

Church meets community,



CDSP's community organizing requirement energizes new leaders

and vice versa

BY REBECCA WILSON AND JIM NAUGHTON

When CDSP made a class in community organizing mandatory for all MDiv students in 2016, it wasn't seeking a recruiting advantage, just trying to meet one of the needs of the contemporary church. But the advantage materialized just the same.

Today, several students with extensive backgrounds in community organizing say that they chose CDSP in part because they were eager for the opportunity to put a firm theological foundation beneath their organizing efforts.

"The longer I did community organizing and church, the more I thought those things needed to be in conversation with each other," says Laura Eberly, a master of theological studies student from the Diocese of Chicago. "Who's here? Who's not here? How are we complicit in making this an exclusive space?"

"I came from a big organizing and advocacy background," says Jed Dearing, a second-year student from the Diocese of Southern Ohio. "So for me, it was encouraging to know that I wasn't going to have to check that part of my calling as a Christian while I was at seminary."

"Before seminary, I was doing community organizing work because it felt like the right thing to do," says Daniel Pinell, a senior from the Diocese of Central Florida. "I wanted to help my community, the immigrant community. But I felt a little conflicted because I felt a disconnect from my previous evangelism ministry. Seminary has helped me integrate the two so that in the future, God willing, I can have a ministry that's a combination of the two."

The community organizing class, taught as a weeklong intensive course, consists of two distinct pieces. One is the classic community organizing training offered by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the nation's largest and longest-standing network of local faith and community-based organizations. It teaches students skills and techniques that help communities to agree on specific goals and to create the political leverage necessary to bring about change. The other, led by a CDSP faculty member, includes an extensive reading list and numerous writing assignments designed to set the training in a theological and ethical framework.

As Dr. Jennifer Snow, associate professor of practical theology and director of extended learning, told Episcopal News Service, the class

Illustration by proksima/iStock

requires “thinking differently about power: building relationships with people, inviting people in to share the power with you as a leader. It’s a very specific strategy about trying to reach a more just society in our particular context.”

The importance of immersing one’s self in a particular context before attempting to exercise leadership is a lesson illustrated by the stories of the three CDSP students who came to campus as experienced organizers.

Photo courtesy of Daniel Pinell



“I became a follower of Jesus because of evangelical preaching in my home country, Nicaragua, but I loved the Roman Catholic tradition, and also many Protestant theologians. In the Anglican Communion, you have those two things together—reform and Catholic. I have more room to breathe theologically.”

— DANIEL PINELL

Daniel

“It all started in San Francisco,” Daniel Pinell says. “I was doing ministry with a missionary order called InnerCHANGE. I got involved with a group of clergy who were doing organizing on immigration issues: the Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity. My wife and I showed up at one of the meetings and that’s how we got started. We moved to Oakland, and they were looking for a person who could be an organizer on immigrants’ rights issues. I applied and got the job and started working at East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy.

“A lot of the people were undocumented. Back then, I was

undocumented too,” says Pinell, who became a permanent resident of the United States last April. “When I was 17 years old, I overstayed my visa. I immediately felt this shame, almost sinful. It was something that I really had to struggle with in my first few years in the U.S. I felt that my students had that same kind of shame, I could see it in their eyes. I wanted to do something about that.”

Pinell says that through grassroots organizing he learned the importance of “giving people a voice,” and

At a rally in 2006, he heard the Rt. Rev. Allen H. Vigneron, then the Roman Catholic bishop of Oakland, speak. “He said ‘Welcome to United States of America.’ That was the first time that a person of authority welcomed me into this country. For me, it was hugely important having the support of the religious community to get over that shame. I would lie if I said it went away entirely, but I felt much better when the religious community showed welcome.”

In San Francisco, Pinell spent two years in an Augustinian order at the pre-novitiate stage of formation and said he “felt the call to ordination but not the call to celibacy.” He and his wife, Nettie, married in 2015, but he says he “still struggled with this call to the priesthood. I didn’t know what to do with it.”

As he explored his call to ministry, Pinell was in charge of organizing monthly vigils sponsored by the Oakland-based Interfaith Movement for Human Integrity at the West County Detention Center in Richmond where roughly 200 undocumented immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers were once held. Contra Costa County ended its contract with the federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency in July.

His work included helping congregations organize the liturgies for each vigil and working with local families who were hosting relatives and friends who had come to visit the detainees.

“We planned the vigils around family visitation times so we could talk with people who were visiting detainees, and offer them coffee and snacks. Sometimes they were so moved by their visits that they wanted to share their testimony.”

The vigils have ended, but Pinell’s faith journey continues.

“Ever since I started this whole adventure of following Jesus, it was through a very ecumenical lens,” he says. “I became a follower of Jesus because of evangelical preaching in my home country, Nicaragua, but I loved the Roman Catholic tradition,

and also many Protestant theologians. In the Anglican Communion, you have those two things together—reform and Catholic. I have more room to breathe theologically. I can appreciate my Roman Catholic tradition and the reform tradition. I don't have to feel guilt and choose sides, wonder if a Roman Catholic should be studying Bonhoeffer. The Anglican Communion is a microcosm of the ecumenical movement."

Pinell was received into the Episcopal Church at Grace Cathedral on Easter Sunday in 2018. "I've been really appreciative of how CDSP has been welcoming to me" he says. "When I started, I was not even Episcopalian. They took a chance on me."

"At the same time," he adds, "I would love to see more involvement with the Latino community, and hopefully see more students from Latino communities."

Laura

Say the words "community organizer," and most people think of former President Barack Obama, who learned the craft on the streets of Chicago, where Saul Alinsky, co-founder of the IAF, made his mark. Laura Eberly got her first taste of community organizing in Chicago, too.

"I have been doing community organizing since 2010," she says. "I came to it from back-and-forth interests in public policy and social work."

Eberly was getting a master's degree in social work at the University of Chicago, and "trying to figure out where I was supposed to be between clinical positions and public policy that was ill-informed by the experiences of people" when one of her professors asked her if she'd ever heard of community organizing. The field appealed to her immediately because it promoted systematic change on issues of justice, but did so by involving the people who would benefit from the change.

"The thread that connects all of it for me is that where we are supposed to be is with the people who are most marginalized by our society" she says. "That's who we're supposed to be hanging out with as Christians."

She received her training at the Midwest Academy, a training institute for progressive community organizers founded by Heather Booth in 1973 as a place to teach strategy, tactics and movement building, and "never looked back."

Mentored at Mercy Housing, an anti-poverty organization that focuses on affordable housing, Eberly helped organize tenants in Chicago neighborhoods with what she describes as "super-local issues" such as speed bumps, stop signs and the accessibility of public transportation.



Photo courtesy of Laura Eberly

"The thread that connects all of it for me is that where we are supposed to be is with the people who are most marginalized by our society."

— LAURA EBERLY

In 2014, she was a fellow in the Aging Justice project, a yearlong intensive policy and advocacy training program that equipped older women and their allies to advance public policies that allowed older women to age in place with economic security and access to affordable health care.

"I wasn't raised in the church at all," she says. "My teenage rebellion was to get God. I volunteered at a school in South Africa and was evangelized from there. I came to God kicking and screaming."

Her turn toward seminary began at Brent House, the Diocese of Chicago's campus ministry at the University of Chicago. The Rev. Stacy Alan, Brent House's chaplain, "started nudging me about the vocational diaconate," Eberly says. "She said, 'There's this ministry in the Episcopal Church that's all about social justice work.'"

The week she was made a postulant in Chicago, her wife received "her dream job offer" in Oakland, Eberly says, so the couple moved to the Bay Area. But shortly after arriving, Eberly was hit by a car and spent



the next 18 months recovering. She found her way back to organizing work through a position at the YWCA San Francisco & Marin, and began attending CDSP half time last spring.

"CDSP has been above and beyond anything I anticipated it would be," she says. "To be perfectly frank, I was not excited about going back and doing more school. I spent five years in an extremely academic institution, and I was enjoying putting things into practice."

However, she found "depth, commitment and a diverse community" at CDSP, and treasures "being able to study with folks who come from all sorts of faith backgrounds and from all over the country."

Eberly arrived at seminary "with a very strong sense that the message of the gospel is about solidarity with marginalized people" she says. "But having people point me toward thinkers like [Jürgen] Moltmann and [James] Cone who have gotten us to where we are now, who have put their life's work into interrogating the scriptures, the transitions of the church, it has opened up a whole new world."

Jed

In 2009, Jed Dearing and a group of friends had just begun living in an intentional community in Columbus, Ohio. "There were 10 of us who had all either post-evangelical or post-holiness traditions," he says. "While we had all grown out of these traditions, we were all still really compelled by Jesus and we didn't know what to do with it, because our previous church homes weren't providing space for it." There, he was introduced to the Episcopal Church through the street church ministry of St. John's Church in the Franklinton neighborhood of Columbus.

"Through the combination of living in this community and getting connected through street church, we started building a network through the neighborhood," he says.

Then, on Christmas Eve 2011, three people died in a house fire at a condemned property owned by a Columbus slum lord. Dearing and his friends organized a protest. "We got together at the church, and the next thing you knew, there were 100 people there with news cameras and the police.

"Very quickly, on the fly, we realized there's power here and a lot of energy, and we've got to organize it," he says. "On the fly, we made the decision to split the group up to look at different aspects of the issue, developed proposals, formed teams, started working from there. It was neat to see both the power of the church and its relationships, and the power of living in a neighborhood that was ready to come together to do something."

Dearing had no formal training as an organizer, but he had been a youth pastor for seven years, and so he knew "how to wrangle big groups of people." Over the next 16 months, the group met with people who had lived in the property, took their stories to their state representatives, researched property law, and met with the county prosecutor to ask how the property owner had been "consistently let off the hook," for his long record of code violations.

"We were present at hearings with family of victims," he says. "Whenever there was a court date, people would march with signs. We had children riding bikes in neighborhoods, sit-ins in the courtroom and

"One of the great gifts of community organizing is to learn not to come in to a situation with a lot of expectations," he says.

"You are being invited to experience things, rather than thinking that you can come in with a big idea that is just what people need."

— JED DEARING



Photo by Thomas Minzeski

marched around the landlord's mansion out in the suburbs.

"We went to his home and knocked," Dearing says. "We were asking to have a conversation and work on resolution, but the door was never answered."

In April 2012, the landlord pleaded no contest to 21 misdemeanor code violations and served thirty days in jail.

By the time Dearing left the community, his network had moved on from sponsoring a food pantry to training neighbors in Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), a method that strengthens communities by mobilizing individuals and institutions to recognize and build on the community's existing strengths.

"When I was asking myself, should I go into social work, community development, or leading the church, I came to realize that the church is a place where community work can be done. You can offer a message of hope and get yourself invited into people's lives in ways that you cannot in other places. You can ask what it means to rally people together for the sake of others for the sake of change. I want to do this work out of the church and out of wholistic reconciliation."

Dearing says he has found a supportive community at CDSP and had the chance to work with "other people drawn to the community organizing piece" of their shared studies.

Touch the Wounds

Not every student takes immediately to community organizing. One stumbling block, Dearing says, is that the IAF model of organizing focuses on helping a community to identify its needs and then to develop its power through mobilizing its members to work for change.

"Many people are skeptical of this," he says. "They wonder if this has a place in the church. This approach is about power, and in some ways the church is trying to deconstruct earthly powers."

However, Dearing says minds are often changed when students attend an "action," a mandatory part of the IAF training.

An "action," in the IAF's lexicon, is the culmination of a campaign that begins with one-on-one conversations and house meetings, and produces a request requiring a yes or no answer that is placed before public



Daniel Pinell, Laura Eberly and Jed Dearing meet up on Community Night in Denniston Refectory.

officials. The "action" is usually a high-energy experience at which members of grassroots communities express their needs through vivid testimony. Few public officials agree to attend these actions if they are not already resolved to pay serious attention to the community's demands.

Dearing says attending the action provoked "a sea change" in his class's understanding of the importance of community organizing. "It was almost a 'touch my wounds' moment," he says. "People began to see how this has a place in the church."

Another stumbling block in community organizing is that it requires humility, Dearing says.

"One of the great gifts of community organizing is to learn not to come in to a situation with a lot of expectations," he says. "You are being invited to experience things, rather than thinking that you can come in with a big idea that is just what people need."

"I worked on my ego a lot in that class," he says. "Which was great. Or, at least useful." 

