Broad-based Organizing as a Religious Practice

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Abstract:

Faith-Based Community Organizations (FBCOs) are important and effective institutions working for progressive change in the United States. Many scholars have researched these groups’ outward successes and challenges while ignoring their impact on participants. But by transforming their participants, FBCOs transform their communities. In order to understand how members of FBCOs transform and are transformed, this thesis explores how one FBCO, POWER, functions like a religion: POWER unites people in common beliefs and practices which reflect and reinforce each other. POWER’s liberatory potential lies partially in the transformation of its members into dignity-affirming, radical, and powerful people.

I begin with an anecdote at a POWER event. Then I explain my purpose and outline my methodology. This thesis relies on participant observation at POWER events, interviews with members of POWER, and close readings of POWER website materials. I then clarify my argument in the Thesis section. After providing background on POWER and organizing more generally, I demonstrate how POWER acts like a religion in a Durkheimian sense. I then analyze the idea of habitus, a particular way to understand the cultivation of virtue and dispositions, before providing examples of POWER’s beliefs and practices and how the reinforce each other. I focus on the values of human dignity, radical action, and power and the practices of one-on-ones, public narratives, direct action, and religious rituals. I conclude by making a normative claim about the potential of transformation through the organizing process and summarizing the major claims of the thesis. An appendix with my IRB Exemption Approval Form and a Works Cited follow.
I. Introduction

I arrived at the POWER Metro anti-racism event as an observer. I left as a participant. I knew that POWER, Philadelphians\(^1\) Organizing to Witness Empower and Rebuild, was an interfaith organization working for systemic change in the city and suburbs of Philadelphia. I came to their meeting at Congregation Beth Adam curious about their organizing work and intending to take notes for my senior thesis, but when I heard others’ stories and reflected on my own experiences, I felt moved to act. The meeting was on a Monday evening in November at a Conservative Jewish synagogue on the Main Line. We gathered in the basement and pushed two round tables together as about fifteen, mostly middle-aged, white, Jewish and Christian adults walked in, ate fruit, brewed Keurig coffee, and perused the books about race which sat on another table. Most of the people there were members of Beth Adam or St. Luke United Methodist Church. There were a couple Villanova students, two Bryn Mawr students (myself included), and a few POWER staff members. Pastors and rabbis, clergy and laity, black and white spoke about their commitments to fighting racism. Rabbi David Ackerman connected anti-racism work to stories from Genesis. Reverend Gregory Holston, the executive director of POWER, spoke about statistics and personal experiences of the “sin” of racism. St. Luke’s Pastor Tatgenhorst called racism a “catastrophe” that is literally killing black people and destroying the souls of white folks like himself.

Then we broke up into one-on-one pairs and I was unable to avoid participation—not that I mind, but I felt I should play more of an observer than a participant role since I had come to this meeting to do research for my thesis. I ended up partnered with one of the ministers hosting

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\(^1\) It is unclear, but they may have adjusted the name to Pennsylvanians in place of Philadelphians as they have expanded more recently to central Pennsylvania. POWER Philadelphia is the original, urban-based branch. All branches (POWER Metro, Central, and Philadelphia) are part of the same organization and differ only in geography (which leads to some strategic and congregational differences as well).
the event. Reverend Tatgenhorst and I bonded over our shared roots in Cincinnati, Ohio. We exchanged stories of times in our lives when we, even as white people, witnessed the “catastrophe” of racism. I shared that when I had recently taken the bus to work, a white woman had called the black bus-driver the n-word. Sharing this story reminded me how catastrophic and present racism is today.

After we regathered, the organizers passed around a clipboard and asked us to sign our names to make a “lifelong commitment” to fight racism. There was some hesitation, but the organizing clergy emphasized the importance of this issue and clarified that they really were not asking for so much—come to a few meetings, read a few books, speak out when necessary. The organizing clergy strategically raised the stakes and urgency through their stories and simultaneously downplayed the commitment. Signing our names did not mean giving up all of our other responsibilities or concerns. Rather, it signified a commitment we should already have had. After all, we all had chosen to attend the session in the first place. In my mind, it was like asking a rabbi to state her lifelong commitment to Judaism. It is a big deal, but it is not much to ask of her: she is already living this commitment. While we passed around the clipboard, a white man remarked that he was taught racism for 19 years and ought to dedicate at least 19 more to antiracism. Rabbi Shawn Zevit teared up as he stated that he would give up his life for some of the people in that room. One white Jewish woman was hesitant to sign her name, but after hearing powerful stories, she asked for the clipboard. We were all sitting in a circle, looking at each other, holding each other accountable to our values. It would have been difficult to sit there and not sign our names. I was also hesitant to add more things to my full plate of responsibilities, but the event moved me. The stories were too powerful, the need too urgent for me to turn my back on a just pursuit. I declared my own lifelong commitment to anti-racism.
Reverend Holston ended the session by leading us all in prayer. I felt a spiritual connection. I felt like our mission was holy and our community sacred. After the event, I became even more in awe of POWER. I was hooked. I went native, as they say. I was so excited that I recruited a few friends to another POWER Metro event a few weeks later. I wanted them to feel the impact of POWER’s work and to get involved in local politics.

I. Purpose

Meetings like the anti-racism workshop described above reflect the pervasiveness and importance of religious institutions, prayer, and rhetoric in POWER’s work. Religious institutions and personal commitments often play an important role in community and social change movements. One of the leading scholars of democratic organizing, Richard L. Wood, identifies the importance of religion in social reform: “Any effort to turn our societies toward greater fairness for working people—and any scholarly effort to better understand those struggles—must take people’s religious commitments seriously indeed” (12). Responding to the exclusion of religion as a significant force in some scholarly literature and public discourse on social change, Wood claims that religion is in fact an important phenomenon to consider in the study of struggles for fairness. This is certainly exemplified by POWER, rooted in religious commitments and a powerful force in Pennsylvania. In writing this thesis, I am not only working to better understand the importance of religion in organizing but also to think about organizing as like a religion itself, which has the potential to empower people and change the way they think about and act in the world.

Some scholars have described the challenges and successes of groups like POWER, often referred to as “faith-based community organizations” (FBCOs), but have focused more on their outward impact and less on the transformative effect organizing can have on participants. For
social change organizations to achieve sustainable successes, they must be intentional about their processes and not only their goals. FBCOs are not only compelling because of their campaign wins—though they are significant—but also because of the impact they have on those who participate in the work they do. In strong FBCOs, people often become more powerful and confident, more creative and imaginative, more radical and relational, more accountable and political.

II. Methodology

For this thesis, I primarily relied on integrating close readings of POWER website materials, participant observation of POWER events, and conversations with POWER leaders from diverse backgrounds. For close reading, I specifically looked at POWER’s self-descriptions and mission statement. I attended two POWER Metro events, the anti-racism workshop and an interfaith Hanukkah candle-lighting event. I took notes at the events and participated in the programming. These events served to supplement my interviews, which are my primary sources of data.

I wanted my interviewees to reflect POWER’s diverse membership. In order to draw out this diversity, I divided POWER’s congregations into five denominational categories which each represent significant blocks of membership: White Protestant, Black Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Other. This allowed me to intentionally interview members from diverse religious and racial backgrounds. I also specifically interviewed leaders involved in POWER’s founding and current organization, regardless of race and religion. I also attempted to represent diverse demographics in other ways (such as gender), though I intentionally focused on clergy and POWER leaders in order to best understand what POWER’s aims are (even if they are not always implemented successfully). Of my interviewees, two are women and six are men; three are African American
and five are white; five are Christian, two are Jewish, and one is Ethical Humanist. Of the five who are Christian, one is Baptist, one United Methodist, two are Episcopalian, and one is Catholic. Although it is impossible to represent every group within POWER, I was able to interview a range of leaders which reflect POWER’s diverse religious makeup.

Two years ago, I did in-person open-ended interviews with two POWER leaders, Episcopal Reverend, Jarett Kerbel, and Reform Rabbi, Eli Freedman. This year, I built on these initial conversations with two conversations in-person and four by phone. I spoke with Carol Duncan, a leader on POWER’s Economic Dignity Team and a deacon at St. Martin’s in the Field; Reverend Gregory Holston, the executive director of POWER and Senior Pastor of New Vision United Methodist Church; Rabbi Shawn Zevit, co-chair of POWER’s Clergy Caucus and the Senior Rabbi of Mishkan Shalom; Hugh Taft-Morales, Leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society; Terri Burgin, a member of the Economic Dignity Team and Catholic lay leader; and Zachary Ritvalsky, one of POWER’s founders and the Pastor of Sweet Union Baptist Church.

The latter six interviews were inspired by the earlier ones, but I focused more specifically on the organizing process and the virtues cultivated within it. The earlier interviews were oral history-style and more open ended. I asked Reverend Kerbel and Rabbi Freedman about organizing, their personal lives, theology, and anything of interest in follow-up questions. This year, my interview questions were more focused on the impact of POWER work on participants. Some of the questions I asked in the second round of interviews were: “Tell me about you and growing up. How did you get involved in POWER? What impact has POWER had on you?” I gave each interviewee (including Rabbi Freedman and Reverend Kerbel) a consent form which we both signed. Each interview was about 30-60 minutes. I transcribed all of the interviews and I quote them verbatim, however, I have removed some filler words such as, “you know,” and
added others in brackets for clarity. This project was approved as IRB-exempt by the Haverford College IRB Chair, Barak Mendelsohn, since it does not pose any serious risk or strain for participants (See Appendix for Approval Form).

III.  Thesis

In this thesis I will demonstrate how POWER functions like a religion, uniting people in common beliefs and practices which reflect and reinforce each other. Conceptualizing POWER as a religion allows us to consider how the organization shifts participants’ actions and values in order to transform them and their communities. This process demonstrates that effective social change lies not only in an organization’s ability to institute policies, but also in the transformation of those involved in such organizations. In POWER, participants’ commitments to human dignity, radical action, and building power reinforce and are reinforced by their practices—among them, one-on-ones, public narratives, direct action, and faith traditions. I will now provide background on POWER and FBCOs more generally before I explain how POWER functions as a religion.

IV.  Background:

Faith-Based Community Organizations (FBCOs) like POWER Interfaith bring together a diverse range of faith groups in order to hold public officials accountable to people’s needs. POWER follows a community organizing model which draws from a history of social change. In 1971, the “father of modern organizing,” Saul Alinsky, wrote *Rules for Radicals*, wherein he articulates how the “HAVE NOTS” (i.e. working poor) can gain power from the “HAVES” (i.e. elites). Alinsky was committed to improving the situation of the urban poor and oppressed in the United States, beginning in Chicago and then spreading to other major cities. He founded the Industrial Area Foundations (IAF), which brings together congregations, unions, schools, and
other institutions to organize and hold city leaders accountable to the wants and needs of the people (specifically the poor and less powerful). IAF is a national organization with local, mostly autonomous chapters. Similar organizations also exist, like Gamaliel and the PICO (People Improving Communities through Organizing) National Network—which are more explicitly rooted in faith. These are broad-based organizations that connect social justice work with religious institutions. POWER Interfaith, of which POWER Metro is the suburban arm, is PICO’s local chapter in Philadelphia. PICO provides trainings and support for its local affiliates and organizes them to generate power in the national arena.

Like other FBCOs, POWER brings together religious organizations which are already organized—they already have people and resources under one roof. Like PICO and other FBCOs, standard practice of the Industrial Areas Foundation is to treat “institutions, rather than isolated individuals, as the basis for a citizens’ organization. It is churches, synagogues, schools, and the like that commit themselves to organizing and contribute the money that provides for organizer salaries” (Stout 29). POWER draws on these institutions which are already organized, and therefore able to mobilize. Strong religious institutions can provide important resources: “religion can help provide some of the things every social movement needs: people to help lead the movement; material resources such as money, phones, meeting space, etc.; and social capital and organizational structures that facilitate mobilization” (Wood 11). For example, POWER’s clergy caucus, a representative group of religious leaders from the various member communities, is able to meet regularly in one of the congregations. POWER does not need to worry about paying clergy member’s salaries, which are already paid by each congregation. Religious

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2 PICO tends to focus more on faith-based institutions than on schools and unions.
institutions often have the potential to provide helpful resources, human and material, that support organizing work.

What is this “organizing work” to which religious institutions may contribute? Organizing is an intentional process that differs from other methods of social change. Strong organizing involves transforming communities and people and increasing civic participation and mass power in politics. Organizing is not just about helping people; it is about shifting power so that people can help themselves. POWER follows this model by emphasizing transformation in their work:

Our path to creating a more just world involves teaching people of faith how to build and exercise their own power to address the root causes of the daily injustices they face. At the center of our faith-based community organizing efforts is the belief in potential transformation – of people, institutions, and our larger culture” (Building Communities of Opportunity”).

By specifically calling attention to their “path,” it is clear that POWER is intentional about their process. As is typical of FBCOs, POWER focuses on teaching, sometimes referred to as (leadership) development in such a way that both participants and entire communities are transformed in more just and powerful citizens. POWER participants not only believe in this transformation; they fight for it.

In addition to process and transformation, POWER also emphasizes diversity. POWER represents multiple communities and a wide range of identities. While this can lead to challenges in navigating differences, this diversity enhances POWER’s credibility and prevents

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3 Later, I will discuss how POWER and FBCOs more generally work to address the root causes of daily injustices.
4 Not every Philadelphia religious group is well represented in POWER. For example, there is only one mosque in POWER Philadelphia despite Philadelphia’s high Muslim population. One interviewee attributed this to historical tensions between black Muslims and black Christians. Moreover, only religious institutions can join; individuals cannot.
the organization from advancing the interests of one group at the expense of others. POWER Philadelphia now has 48 congregations, 37 of which are Christian, 8 Jewish, and the remaining a mix of Muslim, Unitarian Universalist, and Ethical Humanist. Of the 37 Christian congregations, 7 are Catholic (one of which is an order of nuns), 5 are Baptist, 5 are United Church of Christ (UCC), 5 are United Methodist, 3 are Episcopal, 2 Quaker, 1 Lutheran, 1 Presbyterian, 1 Reformed UCC, 1 African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1 Mennonite, and 4 are unaffiliated. Of the Jewish congregations, 3 are Reconstructionist, 1 Renewal, 1 Reform, 1 Conservative, and 2 unaffiliated. POWER Metro includes about 15 congregations of similar representations. While Christian dominated, POWER has represented a diverse range of denominations and faiths since its start.

POWER launched in 2010. I spoke with Bishop Dwayne Royster (who now works for PICO) two years ago when he was POWER’s executive director about the group’s foundation. POWER leaders began by conducting 1200 one-on-ones (two-person intentional meetings) centered around what kept people up at night—their major concerns and challenges—with folks all over the city. Over the course of nine months, 200 people read through all the one-on-ones and narrowed down major concerns to five areas: safety, education, health care, jobs, and housing.

Then POWER began to look for ways to fix some of the city’s problems. They conducted approximately 50 meetings with city leaders—including the police commissioner, bank leaders, and the district attorney. After sifting through the information, POWER leaders discussed what to do next. They decided to seize an opportunity: the city was working to expand the airport, but

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5 Some of Alinsky’s projects were criticized, because after particular communities gained power, they became elites who oppressed others.
6 These numbers are based on POWER’s website at the time of this research.
7 Note that not all Quakers identify as Christian.
most of the airport employees were not making living wages. POWER leaders decided to embark on an ambitious plan to raise wages for airport workers. After about two years of protests, meetings, and a ballot initiative, POWER Interfaith (demanding $10 an hour) helped to move the mayor of Philadelphia to raise wages to $12 an hour for contracted and subcontracted workers. In addition to this first major project, POWER has also been involved in education reform efforts, Black Lives Matter protests, voter registration, and other campaigns as they navigate the different interests and backgrounds of the various member congregations. These examples of POWER’s past work provide a helpful background for understanding what they do and what they care about.

V. POWER as a Religion

In addition to uniting various religious congregations under one umbrella, POWER can be understood as a religious community itself with a particular set of values and practices. Describing POWER in this way allows us to think more openly and critically about what religion is. What I call “conventional religious congregations” (Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Humanist etc.) come together to form an FBCO that is itself like a religion. This conceptualization of FBCOs allows us to better understand how organizing affects and has the potential to affect participants.

There are many different ways to define religion. Often, someone’s definition of religion is simply derived from whatever religious tradition with which they are most familiar. Those operating from an American Protestant Christian standpoint, for example, may be inclined to define religion as private and belief-centric. Perhaps, someone who grew up in a secular Israeli Jewish community might think of religion as a male-dominated hierarchy legitimized by the state. Because this thesis is about what organizing does to and for people, a functionalist
definition is relevant. Often referred to as the father of sociology, Emile Durkheim’s definition of religion is useful, because it captures what FBCOs like POWER do for people.

Durkheim defines religion as “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church” (46). Central to Durkheim’s theory of religion is that religions make distinctions between the sacred and profane. Setting apart specific times, places, objects, or people through rules and regulations makes them sacred and unifies a community in the process. Growing up, I always had a sense that Shabbat, specifically Friday night, was holy, because my dad would always cook a special dinner and we would say prayers together as a family. We would eat in the dining room instead of the kitchen, as we did on other evenings. We would dress nicely and often invite guests. These practices not only sanctified the Sabbath, but also Judaism, my family, and our home. We set ourselves apart from others and we set Friday night apart from other nights. This separation is intentional and crucial. Rituals which mark what is holy—as separate from what is profane—bind communities together. According to Durkheim, both beliefs and practices are central to distinguishing between what is holy and what is profane. These distinguishing beliefs and practices bring people together and create an in- and out-group. By this definition, religion is necessarily social and not limited to communities which are “conventionally” religious.

Countries, families, any group of people can unite together over certain conceptions of the sacred. For example, Robert Bellah challenged and expanded conventional understandings of religion when he proposed that the United States itself embodies an “American civil religion,” with particular symbols, community, and beliefs about the sacred (Bellah 171). “Religion” is not

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8 For a more specific understanding of the sacred in the context of POWER, see below, “Beliefs and Practices in POWER.”
simply “conventionally-understood religions,” but rather any community with values and rituals which mark separation between the holy and profane. This analysis helps us to better understand the modern-nation state and its ritual activities, from inaugurations to football games. It also helps us understand what state rituals do to and for participants and the country as a whole.

In Durkheim’s definition of religion, sacred distinctions unify people, but he is sometimes criticized for erasing difference by claiming that a system of beliefs and practices is “unified.” Even for POWER, unity does not mean unanimity. In any group or community, there is never complete conformity to any one set of practices or beliefs. There are exceptions, disagreements, disunity. In addition to its diverse composition, POWER Interfaith is not ideologically monolithic. While their website details specific organizational commitments, for example, there is not complete consensus on some of those commitments. POWER’s mission statement provides an opportunity to examine some of the organization’s fundamental beliefs:

POWER uses our belief in God’s goodness and compassion for the suffering to organize and empower the people of Philadelphia, Southeastern, and Central Pennsylvania to live and work together so that God’s presence is known on every block, that people work together to transform the conditions of their neighborhood, and that life flourishes for all (“POWER Mission”).

This statement is somewhat vague. What are goodness, compassion, and empowerment? What does it mean to make God’s presence known on every block and transform neighborhood conditions? Does this statement unify POWER participants? Invoking God can serve to unite those who believe in God, even as their conceptions of God differ. God language can appeal to many Jews, Muslims, Catholics, and Protestants. However, not every POWER member is comfortable with this language.

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9 For example, by my fellow classmates.
10 It is worth noting that many individual Jews, especially Secular and Humanist Jews, do not believe in God, however, the Reform, Conservative, and Reconstructionist member congregations in POWER do, even as individuals within the congregations may not.
I discovered some tension about this God language when I spoke with Hugh Taft-Morales, the leader of the Philadelphia Ethical Society—the only ethical humanist congregation in POWER. The Ethical Society is non-theistic, so it does not take a stand on God’s existence. Taft-Morales explained that his community’s discomfort with the centrality of God in POWER made them hesitant to join:

When we first looked at the POWER mission statement, the first reaction for many people, including myself, was that we can't join (laughing). They want to “recreate God's blessed community on every street corner, show God's love and power…” We went back and forth between, should we join [or] should we join but attach a note to our application saying, “Out of respect for people of faith, we don't want to pretend that we are buying into the theistic elements of the mission…”

Joining POWER places the Ethical Society members under an umbrella organization that does not reflect all of their beliefs. However, Taft-Morales and his congregants’ commitment to POWER’s work and effectiveness supersede this difference: “We want to feel included, but also our inclusion feels like a much less [significant] issue than the dire issues facing the people that POWER is trying to empower. So, some of it is simply not making as big a deal as we might feel if we were just focusing on our own perspective on the world.” While non-theism is one of the Ethical Humanists’ values, engaging in effective social justice work is more important. Despite their reservations about POWER’s explicit God-language, the Ethical Humanists joined POWER because of its effectiveness.

Taft-Morales reiterated more than once that POWER’s appeal lies especially in its unique effectiveness to create change in Philadelphia. He explained, “No one is doing what POWER is doing as effectively in delivering people at critical moments, pressure-pointing the government.” POWER has built up a great deal of influence in Philadelphia and is able to bring thousands of people together to protest, petition, and hold city leaders accountable. This effectiveness is
particularly appealing to Taft-Morales, who is committed to ethical principles that demand political action, because he has much less power acting alone. He and his community are willing to give up their non-theistic language in order to be part of POWER: “to a degree, we are having to make compromises in what would be the ideal project, because we also want to be effective, so we're joining a coalition.” Underlying this commitment to “effectiveness” is a shared conception of social justice, the realm in which they want to be effective. So, while POWER participants may disagree on God, they agree on certain principles and methods of social justice.11

As an intentionally interfaith and interracial organization, POWER values a balance between unity and diversity. Zachary Ritvalsky especially emphasized this value. An African American man, Ritvalsky grew up in Philadelphia and now serves as the Pastor of Sweet Union Baptist Church in Philadelphia. He noted that organizations like POWER must gather “a critical mass of people to share a common vision, a common mission, in many cases, sometimes shared beliefs” to transform their communities. In POWER, there are many different people of various races, congregations, denominations, etc., but participants are able to unite around these shared commitments. Ritvalsky further emphasizes unity in diversity and effectiveness by citing a common bible verse:

And too often in the city of Philadelphia, you find isolated efforts to bring about significant change, but the impact of that effort is small because it's either a single person or just a few persons involved in it. And it really disregards a mandate that I see in the bible that… within “Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, there's neither bond nor free, there's neither male nor female but that we are all one in Christ” and as a result of that we are bound to work together for the common good. Almost the slogan becomes, “what can we do together that we can’t do apart?”

11 See “Beliefs and Practices” below for an explanation of what unites POWER members.
Ritvalsky, a minister, links his Christian faith and text with pragmatism. Unity across lines of difference is necessary for POWER to be effective in their work. For Ritvalsky, POWER organizing fit naturally into an interpretation of the Gospel which focuses on social justice. POWER’s unity and diversity are integral to its effectiveness in the public arena.

Although there is disagreement within POWER on particular issues, and even on the language of their mission statement, the member congregations remain united in a shared pursuit of social justice in Philadelphia (and now surrounding areas) and a commitment to particular practices. Despite their diverse faith backgrounds, POWER participants come together not simply to support a specific platform or political agenda or belief in a deity/dieties, but over shared concerns and deeply-held beliefs about what is sacred—human life, radical action, and building power. Moreover, the practices in which they engage reflect these commitments to what is sacred. Each participant considers themselves a member of a religious institution, but also as a member of the “moral community” that is POWER (Durkheim 46). As a “moral community,” POWER members hold particular beliefs and engage in specific practices which create sacred distinctions and establish moral attitudes. These complement the beliefs and practices of POWER members’ home congregations.  

VI. Habitus

Before turning to POWER’s beliefs and practices more specifically, it is important to explain the theory underlying my claims about the relationship between belief and practice. The concept of habitus provides insight into how beliefs and practices cultivate and reinforce each other. This is particularly important, because the existing practices and beliefs which undergird systemic problems often make it difficult to solve these problems and even imagine new

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12 I will explain in more detail in the “Beliefs and Practices in POWER” section below.
possibilities. By engaging in specific repetitive practices, POWER participants are better able to imagine and create change.

For those who are concerned about current issues such as war, inequality, and domination, it is important to recognize the powerful forces upholding this violent, oppressive status quo. How people live their lives is heavily influenced by elites in ways that not only limit someone’s ability to act, but also their ability to imagine something different. According to the 20th century French scholar, Pierre Bourdieu, it is through repeated practices, mostly unintentional, that people learn to accept current systems of domination and then reproduce them, i.e. habitus. Bourdieu defines habitus as:

systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations which can be objectively "regulated" and "regular" without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and, being all this, collectively orchestrated without being the product of the orchestrating action of a conductor (Outline of a Theory on Practice 72).

Habitus is the sum of how people act and think. It is ingrained in who they are and allows them to adapt to new situations. It is both “structured” and “structuring,” meaning that it is created by an individual’s social, temporal, and physical environment and it then re-inscribes those same dispositions. Habitus is not necessarily explicit, intentional, or conscious, but rather maintained by social mores which everyone enforces. For example, when I wear a yarmulke in environments with strict religious, gendered boundaries, I am likely to elicit stares and rude comments. There is not a single authority commanding me not to wear a kippah, but rather a decentralized social system of taboos. The idea of habitus is particularly relevant to POWER, because the issues they are working to address are embedded in many unconscious practices and beliefs, such as implicit racism, sexism, and classism. Habitus is dynamic and long-lasting. In order to achieve real,
lasting change, groups like POWER must intervene at the level of habitus, because it holds
power relations in place.

Bourdieu is curious why even those who are subordinated consent to these power
relations and perpetuate them. He seems to allude to habitus in his discussion of the persistence
of the status quo and of the patriarchy in particular:

I have always been astonished… that the established order, with its relations of
domination… ultimately perpetuates itself so easily, apart from a few historical accidents,
and that the most intolerable conditions of existence can so often be perceived as
acceptable and even natural. And I have also seen masculine domination, and the way it
is imposed and suffered, as the prime example of this paradoxical submission…
imperceptible and invisible even to its victims (Masculine Domination 1).

Masculine domination is one form of habitus: it is pervasive, socially constructed though viewed
as natural, and enforced and accepted even by those who are oppressed by it. These existing
social structures recreate themselves. Like the patriarchy, systems of domination are difficult to
overthrow. For thousands of years, people viewed slavery as natural and normal, and even today,
many people consent to their own subjugation. It might seem normal or necessary that there will
be homeless folks, asking for money on urban streets. War may appear as an inevitable facet of
life. The systemic evil of mass incarceration may simply feel like a personal failure to those
incarcerated. POWER encourages people to share their stories, recognize the interconnectedness
of the suffering that they face, and realize that they are not alone. POWER demonstrates that
everyone in the community is collectively responsible to hold leaders accountable and institute
policies that serve middle, working, and lower-class people.

Habitus can be difficult to identify and even more challenging to change. Is it possible to
interrupt this cycle of “structured” and “structuring”? If so, how? Feminist scholar, Judith Butler,
acknowledges that identities, such as gender, are socially constructed, which opens possibilities
for change: “reified and naturalized conceptions of gender might be understood as constituted and, hence, capable of being constituted differently” (1). The belief that gender is a constant and ahistorical “thing” is a myth; recognizing this myth allows us to imagine something different. Similarly, if other invisible, assumed-to-be-natural systems of domination are made clear, it becomes possible to intervene. Butler opens up space for agency in a system governed by norms outside of any one person’s control.

Feminist and Islamist anthropologist, Saba Mahmood, departs from Bourdieu’s idea of habitus and challenges Butler’s conflation of agency with resistance. She draws from an Aristotelian conception of habitus concerned with intentional moral cultivation through embodied practices (196). Through her research on the contemporary women’s piety movement in Egypt, Mahmood has found that the idea of habitus is useful not only in describing structures of domination outside of our control, but also repetitive practices which people might deliberately employ in order to effect internal dispositions. For example, one of the women Mahmood worked with, Amal, describes how she cultivated the Islamic virtue of shyness through outward action:

I used to think that, even though shyness was required of us by God, if I acted shyly it would be hypocritical because I didn’t actually feel it inside of me. Then, one day in reading [a verse of the Quran]… I realized that al-ḥayāʾ [shyness] was among the good deeds and, given my natural lack of shyness, I had to make or create it first. I realized that… eventually your inside learns to have al-ḥayāʾ too (qtd. in 194).

Mahmood’s interlocutors challenge the idea that virtues and dispositions can only be cultivated through structures outside of human intention. The women she worked with strive to cultivate piety through particular, repetitive actions. Drawing from her informants, Mahmood redefines agency not as exclusively resistance, but as “as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create” (180). While subjugation may shape the options for
action that are available to someone, such action may be in opposition to or consistent with norms of subordination. This definition is more open-ended than the Butlerian idea of agency as “the capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendent will, or other obstacles” (Mahmood 183). The Egyptian women with whom Mahmood worked do not neatly fit into the submission-resistance binary where agency is narrowly defined as opposition to norms.

This intentional, Aristotelian idea of habitus is especially relevant for POWER and organizing more generally. Organizer-scholar, Romand Coles speculates that an intentional habitus might allow organizers and academics to achieve greater power, creativity and success: “I began to wonder if it might be possible to cocreate a radical democratic habitus that would become conducive to fresher, more potent thought and action in the face of the monumental crises of our times” (7). For Coles, a “radical democratic habitus” brings together both organizers and academics to think more imaginatively, pragmatically, powerfully, and beyond the limiting ways of thinking shaped by current crises and existing structures. He explains that this habitus would:

engender persistent patterns, practices, dynamics, and sensibilities that tend to further nurture our receptive and cocreative powers in relation to differences and collective possibilities typically unacknowledged by the dominant rules and common sense of any given time (12).

This “radical democratic habitus” inspires new ways of thinking and acting which leads people to be more open-minded, cooperative in diverse communities, and creative. As Coles finds, this re-imagination of identity and action and their potential, is happening in organizing. In the next section, I will show how POWER is transforming participants and creating a community that inspires creative and powerful ways of thinking and acting.
VII. Beliefs and Practices in POWER:

A. Introduction

What are the particular beliefs and practices which unify the members of POWER? While it is difficult to narrow POWER participants’ beliefs and practices into one neatly-packaged paragraph, I will highlight some fundamental unifying commitments and actions. I have chosen to focus on a few beliefs and practices which I find to be particularly central to POWER’s work and evident in my research. Among POWER’s beliefs are commitments to human life and dignity for all people, especially those who are marginalized locally (children, the poor, African Americans, immigrants, etc…); addressing the root causes of problems—valuing justice and not only charity; and building power for the people. POWER cultivates and reinforces these values through specific organizing practices. POWER engages in many practices, but I have chosen to highlight those which were most prevalent in my interviews: one-on-one meetings, public narratives, direct action, and the incorporation of conventionally religious rituals (faith traditions). Part of POWER’s mission is to turn people who are acted upon into people who act. While I do not claim that POWER completely and totally inverts the status quo, I do argue that POWER successfully transforms communities and people in powerful and important ways, namely to assert and reinforce the aforementioned commitments through organizing practices.

I will first describe each value. Then, I will enumerate the different practices and explain how they reinforce and are reinforced by some or all of the values. Below is a chart which details the intersections of POWER’s values/commitments/beliefs and their practices. I have designed this chart to illustrate the connections between each of POWER’s values and practices (See Figure 1 below). Inspired by a somewhat similar chart in Flaherty and Wood’s study on the
impact of organizing on congregational development (14), I created this chart based on my
interviews, participant observation, and textual research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practices</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Human Dignity</th>
<th>Radical Action</th>
<th>Building Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:1s</td>
<td>Good 1:1s require both listening and sharing. When done right, both participants feel that their sharing and listening is valued, that their story and their life matters.</td>
<td>A major goal of a one-on-one is to get at the root of a person, what drives them and what they care about most.</td>
<td>Effective one-on-ones build each participant’s power by inspiring them to take action together.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Narratives</td>
<td>Public narratives function very much like one-on-ones, but with a larger audience. It can be dignity-affirming for speakers to share their pain, struggles, and ideas and for listeners to be moved by and respond to that pain.</td>
<td>Public story-telling can reorient people to think more critically about the origins of social problems, rather than simply blame the victims. These narratives inspire “collective” rather than “personal” responsibility.</td>
<td>Like 1:1s, powerful public narratives humanize issues and can inspire a group of people to take action, or to continue to act in the face of adversity.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Actions</td>
<td>Direct actions redirect attention and authority to marginalized people and helps them to build confidence in their own self worth.</td>
<td>Direct actions target the roots of problems, power imbalances, by demonstrating the demands of the many against the power and corruption of the few.</td>
<td>Direct actions demonstrate and build people power and garner media attention, raising the stakes for “targets.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion/Fait</td>
<td>Incorporating religious ritual that is familiar to participants can make them feel that they and their faith are valued.</td>
<td>POWER often uses religious ritual to reimagine possibilities.</td>
<td>Religious rituals can often elevate the significance that an action might garner from the news or for participants. When clergy act, people are often more likely to notice.</td>
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</tbody>
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B. POWER Values

1. Human Dignity and Standing with the Vulnerable:

In many of my conversations, POWER leaders express explicit commitments to human dignity and to stand with marginalized people—particularly poor, black, and brown folks, immigrants, and children. By working in POWER for livable wages, racial justice, and education reform, these leaders have found avenues through which to express these commitments. Many of the people I spoke with simply state their alliance with the most vulnerable and marginalized in addition to demonstrating this through their actions.

Carol Duncan and Reverend Kerbel, both Episcopalian, express specific commitments to serve the “vulnerable.” Carol Duncan, an Episcopal Deacon at St. Martin’s in the Fields, grew up in the Philadelphia area and was committed to her faith from an early age. For Duncan, working for marginalized people is an essential aspect of the deaconate: “Deacons in the Episcopal Church are the expression of Jesus's servant leadership ministries and we are called to be the bridge between the church and the world on behalf of the most vulnerable. And so, I have a call to be working on behalf of vulnerable people.” Growing up, Duncan felt like an outsider at school. Church is where she found community and her calling to stand with others who may feel left out or marginalized. Reverend Jarrett Kerbel, the Episcopal minister at the same church where Carol Duncan serves, uses similar language to describe his political commitments: “I grew up with the Gospel value of knowing that God cares most about the most vulnerable and I guess that infected me on some level.” Through POWER, both Kerbel and Duncan have found ways to fulfill their interpretation of the Christian idea of serving the vulnerable.

Using different language, those from other faith traditions also articulated commitments to human dignity and supporting those who are marginalized. Drawing from his Ethical
Humanist tradition, Hugh Taft-Morales is committed “to treat[ing] every person as being of inherent worth.” While this is slightly different than an explicit commitment to stand with those who are marginalized, it similarly reflects human value. Like Taft-Morales, Rabbi Eli Freedman takes a slightly different approach. Freedman grew up in Newton, Massachusetts, a wealthy Jewish suburb of Boston. For Freedman, understanding his privilege has led him not only to feel grateful, but to take on responsibility for addressing inequity. Working with POWER helped Freedman understand inequality and privilege. He acknowledges that he is able to move more freely in Philadelphia without arousing suspicion simply because of his race. Even though American Jews were oppressed in the past, Freedman argues that now they are more privileged and have a responsibility to use that privilege to address inequality: “We come at the civil rights struggle from a different place, from a place of more power, from a place of privilege and… actually in my mind, [this] is just as much if not more reason to be involved and to fight for justice because we have that power.” Even though he does not explicitly articulate the importance of standing with the vulnerable, Freedman, like Duncan, Kerbel, and Taft-Morales, is committed to pursuing justice for all people.

POWER leaders’ commitments to human dignity and to children, especially poor children and children of color, is evident in their anger at the horrendous situation of Philadelphia’s public schools. Reverend Holston grew up in Philadelphia and sometimes faced violence after school because he is black. His involvement in POWER is deeply rooted in his life-long efforts to fight racism. Holston is especially about the racial inequality in school funding: school districts of color receive much less funding than others. Considering this inequality, it becomes clear that racial justice and education reform intersect. Reverend Holston was particularly moved by the children at one dilapidated, asbestos-infested, underfunded school.
Kids at Cassidy Middle School, noted as the school with the worst building in the district, wrote to their representatives protesting their school’s conditions:

They wrote in their own little writing, “why does the color of my skin matter in terms of funding my school?” So, this is a fourth grader saying this. Fourth grader. And sometimes children can just say stuff so simply and so powerfully, as they [did when they] delivered those letters to people in Harrisburg.

Reverend Holston was moved by the story of these fourth graders. It has stuck with him and continued to motivate him to work for change. For Holston, school funding is a matter of racial justice, of dignity and opportunity for all children. Education reform requires a radical approach.

2. Radical Action:

Radical: “of, relating, or proceeding from a root… Origin and Etymology of Radical: Middle English, from Late Latin radicalis, from Latin radic-, radix root” (“Radical”).

POWER is a radical organization, because it works to address the roots of problems by focusing on addressing systemic issues. It is also radical, because to address the roots of problems, POWER must fundamentally reimagine and recreate how people think and interact with each other (habitus). Rather than exclusively emphasize a model of personal responsibility and individual choice, POWER embraces and acts on a collective responsibility to solve social problems.

This is clear in their work to repair Philadelphia’s public schools. When I asked Rabbi Freedman, if the schools are so bad, why he does not simply move or send his daughter to a private school, he explained that his own self-interest, care for his neighbors, and religious beliefs motivate him to fight for a better school system:

I don't want to have to move… But also, it's not just about us, right, it's about the greater community in which we live… [and also] that we're created in the image of God, that we're all created equal, that we all have this divine spark within us… I probably could move to another neighborhood whereas there are others in my neighborhood who don't have that option and they deserve it [good education] just as much as everyone else.
Rabbi Freedman sees the education issues not as issues of personal choice, but as communal issues that require communal solutions, as moral-religious issues that require moral-religious solutions, and as political issues that require political solutions. He is motivated in part by his own interests, but he also cares about others in his community and recognizes that moving or sending his child to a private school is a privilege not everyone can afford.

Terri Burgin, an African American Catholic woman who serves on the Economic Dignity Team, also views education reform as a collective issue. She was particularly moved by the story of a 12-year-old girl she was working with at a Catholic school. This girl was about to switch to her local public school and had low expectations for her future since many of her cousins at that school were already pregnant or in gangs: “If she was lucky, she would graduate and work a menial job that would make ends meet and so her life was already planned out. And so, she didn't really feel the need to fight anymore for herself.” Burgin was deeply troubled by this unfairness and powerlessness. As an African American woman who works hard to overcome limits set by others and even herself, Burgin is especially indignant: “It seemed wrong that we have created a system where someone's life is defined and decided for them before they're old enough to drive or make a decision and it just seemed, [to me] as a person of faith, fundamentally wrong that we would do this to someone.” Burgin is not only angry that this is the reality for many of Philadelphia’s young people, especially those of color and those who live in poverty, but also that “we” allowed this to happen. We, all of us, have a responsibility to create systems and structures that are fair for everyone and to change those structures when they are not fair. This is in line with POWER’s belief in the importance of addressing systemic issues, pursuing justice and not only charity.
POWER’s member congregations not only support people in need through charity but also work to attack the root causes of problems. By emphasizing justice as well as charity, organizing expands the social justice work people engage in and their conceptions of what is religiously commanded. Urban scholar, Paul Osterman, explains that this limited conception focuses more on charitable giving and volunteering and ignores politics (101-2). FBCOs expand participants’ conceptions of social action to include a commitment to justice—attacking the sources of problems—in addition to charity—addressing the symptoms of problems.

Consistent with this trend, in seminary, Zachary Ritvalsky encountered teachings that expanded his interpretation of the Gospel and led him to organize: “[I was] really understanding the Gospel under a new and different light than I had ever understood it before, particularly as it relates to justice and that more or less piqued and birthed my interest in combining obviously faith and social justice and the implications in underserved communities.” Pursuing justice and improving communities stems directly from Ritvalsky’s interpretation of the Gospel. Ritvalsky’s conception of the Gospel necessitates addressing systemic issues in one’s community:

[I realized that] redemption was more [than] about just the individual, that redemption encompassed all of creation. And anywhere that was in the geography that the church called its place where there was injustice perpetrated within that geographical area, we were bound to speak up and to call sin, "sin...” I began to understand that sin becomes systemic.

Ritvalsky began to realize that when there are people living in dilapidated houses, poverty, and without access to good education, he is religiously obligated to help them and address those issues on a systemic level rather than help people only on an individual level. POWER demonstrates this commitment to attacking issues on a systemic level by bringing multiple institutions together, rather than focusing on isolated individuals.
POWER can be read as a religion that focuses on communal redemption. From its start, POWER has linked together people’s problems and identified patterns as they sifted through thousands of conversations with local citizens. Moreover, their approach to education reform depends on changing the public school system and funding practices, rather than simply moving one’s own children to another school or expanding choices. Many of POWER’s congregations continue to support charitable projects, but they are often drawn to POWER because of its systemic approach. In turn, POWER teaches people to think about problems as political, rather than only individual. People must build power in order to address political problems.

3. Power:

To POWER members, power is a valence-neutral term. They recognize the importance of building power for the people and holding those in power accountable. Rabbi Freedman acknowledges this negative connotation and the intentional reclamation of power:

Power is a tough word and it’s interesting that our interfaith group is called POWER. And I think we were very thoughtful about that, because I think a lot of people are scared of the word, “power,” and have a negative view of power, and I think a big part of the community organizing model and a lot of my rabbinate is about embracing that, and not being scared of that word, “power,” and thinking about it in the right way.

For Freedman, reclaiming power for the masses is an important part of organizing. Expressing the same sentiment in an IAF training video, well-known organizer, Ernesto Cortés, recognizes people’s anxiety about power, but situates it in historical context and recasts it as positive:

We’ve been taught to think negatively about power… Lord Acton said that power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Lord Acton wrote about popes and kings. But Lord Acton was talking about power which is inaccessible, power which is unaccountable, power which is untransparent, which tends to hide itself in magic and mystery… because the theology of power is that power is part of creation and like all things that are part of creation, they come from God. And what do we know about creation, from Genesis? That its good! But like all things that are in creation, it can be misused (“Ernesto Cortés on Power”).
Since organizers often refer to power as valance-neutral, they recognize that it is susceptible to both good and bad uses. Cortés distinguishes corrupt power from other kinds of power. Underlying his criticism of regal and papal power is support for accessible, accountable, and transparent power. That is the kind of power that FBCOs work to build. According to Cortés, “The word, ‘power,’ literally means the ability to act… The definition of power is two or more people coming together with a plan” (“Ernesto Cortés on Power”). For organizers like Cortés, power is simply about taking action. Similarly, for Rabbi Freedman, the “right way” to think about power is rooted in people coming together to take action:

There’s a lot of different kinds of power. And definitely for organizing, it’s a power of relationships. And I think that’s a big part of what the power of the rabbinate and the power of faith-based communities is… You know, it’s one thing if I, Eli Freedman, go and try to meet\textsuperscript{13} with [Philadelphia City Council President] Darrell Clarke. It’s another thing if Jews from Rodeph Shalom, Black Christians from Mother Bethel AME, Reverend Ernie Flores and other folks from Germantown Baptist… all come together and say we want a meeting. It’s a very different kind of meeting. Power respects power. Power listens to power, right? And so, if we want to be able to have some agency and control, we have to have that power.

As Rabbi Freedman describes it, power is about relationships, about people, and about accountability. Darrell Clarke has the power to make decisions that affect the city and there is nothing wrong with that as long as he is held accountable by a diverse group of citizens. Freedman’s reference to a diverse group of religiously-affiliated Philadelphians demonstrates the power in and importance of diversity in this relationship of accountability. It is also interesting to note Freedman’s use of the term, “agency,” which is consistent with Mahmood’s definition. Power is about exercising “some” agency, acting on one’s interests, within constraints.

\textsuperscript{13} Rabbi Freedman is describing a leadership meeting, an important POWER practice that I have chosen not to elaborate on due to the length and scope of this project and because other interviewees did not discuss it.
C. POWER Practices

1. One-on-Ones

After I explain what they are, I will show how one-on-ones are dignity-affirming, radical, and powerful. One-on-one meetings are an essential element of any type of community organizing. One-on-ones, 1:1s, or one-to-ones are intentional, two-person conversations dedicated to understanding someone’s self-interest and building power. Although one-on-ones are a universal element of organizing, they vary in style and length from one organization (and even one person) to another. Reverend Jarett Kerbel describes how he conceives of them:

A one on one is highly intentional you know if you're shooting the shit, it's not a one-to-one. My rule is if you tell me about movies, if you're talking about the weather, if you're talking about sports, it's over. Quit. Either reframe it or quit. It's got to be about who are you, what makes you, what's your story. Tell me your story… [It] should be 30 minutes - 45 minutes. They're not long, lugubrious things. You gotta put a little time pressure on it, otherwise you're just wasting time because you have a lot of these to do.

Intentionality and deep story-telling are central to a one-on-one. Sharing these stories and listening to another’s stories builds a relationship and inculcates a person’s sense of their own value. For Kerbel, as for many others, one-on-ones take on a spiritual significance:

I really have a deep spiritual love for the one-to-one, because it's getting to know people. It is a primary human good, really caring about people, listening to them, understanding what their passion and their heart is, what their motivation is, what they care about. It's never a waste of time. That is awesome. I totally love it and it brings the world together because the world is always trying to tear us apart.

One-on-ones are meant to build power and help encourage participants to take action, but even the act of doing them makes the world a better place, according to Kerbel. By learning, through training, practice, feedback and reflection, those who conduct one-on-ones repeatedly develop stronger listening skills, curiosity, and vulnerability. People deepen their relationships and learn to react with questions rather than arguments, to try to understand others rather than persuade them. Engaging in one-on-ones is one way to cultivate a commitment to human dignity. When
people listen attentively and are listened to, they reinforce a sense of their own self-worth and dignity.

In addition to dignity-affirming, one-on-ones are radical, because they draw attention to the roots of someone’s concerns and values. In an IAF training video, the famous organizer, Ernesto Cortés, describes a relational meeting or one-on-one as radical, “because it goes to the root of the situation” (“Ernesto Cortés on Relational Meetings”). A good one-on-one elicits what drives someone at their core, what they care most about. According to Kerbel, focusing on someone’s core and their formation is sacred: “we call them sacred listening which I really like. I like the sacred listening, you know, because it's about you. I want to know about you, what forms you, what forms what you believe.” Something holy is happening when two people build a relationship around what they care about most, rather than around superficial things.

Finally, one-on-ones are powerful, because they motivate people to act on what they care most about. After a good one-on-one, I will find myself eager to set plans in motion, to send emails, set up meetings, and make phone calls. Good one-on-ones help remind me what I care about most and help me pull myself out of laziness and loneliness. Moreover, when two people one-on-one each other on a regular basis, they become accountable to do what they set out to do before speaking again. Also, regular and multiple one-on-ones can create networks of interconnected people who are ready to mobilize in times of need. For example, Rabbi Shawn Zevit was moved and motivated to show up for POWER colleagues after people were murdered at an AME church in Charleston, South Carolina:

Reverend Tyler called me and said, “Can you be there? I'm putting together a vigil that night.” And it's funny, I get emotional just recounting it (tearing up) and I said, "Of course I'm going to be there." And he said, “Will you please sing a song, but sing it in Hebrew, like I really want to hear that.” And I just remember the power of that evening and how it impacted him when he [Tyler] said, “Thank you so much for all coming here to share our loss in
AMES.” And [then]... I think it was a white pastor stood up and said, “Tonight we're all AME.” And the place broke up into a huge roar of solidarity and support.

Through many one-on-ones and other relational work, Zevit has built strong relationships with his colleagues in POWER. These relationships have strengthened his commitment to POWER and the other participants in it, moving him to show up when he is asked to. One-on-ones reinforce human dignity through active listening and sharing, inspire radical action by focusing on the roots of a person’s actions and values, and build power by motivating short-term and long-term action.

2. Public Narratives

POWER members tell stories not only in one-on-ones, but in public settings as well. In this section, I will describe how public narratives specifically demonstrate a commitment to human dignity. Often, those who tell stories in public settings develop their own leadership through the process. When someone tells their story, it empowers and dignifies the teller as well as the listener. Many stories are radical, because they reveal the roots of problems and bring people together in a shared goal to address those roots. Power grows, because people become more motivated to act and to act together.

One MLK day, POWER held an action in which airport workers came to speak. Reverend Holston told me how moved he was by the story of one of the airport workers who was making less money than she needed to pay her bills:

She [the airport worker] said, “At the end of every month I had to actually go ask people for money to make ends meet for me and my son. I need a job that will pay me enough just to take care of me and my son.” And after... she shared all that, you could see people in the congregation... just nodding their head and saying, “you know that’s not right.” And so, I felt that. I felt that.

Public narratives such as this one challenge people to care for and respond to others’ needs and pain, not only their own. The collective listening, nodding, and responding takes people out of a
neoliberal embeddedness in their own lives. Reverend Holston describes how important these stories are and how they not only uplift the speakers, but also help the listeners to become more fulfilled:

> It is always in the stories of people that you feel something that moves you to action. And when you move because of the stories of people, you actually put yourself in a position where you can be your best self, because you’re moving and hearing their pain and responding to their pain… You know, you’ll never reach your full potential, you’ll never be all of what you can be until you’re responding to the pain of others and in that response, you actually find yourself.

Just as the woman telling the story might feel empowered and dignified, listeners like Reverend Holston are also fulfilled. Self-actualization and human dignity go hand in hand. Through POWER’s work, people become more dignified, more fulfilled, and more self-actualized.

> Public narratives also serve to empower and dignify those who give them. Often, POWER leaders will ask someone to take on a public speaking leadership role which then inspires that person to be more confident and exercise the power they have. Terri Burgin felt particularly powerful when she was asked to deliver public narratives. At a POWER event, she was asked to lead, to speak in front of a group:

> Reverend Royster put me up in front of 175 people with no mic and said, “You talk… you're the opening act and you need to encourage this group to keep going...” And so, here I was in front of my colleagues and friends and I had to say something... Apparently, it went really well. Everyone loved it. In fact, I was asked to do it again and again. And all of a sudden, I looked around and I realized I was doing public speaking kind of all over the place and… [then] I was standing on the steps of the Supreme Court giving a speech in front of TV cameras… and I let go of expectations from myself and other people and just embraced the experiences that were given to me.

For Burgin, speaking in front of others changed the way she thought about herself. Moreover, it was not simply a one-time experience. Through continuing to organize and speak, Burgin transformed from a shy, quiet person, to a much more vocal and confident person. She reflects:
When I first joined POWER, I barely had enough of a voice to get heard across an office desk... but through POWER, I've been encouraged that my voice and my story had value, that my opinion had value and that there were people who would listen and honor it and so it's empowering to be a much more assertive person than I used to be and to have confidence in both myself and my own knowledge… When Reverend Royster, the former ED [executive director of POWER], met me, he said, “She's this quiet little kitten. I don't know what happened. At some point she became a lion (we both laugh)!”

Through her continued involvement in POWER, Burgin transformed into a more powerful person who now values her own story and ideas more. Through practice and training, Burgin’s habitus changed. Her disposition transformed from shyness to outspokenness. While this is perhaps the opposite transformation as the one pursued by Mahmood’s interlocutors (toward shyness, although the interpretation of this virtue is complex), through repeated practice and a supportive environment, Burgin cultivated a particular virtue. For Burgin, it is unclear if this cultivation is intentional or not. I think it is neither, in some ways surprising and organic, but not undesired. Even though she may not have set out to become more confident and assertive, Burgin notes that she feels empowered and valued. She is happy with the person she has become.

Public narratives like those of the airport worker and Terri Burgin inspire radical action and build power, because they move people to act collectively to address systemic problems. People react indignantly together. Stories like these motivate POWER members, like the thousands who protested outside the airport, to act. Rather than simply expecting airport workers to make their own ends meet, these stories inspire people to fight for large-scale shifts in policies.

### 3. Direct Actions

Often, the kind of work that public narratives inspire are direct actions. POWER organizes direct actions—protests, mass gatherings, days of action, demonstrations, rallies, group arrests, etc.—in order to galvanize people and bring them into their work; call attention to
systemic issues; and demonstrate that they represent a wide range of people and are powerful. I will focus in this section on how POWER’s direct actions affirm human dignity and empower those who lead them.

POWER’s direct actions help to call attention to the vulnerable and dignify those involved. Almost everyone that I spoke with mentioned POWER’s first big success at the airport. I spoke with Reverend Gregory Holston, the executive director of POWER, who was the head of the Economic Dignity team at the time of the airport action. It is important to him to stand with these vulnerable and courageous workers, some (tip workers) who were making as little as $2.50 an hour:

I felt honored really to be able to speak on their behalf. I felt honored. I saw courage. And a lot of workers there, black, brown, immigrant workers… [were] saying so boldly, “I will fight, and I don't care if I lose my job, I will fight, we’re going to have a union if it's the last thing I do.” And I saw that courage there and I said, “This is the place I need to be. I need to be with these workers. This is a part of my ministry as a pastor, to pastor them, to encourage them,” and many of those workers, they cried on my shoulder as we had many losses along the way.

Reverend Holston, with the help of other POWER clergy and participants, fought not just for a wage increase, but for the dignity of the airport workers. He was inspired by the workers and felt called to serve and support them. Through prayers and protests at the airport, POWER elevated their work to a sacred plane. They brought together, in Ritvansky’s words, “a critical mass of people to rise up against the establishment in order to obtain the change that's necessary, such that those who are marginalized and disadvantaged could get by their humanness.” By humanizing the airport workers, POWER was able to work with them and a few other organizations to achieve more humane wages. And by achieving wage increases, the workers’ dignity and humanity were reinforced. What POWER can do through its economic dignity work
is actually assert the humanness of those who are disadvantaged by working with them to fight for living wages.

As it was for Reverend Holston, direct actions can also be dignity-affirming experiences for those who lead them. Carol Duncan led a direct action in POWER which helped her to become a more powerful person. In September 2017, The Aloft Hotel had received 133,000,000 dollars from national, state, and city governments on the condition that they would hire 170 local workers. However, they later decided to forego the destination restaurant which would have secured 115 jobs. In response to this dishonesty, members of the church across the street, Arch Street United Methodist, reacted angrily and began to protest. The Arch Street Methodist Pastor asked Duncan to be the chief speaker of the action. This leadership role was invigorating and developmental for her:

I was leading it, because I was encouraged to do that, to grow in that way as a leader… The 12 of us sat down in the lobby in a line and we were arrested for protesting. So, I was handcuffed and taken off in a police car. We all were. And when you commit yourself that much, you have to do it in faith. And so, we were singing kind of halfway between hymns and worker songs as we were protesting. We weren't supposed to chant because that would make the sentencing worse. So, we just sang, we didn't chant. It was very exciting.

Duncan describes this moment as particularly exciting for her. She notes that she was asked to lead, even though she was hesitant. It was empowering for Duncan to lead a group of people, to get arrested, to do something she never thought she could do before. In this way, organizing increased her own capacity and confidence, which was bolstered by her faith. She became more able to act on her interests, i.e. more powerful.

4. Religion/Faith

The incorporation of faith leaders, congregations, rhetoric, and traditions in POWER’s work also add to the organization’s power and impact on participants. As in the direct action
described above, Duncan notes that her faith bolstered her commitment and motivated her to act. In this section, I will highlight how religion and faith make POWER’s work more powerful.

POWER incorporates conventionally religious rituals, prayer, and imagery into their work in many ways. They start and end every meeting and action with prayer, organize actions around religious holidays, and employ religious rhetoric.

Religious communities, and clergy in particular, are often regarded with high esteem in modern society and are able to garner media attention and power. In fact, one of the reasons why Rabbi Freedman chose to become a rabbi is because of this influence. After graduating from college, Freedman helped to lead a service trip to South America and he was inspired by a Priest he met named Father Alvarez and nicknamed Chencho:

I remember just sitting drinking a beer with him [Father Alvarez] one night and… I remember him saying something along the lines of, when he goes into a village and if he’s just “Chencho,” it’s one thing. But if he goes in[to a village] and he’s talking with donors and things like that as Father Alvarez, there’s a different sort of approach to it and he’s able to affect more change… And for him that’s what it meant to become a priest, was to help his people… And it was really after that that I took the plunge and applied to rabbinical school.

Rabbi Freedman specifically chose his vocation in order to be able to affect more change. He recognizes the special reverence people of all faiths tend to bestow on clergy. As an organization, POWER has capitalized on this influence as in powerful clergy actions at the airport. Duncan recalls:

There was one particular day when all the POWER clergy gathered at the airport and had a silent protest. We paraded in our clergy garments throughout the airport, kind of praying for the workers. And the airport knew… that we were having this action, so there were police everywhere. There were police on both sides of every corridor we walked down, but we were intending to be completely peaceful. I don't know why they were afraid. And we stopped and prayed at particular places and it affected us for sure and it covered the airport with a cloud of prayer.
Wearing clergy garments, parading peacefully, and praying are all intentional tactics that added power to POWER’s airport work, by drawing particular attention to it and connecting it to something deeper than just wages. The “cloud of prayer” makes POWER’s work sacred by distinguishing it from the mundane. Their work is holy. It is blessed. This direct action also had a dignifying and empowering effect on the clergy involved, as Duncan notes, “It affected us for sure.” But how are participants affected and shaped by actions such as these?

VIII. Prefigurative Strategy

Earlier, I used the term, habitus, to shed insight on how POWER cultivates and reflects its values through practice. My aim was to describe what occurs in POWER. Now I will turn to the idea of “prefigurative strategy” so that I may provide normative claims about POWER’s style of organizing.

In 1977, Carl Boggs coined the term, prefigurative strategy, as an alternative to the hierarchical structure of communist revolution which perpetuated authoritarianism. Boggs argues that a more democratic society requires democratic means and structures:

Prefigurative Strategy… expresses three basic concerns: (1.) fear of reproducing hierarchical authority relations under a new ideological rationale; (2.) criticism of political parties and trade unions because their centralized forms reproduce the old power relations in a way that undermines revolutionary struggles; and (3.) commitment to democratization through local, collective structures that anticipate the future liberated society (103).

Judging by these criteria, one can claim that POWER’s structure is prefigurative. While POWER does have some hierarchy, no one’s power is absolute. Rather, those in positions of authority are accountable to those they serve. POWER is local, collective, and committed to democracy. Boggs’s argument emerges from a perspective of history in which Russian communist leaders shift who is in power without shifting power itself. To avoid this phenomenon, it is crucial that
social change organizations be modeled in an intentionally prefigurative way. The way in which people work to create change ought to reflect the changes they are pursuing. Thus, Boggs is critical and wary of bureaucratization, for example, because it “creates obstacles to revolutionary change” (103).

One small way in which POWER facilitates participants’ ability to act more justly and prefiguratively is through its ability to maintain its commitments in the face of opposition, unlike politicians who often shift with popular trends or lawyers who must argue for things they do not believe. Both Terri Burgin and Reverend Holston felt more fulfilled doing POWER work because of its sincere commitments. Before getting involved in POWER, Burgin spent some time working for a politician in Philadelphia. Even though she thought highly of the representative, she was uncomfortable with who she was becoming through that work:

I didn't like all the compromises we had to make, even though I was working for a really great rep who was doing the best they could for the community, but had just been put into a really bad situation... I just wasn't sure... [considering] the faithful person that I wanted to be, that I would really like myself if I had stayed in that situation, so I left and never expected to be back in politics at all.

It was difficult to locate what exactly was troubling about Burgin’s earlier work, but it is interesting to note that she feels her habitual actions impact who she is. I wondered, why was compromising antithetical to the faithful person she wanted to be? What makes POWER different? Burgin explained why POWER is a unique and refreshing political organization:

Because POWER is nonpartisan. Because POWER is not a political machine, there's less compromising that has to be made... someone else gets to make the decision on the compromising and how far they're willing to compromise. And if it's too far, I can say that and still be honest and say, “We compromised too far. That wasn't good.” It's not that all the choices within POWER are easy, but... I can say, “We need to find a way that works for both of them,” in a way that sometimes in politics you don't always get the chance [to do]... I'm not worried about getting reelected. I get to say what I think is right regardless of who's in charge and I think that's a really empowering space for people to be in.
Participating in an organization that requires fewer compromises allows Burgin to be more powerful and to act more in line with her values. She is able to work in POWER and become the just, moral person of faith she wishes to be. Reverend Holston expressed a similar feeling. After working as a lawyer for several years (and then as a teacher), Holston finally answered the “call” to become a minister. He did not want to elaborate much, but his discomfort with serving as a lawyer stemmed from an opposition to compromising his values: “I wasn't too good at the compromising stuff or arguing for stuff that I didn't really believe or arguing for positions that I didn't really feel comfortable with. Some people are good at that. If I don't believe it, I'm not too good at arguing it. It's just part of who I am.” In addition to inspiring certain virtues, POWER attracts people who are committed to certain virtues. As Burgin explains, POWER members must still make concessions and difficult decisions, but they do not need to compromise their values. They can be part of an organization that allows them to align their values and their actions rather than compromise their values in order to be effective or pragmatic. POWER’s ability to remain committed to its values in the face of opposition actually helps the organization to be more successful at achieving its goals, while also inspiring people to be and become the kind of people they want to be in the world.

Change happens not only through public “wins,” but occurs among participants as well. Intentional processes can cultivate certain virtues and transform those involved. POWER and other organizations have the ability to make the arena less corrupt, to model in their practices a more ethical future.

IX. Conclusion

Faith-based community organizations like POWER are compelling not only because they have the ability to change their communities, but also because they transform those who
participate in their work into more dignified, radical, powerful people. In this way, POWER acts like a religion, uniting people in shared beliefs and practices that reinforce each other and demarcate what is sacred. Through the very process of organizing, those who organize cultivate positive virtues and create a better world.
X. Appendix

HAVERFORD COLLEGE

Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research

November 20, 2017

Ms. Shirah Kraus
Department of Religion
Haverford College

Dear Shirah,

Thank you for submitting a request for exemption from IRB review for your project titled “Broad-based Organizing as a Religious Practice,” dated November 10, 2017. This exemption request has been approved.

If you have any questions about these or other policies affecting human subject research at Haverford, please contact me (bmendels@haverford.edu).

A copy of this letter will be filed in the Provost's Office.

Sincerely,

Barak Mendelsohn, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Political Science and IRB Chair

cc: Marta Bartholomew, IRB Executive Assistant
Works Cited


