Strategic Practice For Social Transformation

BY PHILLIP CRYAN

Since our founding in 1993, the work of the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) has focused on organizational practices that help groups imagine and move toward fundamental social change. We draw lessons from the history of transformative social movements and from movement theory, but the focus of our work is *putting ideas into practice*. It is through the organizing experiences of the groups around the country with which we work that we have drawn some lessons—none of them hard and fast, all of them subject to exploration, debate, and re-examination—about what kinds of organizational practices have the power to change the world.

We live in a moment that is ripe for change and full of possibility. Economic pain and inequality unrivalled since the Great Depression have generated new opportunities for direct social action to transform our society. At the same time, we do not have a broad national movement that articulates people's desires for economic and racial justice. Disparate reactions to current economic and social crises do not necessarily add up to, or move us toward, transformational change.

Nonetheless, there are valuable lessons to be learned from current regional and local experiences across the nation. We understand that major change occurs through the efforts of powerful organizations, and—even more so—through full-fledged social movements. We also understand that "movement times" come rarely, under circumstances that are difficult to predict and impossible to control. What can any one organization, which seeks to build power for fundamental change, do to lay the groundwork for a transformative movement?

This paper presents some of the emerging strategies that innovative social justice organizations are using to build collective power that is potentially transformative. It focuses on the evolving organizing practice of Isaiah, one of the groups with which we have worked most closely over the last few years. Isaiah is a faith-based community organization in Minnesota with over 90 member congregations and the capacity to turn out thousands of individuals to its major events.

Throughout this paper we will use examples from Isaiah's organizing practice, and reflections from Isaiah leaders and organizers to illustrate the practices and ideas discussed. While Isaiah has developed the set of practices described here to an exemplary level, the set of emergent strategies and lessons we present in this paper comes from GPP's work with a diverse group of powerful organizations over several years, not just Isaiah.

10,000 VOICES
for one minnesota
a project of **ISAIAH**

Before explaining what we see as some of the key components of strategic practice, it will be useful to briefly describe some of Isaiah's recent work.

"Shining the Light" on Racism

On December 5, 2010, Isaiah hosted an event at the Minneapolis Convention Center called *Shining the Light*. The goal, according to Isaiah's Executive Director Doran Schrantz, was "to position ourselves, relative to the next governor's administration, as a vehicle for people of faith to push a racial justice agenda." At the event, more than 1,600 members brought the concerns and priorities that had emerged from hundreds of house meetings to the state's next governor, Mark Dayton. (They had invited all three major-party candidates for governor, leading into the November election.) Small panels of community leaders shared their own experiences and views in two facilitated discussions—one on racial justice in transportation and one on racial justice in education—and then senior officials in Dayton's transition team responded to what they'd heard, committing themselves to work together

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with Isaiah in eliminating race-based barriers to opportunity and in building racial justice. At the end of the event Governor-Elect Dayton spoke to the crowd, offering the same commitment.

The campaign that produced *Shining the Light* was only a few months old when its leaders decided to take the risk of calling a meeting with the new governor-elect, whoever it would be, within less than a month after the election. In the summer of 2010 Isaiah had embarked on a bold new effort: organizing 10,000 Minnesotans for intimate conversations about race and structural racism. Based on those conversations—which would take place in small groups, in people's homes and churches—they would seek to make long-term policy-making for racial justice a top priority for the state's new governor.

Both the turnout target (getting 10,000 people to show up, and not for a big-draw event but for lots of very small gatherings) and the social-change goal (putting racial justice at the center of the state's policy-making conversation) were characteristically bold. Isaiah has developed the capacity to turn out thousands for their major events and has repeatedly dared to ask big, hard questions of its leaders and members as well as the decision-makers they target. Still, few issues are harder to get people to tackle head-on than racism. And, because churches with overwhelmingly white memberships were being called upon to produce most of the *10,000 Voices* house meetings, the participants were sure to be overwhelmingly white. (Diverse congregations are members of Isaiah, but of course places of worship are among the most racially homogeneous spaces in contemporary U.S. society).

Bringing white folks together to reflect on their own experiences of racism and race, and aiming to enlist them in the collective work of putting racial justice at the center of policy-making is beyond bold; it is, in the words of Isaiah lead organizer Phyllis Hill, *audacious*. If the aim were to bring together white activists and radicals around such a project, that would be one thing—you might have a willing, if a very small, group. Isaiah works to organize the broad memberships of their member congregations, digging deep into their base, beyond the handful of the already committed.

The members who turned out for the *10,000 Voices* conversations included a great many people for whom this was the first structured conversation with friends and acquaintances about racism they'd participated in. When you couple that challenge with an outlandish turnout target—10,000 participants for the house meetings—it becomes clear that Isaiah is taking risks, stretching beyond tried and true organizing methods and philosophies. And it seems that they are having success with their bold new efforts.

What makes this combination of boldness and success possible? This paper will seek to offer some possible answers to this question. But a more limited question is worth exploring first: what led Isaiah to the *10,000 Voices* campaign? What prepared the ground for it, within the organization? There were two main factors. The first was a two-year-long internal dialogue within the organization's "clergy caucus"—pastors, priests and religious leaders—examining race and racism primarily at the personal and interpersonal levels. This effort—and its success in tack-

ling questions of structural racism in addition to the personal and interpersonal—will be described later in this paper. The second main factor that prepared the ground for *10,000 Voices* was a series of organizing wins.

From Concrete Victories to Broader Social Transformation

Highway construction is work white guys do. That is an established pattern in Minnesota as in many other parts of the country. When members raised concerns about the inequity of this pattern, ISAIAH decided to take on a campaign to challenge and change it—to make Minnesota's transportation workforce look like the state, demographically. They organized a constituency (among member congregations, especially African-American ones), identified a policy hook (a federal rule allowing states to use ½ percent of all federal transportation funding for training and other programs to improve the diversity of the state's transportation workforce), and built a coalition to push for racial equity in the transportation workforce.

Coalition-building took a lot of work, bringing together community organizations, contractors, government officials and leaders with the trade unions representing transportation workers (which have overwhelmingly white membership). This alliance was initially "very difficult" and is now "amazing," according to one of the central figures in the coalition, ISAIAH leader Sarah Mullins.

Initially, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MNDOT) was not receptive to the new coalition's demands for putting millions of dollars into training and other programs to create a more diverse workforce. In 2006, ISAIAH engaged a broad-based constituency, organizing seven public meetings with thousands of people of faith, focused on this issue. Prior to those meetings MNDOT officials were refusing to meet with ISAIAH. As a result of the public meetings, state and federal legislators put pressure on MNDOT. Meetings with the MNDOT commissioner and other senior officials came quickly, and the legislature passed a new law requiring MNDOT to provide regular detailed reports on minority and female workforce participation. Soon the state publicly committed to using "the maximum amount [of funding] feasible" to create a more diverse transportation workforce.

Winning that commitment was just a first step for ISAIAH. Their goal was to get decision-making authority around

MY WORK WITH ISAIAH

The Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) brings political and social movement theory into practice by mining the best ideas from history and the social sciences and then working with different groups to apply them to actual organizing –– base-building, alliance-building, campaign and electoral work. We evaluate and reflect on the ways these groups apply our frameworks, which leads to further refinement, new ideas and new applications.

GPP stays connected to groups over long periods of time, so that the implementation, evaluation and reflection phases are built into all of our programs. We participate in (and sometimes facilitate) strategic planning sessions, campaign strategy sessions, and event planning sessions. We help develop trainings and workshops for use by the organization and we often work closely with leaders in developing specific elements of a campaign. Work with ISAIAH began in 2003 when I was first asked to introduce some of our frameworks to staff and leadership—at a time when they were beginning to think through how they could take their organization to the next level.

The relationship with ISAIAH has been symbiotic. ISAIAH benefits from the additional strategic capacity along with an outsider's look from someone who knows the organization well. GPP gains by learning about what it takes to apply our frameworks. Because GPP also works with other groups we are able to facilitate cross-organization learnings and relationships. It is from this practice that we have developed the concepts in this paper.

I have been incredibly fortunate to work with a group of talented, committed and courageous people who understand the value of, and are willing to make, internal changes, even as they work to change the world. They have made strategic practice come alive.

David Mann
Associate Director
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the use of the public funds extended to a collaborative group that included key community organizations and unions. ISAIAH wanted more than an "advisory committee." They pressed for a group with the ability to actually make decisions regarding the use of those funds, with the goal of racial justice in the transportation workforce. Today that collaborative group exists and it shapes MNDOT policy and practice. Their Civil Rights Department, which prior to this campaign primarily served to offer legal protection to the department, protecting against discrimination lawsuits, now plays a central role in ensuring that all MNDOT's work advances racial equity goals. Industry leaders have joined the union, community groups, and MNDOT in a partnership to further racial justice. "It was not enough for us to just get a good policy win on this," says Pastor Paul Slack, co-chair of ISAIAH's clergy caucus. "We needed to create transformative relationships, grounded in each stakeholder's self-in-

ment to shared goals and the strength of relationships necessary to actively collaborate on the complex work of policy implementation for years to come. "We were in effect creating a new resource," explains Mullins. "Once it's created, people will fight over it. So we also have to fight for equitable distribution of the new resource." Making racial equity a central criterion for decisions guiding the *implementation* is just as important as getting racial equity named and clearly prioritized in the initial policy.

In Mullins' assessment, if MNDOT had just agreed to the initial demand right away—if they had allocated ½ percent of federal transportation dollars to programs to create a more diverse workforce—the policy win would have had a very limited impact. Advocates and leaders among ISAIAH members and others in the coalition would not have developed the knowledge and commitment to carefully scrutinize and guide MNDOT's implementation, they could

ISAIAH
Building Just Communities in the Minneapolis, St. Cloud and St. Paul Regions of Minnesota

FAITH IN DEMOCRACY   FE EN DEMOCRACIA

"You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in."
(Isaiah 58:12)

terest." If MNDOT officials saw the agreement as an outside decision imposed upon them, he explains, they would not be active participants in the difficult work of shaping implementation.

For most community-based organizations, this emphasis on creating transformative relationships and partnerships with public officials is a departure from the prevailing campaign methodology. For ISAIAH, it flows from a commitment to bold social change goals that are rooted in faith values that comprise a shared worldview. ISAIAH recognized that they needed public officials and industry leaders to work with them to change the state's transportation workforce. Both groups were uninterested in cooperation if not downright hostile when the campaign began. Now, they are active partners in achieving the goals set out by ISAIAH and its union and community allies. In other words, this coalition went beyond pressuring public officials and industry leaders.

In the very process of bringing their issues forward, the coalition turned their "targets" into allies with a commit-

not have developed deep enough relationships with MNDOT officials, and MNDOT officials and industry leaders would not have become proactive partners in the work of furthering racial justice in the transportation workforce.

The MNDOT organizing success and a deep-running internal process around race and racism brought ISAIAH to the *10,000 Voices* campaign, a new level of organization-wide commitment to racial justice, as well as a new conception of partnership with elected leaders. At *Shining the Light*, Pastor Slack—the ISAIAH leader who facilitated the two panel discussions—helped wrap up the event with this conclusion: the racial-equity work ISAIAH has pioneered with MNDOT now needs to be taken to *all* state agencies and public programs. For one state agency, the Department of Health, progress on racial equity has gotten a big boost by the presence of a longtime ISAIAH leader committed to racial justice in a top position. A few weeks after *Shining the Light*, Governor Dayton appointed Jeanne Ayers, an ISAIAH leader who has played a leading role in conversations on race and public health, as Assistant Commissioner of Health.

Strategic Practice

What enables an organization to take on this sort of campaign, to be at once audacious in setting its goals and focused and resolute in executing broad organizing strategies to achieve them? This paper seeks to offer a partial answer to that question, based on our work over the years with a wide array of social change organizations, including Isaiah. As we have worked with diverse organizations that aim to make the politically "impossible" possible through bold organizing and strategy and consciousness-raising, we have noticed a common set of strengths in the organizations that are most effective in this work.

Social change groups engage in many kinds of activities or practices related to base-building, leadership development, campaign development, communications, organizing, mobilizing, seeking allies, etc. What makes a group more strategic is when they deliberately create room in the culture of the organization for developing capacities that bring their organizing practices in alignment with their long-term, transformative social change goals. This is what we mean by **strategic practice**.

In our strategy development work with different kinds of organizing groups and networks we have observed a number of elements that help groups bring ideas and action together in ways that advance their long-term goals. For purposes of illustration, we identify seven distinct characteristics that, taken together, enable strategic practice (see sidebar). There is nothing definitive or finished about these seven elements. We make no claims to having all of strategy development and practice mapped out. We offer these examples and this case study to share what we are learning and to encourage dialog about strategic practice.

In examining the work of ISAIAH we see a complex interdependence at play among elements of strategic practice. As groups advance and build greater levels of power, and especially as they lay the groundwork for the kind of powerful movement that can bring about systemic levels of change, these elements work together, so that they don't necessarily look separate. For example, operating from a power analysis suggests that a group needs to engage in deep base-building, leadership development, and alliance-building. Being guided by a long-term vision

for social transformation encourages worldview work. A disciplined organizing methodology builds levels of commitment and trust that enable members and leaders to take calculated risks.

In organizations with strategic practice, a lot of thinking is devoted to ensuring that tactics serve strategy—and a critical mass of leaders, as well as the organizers, can identify how the tactics they employ serve their strategy. In order to align practice and strategy, groups need spaces and processes wherein cycles of analysis, action, reflection and renewed analysis to inform action take place. Ideas shape strategy; strategy directs practice; and then all that is learned through practice reshapes ideas, improving strategy. And the process repeats. A close dialogue between analysis and action, combined with an intention to achieve long-term goals, is another way of describing strategic practice.

1. *A bold, long-term vision for transformation is at the heart of the organization's work;*

2. *The organization has a clearly defined, systematic and disciplined organizing methodology;*

3. *For everyone involved, the work is about both social and personal transformation;*

4. *Leadership development is central to all organizing practice;*

5. *Strategies are rooted in a deliberate power analysis that understands both organization and ideas as forms of power;*

6. *Investments are made in alliance-building, to achieve results that no single organization can accomplish on its own; and*

7. *There is clear understanding that to achieve major changes, you have to be willing to take risks.*

These strengths and characteristics do not *replace* the tools groups use to win concrete victories, but rather they are *complementary to* them. They build out of them. If Isaiah did not already know how to pull off a 2,000-person public event and how to develop committed leaders, they would not have succeeded in advancing their larger vision for transformation. We will return to the question of what organizational qualities contribute to developing strategic practice at the end of this paper, after exploring each of the seven core elements of strategic practice in turn.

1. *A bold, long-term vision for transformation is at the heart of the organization's work.*

When Isaiah leaders embarked in 2009 on a process they called their *Path to Transformation* they started out by asking everyone involved in the organization some big questions: for example, "How do you want the world to be?" This was posed not as an idle or abstract question, something nice to think about for an hour before getting down to business, but as an urgent topic requiring everyone's focused reflection in order to determine the right goals and strategies for the whole organization to pursue. "It made my head hurt," says Phyllis Hill, an Isaiah organizer who had recently joined the organization when the *Path to Transformation* work began.

Big, head-hurting questions about long-term vision appear to be a regular feature of organizational life for groups engaged in strategic practice. "It was great," Hill continues. "This wasn't Hallmark stuff. It was about bringing to the surface the things people really believe in." To align the organization's work with participants' most deeply held beliefs was a huge undertaking. The vision of a transformed society that emerged from their reflections and discussions was radical—a vision of change *from the root*.

When called upon to answer a question like "How do you want the world to be?" Isaiah members collectively envisioned a society not just different from the one in which they currently live but also *distant* from it, difficult to attain—one requiring fundamental changes. To publicly declare such transformation as their goal would carry real risks: of coming across as unrealistic, "pie in the sky" dreamers; of alienating potential allies because of the boldness of their vision; of being accused of inattention to immediate struggles for power. Public declaration of a radical long-term vision "would require living up to the organization's name," Hill notes. "Being a prophet [like the

Biblical Isaiah] means sometimes doing things that people aren't going to like." The *Path to Transformation* led to success in the MNDOT campaign and to Isaiah's current work focused on racial justice.

Isaiah's willingness to stake out a public position around profound long-term changes rather than just short-term policy objectives—or more accurately, their *insistence* on always staking out such a position—is surely one of the defining characteristics of the organization. It is a characteristic recognized not only by Isaiah's members but also by members of allied organizations, elected officials and adversaries. This characteristic was everywhere in evidence at *Shining the Light*, with frequent calls made by a wide variety of presenters and participants for fundamental changes and audacious goals. People talked about equality of educational outcomes across groups and making explicit racial equity goals part of the criteria that all state agencies use when devising, implementing and evaluating all public programs.

When GPP first began to work with Isaiah eight years ago, it was a powerful organization with dozens of dues-paying member congregations, capable of winning concrete organizing victories, of turning out hundreds or even

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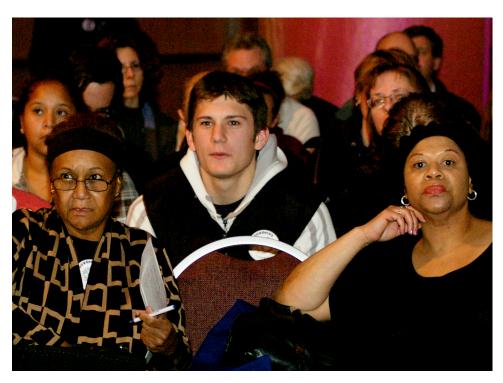
thousands to public events, of genuinely developing leaders and thereby continuously multiplying. Yet with all this power, there were limitations. The organization's culture was held together—in the assessment of current executive director Doran Schrantz, who was a newly-arrived staff organizer at the time—primarily by the rigor of its organizing practice and commitment to leadership development, not by a shared long-term vision of the changes they were fighting for. They were effective in building power and winning concrete improvements, but they had not answered nor even seriously explored the *power for what?* question, according to Schrantz. Power-building tools, methodologies and tactics "have no values embedded in them," notes

ISAIAH president Rev. Grant Stevensen. For example, white homeowners wanting to push non-white residents out of their neighborhoods could use the same kinds of organizing techniques as ISAIAH. The question of "power for what?" would need to be answered with clarity and conviction.

Moral values and a vision of social transformation now provide the compass to orient ISAIAH's organizing tools and tactics. ISAIAH leaders and staff can readily answer the *power for what?* question. We will explore some of their answers shortly. In general terms, their goal is not building power for the sake of having power, but in order to

Participants in Shining the Light, *December 5, 2010.*

transform society so that it looks more like what their values tell them it ought to look like, what it might look like if religious teachings guided people's actions seven days a week instead of one. Bringing about such a transformation requires building power. However, it took several years of deliberate and intense work for the organization to make the transition toward clarity about using power in service of their long-term goals for remaking society.

Being a faith-based organization can make grounding in a long-term vision—an ultimate aspiration that shapes current thought and action—easier than it is for groups without a religious foundation. ISAIAH's vision of social transformation has provided "a place to integrate the language of our faith with the work we do," says ISAIAH president Pastor Stevensen. Defiance of conventional wisdom on what's achievable; aspiration to make the impossible possible; faithful pursuit of a path to deep, positive transformation even when everything seems to be heading in the opposite direction: these are characteristics not just of ISAIAH as an organization engaged in strategic practice but of the organization's namesake. The ability to forcefully articulate and broadly disseminate a long-term vision is a *prophetic* quality. ISAIAH members and staff frequently cite a line from *ISAIAH*, 58:12 on the role their organization can

play as social-change prophet. The verse reads: "You shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in."

Moreover, the day-to-day work of organizing is made easier when everyone in the community is already familiar with a set of profound stories—Bible stories, for a predominantly Christian group like ISAIAH—and thus people can make arguments and exhortations, or pose questions, in relation to those already-familiar stories. Whether the vision is rooted in religious belief or not, grounding in a bold long-term vision can have very practical effects for organizing. For ISAIAH, the vision of "Hope, Community, and Shared Abundance" they developed together with GPP in 2004 enabled them to break down issue silos that had solidified in the organization and to make all their work be about a coherent, comprehensive agenda. Instead of having leaders develop around a particular issue—such as education or immigration—and then drop away from the organization when "their campaign" wrapped up or evolved, all their different issue campaigns began to be framed in terms of consistent, foundational values.

Grounding in a bold long-term vision can also provide the deep motivation required to keep fighting when times are bleak and prospects dire. In 2008 ISAIAH played a lead-

Participants in Shining the Light, *December 5, 2010.*

Today, achieving racial justice is the central aspiration shaping Isaiah's diverse programs and efforts. Leaders and staff now systematically apply a racial justice lens in conceiving and evaluating their organizing work. The work of building racial justice is understood as everybody's work to do—not a program for some group of people within the organization, but a commitment and priority for everyone, working from their own very different positions and understandings. This means adopting an "everyone's in, nobody's out" perspective—a common refrain from speakers at *Shining the Light*—and then actively seeking to call attention to and fight against the many barriers and structures, both systemic and interpersonal, that prevent their vision of equity from being realized. To make real progress, this approach must inform all aspects of the organization's work, notes Phyllis Hill: it must inform "how we engage allies, how we develop leaders, how we understand what accountability looks like in practice."

Getting this majority-white Minnesota organization to the point where racial justice is at the core of all work has necessitated a transition entailing tremendous efforts from people commited to making Isaiah a racial justice organization. Crucially, notes Hill, these changes "didn't come because people started saying 'Hey, let's talk about race' or 'Have you examined your white privilege?'" Instead, power analysis helped Isaiah's leaders understand how structural racism stands in the way of achieving the social transformation they seek, and so they articulated a program of building Healthy Communities for All. "Once you're talking all the time about Healthy Communities for All," says Hill, "eventually people start to ask the question on their own: who is 'All'?"

Today, Isaiah's long-term vision for social change includes as the first priority uprooting institutional racism and establishing a racially just society. These are not

ing role in a coalition that succeeded in overriding Gov. Tim Pawlenty's veto of a transportation bill that raised the state's gas tax. It was the first successful override of one of his vetoes; 36 prior Pawlenty vetoes had held up. Moreover, it was the *fourth* time this transportation bill or something like it had been passed by the legislature and vetoed by Pawlenty. Only on the fourth time did the coalition prevail in an override. Isaiah leader Sarah Mullins notes that without grounding in a long-term vision, Isaiah leaders simply would not have stuck it out for an energetic—and successful—fourth try after three defeats.

They did not continue to fight because of a belief in the transcendent importance of this particular bill; rather, they continued the fight because the bill was seen as a useful means to move closer to the actual goals they are striving toward, like racial justice.

In a similar vein, when it came time for the panel discussion on education at "Shining the Light," the moderator, Pastor Paul Slack, provided clear, blunt instructions to the panelists: "I don't want us to talk about silver bullets. I don't believe in silver bullets." He invited the panelists instead to reflect on what kind of sustained leadership and vision it would take to redress systemic problems with systemic solutions that would truly advance their boldest goals.

just nice ideas people like to talk about; rather, as concrete goals they shape all the power-building work of the organization, from how they shape issue campaigns to where they choose to invest in building their membership base.

In summary, grassroots organizations with the capacity to contest for power, win major changes, and help build movements are organizations that explicitly aim for bold long-term goals. Incremental policy improvements or electoral victories often play an important tactical role in their efforts, but it would be hard for any member of the organization to mistake incremental improvements or electoral victories for the organization's goals. The organization articulates its bold vision with such frequency and fervor that everyone inside and outside "gets it": this group wants something big, long-term and transformative.

2. *The organization has a clearly defined, systematic and disciplined organizing methodology.*

When asked what accounts for ISAIAH's strength and effectiveness, the first answer from more than one ISAIAH leader is the quality of their "debriefs." After every public event, every meeting with a legislator, every joint action of any kind, the participants come together to evaluate the experience and draw lessons from it. These debriefs examine two basic questions: 1) what did you learn as an individual? and 2) what did we learn collectively? Having this practice as a deeply embedded part of the organizational culture makes ISAIAH a "learning organization" in an unusually direct and explicit way. The active practice of seeking to learn from new experiences is a central feature of their organizing methodology. Each new group of leaders absorbs the practice of evaluation and reflection from the organizers and established leaders with whom they work.

Extensive debriefing is only one among several key components of organizing methodology that have become deeply entrenched in ISAIAH's organizational practices over the years. Participants view them as essential elements of shared culture, practice and belief. Intentional, focused *agitation*[1] is another key element of ISAIAH's culture and

practice. No matter what stage a person is at—from a new recruit in their first one-on-one conversation to the most seasoned organizer—they need, and get, regular agitation from their compatriots.

Both these elements—regular debriefs and agitation—give an indication of one of ISAIAH's defining qualities: "a seriousness," according to Schrantz, ISAIAH's executive director. It's not that ISAIAH leaders lack a sense of humor. But when it comes to the work of organizing, they are focused and hard-working. They are disciplined. This extends beyond the experiences of individuals involved in organizing to other aspects of ISAIAH's work—for example, their insistence on a consistent dues structure for congregations that want to become affiliates.

As Schrantz explains, if ISAIAH wants to harness the institutional power of churches, it needs "a rigorous process for making institutional commitments." If a new congregation considering affiliation is not serious about engaging all its members and investing deeply over the long-term in ISAIAH's work, then that congregation will not long remain a member of the organization. Insisting on tough-minded discernment over dues up front can help clarify the institutional commitment process, says Schrantz.

Organizational planning practices offer another example of their seriousness and discipline. Once an issue has been selected and a strategy devised, organizers put together a calendar of events and tactics for implementing the strategy. All participants are held accountable to that calendar and to making measurable progress on their carefully-articulated individual goals, on a weekly or even daily basis.

Organizational strategic plans are not occasional efforts at long-range thinking, forgotten as soon as they are approved, or dusted off when it's time for the Board to update them. Nor are they perfunctory exercises aimed at pleasing funders. They are living documents that shape ISAIAH's day-to-day work, and all participants in that work are held accountable to the plan. It takes discipline to advance toward wildly ambitious goals, to—in Schrantz's description—"push the next base camp up the mountain" in organizing. Vision determines the goal and strategy determines the path; but the best vision and strategy in the world are no use if your organizing lacks vigor and discipline.

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1. An organizing term of art in many community and labor organizing traditions, *agitation* refers to a method by which an organizer creates space for another person to connect to and express their emotions about the issues that are affecting them and to come to understand better the ways their own actions contribute to the perpetuation of those issues. Organizers create this space by taking a deep interest in what people have to say about their own lives and experiences.

Agitation can move a person from identifying a problem they wish were solved toward deciding to take an active role in solving it.

Isaiah brings this same sort of discipline to the planning and execution of public events. While 1,600 people attended *Shining the Light*, that was a strategically scaled-down public event for Isaiah, which has turned out as many as 4,500 people for events. No matter the size of the event, the same tightly-coordinated planning and action that turns people out is brought to bear on the event itself, with every facet carefully planned. A rabbi from Jewish Community Action, Michael Latz, joked at *Shining the Light*: "I have to say to Isaiah: if our people had been this organized, we wouldn't have wandered in the desert 40 years!"

Seriousness in all these aspects of organizing is part of a shared organizational culture. Organizers and leaders take on this quality as part of their own individual identity. And they have done so for many years, long before Isaiah began to grapple with the *power for what?* question. The culture of seriousness in organizing serves as a touchstone for Isaiah organizers and leaders. Many come to see it as something nobler, harder, and higher than their other experiences. And the more identified people are with a collective culture of discipline and accountability, the more intense and focused their individual efforts in organizing become. It's a virtuous cycle.

This culture has presented challenges at times. Before Isaiah embarked on worldview work and integrating a larger vision of social change and a more sophisticated power analysis into its work, there was a tendency to turn organizing methodology into a goal in itself rather than a means. Some potential new members were, in Schrantz's assessment, probably alienated during that period by organizers' zeal for and policing of Isaiah's organizing methodology.

Isaiah also struggled at times to collaborate with other organizations precisely *because* of their self-conscious adoption of a culture of "accountability, discipline, and hard work," says Stevensen. "Inside Isaiah we work really, really hard. So we've been hesitant sometimes to introduce our base to other organizations that have a more casual approach." Likewise, when turnout capacity was the only recognized measure of organizational power leaders saw little value in collaboration with groups that could not turn out hundreds or thousands of members for events. As we will see, a deeper kind of alliance-building with community partners has changed Isaiah's staff and leaders' perceptions of other organizations and has made Isaiah a more collaborative partner.

In short: being skilled in, and serious about, organizing methodology is a necessary condition for wielding power and altering power relations. People's organizations cannot aspire to shape policy and politics if they are not serious about the craft and discipline of organizing. However, it is critical to remember that without a long-term vision of change, no amount of disciplined and serious organizing will bring about social transformation.

3. *For everyone involved, the work is about both social and personal transformation.*

"One of the self-interests[2] people have in this work," observes Isaiah leader Sarah Mullins, "is the desire to transform and to grow. That's often overlooked."

People become active and engaged and take on increasing levels of leadership in part because of the opportunities such engagement offers them for personal growth. Mullins is far from alone in signaling the importance of this personal dimension of social change work. Isaiah's work is "not just about a path to social transformation, but also a path to individual transformation," Schrantz says.

Once people have their first experience of this personal growth through social change work, they're hooked: "It's addictive. It's powerful." Schrantz further observes that what is most addictive—what enables personal transformation at a deep level, and therefore keeps people coming back for more—is less about their reaction to social problems or their understanding of what's wrong, but more about their *aspirations* to grow as people and as leaders who are developing their capacities in ways that are grounded in their values.

As a faith community, personal transformation is an important part of their shared culture, language and goals. We want to be clear, however, that our interest in personal transformation as an essential element in achieving social transformation is not limited to congregational or faith-based organizing. Personal transformation sustains people's activism and organizing through especially demanding phases of a campaign. It gets them ready to fight again after setbacks or outright losses. In short, it

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2. *Self-interest* is another organizing term of art used in many community organizing traditions. In practice, it is about lifting up the motivations that can lead a person to want to take action. An organizer challenges people to honestly assess their own motivations. This helps a person think more strategically about how to align their actions with their goals. It has little to do with the concept of 'self interest' as it is used in political science or neo-classical economics.

makes it possible for an organization to sustain collective action over the long-run.

Helping members, leaders and staff achieve personal transformation is built into every aspect of Isaiah's organizing work—from the first one-on-one conversation with an organizer, through leadership development and every stage of an organizing campaign, and then into evaluation and planning the next fight. Personal growth is an acknowledged and valued goal for the most senior staff, just as it is for newly-active members.

One of the places the emphasis on personal transformation can be seen most clearly is in the way Isaiah conducts grassroots advocacy meetings with legislators and other public officials. Each member in the meeting begins, says Mullins, not with a statement of their policy goals "or a description of Isaiah as an organization (we represent X number of congregations with X number of people), but by telling their own story and talking about their beliefs. It makes the meeting about the people in the room."

Grounding in a bold long-term vision can also provide the deep motivation required to keep fighting when times are bleak and prospects dire.

Stevensen agrees: "We don't have to pretend to be policy experts—it doesn't help us to pretend that. Everyone is an expert on their own experiences and their own beliefs."

By speaking from their own experiences and beginning with stories and aspirations, not policy details and numbers, they set a different tone for their grassroots advocacy meetings than most legislators and other public officials are accustomed to. Even more importantly, it makes for a powerful experience for each of the people doing the storytelling, and one quite different from what would happen if they instead sought to force their concerns and aspirations into the unfamiliar and antiseptic language of policy analysis.

Earlier, we described how the work with MNDOT to adopt and implement racial equity goals shifted from approaching transportation officials as targets toward inviting them into a partnership, one that eventually came together as a Collaborative of industry, labor and community groups working together to achieve a more diverse transportation workforce.

According to Pastor Slack, MNDOT officials went from "treating us like little kids, telling us over and over again how complicated it all is and how little we understand" to being full partners with Isaiah and other groups in achieving racial equity. Because of the strength of the personal transformation component in these relationships, Pastor Slack believes Isaiah will have full partners in MNDOT for many years to come—allowing them to not just resolve current problems but establish the ability to resolve problems that arise in the future.

After a couple of pastors opened the event with prayers, the very first speaker at *Shining the Light* was Emma Corrie, the MNDOT official who coordinates the Collaborative. In her remarks—which mostly focused on describing the Collaborative's work and explaining that it has the Commissioner of Transportation's 100% support—she managed to work in explicit acknowledgment of the personal transformation dimension of this work for her. She cares so deeply about achieving equity in the public transportation workforce, she said, because she approaches this work "as a woman, as a Catholic, as someone with Asian-Indian roots, as a public servant."

Sometimes the importance of personal transformation for an agency staff person or elected official becomes even more clear: Mullins recounts a grassroots lobbying visit on transportation policy issues with a key staff-person for the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee. After the advocates told their stories and asked for the staffer's support in achieving their goals, he responded, "I believe in your goals, but there's nothing I can do." It became clear to Mullins and other participants in the meeting that until they tackled the public official's lack of belief in the possibility of positive change they'd be unlikely to get very far. So they switched gears to talking about the Senate staffer's own background and views, doing a kind of collective "one-on-one" conversation with him. They dug deep, and he was moved. Ever since then, he has been one of their most trusted allies and champions in the work of building racial justice. "I wish we could get *all* the people [who work in government] to see this, to appreciate all the reasons for hope," says Mullins.

The recent work Isaiah has done to fight for racial equity in transportation, education, and other public endeavors

would be impossible without a deeply-embedded organizational emphasis on personal growth. For a majority-white organization to undertake a "path to transformation" that resulted in a commitment to put racial justice at the core of all they do, questions of race and racism had to be addressed, in considerable depth, at the personal and inter-personal levels, as well as at the level of policies, structures and systems.

"It's impossible," says Stevensen, "to even imagine changing the structures, without first recognizing it's inside us." He's quick to clarify that racism is not just a personal problem. But without getting people grappling with its personal dimensions you can't begin a productive conversation on how to challenge its structural dimensions.

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To start grappling on the personal and interpersonal level, you need to have an established practice of making organizing about personal as well as social and political aspirations. Isaiah had people start with their own family histories, using these to reflect on what shapes their views and assumptions about race and racism. Later in the process, they scheduled "fellowship time," visiting one another's families across differences of race, geography, and denomination, to develop a better understanding of one another's perspectives.

Two years of conversations about race among Isaiah's clergy caucus preceded the organization as a whole taking on racial justice as central to its vision of social change and to its day-to-day work. Nearly two years into that series of conversations among clergy, at one of their meetings, a Latino pastor shared with his colleagues the fear he and members of his congregation feel about contacting the police, and the resulting problems of unreported and uninvestigated crime his community faces. Some of the white members of the clergy caucus had a strong reaction, expressing dismay at this mistrust of the police. "It was a key moment," says Paul Slack, an African-American pastor. There was a lot of tension and anger in the room as people confronted these fundamental differences in their perspectives. But then "no one walked out. No one threw their hands up in the air. Everyone stayed, and together we unpacked the resistance people had to naming and acknowledging the validity of differences in people's experiences and views." And when they finished that "unpacking," they made a commitment to pursue their exploration of these differences further as a group, to taking on the most tense and difficult topics together.

The reason they were able to do so, Pastor Slack believes, is that they had established solid enough relationships over nearly two years of conversations on deeply personal and sensitive matters to trust in one another —to trust that, even when they can't see a path forward to agreement or clarity, they can trust in one another to discover that path. They can stumble together, and they can weather a few storms along the road. Without having spent a long time building relationships and exploring the personal and interpersonal dimensions of racism, there's no way—agree Pastor Slack and Pastor Stevensen—they would have been able to establish that kind of trust.

Since the work of making social change is generally so difficult, you need trust in a community to be strong enough to persevere, says Pastor Stevensen—and "not a vague idea of community, but a set of specific relationships you've built." It's the foundation of trust established through such relationships that allowed Isaiah to take the bold step of beginning to look at all their work "with a racial justice lens"—in Pastor Slack's words, "looking directly at how systems of racialization and racism block people from opportunities, and at what we could do to change that."

4. *Leadership development is central to all organizing practice.*

As discussed earlier, strong discipline in the application of a systematic organizing methodology appears to be one of the key characteristics of strategic practice in organizing. There are of course many different organizing methodologies that different kinds of organizations pursue in a

Pastor Grant Stevensen, Rabbi Michael Latz, Pastor Billy Russell and Governor-elect Mark Dayton at Shining the Light, *December 5, 2010.*

on ever-increasing levels of leadership. "Everyone needs to have a role," says Schrantz, "not just tasks to perform but a role, with responsibilities and some degree of real authority."

Isaiah members are not treated as numbers but as individuals, and the organization invests in them deeply. When asked why he took a chance in pursuing a serious conversation about racial justice within Isaiah, after having experienced failure and disillusionment from prior efforts with other multi-racial organizations, Pastor Slack answers "it was because of the genu-

rigorous and systematic fashion. Every time a full-fledged social movement has been generated in the past, a number of powerful organizations utilizing a variety of different organizing methodologies have had a hand in generating the social movement. No single methodology is superior to the others, independent of considering political context, membership base, organizational type, and other factors (though it may prove helpful, to a certain extent, for organizers to think of whichever methodology they're using as the best one). There's no one "true religion" among approaches to organizing.

There are various similarities across all the variations in organizing methodology for organizations that are developing strategic practice, but one stands out: a commitment to **leadership development.** All of these organizations recognize that they need many leaders, playing roles similar to those played by staff, if they hope to build power for lasting change. We cannot ever hire enough paid organizers to make the kinds of change we need.

This recognition is clear among Isaiah leaders and staff. Many of the organization's strongest leaders today are people who entered the organization the same way as most other members: through an intentional one-on-one conversation, then being invited to take action, then being trained and developed by an organizer, and then taking

ine interest in me and my development from [the organizer I first worked with], and then the interest in me and my development from people in the weeklong training I did." This deep investment in people is "what the Church's work ought to be in general," says Pastor Stevensen. "No one else, in the Church or anywhere else, invests in you like this."

Such deep interest in members takes time and resources. Organizations have to consider some significant tradeoffs whenever they make decisions about how to focus their work. Resources are limited, organizers are stretched, political opportunities are fleeting, time is short. Investment in leadership development is very time-intensive and—in the short run—takes away from the organization's ability to devote attention, resources and time to other facets of its work.

And it is worth underscoring that the need for a short-run choice about this tradeoff never goes away. Though with time past investments in leadership development may bear tangible fruit in increased strength and capacity, it always remains the case that, viewed from the present moment, the organization has a short-run choice to make about how much to invest in further leadership development relative to other time-consuming aspects of their work.

The extent to which leadership development is a core component of a group's organizing methodology speaks volumes about their capacities for strategic practice. Quite simply, without a commitment to leadership development, and especially to developing structures and opportunities for members to lead, a group is not likely to bring its other practices in line with its long-term goals.

For Isaiah, leadership development is fundamental. Their own experience witnessing the fruits borne by past investments in leadership development provides such powerful evidence, continuously, of the value of leadership development that, when making short-run decisions about how to invest their limited time and resources, they always choose to invest in more leadership development. They know through experience that no other long-term investment in power-building pays off as well.

For a group like Isaiah, staying true to the vision is a source of strength.

As Isaiah has developed ever-increasing numbers of leaders, it has worked to expand the circle of people involved in making major strategic decisions for the organization as a whole. Instead of having such decisions made by top staff together with a handful of prominent leaders, today Isaiah calls together regular "Strategic Leadership Convenings" of 75-100 people from throughout the organization to deliberate on long-term strategy. These Convenings are where connections get established across the organization's base—across differences of issue focus, geography, race, denomination—and where major collective actions get planned. Also, a significant portion of the time for each Convening is spent on training: opportunities for further development for the organization's leaders. And the work of developing new leaders is not left just to staff. Leaders identify and develop other, new leaders. That is a primary mechanism through which the core of leaders grows.

No amount of trainings and strategic decision-making processes, nor of one-on-one conversations and "interest in me and my development," will of course be sufficient to sustain leaders' commitment and development in the long run if there are not also organizing wins to celebrate and feel pride in. Making concrete, measurable progress toward your campaign's goals is a necessary condition for success in leadership development, according to Mullins. People have to know that their opinions matter, that they have a voice and the ability to shape decisions and strategy, if they are to become deeply engaged in the work; but this is not enough. They also have to actually win things, to see progress, to sustain their commitment.

When people do not believe they can have power, they bow out of the work of making social change. Since most people perceive themselves as wielding little if any power, the burden often falls on organizers to create opportunities for people to change their perceptions of what power is and who has it, in order to develop leaders—and there's no better way to do that than by collectively devising a strategy, executing it, and winning.

Regular trainings, meaningful participation of a broad group of members in decision-making, effective communication of genuine interest in each individual member, and experiences of winning are all critical components of leadership-development organizing. For Isaiah this piece of organizing methodology is like second nature—it is entrenched so deeply in the organization's practices and views that the idea of organizing without such extensive leadership development simply wouldn't make sense to Isaiah leaders and organizers.

5. *Strategies are rooted in a deliberate power analysis that understands both organization and ideas as forms of power.*

From Isaiah's first articulation of a comprehensive, long-term vision of social change until now, members have recognized that achieving their bold objectives will not be possible without—as they put it in a 2006 vision piece—"a significant shift in the arrangement of *power* in our society."

Power analysis is of tremendous practical importance for organizations engaged in organizing. It is impossible to devise a winning strategy without a power analysis of the field you seek to affect and the people you need to move. Pastor Slack describes a key moment, in September 2008, in the MNDOT campaign: Isaiah leaders in a meeting with MNDOT officials interrupted the most senior public official in the room in order to make a direct request of an official who had been silent up that point in the meeting. The person they addressed had no formal authority over the areas

of policy ISAIAH sought to influence. However, the power analysis they had conducted in the weeks prior to the meeting told them that the silent person with no formal authority sitting in the back of the room had the power to make significant policy changes, whereas no one else in the meeting did. He didn't blink when they addressed him, and he agreed to work with them to see that MNDOT implement required training programs and build a more diverse workforce. His leadership has been fundamental in bringing about positive changes ever since. Without careful power analysis beforehand, there is little to no chance ISAIAH would have achieved this—they would have been "calling the question" on the wrong person.

Attention to *power*—its paramount importance; who has it; how it's used; who needs it; how people can organize to acquire it—is habitual for any group in the community organizing tradition. But when ISAIAH members talk about the "arrangement of power in our society" and how they seek to change it, they are talking about something more than the power it takes to stop some particular bad thing from happening (for example, a gentrifying development project) or to make some particular good thing (for example, legal protections for undocumented immigrants) happen. They are talking about altering the field of play—not just winning policy-making battles but reshaping the terrain on which policy-making battles take place.

When Schrantz first joined ISAIAH as an organizer, the Bush Administration was riding high. A new governor, Tim Pawlenty, had been elected on a "no new taxes" pledge. Progressive champion Senator Paul Wellstone had died in a plane crash just a month before the November election. Minnesota voters replaced Wellstone with a conservative whose victory was understood by many as a repudiation of Wellstone's political philosophy. It was a difficult time, one that forced people to grapple with hard questions about strategy. If grassroots advocacy groups continued to pursue the kinds of issue-cuts and campaigns they were

familiar with—e.g. fighting for increased public spending on affordable housing or healthcare—they would simply end up, says Schrantz, "fighting our allies for slices of a shrinking pie." It would be worse than unproductive; it would mean going backward. "We'd be like crabs in a bucket"—attacking not their enemies but one another.

Recognition of this unhopeful scenario helped drive ISAIAH to a new form of power analysis, and ultimately a different vision of social change and set of strategies to realize that vision. Schrantz stresses that it was the practical obstacles they faced that led them to rethink what power is, how it operates, and how to wield it. This was not an intellectual exercise but a practical political one. What can we do, they asked, to substantially alter power relations in our society, in order to have a chance of achieving our goals?

ISAIAH arrived at a very different understanding of power than they'd had before: one with multiple, interrelated dimensions.

GPP uses a framework for power analysis that is adapted from Steven Lukes' *Three Faces of Power.*[3] The first face refers to direct involvement in visible decision-making arenas, such as legislatures, courts and elections, through lobbying, direct action and electoral engagement. The second face is about building strong, stable organizations and strategic alliances that can shape social and political agendas. The third face refers to shaping social and political meaning by tapping positive values and beliefs, by shaping narratives that guide our actions, by framing issues in ways that connect them to the larger narrative and by openly challenging the dominant worldview. We can understand some things about ISAIAH's power-building strategies by applying this framework.[4]

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3. For more information on how GPP has adapted the *Three Faces of Power* for organizers, please visit www.strategicpractice.org.

4. People in ISAIAH may or may not think of their strategies in these terms; we find this to be a useful framework for analyzing the multidimensional aspects of power analysis.

Our faith lights the way for a world transformed.

By acting in community, not isolation

By acting on hope, not fear

By sharing God's abundance with all, not just a few

We create a world with justice for all

FAITH IN DEMOCRACY

FE EN DEMOCRACIA

ISAIAH's Faith in Democracy Public Gathering
Sunday, October 10, 2004
3:00 — 5:00 p.m.

Roy Wilkins Auditorium
175 West Kellogg Boulevard
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Free admission and open to the public.

ISAIAH, 2720 East 22nd Street
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406

Be a flame shining a vision of justice into our world.

The first of these faces was already very familiar to ISAIAH members. They knew how to get elected officials to commit to support them on their policy goals and how to hold people accountable to their commitments. The second face—joining together with other groups to build a strong infrastructure that advances all their causes by playing an active role in shaping what issues make it onto the policy-making agenda—will be the focus of the next section, on alliance-building. As we will see, ISAIAH has invested deeply in building power in that second form, to great effect.

Perhaps the most significant shift for ISAIAH, in terms of how they build power, came about when they more deliberately brought in the third dimension of power, the power of ideas.

For Pastor Stevensen, expanding beyond "organized people and organized money" as the currencies of power to include "organized ideas" as a critical form of power as well "made me pretty nervous, at the beginning. 'Organizing ideas'—it sounded like what they do in college." As ISAIAH leaders dug deeper into discussions and trainings about power, however, he began to understand this third dimension as anything but academic. "It's about the ideas that *have been organized around us*: the belief that everyone's on their own, the belief that if you work hard enough in America you can do anything." In a wide variety of contexts, the dominant worldview constrains the political conversation and the range of policy options people consider.

ISAIAH members began to see that people's beliefs shape the field in which political debates take place, and also that those beliefs change over time. Beliefs are never just a "product of their times" or "natural." Instead, they are shaped and re-shaped by deliberate power-building efforts by some well-organized forces in society, both for good and for ill.

One of the most powerful prevailing ideas ISAIAH ran into as an obstacle was the belief that there is never enough to go around. Cuts are necessary and inevitable. Everyone should look out for themselves, because that's what everyone else is doing. ISAIAH members began to call this viewpoint "The Myth of Scarcity." They developed their own story of "Shared Abundance"—their belief that when we work together and care for one another as members of a community, everyone prospers. In their meetings with elected officials, their public events, and everywhere else, ISAIAH members told stories of shared abundance from their own lives. They reframed policy decisions as moral choices rooted in people's faith and their aspirations for their community.

Slowly and gradually, they began to create their alternative to the dominant worldview. Is government the problem, or can it be the people's vehicle for achieving collective goals? Are markets always the best solution, or are there some problems and some aspirations better addressed through other forms of organization? Can markets even exist without society and government shaping them in varied, crucial ways? Is discrimination a thing of the past, a historical problem now resolved, or is it a central feature of the society we live in today?

When you grapple with power in all its dimensions, and survey the current state of the field, you have the opportunity to devise a strategy that's up to the task at hand.

As ISAIAH members' engagement with the third face of power deepened, they discovered several places where their own views—rooted in faith—differed from the dominant worldview. As long as those dominant views remained in place, uncontested, it would be very difficult to win major changes in people's lives that would move Minnesota closer to ISAIAH's vision.

Choosing to contest for power on this terrain—on the terrain of ideas and beliefs—was a bold and risky thing for ISAIAH to do. How do you measure progress in changing the public conversation? Is it even possible to reshape ideas and beliefs? Will funders think it's all just navel-gazing? And most urgently: won't every hour of organizing work spent on worldview be an hour lost for building power and winning real changes in people's lives?

It was not easy for ISAIAH to tackle these questions—nor are the answers to them all settled today. But eventually ISAIAH leaders' power analysis left them with little choice: not taking on worldview work would mean ceding control of how even their own people tended to think about the world to other organized forces in society. No amount of hard work on leadership development and issue cam-

paigns could make up for the fact that the assumptions of individualism, the benevolence of markets, the venality of government, and discrimination being "a thing of the past" structured many people's understanding of every public issue that appears on their radar.

Several years after adding the third face of power into their analysis and strategy, it is easy to find evidence of the changes it has wrought in ISAIAH's work and in their understanding of their own role in making change. The evidence is everywhere. ISAIAH strives not only to win on particular issue-campaign goals but also to change the contours of the public conversation around those issues and goals—to be a prophetic voice, says organizer Hill, "just like our namesake."

It is not a question of getting the "messaging" right on an issue but of bringing people's deepest aspirations and beliefs to bear on how they think about a variety of social and political questions, for the long term. This takes time to achieve. "People are always asking 'how can we do this "worldview thing" in a morning?,'" Schrantz says. "The answer is: you can't! It has to be part of a long-term organizing strategy."

Unless the third face of power plays an integral role in your analysis and strategy, conversations about worldview may provide an interesting diversion for members but they will be fruitless in terms of building power and winning changes in people's lives.

One of ISAIAH's most noteworthy characteristics is keeping their vision alive while also grounding their work in hard-nosed realism. The ways in which they set and pursue short-term goals that are in line with long-term vision reflects this. In a recent house meeting discussing racial inequity in Minnesota's education system, Pastor Slack shared that it took five years of work on the transportation campaign to secure MNDOT's commitment and partnership around racial justice. "Five years?" responded one of the other participants in the conversation. "We need to have some urgency about this!" Pastor Slack did not hesitate to respond: "Yes, we need urgency. But there are real obstacles to the kinds of changes we want to see, in education just as much as in transportation." Without a clear-eyed power analysis, he said, it would be easy to pretend they could achieve their goals on a short timeline. When you grapple with power in all its dimensions, and survey the current state of the field, you have the opportunity to devise a strategy that's up to the task at hand.

When conservative think tanks and activists began crusading against government as the root of all evil in the 1960s and 1970s, they had a very small audience. Certainly they would have stood a better chance of winning on particular issue campaigns they undertook at the time if they had laid off the anti-government message and sought a more poll-tested way of appealing to prevailing public sentiments.

With the benefit of hindsight, though, it would be hard to describe their long-term success in shifting the dominant worldview as anything less than masterful. In just a quarter century, they created a dramatically different political conversation and battlefield—one where, by the mid-1990s, a *Democratic* president proudly declared the end of "Big Government."

Some of the benefits of contesting for power in its third face—worldview—can be seen on a much shorter timeline than that, both in terms of leadership development and altering the terms and tenor of debate over policy issues. Many of Minnesota's elected officials have taken note of these effects: at *Shining the Light* Governor-elect Mark Dayton—who campaigned unapologetically on a platform of progressive tax increases—exhorted: "We need ISAIAH at the State Capitol to frame the debate!"

6. *Investments are made in alliance-building, to achieve results that no single organization can accomplish on its own.*

ISAIAH's power analysis has shed light on a key discovery: the most powerful organizations and interests pushing the dominant worldview are strategically aligned with one another. They may have important differences in their constituencies, policy priorities, methods, and even their values and long-term goals, yet they operate in ways that deliberately amplify one another's efforts and messages, thus achieving a level of power no one organization among them could hope to attain.

ISAIAH leaders have come to realize that, to achieve major social transformation, it will be necessary to build similarly strategic alignments with other powerful forces. "We are trying to do some things that we can't do as just ISAIAH," explains Pastor Stevensen. No organization, however powerful, can single-handedly remake social systems and structures. If your goals are on that scale—if you aim in the medium or long-term to substantially alter social systems and structures—you will need both a very power-

ful organization and strategic alignment with a set of other powerful organizations.

Allies who do *not* look like you, who bring something else to the table, something that complements your own power by introducing elements you are lacking, can be especially valuable. It is through "alignment" with other powerful groups, says Schrantz, that "the energy of a movement might someday have the chance of being released. We can create possibilities that weren't there before."

Developing the capacity to use the second face of power, which involves strategic alliances and long-term infrastructure, is a critical aspect of movement building. It is part of the way we knit together diverse constituencies into a more unified force for fundamental societal change.

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"Everyone needs to have a role—

not just tasks to perform but a role,

with responsibilities and some

degree of real authority."

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Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Center, which trained, developed, and brought together many of the future organizers and leaders of the civil rights movement, liked to say that there are only two kinds of times you can be living in: movement times and organization-building times. In other words: in the long stretches between major movements, organizing people into increasingly powerful organizations and creating strategic alignment among them is the form movement-building work takes.

Members' development as leaders is a fundamental element of that power-building. Movement periods arise when a host of powerful organizations have built enough power through organizing to be ready to push a transformative set of demands onto the mainstream political agenda when an opportunity for doing so opens up in the economic and social environment.

The characteristics of organizations with the potential to help generate a movement involve more than building power in its second face. The work of preparing the ground for a movement to take root is not something different from organization-building work. While they may

sometimes feel as though they are in tension with each other, deep alliance-building should strengthen, rather than detract from, organization-building work.

Movement work and alliance-building are not separate from, or better than, the work of building powerful organizations. For ISAIAH, "movement" goals are not about transcending the self-interest of people working to build organizational power. It is about extending that self-interest and organization-building into the work of creating and maintaining alliances powerful enough to wield agenda-setting power and make transformative changes.

Deep alliance-building work has allowed ISAIAH and its allies to become clearer about their own particular interests and make sure they are served. The process of alignment has strengthened each organization's work and clarified its distinct identity, its rootedness in its own base and culture. If it had instead somehow blurred the differences between different organizations' identities or bases, it would not have been useful in building power to achieve social transformation.

Schrantz describes a question of strategy ISAIAH's leaders now ask regularly: what constituencies do we need to align with in order to build real power? When posed around a specific issue-campaign, as a "first face of power" concern about who else you need supporting your immediate demand in order to effectively pressure the target into giving you what you want, there's nothing especially noteworthy about the question. But in ISAIAH's organizing practice, this question gets asked with the medium and long-term in mind, as not just a tactical matter for a particular campaign, but as a key component of a long-term strategy for building the power (in its second and third faces as well as its first) necessary to achieve the organization's vision.

This approach represents a significant departure from the early years of ISAIAH's development, when it had a "pretty insular" perspective on organizing, according to Schrantz. When it joined coalitions or otherwise partnered with other groups, the decision to do so was tactical and short-term. Today ISAIAH leaders invest deeply in alignment with a small set of power-building organizations they see as critical for making ISAIAH's vision of social transformation a reality. Partnership is not just defined around an issue or campaign, but pursued as part of a long-term strategy.

Without some degree of shared infrastructure connect-

ing the diverse efforts of a set of powerful organizations, so that they amplify one another's work and pursue complementary strategies, it is hard to imagine how we can build a force that is capable of contesting for the power to reshape society. The "second face" of power, in the 3 Faces framework, is about developing this connective tissue among a set of powerful organizations and efforts—the infrastructure that allows them to begin to generate more than the sum of their individual parts.

As a practical matter, the choice to invest in alliance-building takes time away from other important work, and always carries the risk of the partnership not working out, of having little gain to show for the effort, coupled with the problem of participants feeling they have been wasting time. It is in this sense that alliance-building work is an investment—just as taking the time for leadership-development is—that an organization has to deliberately make up front if it wants to reap the rewards later on.

ISAIAH has chosen to take that risk, to make that investment in deep alliance-building, with a range of organizations over the last few years:

- TakeAction Minnesota, a statewide progressive non-profit that runs both issue campaigns and electoral get-out-the-vote campaigns.
- SEIU (Service Employees International Union), with more than 30,000 service-worker members among their four Minnesota locals.
- The Organizing Apprenticeship Project, a Minnesota group focused on training community organizers and advancing racial justice.
- The Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity, a research group that has produced in-depth reports on racial inequity in Minnesota, based in ISAIAH's organizing purposes.
- The Grassroots Policy Project.

ISAIAH's alliance with TakeAction Minnesota has now grown so deep that the two organizations have each incorporated the other into major—and successful—grant proposals. That is, as part of their own grant proposals, they have included a component of the work to be done by the other organization—and succeeded in getting the funding for that work for their partner.

The conviction that deep alliance-building pays dividends can be seen in other organizational relationships

at the national level, as well. For example, ISAIAH is a key member of a national coalition called the Transportation Equity Network (TEN). ISAIAH played a critical role in turning TEN into a leader-led (as opposed to staff-led) organization that can deliver valued opportunities for influencing federal policy, learning from campaigns and programs in other parts of the country, and developing strategy for its various member organizations. Sarah Mullins currently serves as the National Chair of TEN, and sees this work as a direct outgrowth of her leadership in ISAIAH, complementing and strengthening ISAIAH's transportation work at the same time it helps advance transportation equity around the country.

Building connective infrastructure and the capacity for collective action among these varied groups has not been the only benefit of ISAIAH's investment in alliance-building. In addition, the work of relationship-building and partnership with them has pushed ISAIAH's leaders to learn and grow. At times this work has borne fruit far beyond what the leaders who made the initial decision could have imagined. At other times the lessons have been hard ones, the work more challenging than hopeful—but in all cases, ISAIAH's leaders have learned a great deal from the work of partnership. They have developed deeper understanding of what sort of effort it will take to build the kind of "second face" power capable of achieving their long-term goals, and they have grown as leaders.

7. *There is clear understanding that to achieve major changes, you have to be willing to take risks.*

ISAIAH has a long-established culture of what leaders and staff call "entrepreneurial" organizing: an openness to innovation, letting the results from a new approach or tactic speak for themselves rather than pre-judging them. It is a learning organization. Risk-taking has been permitted, if not outright encouraged, by the organization's culture. There has been a general understanding—borne of experience—that, in Pastor Stevensen's words, the most productive kinds of conflict happen inside people when they are "deciding whether to step off the cliff," whether to take a big risk.

When ISAIAH set the goal of turning out 5,000 people for a public event in 2004, it was a huge, and some might say, ridiculous, number. The largest turnout they had ever achieved before then was less than 1,500. If they failed—as

any rational observer would have expected them to—the risk was huge. As any organizer knows, people's perceptions of the success or failure of turnout for an event do not come from the number in attendance but from the relationship between the number in attendance and the size of the venue. "The very last thing you want," explains Pastor Stevensen, "is to get Roy Wilkins Auditorium [the huge space they rented for the 2004 event] and then have it be half empty."

Several weeks of unrelenting frenzy and dedication after renting the space, ISAIAH turned out well over 4,000 people—more than *double* their best-ever prior number. They had taken a huge risk, and it had paid off. You can bet the elected officials making commitments under the spotlights that day were feeling the heat, and have not forgotten the organizational power they witnessed.

It is not any one of these characteristics but the interplay among them that creates conditions for the day-to-day organizing and alliance-building that lead to fundamental change.

"If you're not losing sleep over it, it's not a big enough event," says Pastor Stevensen. "It's not shaking things up." Shaking things up, by this definition, requires going outside your comfort zone and what you know you can achieve. It requires taking big risks, with the real possibility of falling flat on your face. It is stressful and challenging to operate like this, of course; but "I just don't know how else you can *do* this work," says Pastor Stevensen. Faith certainly helps, notes Schrantz, for taking big risks.

There's no shortage of other examples of major organizational risks ISAIAH has taken in the years since. Convening hundreds of house parties to get people talking about racism is among the strongest examples, but there are many others. One goal of the "10,000 Voices" house meetings in the fall of 2010 was to generate postcards to the three

major-party candidates in Minnesota's gubernatorial race, inviting them to participate in a large ISAIAH public event post-election at the Minneapolis Convention Center. There were three major risks in this plan. The **first risk** was that the new governor-elect would not agree to come. At the time they rented the space and began to generate postcard invitations to the candidates through house meetings, they had no idea who among the three candidates would be the next governor, and if that person would accept their invitation. The **second risk** was whether their house meetings would generate "an articulate constituency" (in Pastor Stevensen's description) on questions of race, racism and opportunity—especially whether large numbers of white people would form part of that "articulate constituency." They had no way of knowing, when beginning the "10,000 Voices" house meetings, how rooms full of white churchpeople from many of their member congregations would respond to a two-hour in-depth conversation about race and racism. The **third risk** was engaging the election's winner not just as a target to extract commitments from but as a potential partner and ally. When the long-awaited day of the *Shining the Light* event arrived, they had their articulate constituency—a diverse group of people of faith, including whites, African-Americans, Hmong, Latinos—and they had Governor-Elect Mark Dayton, who committed to be their partner in building racial equity.

When asked about ISAIAH's culture of taking big risks, Pastor Stevensen responds with some dismay. "I would say 'big *calculated* risks,'" he says, "not 'big risks.'" They don't just stumble around, trying out new ideas and strategies in the vain hope they'll pay off, he insists. They make careful, deliberate choices "about goals that are damn hard but winnable." At the same time, he acknowledges that putting racial justice at the core of all their work, and especially its decision to engage white members in serious conversations about racism is an exception. "This one's not something we know is tough but winnable. Racial equity is not an issue we have any reason to expect is winnable. But it *has to be* winnable."

With people of color making up just 1 in 25 Minnesotans over age 65, yet 1 in 3 Minnesotans under 18, the state is in for some massive demographic shifts, he points out. "We have to start conversations about this with white people. We have to take on this work." The motivation for doing so appears to be—for the organization's president, any-

way—as much a moral imperative as a calculation. How could a project of real transformation be undertaken, in the end, without taking such risks?

Prerequisites

We would encourage grassroots organizations that aim for systemic and transformational levels of change to consider investing resources in developing the qualities of strategic practice that we explore in this paper. However, there are questions of capacity to consider and pre-conditions that groups should meet before they can make some of the shifts that are entailed in cultivating strategic practice.

To illustrate, we turn again to ISAIAH and the many strengths they had in place to build upon when we started working with them. ISAIAH had a large base of member congregations in both the urban core and the suburbs, a track record of organizing wins (e.g., $16 million for clean-up and development of brownfields), and impressive turnout capacity (able to put more than 1,000 people in a room for their major events).

ISAIAH was able to shift away from regarding turnout as the sole measure of success *precisely because they were so successful at turnout*. Without that success, a decision to shift focus to other goals for their major public events would have done little for them. There wouldn't have been enough power in the room. And the same goes for other strengths of the organization: without a large and well-established base, some ethnic and geographic diversity in its membership, a fair amount of organizational stability, and a track record of real organizing wins, it is less likely that ISAIAH could have advanced toward developing its current level of strategic practice.

In addition, long before we began working with them, ISAIAH had a well-deserved reputation for skilled, in-depth leadership development. This is what initially drew Schrantz to the organization. The content and goals of that leadership development have evolved in recent years, through all the strategic and organizational changes described in this paper; but a solid foundation of leadership-development organizing know-how had been established long before GPP began its work with ISAIAH.

A reasonable question for organizations to ask when considering taking on larger and longer-term goals for organizing work is: Do we have the strength and stability as an organization to make significant shifts in our work?

Concluding Comments

It would be misleading for us to present the seven characteristics described here as a "checklist" for strategic practice. In addition to the prerequisites we mentioned earlier, we also have to pay attention to the complex interplay among these elements. They are not formulaic in that they are not easily separable in actual practice. Instead, each builds upon the other.

What we have seen both in our work with a variety of kinds of organizations over the years and in the movement history we study is that *it is not any one of these characteristics but the interplay among them* that creates conditions for the day-to-day organizing and alliance-building that lead to fundamental change. Many different kinds of organizations have tapped into the power generated by that complex interplay between these elements.

Organizations that do one or some of these things well—that deeply develop leaders through systematic, disciplined organizing that is about personal transformation for all involved, for example, but do not have a thorough political analysis or articulate a long-term vision of social change; or organizations that take big risks and build alliances but do not have a culture of disciplined organizing or a priority on leadership development—can still be powerful and effective in achieving a variety of kinds of important goals. Their work may remain fragmentary and reactive, however. These disparate efforts tend not to add up to something more than the sum of their parts.

Organizers and leaders in any grassroots organization are constantly making decisions about what to prioritize and what to leave for later, and constantly weighing the potential benefits of trying new approaches against the opportunity cost of diverting attention from familiar, "tried and true" methods. The most effective organizations find ways to cut a path through these challenges. As Pastor Slack put it, "there are no silver bullets" and so multiple valued methods are required.

Staying true to the long-term vision, or keeping our eyes on the prize, can be daunting. The odds of achieving audacious goals are stacked against us. And many of our daily activities pull us toward 'getting practical.' For a

group like ISAIAH, staying true to the vision also is a source of strength, and the trick is to align the practical with the visionary. According to Pastor Slack, "We have to be hopeful and realistic."

Organizations that cultivate strategic practice are more likely to have leaders who draw strength from the many challenges they face. ISAIAH organizer Phyllis Hill provides an eloquent explanation of how the very difficulties in cultivating strategic practice are what generate its strength: "The work can be so heavy, it becomes a test of faith. Can we actually make the changes we believe in?"

The decision to continue fighting, to seek to be part of a genuine social movement, becomes a statement of faith— not just about how collective transformation happens but about how individuals choose to play a part (or not) in heralding that transformation. The only way for bold and seemingly impossible social goals to be achieved, as Hill sums it up, "is if I am part of making it."

About the Author

Phillip Cryan is an organizer, policy analyst, and writer based in St. Paul, Minnesota. Since 2006 he has collaborated with GPP on organizing and popular education projects as well as research and writing. He has experience with congregational, political, community, and union organizing; and holds a Masters degree in Public Policy from the Goldman School at the University of California, Berkeley. He is currently the Organizing Director of SEIU Healthcare Minnesota, a 16,000-member union, and he serves on the TakeAction Minnesota Board of Directors.

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