside of the repeating tasks and small group activities that dominate congregational and organizational life.
- An opportunity to know the private motivations each person has for doing public action such as congregational volunteerism or social justice work.
- A search for leaders and participants with the talent, motivation, initiative, energy, or anger to change a situation.
- A way to identify issues that need to be addressed and are not on the current action plan.

What is not an individual meeting for relational organizing purposes?

- An interview of non-stop questions or survey.
- Going through the whole life story or resume of an individual.
- A recruitment device that fits someone into a set agenda or committee.
- An intellectual conversation about policy or strategy on issues in the congregation, neighborhood or city.
- Search for personal friendship or a social encounter.

What do you need to do individual meetings?

- A firm decision that you will make the time to engage in this important leadership task. You must invest time and energy for this to succeed.

- A clear context for your introduction on the phone and in person, and a reason for doing this that you can explain to others simply.
- Regular phone call time set aside to ask for and schedule meetings.
- Patience and persistence to work with people's availability and possible resistance.
- Curiosity about other people and an ability to listen.
- Willingness to practice this skill over and over again, in multiple settings.

How do you do an individual meeting?

- Have a clear introduction and ending: the middle is improvisation that is particular to the person with whom you are talking.
- Talk more deeply about a few things instead of covering 20 topics.
- Ask “why?” much more often than “what?”
- Ask the person to tell stories and personal history, talk about important incidents, time periods, or mentors—not just recite facts and dates.
- Offer back conversation and dialogue: it's not just for the purpose of the other person answering your questions.
- Close by asking the person who else they think you should be meeting with, and what questions they have for you.

How do you use individual meetings?

When you decide to do an individual meeting campaign, it is important to establish a context: Are you the only one doing meetings, and for what reason (i.e. committee chair, task force/study leader, leading on developing a new project)? Is a team going to agree to do them with a particular list (i.e. new members, youth, seniors, religious education teachers)? Is staff

preparing to do them with a certain constituency (i.e. people of color in the congregation, young adults, worship associates)?

Keep track of each meeting by making notes on each individual, deciding ahead of time what kinds of things you want to remember. Just write down important items, not everything you heard. However, don't ever take notes while you are having the meeting itself: this makes you a surveyor or interviewer, which is not the right purpose or tone for the conversation.

Create a process for evaluating what you learn once you have a significant number accumulated. This may be your individual work, or involve a meeting with the team that is working on the campaign. It's important to go into the meetings with an open mind: you can test for certain interests or issues, but if you have one specific purpose in mind (need to recruit teachers, for example) you won't be finding out what you need to know. Your goal is to ask questions and listen, without fitting the person into any fixed spot. Individual meetings are an exchange about what is important to each of you, not a session where you work to get the person to do something.

After you have met your goal for a certain number of meetings, either individually or as part of a team, evaluate what you learned. This may lead to various choices:

- additional individual meetings with new people,
- some kind of different group action,
- second meetings with especially interesting or strong leaders,
- a new project or event,
- revising how you have been operating based on what you heard,
- asking people to take some sort of new initiative based on what you discovered about them.

The entire process is improvised and created out of what you actually hear and how you decide to respond. You can't plan this response until you have a number of individual meetings.

What are the benefits of building a relational culture of organizing?

- Leaders who come to know each other beyond a task-oriented agenda and can do new things in new ways.
- New people who can be engaged around their own interests, not an existing plan.
- The capability to do a new project or campaign based on people’s real energy and motivation, not an annual or monthly repetition of activity.
- A network of people who know and trust each other, able to take action in a variety of ways over time.
- A stronger, more dynamic, more creative congregational or organizational life.

“A person will worship something—have no doubt about that. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, Reading 563 in Singing the Living Tradition):

When we inadvertently worship bureaucracy instead of letting our structures serve a greater goal of relationship, when we are not deeply committed to innovation and dynamism in our congregations, we are not affirming the inherent worth and dignity of each person. We limit all the rich ways that talent can flourish and congregations thrive.

Building a relational organizing culture over time is the best way to build our churches’ strength, our leadership potential, and our full participation in all the possibilities of life. May we have the courage and the wisdom to explore all the great and varied potential within the congregation and its people.

Examples of Ways to Build Individual Relationships

Bureaucratic Organization (Structure) *plus* Relational Organizing (Process)

- ***Knowing people more deeply in an existing group or committee***

Meet with a fixed group agenda	Do individual meetings during and between group meetings on a regular basis
Work on tasks and plans	Add individual reflection at the beginning or end of meetings on topics that vary over time
- ***Looking for new committee participation***

General announcement in bulletin	Individual meetings with 5-10 interesting people you don't know
----------------------------------	---
- ***Inviting a group to attend a meeting or event***

Email the list or print announcement	Personal phone calls (Try for conversations, not voicemail)
--------------------------------------	---
- ***Starting a new group or action***

Announcement in the newsletter	Individual meetings with those who respond and express interest
--------------------------------	---
- ***Expanding your network of relationships in the congregation***

Say hello during greeting time at worship	Schedule individual meetings before or after worship
---	--
- ***Working on knowing people across differences***

Attend program on diversity or anti-racism training	Have individual meetings with five people who are different from you and each other
---	---
- ***Knowing the staff and being known***

Read the newsletter. Listen to sermons. Talk on the phone. Email.	Set up an individual meeting with no set agenda to accomplish
---	---