



## **CREATING A REGIONAL TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY IN DETROIT BY CONNECTING CITY AND SUBURBAN INTERESTS: A DIFFERENT KIND OF STEW METROPOLITAN ORGANIZING STRATEGY ENABLING STRENGTH (MOSES)**

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Reverend Joseph Barlow Metropolitan Organizing Strategy Enabling Strength (MOSES)

### **The Power of 3,000**

It's not easy to mobilize large groups of people, and it's not easy to get the attention of people in power, says Reverend Joseph Barlow, founder and past president of the Metropolitan Organizing Strategy for Enabling Strength (MOSES). He admits that everybody was a little surprised on that warm August day in 1996, when U.S. drug czar, General Barry McCaffrey, came to Detroit to assess the city's potential for special designation as an area of high need and federal investment.

McCaffrey had agreed to attend a community meeting organized by Barlow's fledgling group, a meeting for which the expectations were realistically low, even if hopes were high. Barlow figured that 400 concerned community members might show up and he wasn't sure if that would be a large enough crowd to make an impression. Nor was he sure about how much direct lobbying he or his members might be able to do during the event.

Then two things happened. First, McCaffrey's secret service detail sought out Barlow to be McCaffrey's host for the meeting, giving Barlow a significant opportunity to make his

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case directly to the drug czar. Second, the meeting hall didn't have anywhere near the 400 that Barlow had hoped would arrive; it had nearly eight times that many—3,000 people. Against that backdrop of overwhelming community support, Barlow made his pitch: the Detroit metro region should be designated a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (HIDTA), which would make it eligible for special federal funds. Specifically, Barlow was asking for \$5 million for treatment, \$5 million for prevention, and \$5 million for enforcement.

When Reverend Barlow went to see General McCaffrey off the next morning, he says McCaffrey told him, "Mr. President, I'm going back to Washington and I will see that you get your request."

Barlow says he is convinced that it was the strong display of "community togetherness" that convinced the drug czar to declare the area a high trafficking area and pledge the money needed to help start cleaning up the drug problem. "I think he got the spirit. I think there was a spirit there," says Barlow.

But that impressive show of unity and spirit didn't happen by accident and the capacity to turn out such a massive number of people for an important meeting didn't materialize overnight.

### **"Tuning Fork of Faith"**

What General McCaffrey saw was the early stirring of a powerful approach to community organizing and action, say MOSES activists, a movement that focuses on organizing and coordinating action through congregations of all faiths. Made up of nearly 70 churches, temples, and mosques, MOSES has been able to reach out and into the communities those faiths represent in an effort to amplify the power of the pulpit. "Where one congregation is strong in one area," says Barlow, "we're strong in another."

But MOSES staff members and supporters say that getting such a diverse coalition of denominations together has not been a simple matter. The key has been to work to set aside denominational differences and focus on what the congregations have in common: an interest in a healthy regional economy and improved quality of life. The approach has been straightforward, says Barlow. "We say, 'Let's talk about what our faith demands of us, whether we are Jewish or Muslim, Catholic or Protestant, white or black.' There are some common things that unite us. And the degree to which we can continually hit that tuning fork of faith is the degree to which we can bring people together, whether it is as a coalition for overall justice or as it applies to fighting drugs or encouraging urban redevelopment or battling sprawl."

Bringing faiths together has largely been a matter of nitty-gritty, one-on-one reaching out and opening doors, of beginning an inter-faith dialogue that leads to better understanding and cooperation. Shortly after 9/11, for example, Reverend Kevin Turman, says his church hosted an imam from a local mosque. "He came and he talked with us about the

Islamic faith in general and fundamentalism in particular, helping us gain a better understanding of a different faith."

Such cross-cultural and religious connecting can be both liberating and enriching, say MOSES organizers. "I think that's probably the most valuable part of what we do and the most exciting part," says Ponsella Hardaway, Executive Director of MOSES. "Constantly meeting new people that normally we wouldn't. Years ago I would have never talked to a Catholic; I was taught not to."

But what's most critical to making the mix work, says Reverend Barlow, is that the focus on denomination is really set aside; there is never any notion that one church is going to convince another of some truer religious path. "I'm not here to persuade you to be a Baptist," says Barlow. "I care about laying bricks. At end of the day if you're finished laying bricks, go home, I'm not going to try to convert you." Because of that, he says, "I think that people realize that this is no ordinary organization, it's an organization that speaks to the total community."

### **Tearing Down the Walls**

In taking on issues that impact metropolitan Detroit - from neighborhood blight to drugs - MOSES has come to realize that nothing occurs in isolation, not problems faced by inner city neighborhoods, nor the strategies for dealing with those problems. But the organization, says MOSES organizer Vicky Kovari, had a reputation for inner-city activism. "MOSES started as a collection of neighborhood based organizations."

If it was going to deal with an intertwined nature of issues and answers, MOSES knew it needed to become more of a force in greater metropolitan Detroit, including the suburbs. To do that effectively, Kovari and her colleagues knew they would have to once again practice reaching out to those from whom they had traditionally been very isolated. And they knew they would have to do that carefully and strategically.

In thinking about what issue might best unite the metro region and also address many of the mutual problems facing the city and its suburbs, MOSES hit on the idea of regional transportation: healthy communities and economies depend on mobility. Businesses in the suburbs need employees. Potential employees in the city need to be able to get jobs. People also need to get to school, medical appointments, day care centers, and grocery stores. Transportation and mobility, says Kovari, was an issue that cut across geographical, age, religious, racial, income, and educational lines.

And so in 2001, MOSES began to organize supporters for the creation of a Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority. To avoid having the typical issues of turf, prejudice, suburban-urban mistrust, and conflict derail the effort, MOSES expanded its church-to-church organizing strategy into the suburbs.

Again, the key to building new relationships among unlikely partners was the one-on-one contacts, says Hardaway. "We've had suburban congregations and urban congregations

coming together and sitting down one-on-one and exploring our own emotions and feelings about race and the history of the region, because there have been such walls that have been built up over the years." The effort to reach out to suburban congregations apparently hit Reverend Barlow's tuning fork of faith on just the right note. "I had white church members saying, 'If we're about who we say we are, then why don't we know the people that live around us?'" says Ponsella Hardaway.

It's not just getting to know one another that's made the difference in building new relationships, adds Barlow, recalling an exchange he had with the pastor in a suburban congregation. "He said, 'Why should I join you? We've got everything we need out here.' And I said, 'You think you've got everything you need, but I'm going to tell you a story about Johnson grass. It's a weed and if you don't contain it here, the seeds are eventually going to blow into your yard.' And he said, 'Oh my, I've never looked at it that way.'" What the suburban pastor realized was what MOSES already knew: that nothing occurs in isolation and that nobody lives on an island. The suburban pastor signed on to the cause.

### **Twin Wins and Tough Lessons in Forming Alliances**

In pushing to create a new regional transportation authority that would oversee the rebuilding of what many viewed as a dysfunctional, fragmented, parochial system of public transportation in the region, MOSES knew it would also have to reach out beyond its traditional religion-based constituency. And so it launched a campaign called "One Hundred Congregations – One Hundred Days," the goal of which was to reach out to one hundred churches, handicapped advocacy organizations, as well as non-traditional allies such as environmental and senior citizen groups. In stepping outside its normal congregation-based network, MOSES was able to build an even stronger constituency for change.

Kovari says MOSES activists also knew that having business on board would be necessary to making any real political or practical progress on the issue. "We reached out to the Chamber of Commerce, the Big Three Auto Companies, and other businesses who we knew were getting more interested in the whole subject of getting employees to and from work."

The newly formed coalition's first victory was staving off an effort to cut by half the amount of state gas tax that flowed to public transportation. Its second victory was getting the state legislature to create the Detroit Area Regional Transportation Authority (DARTA).

In winning, though, MOSES also learned about the delicacies and dangers of alliances. When it appeared that the DARTA legislation was being purposely stalled by a powerful member of the Michigan legislature, MOSES' core constituents did what came naturally: they marched to the office of the policymaker and staged a demonstration. It wasn't exactly in keeping with the Chamber's buttoned-down, behind-the-scenes approach to lobbying. And so it caused considerable tension.

Kovari acknowledges that political alliances change not only from one issue to the next, but sometimes from one strategy to the next. The Chamber as an organizational ally was tough, but the effort also led to the creation of new allies. In organizing in the suburbs, MOSES was able to pull together a group of suburban political leaders, now known as "The Michigan Suburbs Alliance," which represents more than 30 municipalities and has the potential to become a natural ally in all the regional work MOSES is doing.

### **Regeneration and Renewal**

Rather than lament the partial collapse of the coalition that won the creation of DARTA, MOSES activists like Kovari see it as part of the natural ebb and flow of the action. "It falls apart and you have to recreate it. Right now we're in the process of recreating this transportation campaign."

But maintaining organizational energy is always an issue, one that is founded very directly on bringing new blood and new ideas into the organizational mix. What MOSES has learned is that to recruit new potential leaders to the cause means intentionally making the invitation. You have to ask. It may sound simple, but it's not something that all organizations have figured out. Yet it can be a powerful and effective strategy, says Sandra Samuels, a MOSES community leader. "When you are personally asked it means that someone sees something in you, that they have faith in you."

"It's about the current leaders bringing in new people," sums up Kovari. "You find people with anger and passion, a person who is open to taking some responsibility and risk and you invite them into the conversation. That prevents you from getting stale and losing energy."

### **The Power of the Pulpit**

Besides being a vehicle for finding and nurturing new leaders, MOSES is effective in mobilizing thousands of people. In 2002, MOSES organized a meeting of 5,000 people from the central city and suburbs. They did it again in September 2004, bringing together the Governor, the Mayor and 4,000 people from across the region around the issues of health care, public transit, immigration reform, and land.

It's that magnification of power that comes with the unity of purpose represented by MOSES, says Barlow. "We have spent so much time fragmenting ourselves. We divide ourselves into east and west, north and south. But when you organize people, when you pull them together, you've got the power. And its relationships like ours that lead to big events, big meetings where people see the power of working together, power that can move politicians and policies."

Most important though, says Kovari, it's about making change. "You live in this city and you hear about how great it was years ago and how much it's gone downhill. And I always think that, I want my kids to be able to say just the opposite: 'When we were growing up in the city it was really tough. And now look at how great it is.'"

## Creating a Regional Transportation Authority in Detroit by Connecting City and Suburban Interests: Leadership Story

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The LCW Research and Documentation Component is housed at the Research Center for Leadership in Action at NYU's Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. LCW uses three parallel lines of inquiry ethnography, cooperative inquiry and narrative inquiry – to explore questions related to the work of leadership. RCLA is committed to developing participatory approaches to research and uses dialogue with LCW participants as a core of the research process. While the award portion of the program has concluded, RCLA continues to partner with nonprofit organizations to develop together new understandings of how social change leadership emerges and is sustained.

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