

THE CHURCH AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING: EXPLORING THE WORK
OF LUKE BRETHERTON AND BRADFORD HINZE—SELECTED SESSION

- Conveners: Alessandro Rovati, Belmont Abbey College
Bradford E. Hinze, Fordham University
Moderator: Mary Doak, University of San Diego
Presenters: Alessandro Rovati, Belmont Abbey College
Jason Steidl, Fordham University
Respondent: Richard L. Wood, The University of New Mexico

The ongoing policy paralysis, the rising economic inequality, and the systemic racism that plague the US have caused an erosion of the political agency of individuals and local communities. In this context, the practice of community organizing has emerged as an alternative mode of political engagement that allows people whose voice would not otherwise be heard to contribute to the political process. From the very beginning, the church has been directly involved in this attempt to let the marginalized regain their political agency, which is why theological reflections on the role that grassroots forms of democracy play in the life of the faithful have flourished in the last few decades. The session reflected on the relationship between the church and community organizing by engaging with the work of two prominent scholars, Luke Bretherton and Bradford Hinze. By exploring their scholarship, the presenters reflected on the theological bases of Christian involvement in community organizing, considered actual instances of grassroots political engagement, and suggested ways for the church to continue its mission of tending to and fighting for the most vulnerable.

In his paper, “Seek the Welfare of the City Where I have Sent You: The Church and Community Organizing,” Alessandro Rovati argued that community organizing makes two important contributions to the church’s call to solidarity and justice. First, it provides an alternative vision of citizenship and democracy that overcomes many of the false dichotomies that dominate current political and theological debates and thus opens up the possibility of a common life in the midst of the complex pluralism that characterizes contemporary Western democracies. Second, community organizing embodies concrete practices that, by reinforcing the sense of ownership and political participation, foster authentic development, propose paths that bring about meaningful change, and develop creative imagination and skills to build relationships that can create new opportunities for genuine social transformation. Rovati identified in community organizing’s radical openness to the other what makes it theologically significant while also highlighting some possible tensions between organizing and the church’s ethos and life.

Jason Steidl focused on the gap experienced by Christians who are involved in community organizing between the participatory and dialogical practices that characterize it and their own faith communities, which can instead be insular, hierarchical, and even oppressive. In his reflection, “Christians and Community Organizing: The Challenge of Grassroots Democracy to the Church,” Steidl encouraged those who participate in organizing to use the perspectives and skills they have gained to recognize and challenge the church’s blindness to its own sin. Following Hinze, he called for a liberationist dialogical ecclesiology that privileges the perspectives of those who exist on the peripheries of the church, enabling them to prophesy against the structures and authorities that have dominated and suppressed

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them. Drawing on the history of PADRES, a group of Chicano priests that during the 70s and 80s worked to make the US Catholic Church more representational of the concerns of its Mexican American members, Steidl showed how the principles, practices, and orientations of community organizing have the power to provoke the church's conversion to care for communities on the margins and better embody its mission to care for the "least of these."

In his response, Richard L. Wood highlighted two competing analyses of the current crisis. One holds that we face a crisis of representation but that our democratic institutions are fundamentally healthy. A competing analysis holds that a form of racialized oligarchic capitalism—and the associated dynamics of racialization and rejection of all authority—infect our institutions and erode their capacity to effect democratic change. Wood argued that, on the latter diagnosis, both scholars and the church must move beyond listening alone and instead focus on the full range of practices in community organizing: listening to marginalized voices, lamenting, prophetically witnessing, and decisively confronting the destructive powers that have a grip on our common life. Those practices, simultaneously civic and ecclesial, then must become the grist for the theological reflection from below that can enliven the church and redeem the democratic promise. Only in that way can we become a church offering universal salvation to all, rather than a sect highlighting a narrow set of issues and offering salvation only to the elect.

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