

SEEDS OF JUSTICE

*Organizing Your Church
to Transform the World*

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Introduction

Why does the world we hear preached about on Sundays seem so different from the one we see in our lives Monday through Saturday?

What do we do with the anger we feel watching the news, scrolling through social media feeds, or just walking down the street because of the unfairness and injustice we see?

How do I get my congregation involved in the issues I care about?

Can my church actually create real change in laws and policies that deeply violate the gospel?

Is there more than intercessory prayer and peace marches that my parish can be doing?

If these are questions you ask yourself, then maybe this book is for you.

I began organizing because I wanted real answers to these questions, and this book is the record of what I've found through more than fifteen years of work, many mistakes, and the guidance of a number of more experienced mentors and everyday church and community members and leaders.

I grew up during the 1980s and '90s on the border of Spanish Harlem and Harlem, rough neighborhoods at the time. It was an odd place to grow up as a white family, witnessing the struggles of our black and brown friends and neighbors, while also, because of our racial and cultural privilege, remaining largely exempt from many of the burdens they carried. Seeing this disparity got me started in the world of social justice, marching and protesting, even before I had a full analysis of

what was going on or any real training or methodology on how to effect change.

Trying to answer these questions led me to participate in the AFL-CIO's Union Summer program in Kansas City, organizing with construction workers for their rights during the day and canvassing neighborhoods around economic justice issues in the evenings. From there, I joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps and moved to Tennessee to combat the death penalty. Inspired by this fight, I ended up staying long past my volunteer year. Speaking at churches, organizing legislative campaigns, and planning rallies and vigils was right up my alley. Despite being a real youngster in the fight, I was entrusted with vital work and we were able to pass the first anti-death penalty legislation in Tennessee's modern history. I saw the abolition movement as the point of the spear in taking on racism and mass incarceration.

But I also became painfully aware that fighting around a single issue, even one as morally compelling as capital punishment, had its limits. Not enough people felt the issue in their guts on a day-to-day basis, meaning that we would always be in the position of moral suasion, hoping that those in power would hear the righteousness of our arguments. Otherwise, we didn't really have the ability to make change happen when they didn't. We had plenty of passionate, radical activists on our side, but we weren't touching a large swath of the general public.

I wanted to build something strong enough to actually compel action and change. And I wanted to learn how to become more deeply ingrained in the life of congregations and communities.

This led me to the Community Renewal Society (CRS) in Chicago, a storied social justice organization, with deep roots in the civil rights movement. There, for over eight years, I worked first as an organizer and then as the director of organizing, under the guidance of the Rev. Calvin S. Morris, PhD, an icon

who had served on the staff of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over the years at CRS, we developed tools to engage not just individuals but entire churches. I went from leading demonstrations of a few hundred people to working with congregational leaders to create public actions of thousands. In my years there, our organizing helped create change in the city, the county, and the state, often around issues that no one was talking about and where elected officials had been unable to move in the past.

We passed legislation to create job opportunities for people with felony records. We helped fight for a fair state budget with more equitable school funding for low income students. We built a coalition that unlocked \$20 million for affordable housing. We combatted violence and mass incarceration, creating community-based restorative justice peace hubs. And during this time, we learned how vital whole congregations, not just individuals, are, and how, by doing the work of justice, we can transform congregations themselves.

Several years ago, I left CRS. Now married with two young children, my wife and I had decided to begin a process (which took longer than we thought it would) to move back to our home city of New York. In the intervening years, I've had the privilege to continue to organize exciting efforts for justice in a number of roles: as the national organizing director for Jobs to Move America, a community and labor coalition focused on leveraging our public infrastructure spending to create economic, racial, and environmental justice; as the campaign director for the Responsible Budget Coalition in Illinois, a coalition of more than three hundred organizations that finally succeeded in ending the longest budget impasse in U.S. history and in leading the charge for a progressive income tax amendment to the Illinois constitution; and now as the international lead organizer for the American Federation of Musicians, fighting to ensure that multinational corporations like Disney and Live Nation don't make profits on the backs of working musicians. And at the urg-

ing of many friends and collaborators, I also took time to begin working on this book, knowing that the tools we had learned were needed by so many congregations and communities.

This book is broken into three large sections corresponding with the major movements that we and our congregations need to undergo to become real agents of change. These are (1) understanding our call, (2) preparing our churches, and (3) taking action for change. Each section includes a number of chapters, each focusing on a different specific lesson and set of skills. And, because no real change is ever accomplished alone, each chapter also includes, in their own words, a story from a lay leader, community member, or clergy person about how they have used these tools to create real change in their congregations and communities—just as you can in your own.

In the first section of this book, we need to understand our call. We are called to act, not just for charity and mercy for the oppressed, but for justice. Jesus calls us to be radicals, in the true sense of the word, meaning to go to the roots. We are called to change the very structures of our society. And to do so, we must get comfortable with power, both individually and as congregations. These movements aren't easy for most of us to make. We might not think of ourselves as radicals, and we may shy away from power. Our congregations may not feel ready for this either, but, with the foundation of our faith and solidarity together, we can move forward.

The second, and longest, section of this book is focused on this movement itself. How do we and our congregations actually become powerful and prepare ourselves to create change. Jesus spent most of his time preaching in the countryside and preparing his disciples before his final march to Jerusalem and his confrontation with the Roman Empire and its collaborators among Jewish leadership. Musicians and athletes spend many hours practicing and preparing before public performance. But faith-based justice efforts so often simply identify an issue and

attempt to spring into action without any of the work necessary to be successful. This was the insight I have gained from the labor movement, and it's the specific tools of congregational organizing that will allow our churches to move into action and do so powerfully, faithfully, effectively, and in unity.

Finally, we turn to our public witness and action itself and address how churches can act to create real change in our communities. As people of faith we must accept that following Jesus will bring us into conflict with those in power. We need to let go of many of the fears and false teachings that hold us back. And we need to learn how to create plans and strategies to use our newfound power to succeed.

The miraculous thing about God's work is that, so often, while we are calling out to God to create a miracle, waiting for a prophet to arrive, God is quietly letting us know that we already have what we need. The seeds of our congregational transformation are already there, planted in our hearts' desire to see our world made new. What we must do is water and cultivate these seeds, growing ourselves and our churches into what we want them to be, what God desires for our world, communities of love, justice, and transformation. We, in fact, are the people we have been waiting for. All that is left to do is to begin.