

Alinsky Community Organizing Still Alive in Oklahoma City

Amid a scandal about the new crucifix at St. Charles, a group of dedicated community organizers met Saturday to ratify their “issues” for St. Charles, as well as the city-wide issues for the May 16th assembly of congregations. This group is part of the Industrial Areas Foundation, a progressive group of political agitators trained in the Alinskian organizing methods described in the book *Rules for Radicals* by Saul Alinsky.

Matt Krodel chaired the event, and Father Phillip Seeton opened with prayer.

Five group leaders directed skits from the Old Testament prophet *Nehemiah*, Margie Roetker, Mary Wells, Deacon Bill Gorden, Donna Rockwell, and Linda Clark. The skits portrayed oppression and a need for organizing people to accomplish their mission. One man played the “economic conservative” who claimed the project was stupid and he would see that no money is spent on it. Matt Krodel, played a priest who replied “It’s not my responsibility.” Other people represented the unions or guilds and supported the work, or the nay-sayers who did not want to do the work. One said we can only buy food at the big box store where the food causes diabetes and has no nutrition. Another said their children were latchkeys, and single parents had no help and had to make their teens work, and eventually drop out of school and work full time.

Between the group skits, the “storytellers” gave personal testimony of suffering at St. Charles. The storytellers included Carol Hetherington, Laurene Powers, Mary Wells, Margaret Phipps, Melanie Johnson, Kathleen Shannon, and Dawn Flinton. Their stories were about substance abuse, youth violence, and transportation problems. One woman said there is a lack of hope in children, that young girls are becoming mothers too soon and are stuck in poverty the rest of their lives. She felt boys also have no hope, and are trapped in a cycle of poverty as well.

The leaders reminded everyone to listen to others in the room that may have ideas different from their own, to think outside the box, to love their neighbors as themselves, and never do for others what they can do for themselves. Mary Wells said we must do as *Nehemiah* did--to rebuild with the people on a local level—which is the Catholic term subsidiarity.

Matt Krodel stated there will be those who are opposed, and to remember we have all been opposed to something at one time, and instead of labeling when we don't understand, we should use the opportunity to learn and grow, and to see the best in our brothers and sisters.

A man named Jim (the economic conservative) commented that he knows there is a slush fund in the state senate where we can get some money, as well as the Governor's rainy day fund, to help pay for some of our issues. He learned this at a monthly mental health meeting he attends.

Over the past few weeks House Meetings were conducted at St. Charles. The house meetings are where the IAF-trained parishioners interview the other parishioners to find problems in the community. The main goal of this interview is to find other parishioners who can be leaders, and who can bring followers to increase the number of people involved, like the old pyramid scheme (think Amway). The final list of issues for St. Charles parish is as follows:

- 1) abortion
- 2) Anglo interaction w/Hispanics (currently a lack of this at St. Charles)
- 3) deterioration of neighborhood (has been getting worse over the last few years)
- 4) financial difficulties of the Catholic school (how can we fix it?)
- 5) elderly parishioners issues, including wellness, nutrition, hearing, possibly establishing a nursing ministry and a Stephen's ministry
- 6) a need to improve communication between the school and church at St. Charles

Later, they voted to have the issues below as their city-wide issues. Stories were told concerning these issues as well. One woman complained the police refused to take action when neighborhood kids were fighting in an empty lot. One woman said she had to move so she would be closer to the bus line and that the bus sometimes skips stops to make up time when they are running late. Another spoke of the difficulty having family members with mental health problems, and needing assistance when the caregivers become elderly or pass away. The following issues were ratified with an instant "aye" (and no call for "nays") as the city-wide issues to be presented at the assembly of congregations May 16th.

- 1) Advocacy for the mentally ill (OK has the highest in the nation, budget cuts occurring)
- 2) Advocacy for the elderly, including Mobile Meals, conditions in nursing homes, and establishing a livable wage for nursing home employees
- 3) Transportation improvements (better service, later hours)
- 4) Violence in the neighborhood surrounding St. Charles (Improving police response time in Warr Acres and better relationship with police)
- 5) Health Care
- 6) Helping immigrants

It is surprising that St. Charles, a Catholic parish, did not include abortion as a city-wide issue when it was the number one issue on the parish list. IAF has stated in many articles that they will not support issues that are "controversial." This writer finds it hard to believe Health Care or Immigrant issues would be any less controversial. The articles about IAF also state that their issues must be *winnable*, so perhaps they do not feel abortion is worth fighting.

Matt Krodel quickly mentioned that they have established by-laws where they will veto any issues that are against the Catholic teachings. Much has been said in the local media about this group being associated with pro-abortion groups, pro-homosexual marriage groups, and other progressive issues. Stephanie Block was a speaker in October 2009 on Alinskian Community Organizing at UCO's Nigh Hall, and showed ties to many progressive groups.

The IAF originally arrived in Oklahoma City through Catholic Charities and had a goal of establishing a presence at all the Catholic parishes, as well as 40 churches total in the city. However, many conservative churches and parishioners were opposed to this progressive group and fought hard to rid their congregation of something they felt was incompatible with Christian beliefs. Catholic Charities has also been removed from the committee when it became too divisive. More information can be found on the website www.johntwo24-25.net.

The next city-wide Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee meeting will be on May 16th, 6:00-7:30 pm at Fairview Baptist Church. Representatives will be there from the six remaining Catholic churches: St. Charles, St. Patrick, Holy Angels, Our Lady's Cathedral, St. Eugene, and St. Monica.