



Community organizers respond to opposition

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The Edmond Sun

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— OKLAHOMA CITY — Metro interfaith leaders said their community organizing coalition will be a need-based, bottom-up effort that will not be directed by a controversial Chicago-based group.

Thursday afternoon The Edmond Sun met with about a dozen representatives of the Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee days after several hundred Catholics and others met to hear “the truth” about Alinskyian community organizing.

Stephanie Block, part of a Catholic speaker’s bureau, spoke about Saul Alinsky’s Chicago-based Industrial Areas Foundation and its effects on the church Saturday night on the University of Central Oklahoma campus. Jo Joyce, a parishioner at Edmond’s The Catholic Church of St. John the Baptist, opened the event with a prayer, asking for peace and unity, seeking truth in love and in charity. Representatives from about a dozen metro congregations attended.

During the 2008 presidential campaign, Block wrote about then-candidate Barack Obama being a lead organizer for an effort funded by the Catholic Church in Chicago that was formed on principles espoused by self-described radical Saul Alinsky.

Thanks in part to Sarah Palin’s remarks about Obama’s community organizing, the issue landed in the national spotlight.

Block said Alinskyian community organizing has eroded the Catholic church’s moral teachings. She said once the IAF is established in a local area they push progressive political goals such as abortion rights, legalized euthanasia, human embryonic experimentation and altered religion.

The IAF “serves the culture of death by networking with political progressives,” Block said.

The Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee, a coalition of 25 or so congregations and non-profit groups, has contracted with the IAF to provide leadership training. Block said IAF tactics include sugarcoating its sales pitch.

The IAF national office referred The Sun to the local affiliate for comment.

Leaders not deterred

Local Oklahoma Sponsoring Committee leaders say they may differ on many issues, but they are able to put them aside, still maintain their identity and beliefs and focus on their common ground.

OSC President Jim Rowan said over the summer he went through IAF training at a Catholic college in Los Angeles. It included observing dialogue between local residents and the LA city council.

Rowan said council members listened to the people and said they would act on their concerns.

“I listened very closely and the IAF taught us a process,” Rowan said. “They did not try to indoctrinate us with any ideals. They just said, ‘This process will work.’”

Rowan said it was transformational for him because he had no idea people cared enough to train individuals to act upon their impulses for social justice.

Kristen Ausdenmoore, the OSC’s lead organizer, said the heart of community organizing is giving churches the tools they need to act on their traditions of social justice.

Ausdenmoore said community organizing is about creating a conversation out of the religious traditions that call people to do justice work, to create a conversation about the pressures that families face in this community and then act on those pressures.

Mark Christian, minister at the First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma City, said he senses that members of his congregation want to connect in a way that betters their community, and they have local issues. Examples include a lack of public transportation, problems walking or biking due to loose dogs or traffic, issues that interfere with person-to-person contact, Christian said.

“Those are the kinds of problems that bubble up that people are facing,” Christian said. “There’s no venue for those issues to come up in Oklahoma City right now.”

Rowan said the pope calls on Catholics to act with other religious groups to work for justice as a group. Rowan said if churches were to act on their own they might be able to accomplish a few things.

“Acting in concert with other churches your voice can be heard with a little more authority,” Rowan said. “It’s not our desire to displace politicians. It is our job and our desire to go out and assist them by raising up to these politicians people who can make differences.”

Rowan said by collaborating with coalition members, nothing will be done that is out of harmony with different faiths.

Barry Cohen, rabbi at Temple B’nai Israel, said members of the Jewish faith have a responsibility to balance the needs of the congregation with reaching out to the greater community and discovering common ground with churches and beyond.

“I think we’re going to be pleasantly surprised that there is a sense of common need, common responsibility to address the needs of the greater society,” Cohen said.

That involves repairing the world, Cohen said.

Glenda Stansbury, co-chair of the organizing committee at Oklahoma City’s Mayflower Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, said while congregations may have their own issues and set of belief systems, social justice overlaps all faiths.

“We can work together and love each other regardless of individual differences or theological belief systems,” Stansbury said.

For example, early Christians were taught to care for widows and orphans, Stansbury said. Ignoring them is equal to turning their backs on all traditions, she said. Faith traditions demand this of adherents, she said.

Rowan said the overall community organizing effort is in the listening stage, which will continue for some time. It will include meeting in different homes.

Oklahoma City Archbishop Eusebius Beltran has urged those on each side to pray and study, and for Catholic parishes involved with the OSC to continue their work.

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