



Organizing Essentials

#2: Clergy Engagement

While all 1-1's matter, 1-1's with clergy are especially important. Clergy play an essential role in faith-rooted organizing; thus, it's of utmost importance that organizers become adept at building relationships with clergy leaders.

The Stakes are High

1-1's with clergy are high stakes. Some clergy may feel they have been manipulated by organizers in the past who sought access to their congregation and their moral authority but who did not work with them as true partners. Organizers at times may come across clergy who have been burned by other organizers and who, as a result, distrust the organizing field. Clergy do not want a "drive-by," an experience in which an organizer uses him/her for a short-term goal and then is never heard from again. Often clergy who feel burned by organizers not only choose to stay away from the organization but may actively discourage their peers from getting involved.

So how do we work with clergy in a way that builds trust and that supports their leadership? Here are a few keys:

Clergy are not all the same: Organizers must learn to navigate a racially and religiously diverse environment. To do so, they must realize that clergy are not all the same. Organizers must bring curiosity and an eagerness to learn about different faith traditions. The role a pastor plays in an African Methodist Episcopal church is different from a pastor's role in an independent, evangelical church. Rabbis and imams have unique roles and identities. For example, the word "rabbi" means teacher, whereas the term "pastor" invokes someone taking care of a flock. There is much to learn about these different traditions. As organizers learn to navigate these varying landscapes, they become more able to engage various traditions.

It is also important to know the historical context of a congregation and its neighborhood. For example, it can be important to know if the congregation is located in a neighborhood that is experiencing gentrification, over-policing and/or other forms of racial discrimination and to understand how that reality has affects the life of the congregation.

Build trust and relationship first: It's important that organizers get to know clergy and their congregations and, over time, gradually develop a partnership with the clergyperson and with the congregation's leadership. Through that partnership, the organizer and clergy leader can create a strategy that enlivens the congregation and engages them in organizing. As noted above, it's usually a mistake to assume a congregation will jump into an organizing action

before relationships are built. It can be very helpful if a clergy person introduces an organizer to a clergy colleague or joins the first 1-1 meeting. Clergy will feel more confident in working with an organizer if they know other faith leaders who are a part of the effort.

Be clear and transparent about yourself and your organization: When an organizer walks into a 1-1 with a clergy person, the clergy leader will want to know who the organizer is and what s/he wants. Organizers need to be prepared to share who they are, and why they are in organizing. They need to be able to credential the organization concisely: the organization's history, accomplishments, and active congregations. They need to be able to describe what getting involved in the organizing effort means, and what is required of clergy and congregations who get involved. It can be helpful to practice this language with others before going into 1-1's.

Be patient and persistent: Clergy are busy people, and it can take great persistence to get 1-1 time with them. It may take time for clergy to invite you to engage with their members. Clergy encounter some risks when getting involved in organizing. They may have members of their congregation who believe that the congregation should not get involved in "politics" and should stick to charity. They may have politically conservative members, or members who are part of the local power structure. Consequently, it can take time for some clergy to figure out how to move the congregation forward. Organizers can assist in this process by taking it one step at a time, by exploring options and by adapting the organizing process to the context of each congregation.

Listen: As with all 1-1's, it is crucial to actively listen to clergy so as to understand their values, interests, needs and the dynamics they must navigate inside their congregations. It's helpful to ask about their own history, and the joys and frustrations that come with the clergy role. In preparation for 1-1's, organizers must consider what types of questions will deeply engage faith leaders and will provide some constructive agitation.

Clergy are people too: New organizers often feel intimidated by clergy leaders. Organizers who are intimidated may tend to avoid doing 1-1's with clergy. Or they may be reluctant to push, agitate or challenge them. To overcome these counterproductive instincts, it's important for organizers to come around to the reality that clergy are people too. They are people with competing responsibilities, who manage very human institutions, and who have strengths and weaknesses like the rest of us. Like everyone else, they appreciate frank conversations and the occasional challenge. Organizers, after having spent time engaging the congregation, can serve as a sounding board for clergy leaders and may be invited to work with them as thought partners.