



Effie Caldarola

What is community organizing?

By Effie Caldarola

That was one thing I wanted to ask my friend, Adrian Dominican Sister Lorraine Reaume, who recently visited California for community organizing training with a group called PICO. She is a board member of AFACT and hopes to help organize her parish, Our Lady of Guadalupe.

So what's PICO? What's AFACT?

During the 1960s, community organizing had a vaguely left-of-center ring to it. A guy named Saul Alinsky was well-known as probably the premier community organizer and the inspiration for people like Cesar Chavez.

But community organizing isn't so radical – it's as American as apple pie, having its roots in the American Revolution and the populist movement.

Community organizing has as its premise the idea that power comes from the people, and there's no more American concept than that.

The people who have power, or who are comfortable speaking to power, don't need organizing, or they do it quite well for themselves, thank you. But sometimes people in the lower economic brackets, who spend most of their time surviving, need to be reminded that they, too, have power. Sometimes new Americans, unfamiliar with the way our system works, need help finding their voice.

Enter AFACT, which stands for Anchorage Faith and Action Congregations Together. AFACT currently has 15 member congregations. Anchorage Archbishop Roger Schwietz has been very supportive of AFACT and four Catholic congregations belong: St. Anthony, Our Lady of Guadalupe, Catholic Native Ministry and Holy Family Cathedral. All total, 15 congregations speak to their people one on one to find out what the needs are. Then, working together, people produce results. You probably read about the meeting with Carol Cuomo and Native Alaskan parents about the problems Native kids face in Anchorage schools. AFACT helped bring that about. All those people who testified about the need for better coverage of poor working families under the Denali KidCare program? Credit AFACT.

PICO is the national network which operates – according to their website – in 150 cities and 17 states, with more than one million families and one thousand congregations. A Jesuit priest, Father John Baumann, founded PICO in 1972.

"Rather than being issue or movement based, PICO is people based," Sister Lorraine told me. "It's based on helping people discover their power."

The training was attended by 84 people from all over the country. Sister Lorraine said the lesson was "power rests in relationship."

Saul Alinsky, the son of Russian-Jewish immigrants, started his career in the neighborhoods around the great packing plants of Chicago – the same ones Upton Sinclair wrote about in "The Jungle." He organized folks into a "Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council" and they fought to improve working conditions.

Here's something about Alinsky for us to chew on: one of his greatest allies in his fight was the Catholic Church. The Archdiocese of Chicago threw its considerable weight behind Alinsky, and later, dioceses all over the country joined the battle.

Why? Why such commitment then, and a more tepid response, nationally, to social issues now? My theory: American Catholics were the poor then, the people who worked in the plants and stockyards – Poles, Italians, Irish – the immigrants who peopled the Catholic pews and the burgeoning Catholic school system.

As the American Catholic Church grew rich and fat and respectable – the largest single denomination in the U.S., the largest denomination on the Supreme Court – fighting for the poor remains theoretically important, but the passion of personal interest has waned.

Okay, so community organizing is a) American, b) Catholic, and c) available to us in Anchorage by supporting AFACT. What are we waiting for?

The writer is a freelance writer, preschool teacher and mother of three. She lives in Anchorage.