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### True North Organizing Network

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**Internship Report: True North Organizing Network**

**Evan R. Morden**

**SOC 482**

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## Introduction

Houselessness, public education, immigrant rights, and environmental stewardship are issues brought together by deep sense of pain, anxiety, and anticipation felt all over the North Coast of California and Tribal Lands and across socioeconomic, racial, and religious lines. True North Organizing Network, a values and faith-based community organizing group, focuses their energy on these four core issues. Houselessness in rural Northern California is widespread and impossible to ignore, with over 1,470 people counted as homeless as part of a January 2019 point-in-time survey of homelessness in Humboldt County— a massive increase from previous years (Times-Standard 2019). The SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) pandemic has only served to worsen an already dire situation, with mass numbers of evictions, increasing rates of joblessness, and severely limited social services stretched well beyond their capacity. True North is actively engaged in an attempt to create a countywide strategy in Humboldt to address houselessness and the needs of the unhoused populations and is involved in similar efforts in Del Norte county.

In addition to homelessness, the public education systems all over the state of California, including in Humboldt and Del Norte counties, have suffered repeated budget cuts and numerous challenges in its attempt to serve students (Cano 2020), many of whom are geographically isolated and have limited financial resources. With the introduction of Proposition 15 on the California ballot for the 2020 election, many hoped that some \$22 million would be dispersed between the two counties' education systems, allowing for the purchase of much-needed building upgrades, equipment, and the hiring of teachers and support staff. True North was part of the statewide effort by its parent organization, PICO California to get Proposition 15 on the ballot, and to participate in direct voter engagement actions such as phone and text banking.

Immigrant rights is another topic of focus for True North. At the beginning of the Trump administration, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) began a nationwide effort to arrest and deport all undocumented immigrants. This effort represented a shift in policy from the Obama years, when the primary job of ICE was to arrest and deport only those undocumented immigrants who had active federal criminal warrants (Gomez 2017). Recently, True North has been involved in efforts to set up a Rapid Response Network (RRN) that will act as a community E-9-1-1 for ICE raids. The system allows for dispatchers to send alerts to residents who may be affected by ICE raids, and also alerts nearby trained legal observers.

Finally, environmental stewardship is a major concern on the so-called “Lost Coast”, where the convergence of six rivers was once home to a renowned fishing industry, a booming logging industry, a successful dairy industry, and most recently, a marijuana industry still struggling to adapt to the legal market (Du Sault 2020). Environmental stewardship is the bread-and-butter of an area whose primary legitimate industries are entirely dependent on sustainable, eco-conscious practices to survive. True North has been involved in several environmental projects, including the efforts to remove two hydroelectric dams on the Klamath river, and most recently a project to acquire a 1,668-acre ranch in Del Norte county with the intention of using the property for ecological restoration.

Utilizing a unique organizing model allows True North to touch on a wide range of social and political issues by cultivating strong personal relationships, building social capital and power, and exacting organized pressure on highly researched individuals and institutions. United around shared values, the network has been able to create tangible change within the communities it serves with a focus on individual input and respect. The following section is a

literature review that focuses on the organizing methods used by faith-based organizations as well as applications of their approaches, both successful and unsuccessful.

## Literature Review

### Introduction to Literature Review

This literature review covers the importance of cultivating sustained membership and activism within organizations, the differences between interfaith and single denominational faith-based community organizing groups, organizational methodology for gaining social capital, case studies on the social reform efforts of faith-based community organizations, and the efficacy of a variety of social reform efforts pursued by faith-based and religious networks. Particular attention is given to the importance of organizational growth, diversity of action, and respect for individuality within successful and longitudinal faith-based community organizations across a range of collective actions. A majority of the literature focuses on qualitative data collected through participant action research with a concentration on specific social reform efforts made by a variety of organizations who possess a wide range of political affiliations and perspectives.

### History of Sustained Activism

As faith-based community organizing has evolved through time, trials, and tribulations, the goal of many organizations has become sustained existence, along with the problematization of traditional and comfortable church culture focused on prayer, self-reflection, and inaction. Organizations such as PICO National Network (now referred to as Faith in Action) are publicly committed to the creation of networks that outlast traditional political movements focused on single issues. This approach is relatively novel, at least in the context of formal nonprofit

organizations (Whitman 2006:51). Religious based community organizing is comprised of a vast number of political and social ideologies, therefore containing numerous paradigms and perspectives surrounding recruitment, structure, and values. Among several models of faith-based organizing, congregation-based interfaith community organizations include groups such as PICO National Network, the Gamaliel Foundation, and the Industrial Areas Foundation. Organizations of this type fund regional committees made up of local community members with deep roots and hire organizers who are tasked with finding new members, thereby legitimating, and building the power of the organization while simultaneously planning for the groups' longevity. The process of building community relationships through one-to-one conversations is slow and arduous and not designed to provide a quick or reactionary solution to political issues that may quickly evolve. However, it is designed to promote a lasting relationship with community members, and prolonged engagement in causes most important to those localities.

The slow collection of power and social capital makes organizations designed with longevity in mind distinctively qualified to deal with sensitive political and social issues. By becoming permanent fixtures in communities, faith-based community organizations are able to approach issues as a collection of affected members, versus a group of outside interests. Particularly in issues relating to race or class, faith-based organizations are able to cater their services in a culturally sensitive and appropriate manner (Adedoyin 2013:194). Additionally, sensitive issues that serve as barriers to social mobility identified in other studies such as the one conducted by Alfonso et al. (2018) are able to be addressed by smaller community congregations. In the aforementioned study, barriers to educational success were assessed in a rural community in Georgia, through the lens of systemic racism and cultural oppression. Alfonso et al. (2018) found that issues such as complicated family structures, lack of parental

involvement in education, and funding difficulties were contributing to the lack of upward mobility for youth. Although no solvency was sought in their study, similar communities such as the one researched by Quezada (2004) have documented positive outcomes as the result of faith-based community organizations' involvement in the funding process and curriculum development for schools – in this case through the Texas Alliance School Initiative, an initiative aimed at providing afterschool programs and encouraging parental involvement in early childhood education. Quezada's findings show that a successful hybridization of faith-based organizing and public institutions such as the public-school system is a potentially useful means of building trust in governmental structures that have widely lost legitimacy in the public eye, and in this case also serves to strengthen the relationships between parents, teachers, and students. Programs like these demonstrate the power of faith-based organizing in assisting communities that have poorly funded social services and public education such as Humboldt and Del Norte counties.

#### Interfaith-Based vs Single-Denomination Community Organizations:

Due to the broad scope of organizations that identify as faith-based, it is helpful to consider the variety of faith-based organizing strategies found in the research, and to distinguish between those networks that describe themselves as interfaith/multi-faith/values-based, and those that are single denominational sectarians working to promote the interest of a single church. These approaches differ drastically from one another in many ways, but also feature similarities in not only organizational structure, but intention. Rogers (2009) observed the actions of three Judeo-Christian, single denominational nonprofit community organizations with the objective of

determining effective methods for organizing in a faith-based context. In all organizations studied as part of their research, values were a uniting feature of all faith-based organizations.

However, the ability of single denominational faith-based groups to coordinate collective actions with other organizations and individuals of other faiths proved to be an obstacle to success (Rogers 2009:340). Additionally, in organizations based in singular religious sects, inter and intra-organizational communication was delegated to only a few high-ranking clergy members who chose issues for the organization or congregation to focus on (Rogers 2009: 333). Similarly, Quezada (2004:32) notes an obstacle to the Texas Alliance School Initiative (TASI) was its direct association with the Catholic Church in El Paso and the hesitancy of parents to allow their child to participate in a single-denominational program. In another example, Brown (2011:318) notes that clergy disclosing their personal goals for social or political change has no discernable effect on their congregations' willingness to act, and in some ethnic communities, it discourages participation. This conclusion has potentially important consequences for the ways single-denominational organizations approach political issues and speaks to the unifying power of orienting social causes around shared values.

On the other hand, interfaith organizations – sometimes referred to as multi-faith or values-based – have a diffuse range of political and social issues they are engaged in and focus primarily on values and individual self-interest. This approach allows them to avoid political scandal by holding diffuse power and social capital, assigning individual members to their preferred tasks, and allowing small local organizing committees to define their own paths forward (Whitman 2006:53). Using this individualistic methodology is in line with the findings of Wood and Warren (2002) whose study of 133 faith-based organizations demonstrated the power of forming multi-face and multi-race coalitions to build power and accomplish systemic

change. One of the most appealing aspects of organizing communities around faith is the potentiality to bridge large political divides and engage in political discourse in a socially regulated setting. In Alberta, Canada, Banack (2015:946) describes the efforts of multi-faith coalitions of faith-based organizations that have become a powerful force in driving educational reform. Banack argues that the success of these coalitions of faith-based organizations has been due, at least in part, to larger political ideological shifts that they have been involved in directly. By adopting a diverse approach, networks such as those examined in Banack's (2015) study have been able to serve as an instrument of value-based unification. Interfaith organizations are also uniquely equipped to weigh-in on issues that involve the welfare state such as housing, senior assistance, as well as other social advocacy issues (Belcher et al. 2004).

A commonality shared by interfaith and single-denominational organizing networks is the belief in the religiosity inherent in the practice of organizing (Swarts 2011). This includes the ceremonial practice of prayer or reflection at the beginning of every meeting, a purpose for each meeting that includes value-based appeals, and a willingness to attempt to find common ground. Delehanty (2018:255) describes emotional appeals as a critical component of the faith-based organizing process, and usually are based on a lived experience narrative. Focusing on lived experiences is a means of discovering common values that emotionally connect organization leaders to new members. Although different in many ways, especially political beliefs, faith-based organizing is a powerful tool for bridging the social and political divides becoming increasingly common in the twenty-first century.

### Methods for Gaining Social Capital

One noticeable change in the methods traditionally used in faith-based community organizing has been in the development of strategies such as “The Arc of Organizing” developed and employed by Pacific Institute for Community Organization (hereafter: PICO) National Network; a congregation-based community organization that focuses on the use of community connection and personal relationship-building to collect power and gain social capital (Delehanty 2018; Whitman 2006; Wood and Warren 2002). These methods of engaging mostly low to middle-class community members is a shift from traditional organizing methods such as mobilization and campaign-style that primarily focus on gaining and leveraging political capital and securing participants who already have a large network of community support (Whitman 2006:51). A social capital-based approach is defined as one that directs its resources towards building features of the organization’s social consciousness (e.g. norms, self-interests, values, etc.) that facilitate the symbiotic cooperation of members and local organizing committees with outside organizations, as well as other institutions, individuals, and government agencies (Wood and Warren 2002:8). Additionally, social ‘capital’ strongly implies a growth-based ideology, with a focus on building and legitimizing the power of the organization through interpersonal relationships and shared values, usually across socio-economic, and political boundaries (Swartz 2011:463). By gaining personalized community connections, social capital-based organizations are able to self-legitimize and obtain political capital through the growth of its social recognition and perceived legitimacy (Whitman 2006: 53).

Despite a larger body of research on conservative faith-based organizations, there is a gap in the literature when it comes to congregation-based community organizations: a term generally used when referring to progressive, interfaith, multi-cultural organizations such as the Gamaliel Foundation and PICO National Network. These are examples of organizations that have been

successful in utilizing a social capital-based strategy to legitimize and strengthen themselves and their capacity for collective action (Swarts 2011:455). Walker and Willer (2014) conducted a laboratory experiment focused on the legitimizing processes similar to those becoming more common in congregation-based community organizing, by measuring self-interest through a process based on Network Exchange Theory. Their experiment demonstrated the necessity of using a legitimizing process such as social capital growth to engage participants in collective action, implying that a focus on individual engagement drives community action (Walker and Willer 2014:1242). However, Lloyd (2014:644) argues that this approach could create problematic multiculturalism by concentrating on engaging individuals' self-interest instead of putting an emphasis on communal goals. This seemingly sharp contrast is addressed by Swarts (2011) in her qualitative research on the importance of constructing concrete symbolic boundaries within congregation-based community organizations. Defining exactly what organizations are and are not is critical to maintaining focused individualism, while also recognizing the need for a collective and empowered approach (Swarts 2011:470). These findings fall in line with Walker and Willer's (2014:1234) conclusion that the process of building legitimacy through interpersonal relationships contributes directly to the early and continued formation of coalitions among their laboratory study participants.

Nonetheless, there have been major drawbacks to this methodology in the expansion of PICO National Network especially at the state and local level (Whitman 2006:54). Whitman (2006) argues that this is possibly because of the difficulty in maintaining an individualistic model while expanding to a national level organization across the country. Smaller, localized movements are the foundation of grassroots organizing and social capital-based methods and have widely been studied in sociological contexts (Wood and Warren 2002: 43). However, there

is a noted lack of quantitative research into the realm of congregation-based community organizations; especially relating to the expansion and media attention these networks are gaining.

### Faith-Based Community Organizations' Social Reform Efforts

Faith-based community organizations have been the backbone of a wide variety of political movements throughout United States' history, and all over the globe (Brown 2011:312). In recent years, small community organizations have been asked to help solve countless regional issues, including managing local HIV/AIDS crises, pursuing a wide variety of educational reform actions, acting to pass legislation to help the formerly incarcerated achieve rehabilitative success, and engaging in affordable housing development (Adedoyin 2013:186; Alfonso et al. 2018:199; Belcher et al. 2004:273). Small faith-based organizations are accustomed to solving community problems through grassroots efforts, largely because they are uniquely equipped to help bridge political and social divides within communities (Flores and Cossyleon 2016:673). Orienting their actions around values as compared to specific political issues, congregations and larger well-connected community organizations are able to leverage self-interest by focusing on causes that are rooted in common values of the congregation or organization and all of its associated participants while encouraging and emphasizing individual engagement (Rogers 2009:331). Another important factor in the success and proliferation of faith-based community organizations is the unusual diversity of socioeconomic, racial, and political affiliations within religious denominations and congregations (Lloyd 2014:642). This unique, shared institution gives faith-based organizing methods a rare advantage of allowing participants to unite around a collective sense of faith and religiosity, while encouraging political discourse in a respectful and socially regulated space.

Faith-based community organizations and religious institutions have been ardent supporters for decades, and have been at the forefront of social welfare programs such as providing shelter for the unhoused and providing aid to the poor and sick and in some cases replacing government services altogether (Igalla et al. 2019:1184). An increasing focus of religious and community organizations has become public education; especially PK-12 and afterschool programs for youth (Warren 2011:487). Rogers (2009) argues that this shift in focus to include public education is intentional and in a large part due to the unique ability of faith-based community organizations to bridge political divides that act as barriers for systemic change. In her research, Mediratta (2007:199) suggests that the success of faith-based initiatives into public education should meet a three part criteria: (1) organizations should be community based and actively engaged in other improvement measures such as housing reform or environmental activism; (2) they must be completely independent from the school district or specific school they are attempting to change; and (3) seeking to recruit new members and pass on strategies for organizing to new participants. Other indicators of success are mentioned by Malin (2016), who asserts that the socioeconomic and political makeup of a given area has a substantial effect on the success of increased educational funding. This is because the states and even individual districts have a huge role in dispersing funds for education, and historically affluent and democratic areas have received the lions-share of capital (Malin 2016:228).

The organizations currently involved in efforts to organize public education reform are not strangers to networking and building power in communities who are affected by poverty. Efforts to use community organizing for positive and politically sensitive changes have been successful in areas such as Chicago, where a small organizing network was able to assist in the creation and adoption of the Illinois ‘sealing bill’ – a law that would allow criminal records to be

sealed two years after the successful completion of an offender's sentence (Flores and Cossyleon 2016:663). Adedoyin (2013) draws attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States, and the crucial role faith-based community organizations have served in facilitating direct human services to African American communities who are usually hesitant to accept outside help. Financial restraints and the stigmatization of HIV/AIDS creates barriers for organizations to assist the regions hardest hit by the crisis, but faith-based organizations are in a unique position to tackle this and other potentially volatile topics (Adedoyin 2013:198).

### Efficacy of Actions Taken by Faith-Based Community Organizations

Faith-based organizations are involved in a plethora of political and social causes on a global and local scale. The issues are as diverse as abortion, education, health and wellness, water rights, immigrant rights, vaccination efforts, and foreign crisis aid. Functioning as key participants in the social and political consciousness of the United States, faith-based organizations are widespread through every corner of the country and its territories. With over 80% of the country associating with a place of worship according to a national study cited in Hardison-Moody and Yao (2019:364), using faith as a means of driving social change has the ability to be hugely successful in next several decades. Relatedly, Lloyd (2014:646) describes the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's and 70's as a religious or faith-based movement – a demonstration of the power built in churches and congregations.

Nonetheless, as faith-based organizations begin to venture into new political territories such as education, health, and wellness it is important to view their actions through a critical lens, and to carefully inspect not only their efficacy, but also their shortfalls. The success of collective action is largely dependent on a longitudinal approach to organizing that includes

retaining leaders and community members. In a study of 50 separate branches of PICO National Network, Tesdahl and Speer (2014:54) determined that every individual organization netted a loss of long-term participation, even with all else being equal. Furthermore Swarts (2011:469) notes the importance of long-term participation and continuity of leadership as a strong indicator of cohesion and a driving force behind a sense of unity within the organization itself.

Even beyond retaining participants, there are many other contributing factors to the efficacy of actions taken by faith-based community organizations. As discussed in Quezada (2004), single-denominational faith-based organizations can encounter barriers in certain communities due to reluctance to participate in a program that is tied directly to a major faith institution such as the catholic church. Conversely, interfaith organizations may struggle with problematic multiculturalism that creates racial barriers to social efficacy (Lloyd 2014). Another potential pitfall for community organizations is the threat of media agenda setting. Grassroots organizations are especially at risk for media firestorms, largely because they tend to not seek public attention. Dreier and Martin (2010) discuss the fall of Associations of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) during the 2008 presidential elections as an example. Although ACORN is not a faith-based organization, it does share several methodological and structural characteristics with groups such as PICO and the Gamaliel Foundation. Despite these potential shortcomings, the majority of faith-based organizing is phenomenally successful as indicated by – among many other things - the diversity and abundance of organizations. Aided by new organizing strategies such as the PICO model, faith-based organizing is likely to become an even more potent political force in years to come (Hardison Moody and Yao 2019:363).

## Conclusion

The United States has an extensive history of religious and faith-based organizations, including movements that have become incredibly important in issues as diverse as civil rights, health, wellness, and education. Faith-based community organizations including both interfaith and single-denominational groups are increasingly part of the social and political consciousness of the United States through engagement in a wide variety of reformative efforts. Although distinct in methodology, both types of organizations have a tremendous capacity for accomplishing meaningful goals. Single-denominational faith-based organizations have the advantage of group cohesion and focused political agendas, but frequently alienate other potential allies and community members who prefer a more individualized approach. Interfaith organizations are diverse, multicultural groups whose approach is oriented around shared values and individualism. However, they risk problematic multiculturalism and tend to function best at a regional level.

The model of interfaith organizations such as PICO National Network (now called Faith in Action) focuses on growing power through a process of legitimation accomplished through personalized, one-to-one relationship-building. This method is rooted in a values-based approach; the agenda of the organizations are diverse and are driven by the shared values discussed in one-to-one meetings with leaders and accomplished through personal development work and self-reflection. By creating diffuse power networks based on values and longevity, interfaith organizations are able to focus on multiple complicated or politically sensitive issues at

once, and persevere through many election cycles, administration changes, and the emigration of members and leaders. Social capital is the primary objective of this process and is built through constantly distributing and discussing leadership strategies with new members, congregations, and local organizing committees.

It is also clear from the available literature that many of the more successful faith-based movements have adopted social capital-based approaches. In my opinion, movements discussed in this literature review such as TASI would have benefitted from a more diffuse and interfaith approach, and from increased coordination and cooperation with other faith-based organizing networks. Additionally, organizations that use social capital as their primary means of building power are able to encourage long term participation from members and prioritize establishing deep roots in the communities they arise from. Through longitudinal engagement with communities, organizations are able to be more effective in their ability to delve into politically complex issues while maintaining good standing with their neighbors.

Although there is a relatively robust amount of literature available on conservative Christian movements and single-denomination faith-based organizations, there is a noticeable gap in research on interfaith groups and their social reform efforts. This may be partially due to the relatively recent expansion of multicultural faith-based organization, or because of the difficulty in measuring and quantifying longitudinal collective actions. Nonetheless, this gap is an opportunity for further research, particularly descriptive and explanatory research. Furthermore, the vast majority of literature reviewed in this report is qualitative, representing a larger trend in the methodology of studying religious social movements and demonstrating the need for new instrumentation and observation in this field. Particularly in the realm of education reform efforts by faith-based organizations, there is a blatant lack of research. Large national

organizations are becoming increasingly involved in pushing for voter initiatives and other policy changes to educational policy, as evidenced by PICO (Faith in Action) National Network's involvement in the development of Proposition 15 for the California 2020 General Election.

### Internship Description

True North is an organization originally developed through a regional campaign of listening focused on building relationships and creating understanding through a system of shared values. Through their listening campaign the organization identified four core issues of focus: (1) Environmental stewardship; (2) Immigrant rights; (3) Public Education; and (4) Housing and Homelessness. Located on the lost coast and in the so-called "Emerald Triangle", all four of these focuses represent issues prevalent throughout the community and at the forefront of the social consciousness on the North Coast. Uniting all of them is a sense of religiosity that attempts to lift up the voices of the disadvantaged and create a more equitable and just society through community involvement, testimony, and unity. These four issues guide the efforts of the organization as it works to engage directly with communities through the establishment of lasting personal relationships between everyday community members and True North organizing staff and leaders. True North's model of organizing is relatively unique due to its focus on the slow building of power through the creation of social capital. Additionally, as the only interfaith-based organizing movement in Northern California, the organization flexes its muscle by using its moral authority to bridge political divides in an increasingly polarized political climate.

True North is organized into groups of small Local Organizing Committees (LOC's) sometimes referred to as "clusters". LOC's are made up of volunteer clergy and community

members all called “leaders”, who are tasked with cultivating strong personal relationships with their congregants and use their capacity as faith leaders and participants to lift up the voice of the organization to the broader community. The importance of LOCs being engaged in active relationship building cannot be overstated: it is the action component of creating social capital at a local level and emphasizes individuality within collective action. It also allows leaders to hear from community members directly, and then report their needs and insights back to the larger organization. Although essential to the infrastructure of the organization, leaders generally do not handle all of the day-to-day operations. True North employs office staff to provide technological support, in addition to designing content and digital media to be released on social media, and writing press releases.

The lifeblood of the organization are its paid organizing staff, who are responsible for executing the “Arc of Organizing” – an organizing cycle oriented around a nexus of shared values and collective power, and made up of five steps: (1) reflection and learning; (2) understanding the story of the population/community you hope to help; (3) conducting research into the action you hope to make; (4) finding a new vision for how to move forward; (5) taking radical action through a targeted and well-researched approach. Each step of this cycle flows into the next and is intended to serve as a blueprint for creating substantive changes and reorienting the center of power away from the ruling class. Organizers coordinate correspondence between LOCs, hold one-to-one meetings with leaders, community members and politicians, sit in on research meetings being conducted by LOCs, manage projects, create agendas for meetings, and correspond with state and national leaders to communicate resource needs and discuss ongoing projects and actions.

A board of directors comprised of leaders from a quorum of LOCs preside over the operational affairs of True North, and are in charge of managing the organizations financial resources, creating paid and unpaid positions, setting annual action goals, and selecting the Executive Director of the organization. The Executive Director, Terry Supahan, is in charge of all of the organizing staff, office staff, and oversees all operations for True North. A defining feature of True North and its affiliates is a focus on contributions from everyone involved in the operation of the organization. Individuality is heavily emphasized, and it is an expectation that anyone attending any meeting will contribute to the conversation and trajectory of the organization. The concentration on processes of legitimation and the structure of the hierarchy is intended to promote the long-term health of the organization and its LOCs, while achieving enthusiastic and longitudinal participation of its leaders.

Short and medium-term expectations are set annually, and worked towards both independently and cooperatively by leaders, LOCs, and the unified LOC made up of all the individual LOCs. They can include creating awareness around issues and crisis, participating in direct voter engagement, holding politicians accountable for their policy choices, and providing a safe hub for faith leaders and communities to respectfully discuss political differences. However, long-term goals are the main objective of True North, and encompass a diverse array of projects centralized around the four identified core issues of houselessness, environmental justice, immigrant rights, and public education. They have been involved in the effort to put Prop 15 on the 2020 California ballot, in addition to an assortment of local policy issues, such as the coordination of city and county government to establish a strategy to address houselessness in Humboldt County, involvement in the efforts to un-dam the Klamath river, and the development and organization of a Rapid Response Network to provide community alerts about I.C.E raids.

## Reflection

Throughout my experience working as an intern for True North, I was afforded an opportunity to explore a newfound enthusiasm for connecting with the community around me and leveraging relationships to create power. A concentration was placed from the very beginning on the relationships between the other interns and I, when we were given an assignment to write out and share our personal stories including the root of the motivations for wanting to intern at True North. Sharing our stories with each other was a powerful experience that drew my attention to the strength and resilience of the people around me and cultivated an environment of mutual respect created through trust and mutual understanding. It was heavily emphasized that defining our own self-interest - both what drove us and what dissuaded us from participating in actions - is absolutely critical to the focus and drive of the organization.

In her research, Swarts (2011) discusses the importance of creating symbolic boundaries in faith-based organizing networks and arrives at a similar conclusion – that creating an environment united behind both what the organization is and is not, is incredibly important to the longevity and enthusiasm of its participants. My experience in the weekly internship meetings was largely about constructing symbolic boundaries: we compared and contrasted organizing methods, established next steps, and learned the formal structure of meetings laid out by the Arc of Organizing. Every meeting, the facilitator begins with a purpose, clearly defining the topics and agenda of the meeting, in addition to laying out ground rules. The construction of symbolic boundaries at the beginning of every meeting is key to fostering respectful discourse and

encouraging everyone to feel comfortable contributing, and also serves to clearly alert any outside participants to the agenda of the organization from the meeting's onset.

Although many faith-based organizations focus on single issues, the values-based, interfaith approach of True North positions it to unite a diverse and fluid range of faiths that includes Native religions, Eastern religions, philosophy, Judaism, and several Christian denominations. The eclectic and distinct personalities allowed for a range of perspectives and a vast range of knowledge. Each meeting, from one-to-ones to united LOC meetings and meetings with politicians, includes a reflection component that helps participants become situated in the moment and the goals of the meeting. Although sometimes a traditional prayer, frequently reflections were poems, songs, or thought exercises, some from eastern religions, and others more reflective of Judeo-Christian faith. Unifying all of the reflections is recognition of the value of sharing time together and the potential of collective human thought to creatively solve complex problems both internally and externally.

Lloyd (2014:646) expresses concern at this multi-faith approach, arguing that it encourages problematic multiculturalism and an unrealistic and false sense of colorblindness that furthers racist conceptions of religiosity. My experience with the organizing process was entirely different. I found that multicultural reflections helped to lift up powerful stories and voices by encouraging the participation of disenfranchised or underrepresented people. I could foresee a situation where problematic multiculturalism could become a component of similarly structured organizations, however none of the meetings I participated in had any element of colorblindness, and discussions about race, poverty, and inequality were frequently held by leaders and staff. Additionally, True North has actively attempted to combat problematic multiculturalism by

spearheading the formation of a Spanish-speaking LOC and pushing for the formation of other language and ethnicity-based LOCs.

One of the main projects I worked on was participating in direct voter engagement to encourage California voters to vote yes on Proposition 15 in the 2020 election. Although the initiative failed to pass by a slim margin, I believe it represents a successful push by a faith-based organizing group into the public education space. Proposition 15 was a proposed constitutional amendment that would change the way property is taxed in the state of California. As a result of Proposition 13, a 1978 property tax initiative, properties are taxed on the original purchase price of the property, and not on the current market value. This essentially means that commercial spaces are able to continue to generate revenue and pay the same low tax rate as when they purchased the property, regardless of inflation or massively increased value.

If Proposition 15 had passed, it would have generated up to \$11.5 billion in tax revenue that would have gone to schools and local governments throughout California. In Humboldt and Del Norte, that could have been up to \$23 million in additional funding for schools, which would have proven invaluable by all accounts. This issue was of particular importance to True North's Executive Director Mr. Supahan, who was a vocal advocate and connected with the issue on a personal level. Despite the failure of the measure, this effort was a unique attempt to change the way education is funded in California.

A large body of the research into faith-based organizing is oriented around projects of individual congregations or religious denominations to influence individual programs or to encourage parental involvement. In the case of Quezada's (2004) research into TASI, a catholic community organization developed a program to encourage participation of parents in their children's education. Although the program did increase parental involvement, many parents

were hesitant to participate in a program directly affiliated with the Catholic church. True North has attempted a similar strategy in Del Norte county, but has involved Yurok tribal members and numerous congregations in the efforts in a hope to avoid the potential shortfalls experienced by other religious education reform movements.

Relatedly, Mediratta (2007:199) conducted a systematic review of several community organizing efforts to reform or improve public education, and subsequently gives criteria for the success of organizing networks who have ventured into this field: (1) organizations should be community based and involved in multiple projects; (2) educational reform should come from outside the school itself; and (3) organizing methodology should be spread among parents, teachers, and community members. True North follows all three of these criteria already as part of its normal operational methodology, and my experience was that people – newcomers and returning participants alike – felt supported in expressing their opinions and sharing their ideas for improvement.

Another key feature in the blueprint for every meeting was a section where the meeting was debriefed, and positive and negative features were discussed. This component, although often fairly rushed because of time constraints, was emphasized as one of the defining features of the PICO model. Giving a chance for everyone to contribute to the improvement and inclusivity of the organization is absolutely central to the individualistic focus of the Arc of Organizing. Whitman (2006:56) asserts that the national power of politics exists in local organizing: This sentiment was repeated frequently by supervisors, leaders, and community participants alike. True North leverages the power of individuals at a local level and reflects that up a ladder of resources all the way to the state and national level. By drawing on contemporary social theory such as Durkheim and Weber in the construction of their organizing methodology, PICO, Faith

in Action, and its federations including True North are able to influence the outcomes of local elections and mobilize voters through individual and personalized engagement.

Additionally, a focus has become building the same variety of personalized relationships with elected officials. These relationships are sought out when elected officials are still candidates seeking exposure, and are grown into working, professional relationships built out of mutual respect. This unique variety of relationship-building allows organizations to engage in respectful and substantive discourse with otherwise unamenable or despotic politicians. One of my main tasks as an intern was to coordinate and organize a forum of Arcata City Council candidates to express their opinions on the houseless crisis currently facing Humboldt County and Arcata. I was able to watch the respectful yet firm approach of leaders in engaging prospective elected officials, giving each exactly the same amount of time to address the same questions, and allowing each to express their opinion. One of the key questions of the meeting asked all ten prospective candidates vying for three open seats to commit to meeting with the Arcata cluster LOC within three weeks of their election to office; all ten agreed unequivocally.

Working for True North has been truly inspiring and has provided me with exciting career prospects that I had never previously considered. I was not aware that organizing was a paid job and career, and have quickly discovered a passion for the work. The internship allowed me to meet in small groups with many of the authors cited in this paper, and has given me the opportunity to continue to work with True North and its affiliate organizations in a more involved capacity. It has also pushed me to pursue a graduate-level education in order to gain credibility and to increase my understanding of research methodologies that may serve useful to similar types of organizations in the future. It would be an understatement to say that this has been a paradigm-shifting experience.

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