

OVERVIEW

Strategic Practice for Social Transformation

Note: This overview provides highlights from a more detailed strategic practice case study available at www.strategicpractice.org. The case study was written for GPP by Phillip Cryan.

Introduction to Strategic Practice

When the Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) first began to work with ISIAIH¹ 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 to public events, of developing leaders and continuously growing. In late 2003, leaders began expressing interest in broadening their power analysis, exploring their long-term vision for social change, and using their faith values to shift the terms of the political debate. ISIAIH began to mine its members' beliefs and values through what became the *Faith in Democracy* program. Members welcomed the opportunity to explore their faith values and to define a worldview that encompasses their beliefs and gives them a new way to get at the underlying debates and concerns in the public arena.

The worldview work helped shape long-term approaches to developing issues in a broader worldview context. For example, instead of just focusing on health insurance or health care, ISIAIH's work on health expanded to encompass health equity and an exploration of how to create conditions for health and wellbeing. This way of framing health care issues intersected with other systemic con-

cerns impacting community wellbeing, such as transportation. Through this work leaders came to focus on structural racism as a cross-cutting and systemic problem contributing to disparities. With the help of the Kirwan Institute, ISIAIH dug more deeply into the underpinnings of these disparities.

In the summer of 2010 ISIAIH launched *10,000 Voices*. This effort aimed to organize 10,000 Minnesotans for intimate conversations about race and structural racism. Based in 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 as well as state administrative departments and programs. Just after the 2010 elections, ISIAIH hosted an event *Shining the Light* at which more than 1,600 members brought the concerns and priorities that had emerged from hundreds of house meetings to the state's newly-elected governor, Mark Dayton. The goal, according to ISIAIH'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.” Our case study dissects these events to tease out the practices that made them possible—the characteristic and elements of ISIAIH's organizing that exemplify what we refer to as **strategic practice**.

Elements of Strategic Practice

Social change groups engage in many kinds of power-building activities such as base-building, leadership development, campaign development, communications, organizing, mobilizing, seeking allies, etc. What makes a group more able to move a larger, transformational vision is when they deliberately create spaces in the life of the organization and develop capacities that bring their practices

1. ISIAIH is a faith-based community organization in Minnesota with over 90 member congregations. Dave Mann, GPP's Minneapolis-based Associate Director, has engaged in side-by-side consulting with ISIAIH staff and leaders these past eight years.

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in alignment with their long-term, transformative social change goals. This is what we mean by strategic practice.

In order to align practice and strategy, groups need spaces in their organization and processes wherein members and leaders engage in analysis, action and reflection. Ideas shape strategy; strategy directs practice; and then all that is learned through practice reshapes ideas, improving strategy. Another way to define strategic practice is the close dialogue between analysis and action, combined with an active intention to achieve long-term goals.

As we examine ISAI AH's approaches to building power for lasting change, seven inter-related yet distinct elements stand out. In summary, they are:

- 1. A bold long-term vision for social transformation that is at the heart of all work.**
- 2. A systematic and disciplined organizing methodology.**
- 3. A commitment to leadership development as central to all organizing.**
- 4. Recognition that the work is about both social and personal transformation.**
- 5. Strategy that is informed by a power analysis that includes the power of ideas and of organization.**
- 6. Significant investments in strategic, long-term alliance-building.**
- 7. A shared understanding that, in order to achieve major changes, you have to take organizational and personal risks.**

What follows is a more detailed description of each, using examples from ISAI AH.

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

For ISAI AH, the vision of "hope, community, and shared abundance" they developed in 2004 enabled them to break down issue silos 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.

ISAI AH's vision of social transformation has provided "a place to integrate the language of our faith with the

work we do," says ISAI AH president Rev. Grant 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 ISAI AH as an organization engaged in strategic practice but of the organization's namesake. ISAI AH members and staff frequently cite a line from ISAI AH, 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."

2. The organization has a systematic and disciplined organizing methodology.

ISAI AH has been serious about the craft and the discipline of organizing from the start. Having a clearly defined and disciplined approach to organizing has made it easier for them to incorporate worldview work in ways that link feeling, thinking and reflecting with well organized and disciplined action. Connecting faith and values with their organizing methodologies also has helped clarify how organizing is a means to achieving longer-term transformational goals, not an end-in-itself.

ISAI AH as an organization invests deeply in its members and leaders, and, in turn, members hold themselves and the organization accountable for achieving shared goals. It helps people identify with and feel part of a collective culture of discipline and mutual accountability.

The rigor of organizing, and the devotion to deep base-building that it involves, is what makes it possible for ISAI AH to reach well beyond the 'usual suspects,' or a handful of activists, to engage a broader and more diverse base of people in dialog, reflection and action. Adding in the dimension of exploring faith and values in the context of social change and organizing means ISAI AH can get to a level within and among people that transcends social boundaries of race, ethnicity, age and political backgrounds (as we can see from the *10,000 Voices* campaign).

3. Leadership development is central to all organizing practice.

Leadership development involves purposeful activity that contributes to the ability of individuals and groups to realize their capacities to effect social change. It recognizes each individual's capacities for leadership, as well as the

collective nature of leadership. ISIAIH's emphasis on leadership development reflects democratic values: everyone is involved. It underscores ISIAIH's belief that ordinary people have the ability, the right, and the imperative, to be part of making the major decisions shaping their lives.

As ISIAIH 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 ISIAIH 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.

Regular trainings, meaningful participation of a broad group of members in decision-making, genuine interest in each individual member, and experiences of winning are all critical components of leadership-development.

Also critical is developing structures and opportunities for people to engage in leadership. "Everyone needs to have a role," says Schrantz—not just tasks to perform but a role, with responsibilities and real agency. The work of developing new leaders is not left just to staff. Leaders identify and develop other, new leaders. This is a primary mechanism through which the core of leaders grows.

Because of the ongoing work to constantly develop and refine a shared worldview narrative, members feel emboldened to press officials on where they stand in relation to core values about human dignity, racial justice and shared destinies. In reference to these values, officials are compelled to justify their positions on issues ranging from tax policy to transportation, affordable housing, public health and education.

The process of embracing racial justice as central for

ISIAIH's social change reflects their approach to leadership. ISIAIH's clergy caucus spent two years building relationships and exploring the personal and interpersonal dimensions of racism. Without this degree of relationship-building, it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to establish the needed levels of trust. According to Rev. Stevensen, you need trust in a community to be strong enough to persevere. This is not a "vague idea of community, but a set of specific relationships you've built." This foundation

of trust allowed ISIAIH to take the bold step of beginning to look at all their work "with a racial justice lens," as Clergy and Religious Leaders Co-Chair Pastor Paul Slack put it, "looking directly at how systems of racialization and racism block people from opportunities, and at what we could do to change that."

4. The work is about both social and personal transformation.

As we have noted earlier, ISIAIH has made progress in orienting all of their work toward achieving social transformation. Built-into their organizing and leadership development work is a recognition that 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. As ISIAIH's Executive Director, Doran Schrantz notes, ISIAIH's work is "not just about a path to social transformation, but a path to individual transformation." Once people experience personal growth through social change work, they're hooked: "It's addictive. It's powerful."

Helping members, leaders and staff achieve personal transformation is built-into every aspect of ISIAIH'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 everyone, including new members and senior staff.

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

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ISIAIH's Faith in Democracy Public Gathering

Sunday, October 10, 2004
3:00 - 5:00 p.m.

Ray Wilkins Auditorium
176 West Kellogg Boulevard
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Free admission and open to the public.

ISIAIH, 2720 East 22nd Street
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55408

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The campaign to increase diversity in the transportation workforce offers an example of how ISAIAH integrates multiple levels of transformation: personal, institutional and political. At some point in this campaign, the relationship with transportation officials shifted from treating them as targets toward inviting them into a partnership, one that eventually came together in the form of a collaborative of industry, labor and community groups working together to achieve a more diverse transportation workforce. As a result, ISAIAH and its allies are part of the team that is implementing racial equity goals for the long-term. This is an unusual approach in community organizing and, we think, a significant one. It reflects ISAIAH's attempt to put into practice their notion of co-creating democracy.

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

Over the years, ISAIAH's understanding of power has evolved from one that was focused on the most visible arenas of decision-making to one that sees power as multi-dimensional. ISAIAH seeks to build and exercise power in all its dimensions, in recognition that power is not a 'thing,' but a set of social relations, and that those relations can and should change.

ISAIAH has been able to move decision-makers through direct campaigns and actions, influencing legislative, legal and administrative decisions that affect people's lives. But, focusing on these actions alone does not necessarily alter the terrain, or advance longer-term goals. Leaders recognize that achieving their long-term goals will not be possible without significant shifts in the arrangement of power in our society. This involves altering the field of play—not just winning policy-making battles but reshaping the terrain on which policy-making battles take place.

A multi-dimensional analysis suggests devoting time and resources toward building power through infrastructure and alliances, and by shaping meaning, through worldview work. We will talk more about alliance-building in the following section.

The *Faith in Democracy* process reinforced for ISAIAH the power of ideas. Already, they have seen how exploring, dialoguing, and acting in the context of faith and worldview allows them to impact the larger political discourse and frames, as well as individual issues. Still, choosing to contest for power on the terrain of ideas carries risks for

ISAIAH, and there was push-back against what some feared would be an academic or intellectual exercise. "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."

With regard to their racial justice work, power analysis has 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: who is 'All'?" Today, ISAIAH's long-term vision for social change includes uprooting institutional racism and establishing a racially just society.

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

Another significant shift, linked to their power analysis, is engaging in the process of deep alliance-building. ISAIAH used to have a more insular perspective about alliances. When it joined coalitions or otherwise partnered with other groups, the decision to do so tended to be tactical and short-term. Today ISAIAH leaders invest deeply in relationships with a small set of power-building organizations they see as critical for making ISAIAH's vision of social transformation a reality.

Investing in well-chosen alliances has provided rich opportunities for further leadership development. Partnerships do not always go smoothly, and, at times the work is more challenging than hopeful. Still, leaders are sustained by the knowledge that, no organization, no matter how powerful, can remake social systems and structures on the scale that is needed. In addition, the process of seeking alignment with other groups has strengthened each organization's work and clarified its distinct identity, its rootedness in its own base and culture.

Notable partnerships include: teaming up with Minnesota SEIU, coordinating with TakeAction Minnesota and providing leadership for the national Transportation Equity Network (TEN), which helps participating groups influence federal policy, learn from programs in other parts of the country, and further develop their own transportation strategy. In addition, ISAIAH works closely with a few intermediaries like the Organizer Apprenticeship Project,

the Kirwan Institute (including a joint field guide on racial equity in health and transportation) and with GPP.

7. Leaders share an understanding that, in order to achieve major changes, you have to be willing to take organizational and personal risks.

ISAIAH's *10,000 Voices* campaign is one example of risk-taking that we examine in our case study. Putting racial justice at the core of all their work, and especially its decision to engage white members in serious conversations about racism reflects ISAIAH's willingness to move beyond the traditional community organizing comfort zone. According to Rev. Stevensen, 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 one in 25 Minnesotans over age 65, yet one in three 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."

Concluding Observations

Within ISAIAH we see many examples of these seven elements working together. Ongoing engagement around vision and values means the long-term vision is a living, day-to-day reference point for leaders, organizers, and even some allies. Investment in leadership means all levels of goals and activities are broadly shared and understood.

An organizing methodology that draws out people's motivations and deeper aspirations makes it possible to integrate the day-to-day with the long-term. Activities and spaces that engage everyone in analysis, action and reflection create a virtuous cycle. Their emphasis on leadership development reflects and reinforces ISAIAH's commitment to deep democracy. The resulting levels of commitment and trust also lay the groundwork for stretching people beyond their comfort zones, and for taking risks that fly in the face of conventional community organizing, like pursuing issue areas at more systemic levels and taking on racial justice.