

GOING PUBLIC

AN ORGANIZER'S GUIDE
TO CITIZEN ACTION

"If you want to know how ordinary Americans accomplish extraordinary things—build affordable homes, create effective schools, win living wages—then the story and the strategy reside in this remarkable book. *Going Public* is at once pragmatic and profound."

—Samuel G. Freedman

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CHAPTER 9

Disorganizing and Reorganizing

licly with one another—one leader pressing the agenda of the organization, the other leader siding with the mayor when the mayor said that he couldn't do much about the plague of rats overrunning certain communities. I went home that night and told my wife that we should unpack slowly.

The temptation (other than to flee) would have been to try to find some large issue, or dramatic cause, to rally the group around. Instead, we began a long and difficult process of disorganizing and reorganizing this wreck of an organization. Week after week, month after month, I worked with a small team of determined leaders to raise money, to pay down the debt, and to recruit new dues-paying congregations. We pushed out one of the incompetent staff people and several of the undisciplined and negative leaders. Slowly and incrementally, with many setbacks, we sought to rebuild trust and confidence among the top leaders. At the end of this phase, the organization, still shaky, still in debt, still in doubt, was able to hold a public assembly of one thousand leaders, from twenty institutions, who were at least clear that they needed to continue to address the basics—dues, fundraising, recruitment, and leadership training—if they were ever to have real power in Baltimore.

At the end of fifteen months, for a variety of reasons, I gladly moved on to New York to begin the EBC organization, and Arnie Graf moved to Baltimore to pick up and accelerate the difficult work of disorganizing and reorganizing BUILD. Arnie is as persistent, focused, and creative an organizer as you will ever meet, but the challenge in Baltimore absorbed every ounce of determination, patience, and imagination that he could muster.

At least four more years of steady work followed, with Gerald Taylor assisting Arnie during part of this phase. Finally, mostly due to Arnie and Gerald's efforts and the extraordinary commitment of leaders like Phyllis Douglass and Marion Dixon, Msgr.

In 1979, Ed Chambers asked me if my wife and I would consider moving to Baltimore. The IAF had started a new organization there about four years before, and it was already in trouble. If we had known how much trouble, we may not have packed our belongings and our dog into our Chevy Nova and headed east. When we arrived, on the weekend of the Three Mile Island meltdown, after barely surviving an avalanche of boulders on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, we learned the total and terrible truth.

Our relatively new power organization had already imploded. Instead of a solid budget and a sound dues base, it was twenty thousand dollars in debt and dropping fast. Instead of forty or fifty member congregations, there were five or six, and disputes threatened to reduce that number even further. It had several paid staff—none of whom were up to the job and all of whom needed to be fired. The first ministers' meeting I attended drew a total of four pastors—two of whom could not contain their intense dislike for one another. And, in the first action that I observed, on my third day in the city, the two leaders running the action disagreed pub-

Claire O'Dwyer and the incomparable Reverend Vernon Dobson, BUILD reemerged, nearly eight years after its bumpy beginning, as the premier power organization in the city. By then, it was nearly a new organization—many new leaders, topflight new staff, money in the bank, new institutional members, and a new agenda of issues and actions that demanded the attention of the Baltimore establishment. It went on to author the country's first successful living wage legislation. It imagined and created an authority to fund after school programs—the BUILD Child First Authority—again the first of its kind in an American city. It rebuilt forgotten corners of a forgotten city with handsome, new Nehemiah homes. It conceived of the nation's first Joseph Plan—a state strategy to set aside surplus funds during boom years to bolster threatened social spending during leaner times—and now helps implement it. It became one of the most important citizens power organizations in the region and is now one of the three or four most effective power groups in the nation.

In the early eighties, a parish in the Bushwick section of Brooklyn joined East Brooklyn Congregations. Its dwindling congregation of 150 members met in a crumbling cavern of a church building in a community that had suffered years of white flight and arson. The building needed hundreds of thousands of dollars in repairs. And the diocese was threatening to shut the doors. When I asked the four staff members—Fr. Ed Brady, Sr. Frances Gritte, Fr. Lew Maynard, and Sr. Maryellen Kane—why they had decided to join the organization, they answered honestly: they felt that they had absolutely nothing to lose and wondered whether they could try to apply the universals of the IAF approach in a last-ditch attempt to disorganize and reorganize the parish.

We met for days, a few miles from the smoldering streets of Bushwick, in the peaceful backyard of Sr. Frances's home in

nearby Queens, where an occasional bird twittered at us from up in the trees. I provided training on how to do individual meetings, on the tension between a relational culture and the typical bureaucratic culture we find in most congregations, and on the identification and engagement of talented new leaders. They argued and struggled among themselves as to how they would relate to one another. They wondered how they would fend off resistance to any new approach from the parish's small but fierce old guard. And they schemed to find ways to finesse the diocese while quietly pursuing this organizational experiment.

At the end of several months of training and strategy, the staff came to a critical decision: everything that they did—beyond liturgy and necessary crisis response—would be put to a simple test. Did the activity lead to the training and developing of leaders? Or not? If it did, they would invest their time and energy in it. If it did not, they would avoid it, or withdraw from it.

If you have ever run a parish, business, or agency, you know how radical this decision was. For the parish staff, it meant saying no to the existing groups and cliques that had come to expect a member of the parish staff to sit through three-hour meetings of unbearable boredom. In dying parishes, this practice is rationalized as a "ministry of presence."

The staff encouraged veteran leaders to think differently, and individual staff members mentored, supported, and trained key leaders who were open to change. But when entrenched leaders refused to respond, then the staff moved ahead and sought out newer, more open, less "established" leaders with vision, energy, and a following.

The staff stopped being managers, paper-pushers, baby-sitters, or reactors. They became talent scouts, coaches, teachers, and trainers. They also moved aggressively beyond the walls of the existing parish and sought out the majority of members not yet in the

pews. They went into the Hope Gardens housing projects, into the tenements along Central Avenue, into welfare offices, and into public schools. The pastor even visited one of the low-wage knitting mills that employed many of his monolingual, Spanish-speaking members. I walked in with him one morning. The workers were bent over tables overflowing with fabric, intent on their sewing and in fear of the owner. We had heard how he enforced discipline: by brandishing a bolo knife now and then. When the first worker spotted Fr. Brady, her face went from stunned surprise to joy to gratitude, while the expression of the owner, eyeing us through the glass wall of his office, hardened.

Slowly, after hundreds of individual meetings and scores of house meetings and block meetings, after a phase of direct action on matters of immediate concern, the congregation began to grow. Sunday attendance went from 150 to 400 after about six months of work. Then, six months later, 800 began to worship. Then 1,000. Then, after two years, nearly 1,500 people refilled the large, ornate, crumbling Catholic church. The diocese responded by committing to fund the renovation of the church building. Artisans repaired the roof, patched holes, and repainted the gold leaf in the vault over the altar.

The pastor, largely unrecognized for his remarkable work, was quietly transferred. One by one, the other staff members moved on. A determined and experienced new duo, Msgr. John Powis and Sr. Kathy Maire, took over and kept pushing the parish forward. St. Barbara's is now vital, teeming, complicated, and challenging—central to a community hungry for a stable institution that can effectively anchor neighborhood life.

As the Nehemiah Homes were being built, the EBC staff of three—Stephen Roberson, Lucille Clark, and I—worked in a third floor office housed in a ramshackle rectory off Eastern Park-

way and Rockaway Avenue in Brooklyn. To reach us, visitors needed to walk through the line of men waiting to eat in the soup kitchen on the first floor, to slide through another line of people outside a social service office on the second floor, and then to climb a narrow set of stairs to the third floor. The offices themselves were decent, but spare. Burglar gates covered the windows.

One morning, we received a visit from the commissioner of community development from Nassau County, Long Island. He was a very dapper fellow, indeed. He wore a handsomely tailored suit, carried an expensive attaché case, and sported all of the most up-do-date insignia worn by the successful executive corps. He had read about our strategy to build thousands of new single-family homes and wanted to meet with us to find out how we were going about it.

As we shook hands, before we sat down, he made an announcement. "I'm sorry to say this, but I can tell you right now that you can't possibly succeed."

Stephen and I stared at him for a moment. Then I said, "Well, you could save us a hell of a lot of time and trouble by telling us how you know that."

The executive looked around the office, at the furniture, the worn wooden floors, the gates on the windows, and said, "This place lacks the proper ambience for success..."

Ambience. Stephen and I repeated the word to one another for a few moments.

The executive hadn't asked a single question about who we were, who we had hired to help build the homes, how we had raised millions of dollars of no interest construction financing, what we saw as our fundamental mission, or what actions we had already taken or were planning to take. No, he focused on the outward signs of "organization"—buildings, equipment, structures, paper, image, ambience—and jumped to his stunning conclusion.

(By the way, several years later, we read that our visitor committed crimes while in office, was indicted, and spent several years in prison.)

Effective organization doesn't begin with furniture, office complexes, and snazzy logos. It begins with a team of talented leaders, clear on its mission, and willing to act to try to accomplish that mission. Great companies start this way. Great religious congregations, denominations, faiths originate this way. And a living democracy and vital society start and restart here.

You won't find examples of this living and breathing democracy in well-appointed offices or in expensive hotel conference centers. You won't find them in the creaking chairs and roped-off pews set aside for "community input" by the managers of the political establishment. You'll find them at unexpected times and in unusual places—like on a sultry night not long ago in lower Manhattan.

The corner of Pitt and Stanton, near where Houston meets the East River, shimmers in the evening sun. There's too little space, too little air, too little elbowroom. It's a neighborhood that seems to have tumbled out of one of Richard Scarry's "world's busiest" children's books, with planes, boats, trains, cars, and characters packed into every corner of every page.

I've arrived early, so I take a walk around the neighborhood—past a small synagogue graced by a beautiful flower garden, past a New Age restaurant serving sandwiches with sprouts and lots of bottled water, past a youth center humming with shouts and cries, kids spilling out the door and onto the sidewalk and street. Our Lady of Sorrows Church and School and Rectory appear jammed, like an afterthought, into an already crowded row of tenements. The church buildings seem hunched, squeezed.

Across the street, three large trailers are parked. These trailers serve as the mobile headquarters for a movie in production. Danny Glover stars, I'm told. The shooting takes place at 3:00 A.M. In front of the church, the movie's food service is set up—serving

chicken, fruit, and drinks to workers, street people, passersby, and extras. But who is who? I can't sort out the characters from the "characters," and neither can the canteen crew, who happily serve food to whoever stops by.

Downstairs in the church hall, the meeting room begins to fill—as if the fullness of the street is seeping into every available space. The church basement is divided in two by a partition. On one side of the partition, about 150 leaders of Lower Manhattan Together will meet. On the other side, the extras for the movie will muster. A few of the LMT leaders wander into the extras portion of the hall. Several extras mistake our group for the movie company.

At half past seven, starting time, the room is packed. Angel Diaz chairs tonight's meeting. But "chair" is the wrong word. He doesn't have a chair tonight—just a microphone and a spot, front and center, and complete command of himself and his surroundings. When he asks the group to stand for the opening prayer, the group rises. And Reverend Vanderjaat, the pastor of Middle Collegiate Church, prays.

Reverend Vanderjaat has a reddish beard, long face, and the body of a distance runner. The prayer he leads is heard by a diverse group—Anglo Saxons like Hubble-Riggs and Warnick, ethnic Catholics like Connelly and Gurdack, Hispanics like Nieves and Hidalgo and Gonzalez, African Americans from a struggling Presbyterian church at 6th and the FDR Drive, a Jewish foundation director, a daughter of a sitting Supreme Court Justice, and a Chinese not-for-profit executive.

If all God's children aren't here tonight, *most* of them are represented, heads bowed in prayer above the low murmur of the movie extras. Scanning the crowd is like looking at an exposed side of a mountain. There, in the rock face, the layers of sediment tell the story of the earth—a geological petition with the signatures of many millennia.

Tonight, you see the human layers that make up this city—the

Dutch and the English, the Jews and Italians, the Greeks and African Americans, the Hispanics and Asians. One after another, they have come. They have settled in and settled down, one group on top of another, layer upon layer.

For ninety minutes, tonight, they will operate together, mix with one another, become greater than the sum of the parts of their diverse and distinct identities, but not so expansive and diluted as to drift into some photo-op of an idealized American "family." In action, they represent a something-in-between-the-local-and-the-national, a mediating group, a kind of informal congress, that functions in ways and produces results that no local group or national body can achieve.

When the prayer ends, Mr. Diaz takes charge. He is five foot six inches tall, dressed in a white shirt and tie, pleasant and upbeat, confident and in control. He reviews the business of the night—celebrating major improvements in pedestrian safety along Houston Street, announcing a new campaign to conduct citizen inspections of public housing projects, and continuing to press forward on significant park improvements in lower Manhattan. Mr. Diaz is a manager of public housing by day, leader in his congregation and LMT by night. He is moderate, thorough, balanced, and persistent.

Mr. Diaz calls on a leader from First Presbyterian Church, Liz Hubbell-Riggs, to review the progress made on pedestrian safety and to deal with the City's Department of Transportation Manhattan commissioner, who is attending tonight's session. The lights switch off, and Ms. Hubbell-Riggs leads the group through a before-and-after slide show of dangerous intersections that have been improved because of LMT's efforts. After each of a dozen improvements, Ms. Hubbell-Riggs praises the city official and thanks him. The rhythm of her presentation—the dangers before, upgrades after, and thanks—engages the crowd. The commis-

sioner is pleased. He's beginning to beam. When it is his turn to respond, he says that he felt that he was "home," in the parish he attended thirty-eight years before, in the school he was graduated from, among people from another parish where he had served as an altar boy. The group applauds him.

At the end of the litany, another leader, a young Episcopal priest named Jeremy Warnick, steps to the microphone and brings up another dangerous intersection—Houston and the FDR Drive—that has not yet been addressed. The commissioner becomes subdued, more formal. His voice takes on the tone of a city bureaucrat who is not at all at home. He says he will need to "take that request under advisement." Fr. Warnick presses and asks for a response in the near future. The commissioner responds positively but is clearly less comfortable than when he was regaling the group about his altar boy days.

The entire exchange is a good example of how we try to conduct public business—giving ample credit where it is due, but not sliding into false familiarity or hero-worship. Our leaders remind the official that there is more work to be done. They inject a necessary edge into the encounter. The commissioner walks out of the room and hesitates in the hallway. He has been applauded, recognized, challenged, and warned—all in just a few well-paced minutes. He feels basically positive, but decidedly mixed, which is fine with the leaders who thank him for his time and remind him that they will be calling.

The next part of the meeting focuses on the inspections of four large housing projects conducted by LMT leaders and staff. Again, the lights go down and the leaders narrate the conditions contained in the slides that appear on the screen. When the slides show large rat holes and overflowing garbage bins, the crowd quietly groans. The leaders have created LMT report cards for each project, and the first grades given are not high—mostly C's and

D's. Reverend Getty Cruz conducts this part of the meeting and proposes that the group take these grades to the project managers, not the media, to see if they will respond. If they don't improve, then the group would make the evaluations public. There is unanimous support for this tactic, and the attention of the leaders shifts to parks.

LMT has pressed for and secured major commitments to Seward Park and East River Park. The mayor announced the renovation of East River Park in his January State of the City address. A Parks Department senior architect, George Vellonakis, is there to present his renderings of the park improvements. He shows where new walkways, play areas, and benches will be placed. Five million dollars will begin the reclaiming of this worn public space. Then Fr. Joseph Gurdak, dressed in the brown robes of his Franciscan order, reminds the leaders that this young architect also produced the design for the newly renovated City Hall Park. Robust applause follows—and continues for more than a minute. Mr. Vellonakis seems to relish this moment. The people of the city are giving him as warm and as generous an evaluation as he may ever receive in his public life.

The meeting ends at 9:01, a minute late. But even though the heat and humidity have taken their toll, people don't bolt from their chairs and rush out into the night. People are damp, but not tired. Many stay and chat, gathering spontaneously in groups of four or five all around the hall. That's the first, informal evaluation of the work of the night.

At least twenty leaders remain for the second, more formal evaluation that the lead organizer, Joe Morris, has asked me to conduct. We review several of the key factors that made the night a success—the intense preparation that Joe has demanded of his leaders, the nearly flawless coordination of verbal presentation and visual aids, the tension injected artfully at the end of the transport-

tation commissioner's appearance, and the tone created by Angel Diaz's apparently easy mastery of the pace of the event. We focus for a few moments on how to make sure the newer leaders feel more comfortable in their roles.

At twenty past nine, I wrap up the evaluation and ask people how they feel. Everyone is positive. One man puts it best, "I feel so much better than when I walked in tonight, energized, enthusiastic . . ."

And that's how I feel, as I hail a cab on Houston Street and race through this beautiful, balmy New York night.