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Contact: *Tim McManus, Lead Organizer*
408-710-9428; timothy.c.mcmanus@gmail.com

Local Democracy in Action: The COPA Spring Assembly

Democracy is alive and its future in the Monterey Bay region looks strong. Nearly 300 leaders, representing over 30 institutions from Santa Cruz, Monterey and San Benito Counties, gathered on May 15th at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Seaside for COPA's (Communities Organized for Relational Power in Action) Spring Assembly. The diverse gathering – farmworkers, retirees, teachers, professionals, developers, students, clergy – centered on proposals for action on key issues affecting the region's families, as well as commitments by COPA to train new leaders in the habits of democracy, and to raise local money to support expanding these efforts.

Framing the assembly through the notion of covenant, Rabbi Paula Marcus of Temple Beth El in Aptos asked, "How do we contradict this vitriol that eats away at our social fabric? When we share our stories of real life challenges, our hopes and our dreams, we say, 'We are in this together!' We have a claim on each other's time and resources. This is how we contradict the selfish trend of 'me first' politics that fills the airwaves and media outlets."

COPA's "covenant" began with its founding in 2003, and continues today as dues-paying member institutions join together in relationship and action on shared concerns. On May 15th, COPA advanced its issue agenda in the following ways:

- **Health Care for the Undocumented** – COPA received commitments from Monterey County Board of Supervisors Chair, Jane Parker, and Interim Health Department Director, Elsa Jimenez, to support continuation of COPA's Pilot Project that pays for needed medications, labs and radiology for the remaining uninsured through a \$500,000 allocation from the General Fund. Both also committed to joining COPA in organizing a summer Study Session of the Board of Supervisors, health care providers, employers and other stakeholders to develop a comprehensive plan to address the health care needs of the remaining thousands of uninsured residents.
- **Restorative Justice** – COPA leaders taught the importance of local implementation of Prop 47, shared personal stories of rehabilitation and skills-training programs that are working in our regions, and received a commitment from Santa Cruz Supervisor John Leopold to work with COPA to identify funding sources (local, state and federal) that could be used to expand treatment, rehabilitation and prevention efforts.

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- **Affordable Housing** – COPA leaders launched a regional organizing strategy designed to build a constituency prepared to support efforts to build more affordable housing in the face of anti-growth and NIMBY-ism. COPA also recognized its relationship with the Monterey Bay Economic Partnership and committed to working with them to support the creation of a local Housing Trust Fund that would loan necessary money to affordable housing developers.
- **Predatory Lending** – Sharing stories of seasonal workers forced to take out predatory loans of more than 300% annual interest rates in order to pay bills, COPA announced its strategy of developing alternative lending products (fair interest rates, short-term, available to low-income residents) through local credit unions, and recognized the support COPA has received in these efforts by the Santa Cruz Community Credit Union.

COPA's model of organizing stresses that an assembly like this one is only the beginning of the real work to come – “The action is in the re-action,” taught COPA leaders Vince Zuniga from St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Hollister and Carolina Roman from Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Salinas. It will be a busy summer for COPA, with the following upcoming events:

- Advocacy at Monterey and Santa Cruz County Budget Hearings
- A summer training series, COPA Democracy Institutes, to teach the skills of democracy to a new generation of leaders
- The COPA Investment Campaign as leaders work this summer to raise \$60,000 in local funds to support future organizing

Lupe Jara, St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Seaside, and Martina O'Sullivan, Resurrection Catholic Community in Aptos, traced the history of grassroots organizing in the Golden State, a story that began with Fred Ross. Ross was the first Industrial Areas Foundation (COPA's national training network) organizer in California, creating “Community Service Organizations” up and down the state. He hired and trained a young Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta for his IAF projects, and later joined them in the creation of the United Farm Workers movement. COPA's current organizing builds on the tradition and legacy of these organizers. On June 1st, COPA will be joined by Gabriel Thompson, the author of America's Social Arsonist, a new biography of Ross, for a conversation about organizing's past and present (Resurrection Catholic Community, Aptos, 7pm).

As the nation's politics seem lost and irretrievable, COPA's work shows that our democracy can be reclaimed. In the work of building diverse relationships across the usual barriers of class, age, religion and ethnicity, and working together to address common concerns, Rabbi Paula proclaimed that “We say no to fear and separation and we embrace a shared vision of the world as it should and could be.”