



Controversy emerges over organizing OKC group's links to Alinsky philosophy

Written by Patrick B. McGuigan Saturday, 04 April 2009 00:00

Oklahoma City -- Efforts to foster community organizing within local congregations, including several MidTown Catholic parishes, are linked to a national group with a philosophy rooted in the 1960s-style political organization philosophy of Saul Alinsky. That is provoking reaction among many who disagree with Alinsky's self-described "radical" views on politics and economics.

The local divisions have come to light after nearly two years of quiet preparation and fundraising here in collaboration with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). IAF draws heavily on the political philosophy of Alinsky, whose "Rules for Radicals" advocated recruitment within faith communities.

A local group, named Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee, has formed the alliance with IAF. That has met with criticism from conservatives, who bluntly tag IAF as an unsavory mixture of liberation theology and Marxist ideology. One local Catholic says, "The Church's primary mission is not political or social, but rather spiritual -- i.e., the salvation of souls. With IAF, the mission has been hijacked -- to being one of redemption from poverty and material injustice, or in other words the Marxist redirection present in all wrongheaded forms of liberation theology." Dr. Frank Lipsinic, also a Catholic, says, "It is the responsibility of the faithful, not the institutional church itself, to become actively involved in political efforts toward the common moral good. But with the IAF and similar organizations, the Church is being exploited for its political endorsement, and thereby becomes directly involved."

Opposition to IAF's style and principles extends beyond Catholic circles. One such voice is David Dunn, research director with Oklahoma Family Policy Council, based in Bethany and associated with Focus on the Family. Dunn said, "What is happening angers me. Catholics are leaders and allies with evangelical Protestants on so many key pro-life and marriage issues. All of us must resist the IAF in Oklahoma. Saul Alinsky's vision was to prey upon the good will of Catholic and Protestant churches and to, by subterfuge, leverage their organization to further a very radical agenda."

Resistance to IAF's entry into MidTown is broader than those who think of themselves as politically conservative. Some liberals worry that the estimated \$50,000 thus far donated from Oklahoma City churches, to IAF, in amounts ranging from \$1,500 to \$7,500, is an unjust use of funds when social ministries more directly serving the poor and homeless are without needed funding.

Members of IAF's local sponsoring group insist that the group offers nothing fundamentally in opposition to the Catholic faith or traditional doctrine, and that IAF is strictly non-partisan, never pitting politics against personal faith.

In a letter written last fall, and obtained last month by this reporter, Catholic Charities attorney Richard M. Klinge cited the support for IAF of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops through the Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD). Countering a frequent slap at IAF, Klinge said the group does not support attacks on innocent human life.

Oklahoma City Archbishop Eusebius J. Beltran touched on the controversy in a March 22 column in *The Sooner Catholic*, characterizing it as "a difficult question." He said IAF has "rightly" been accused "of using bad tactics and force to meet its goals" in the past. Beltran said, "a number of Catholic parishes have expressed an interest" in IAF. He characterized supporters as "good and faithful Catholic people who see a possibility to fulfill their responsibility to others." However, he noted,

“There are other good and faithful Catholic people who see collaboration with the IAF movement as a mistake, an evil, a potential threat to our Church.”

In the letter, the head of the Catholic Church in central and western Oklahoma said he and members of the Priests Council would “monitor this matter.” Quoting St. Paul's letter to Philomen, he said the controversy should not obscure that “our true citizenship is in heaven.”

Some citizens from communities with IAF experience disagree with Klinge's defense, and that of other IAF supporters. One man from Tucson, where the Pima County Interfaith Council has been active, described himself as neither fully liberal nor fully conservative.

He raised concerns over honesty and transparency, saying, “To me more than anything else it is always a matter of lack of straightforwardness. With IAF you most often feel like ‘helping the poor’ becomes the excuse for your becoming blindly involved in someone else’s hidden agenda, and you feel politically used.”

Another person from Texas, where Austin Interfaith has been active, said, “For me, the pivotal issue is that the ‘collective bargaining’ aspect of the political function of Austin Interfaith is a violation of conscience.” This person said that although IAF’s public activities do not directly contradict Church teachings on moral concerns, nonetheless “Austin Interfaith does not directly support any social issues that are of particular concern to the Catholic Church.”

In his letter, Klinge described the effort as “Congregation Based Community Organizing” (CBCO) and said 25 individual church institutions had joined the effort at that point. “Our goal is to have forty church institutions as members by mid 2009.”

About the author:

Patrick McGuigan, a contributing editor for *Tulsa Today*, is managing editor of The City Sentinel in Oklahoma City, where this article will also appear.