

ORGANIZING FOR CHANGE

IAF

POWER ♦ ACTION ♦ JUSTICE

*STANDING FOR
THE WHOLE*

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220 West Kinzie St. 5th Fl.
Chicago, IL 60610
312/245-9211

*Political virtue is the
commitment to, knowledge of
and ability to stand for the whole,
and is the necessary condition
for democracy.*

- George Lummis, Democracy, Fall 1982

STANDING FOR THE WHOLE

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We who lead and organize with the Industrial Areas Foundation may be considered presumptuous for talking about "a commitment to, knowledge of, and ability to stand for the whole." If you added up the budgets of our 58 affiliate organizations, the total would not reach \$12,000,000 per year - a pittance by corporate church, union, or political party standards. All of our full-time organizers and support staff number no more than 145. Our offices are in some of the most neglected and devastated corners of America's central cities and written-off rural areas. And our names do not appear with any regularity in the political or social or celebrity columns of major newspapers. Yet, we *do* presume to describe our commitment to, our knowledge of, and even our ability, to stand for the whole. Here's why.

Our organizations are made up of 2,200 congregations and associations; tens of thousands of ministers, rabbis, pastors, lay leaders, and nearly two million members and associates from Brownsville, Texas to Brownsville, Brooklyn. Our members are black and Hispanic, Asian and white; individuals on the edge of homelessness as well as families in stable middle - class communities in the San Fernando Valley or Prince Georges County. We are Democrats and Republicans and Independents, most of us in the moderate middle of the political spectrum. Taken together, with our millions of hours of practical nonpartisan activity, our range and depth of experience; our growing ability to employ the full range of relational public skills (listening, presenting, agitating, confronting, negotiating, compromising) and our mix of patience for the pace of political development and impatience at the conditions that stunt and stifle growth-we are as diverse, as determined, and as vital a network of related and relating citizens as exist in our nation today.

Before trying to define who we are and what we believe, we are going to take the time to say who we are *not*.

We are *not*, fundamentally, materialists. We don't believe greed is good. We don't worship profit. Wall Street isn't sacred, and stock transfer aren't liturgy. We don't see the profound transformations taking place in Eastern Europe as triumphs of the commercial spirit (consumers starved for shopping malls going over the wall), but as triumphs of the human spirit. In Eastern Europe, men and women are demanding that the state and the economy serve the interest of the most important sector of any healthy society - what Peter Drucker has called the third sector. This sector of voluntary associations - family, congregation, and other institutions - gives the market its meaning, not the other way around. This sector is most precious to the majority of Americans. This sector is where we grow and see our children grow. This sector is the soul of the whole.

Nor are we citizens who worship another false idol: the bureaucratic state. We *don't* want a society of empty programs and do nothing administrators. We don't believe that bigger government is always better. We don't value paper and procedure and patronage. We are the ones who have suffered the most in cities staffed by political hacks and process junkies. Those are our children who have not been educated. Those are *our* blocks which have not been rebuilt. Those are *our* loved ones who have died on stretchers in overloaded emergency rooms or who have watched their life - blood drain away while waiting for an ambulance that came too late. We reject the building of bureaucratic kingdoms -- whether the Republican version (cost - plus defense department contracts), the Democratic version (cost-plus social service programs), or the socialist version (both).

We are also *not* people anxiously awaiting a charismatic leader - a saviour who will led us to a political promised land. We value leaders who aren't "naturals", who have difficulty speaking, people without sound bites ready for the press. We believe that *no one* leader is needed, but a collective of leaders. We believe *no one* person should stand for us and speak for us and broker for us--thus depriving us of our dignity and our stake in our own futures - but that we should learn to stand and speak for whole ourselves.

Finally, we do not see ourselves as another faction or party or sect, not another issue group or special interest or lobby. We don't view the public arena as a piece of limited turf, or as a cramped apartment with only three small rooms. We are not trying to squeeze one of our leaders into one of the rooms where power people currently meet. We see ourselves as trying to build a large enough room, with a big enough table, to accommodate as much of the talent and creativity and variety as we know still exists in the shattered cities and towns of our nation.

Then who are we? We will try to answer this by describing what we believe, what we teach, what we do, and why we do it.

1) We believe in what we call *the iron rule*: never do for others what they can do for themselves. *Never*. This rule,

difficult to practice consistently, sometimes violated, is central to our view of the nature of education, of leadership, and of effective organizing. This cuts against the grain of some social workers and program peddlers who try to reduce people and families to clients, who probe for needs and lacks and weaknesses, not strength and drive, not vision and values, not democratic and entrepreneurial initiative. The iron rule implies that the most valuable and enduring form of development - intellectual, social, political - is the development people freely choose and fully own.

2) We believe that most leaders - hundreds and thousands and millions - are *made*, not born, and that the majority of men and women have the ability to understand, to judge, to listen, to relate, to speak, to persuade, to confront, and to resolve. We find in our congregations and our blocks, in public housing projects and barrios, a vast pool of citizens, able-bodied and able-minded men and women. They are often untrained and untaught. They are ignored by almost everyone. They are even redefined as a new class or underclass, but time and again they have proven their ability to grow and develop if invested in. The heart of our organizing is the finding of talented potential leaders, the inviting of those leaders into training and relationship, and the enabling of people to decide whether they want to develop, and where, and when, and how fast. Creating the context for leadership development is the core of our work.

3) We believe in a sense of ownership of our own development and ownership of our institutions. We believe in dues. We believe in paying our own way. We neither solicit nor accept governmental monies for our central organizations. Without financial independence, there is not true political independence.

4) We believe in a educational process that has little to do with traditional classroom approaches. In local areas, every night and most weekends, scores of local national training sessions take place, analyzing public agencies, tracing the connections between public and private power players, designing strategies, planning action. We also conduct 10 days of training three times a year, where several hundred leaders and organizers systematically probe the central issues of democratic politics and effective action. But the greatest percentage of learning and tutoring takes place in the field, in the City Halls and housing agencies, in state legislatures and bank board rooms, in T.V. studios and editorial boards. The materials that we and our fellow leaders use are the unlimited examples of failure in our cities: the bankrupt programs and grounded pilot projects, the political fixes and insider deals. We don't have to look far for issues. They surround us.

5) We believe in the individual relational meeting. By relational meeting, we mean a contact that is face to face, one to one, for the purpose of exploring the possibilities of a public relationship. It is a thirty-minute opportunity to set aside the pressures and tasks and deadlines of the day and

to probe another person, to look for their talent, interest, energy, and vision. The other person's perspective is of primary value. Their stories and insights and memories are more important than a name on a petition or contribution to a cause. The modern leader and organizer is not a peddler of issues - an activist Fuller Brush man-but an initiator of relational meetings and builder of public relationships.

6) We believe in building for power-power that is fundamentally reciprocal, power that is tempered by the teachings of religious traditions and exercised in the context of ever changing relationships with our fellow leaders, allies, and opponents. We value the public sphere; we want to build a larger table in a more spacious room, but we don't kid ourselves about the tone of discussion that will take place at that table. We accept the tension, emotion, conflict, and uncertainty that are part of political life. We are prepared to argue, listen, revise our views, and compromise in exchange for respect and a willingness to compromise from those who now hold power. What matters to us is not consensus, but a stake in the ongoing dynamic of controversy, resolution, and change. We do not want to dominate. We do not want to *be* the whole. We want and will insist on being recognized as a vital part of it-and as capable as others of standing for it.

What exactly do we do?

One way to answer this is to say that we build a new kind of organization. It is rooted in families, congregations, and associations. Our organizations are dues based. Our organizations have small professional staffs. Our organizations are fueled by the hundreds of thousands of volunteered hours of talented men and women in local communities. Our organizations work on a wide range of issues- from getting cities to replace stop signs to getting states to restructure and refinance their school systems; from pressuring to get a drug den demolished, to rebuilding entire neighborhoods with new affordable homes: from reducing exorbitant water rates to figuring out the financing for a new water and sewer system.

Another way to answer, equally true, is to say that we try to construct a classroom without walls where the truly best and the brightest citizens of our republic-parents, teachers, teenagers, factory workers, bus drivers, garment workers, secretaries, nurses, dignified people on public assistance - come and learn through their own experiences how to translate their values and dreams for themselves and their communities into concrete reality. We use issues as a *means* to advance our knowledge of the whole, and how that whole works and fails to work, and how that whole may be bettered.

A third way to answer is to say that we see ourselves as building and rebuilding a vital, powerful, voluntary third sector. That sector will confront, compete with, and collaborate with the partisan public and private sectors at dif-

ferent times. We challenge the public sector - undermined by privatization, corruption, celebrity - worship, and a loss of citizens' confidence - to redefine its role in the 1990's.

Why do we do what we do?

The answers are as diverse as the individuals who compromise our organizations.

Some of us organize and lead because our faith, our religious belief, impels us toward this work. The words we read in the Hebrew Scripture or New Testament or Koran haunt us as we walk the streets of our cities. We are compelled by their injunction to relate, to reflect, to take action and risk; to make the dry bones of our shattered communities rise up, connect, and live.

Some of us organize out of anger - out of the root meaning of that word, grief. We move into the public arena grieving for all the opportunities lost and to be lost, for all the careers stunted and shortened, for all the hopes and dreams denied. We have looked into the eyes of undamaged children and looked again, years later, to find those eyes deadened by drug addition or dimmed by inferior schools or degrading work. We have looked in the mirror and seen ourselves isolated, disconnected, spectators watching the play of public life on a TV screen, and have looked again and seen the same selves engaged in the drama of pressure and progress and change.

We organize because there were moments in our lives - often long buried - that told us that we could lead, moments like this moment described by one of our fellow leaders:

As a young girl in North Carolina, my sister and I began to attend the local Roman Catholic Church. In those days, blacks sat in the back pews. Now I was a very large young girl rather heavy, and so was my sister. When we went to that church, I saw no reason why my sister and I should sit in the back. So one Sunday we went right up and sat in the first pew. The pastor and ushers were upset. The pastor came over before Mass and asked if we would please sit in the back, like all other blacks. I was as scared as I could be, but I just couldn't see where God would care where we sat, and so I said no. Finally, the ushers came and carried my sister and me to the back. Carried us right down the aisle of the church.

On the next Sunday, my sister and I sat in the front pew again, and the priest came and the ushers came and they hauled us off again, them huffing and puffing, to the back. On the third Sunday, the same thing happened. By this time, we were pretty well known. Two black girls who got carried away to the back of the church every Sunday. My family, my mother particularly was frightened at what we were doing, but said that we were doing the right thing.

On the fourth Sunday, the priest and the ushers didn't do a thing. The Mass started, the choir sang, we took our seats, and from then on we sat where we wanted in that church and in any Roman Catholic Church we ever attended.

We organize and lead out of love and stubbornness, out of joy and near despair, out of clarity of purpose and, sometimes, simply, because we don't see who else will do what needs to be done.

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We organize and lead because we know, or sense, that there won't be a whole - a whole nation or whole city or whole community greater than the sum of its parts - unless many millions of Americans feel that the land is theirs, ours, that we are in it, of it, and willing to know it, commit to it, and stand for it.

We organize and lead because we see or participation as a necessary condition of a healthy democracy and a dignified life.