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Grass-roots network strives for change

TAP enlists members of 13 congregations to tackle problems.

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SOUTH BEND -- For the past year, they've talked of passions, of social ills, of what they plan to say Sunday.

That extensive, grass-roots network of everyday people from 13 congregations will step into the public light for the first time Sunday and list changes they intend to see in this city.

They are called Transforming Action through Power.

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The new group has earmarked four issue areas: community revitalization, youth and violence, educational opportunities, and civil rights and immigration.

Their founding convention, open to the public, will be 3 to 4:30 p.m. Sunday at Adams High School.

Public officials have been invited. Here's what they can expect, says the Rev. Michael Cobbler, pastor of Hilltop Lutheran Church of the Ascension:

"People of faith will no longer just be sitting on the sidelines, heavenly minded and not

doing any earthly good," says Cobbler, adding that they'll partake in the "communal and political life of South Bend."

"Whomever (officials) we approach, we approach with the hope that they will be allied with us in their work," he says.

TAP's efforts are known as community organizing. There's a host of this across the country. Cobbler, who is TAP's co-chairman, has 30 years of experience with it in Ohio, New Jersey and New York.

In New York City, he was involved with a group that got city leaders to give up land in an "absolutely devastated" part of the South Bronx, then rallied churches to build 1,500 new homes there.

In Columbus, Ohio, he helped to lead another group that caused public transit leaders to rethink their system. Inner-city residents needed the new jobs that were on the outskirts, but buses didn't

More Information

TAP convention

Transforming Action through Power will hold a public convention from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Sunday at Adams High School at Mishawaka and Twyckenham avenues in South Bend to announce its plans. Doors will open at 2 p.m. Music will be provided by local church choirs.

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connect the two -- until the group researched and found a way to do it, he says.

In South Bend, TAP is coordinated by Jesusa Rodriguez, who has served on the local safety board, hosted TV programs on Latino issues and organized an annual Cinco de Mayo festival.

She was hired a year ago as the full-time, paid organizer.

But the "go-to" people on the issues are the new leaders she's helped to cultivate, Cobbler says.

TAP was conceived soon after a December 2004 hearing in South Bend that drew about 750 people before the Indiana Utility Regulatory Commission. The hearing was on a hot topic: the deposits that utility companies charged their delinquent customers -- typically the needy -- to turn on their heat.

Local advocates felt a need to pool their power. Cobbler had just moved to South Bend. They won their key funding from the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which is part of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Rodriguez and other TAP leaders started meeting one on one with members of congregations about a year ago. They didn't seek the community's most powerful but, rather, people who were seen as leaders at the grass-roots level or who led in different roles, says the Rev. David Gerth, pastor of Zion United Methodist Church of Christ.

They talked about the person's greatest passion, then challenged the person to have the same talk with someone else.

Gerth saw a huge spiritual benefit for folks who'd known each other for years, saying, "It's a rare gift to sit with someone and say, 'Let's talk, and I'm going to do most of the listening.'" The group formed its four issue areas from the ideas in those conversations, says Pat Frazier, a member of Kern Road Mennonite Church.

TAP then held assemblies about once a month at different locations, 100 to 200 people at a time from various faiths, Frazier says. Together they defined the issues and Sunday's agenda.

"Everything is very carefully developed and scripted," Gerth says.

It's been rewritten and rehearsed with lots of feedback. Gerth, who helped with community organizing at a St. Louis church before moving here a year ago, says this is part of the learning process.

"Not just to perform well," he says, "but to create the kind of energy that makes others want to join. Everything is focused around leadership development for people of faith."

"You don't have to be a person of means," says Cobbler. "Or articulate -- that's what comes with the training."

Rather, he says, TAP asks its leaders to be passionate about an issue and to be a "person of faith and good will" -- that is, that the person belongs to a body of faith, since TAP works through congregations.

TAP developed outside of the media light, Gerth says, because it takes that long to build relationships and agendas among 75 people, 100 people, and more.

Training and guidance is being provided by the Chicago-based Gamaliel Foundation, which advises several other community organizing groups across the country.

Organizers want to be clear about what TAP isn't: It isn't a direct provider of aid.

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