

Building Relationships with Communities of Color on Immigration Issues

What to do after you've done your mapping

Think Strategically:

After you have a good sense of the “lay of the land” regarding Communities of Color working on the issues of immigration, the next step is to think strategically about where to begin building accountable relationships with them . This is more of an art than a science; but it includes asking the following questions:

- 1) Which of these communities are working on issues that would provide the most common ground with your Pax Christi group?
- 2) Besides common issues, which of these communities share common values/beliefs with your Pax Christi group (for instance you might want to start your work with Catholic Communities of Color)?
- 3) Which of these communities would be most open to exploring a relationships with your Pax Christi group?
- 4) In which of these communities do you already know some People of Color with whom you have some good history?

The point is that you cannot be every where relating with everyone at the same time. You have to make choices based on a criteria that will both help your group to build the kind of relationships that will both build a multi-cultural coalition to resist the war at home and deepen your anti-racism commitment.

Explaining who you are and what you are up to:

Depending on any prior experience, you may have to spend a good deal of time explaining who you are to any Communities of Color with whom you seek to be in a relationship. This is not something that can be accomplished through a one time introduction, but is something you should be prepared to do time and time again.

It is also important to be honest about Pax Christi to People of Color. For White Pax Christi people to self-identify Pax Christi as a predominantly White peace and justice organization shows a level of self-awareness that many People of Color will respect. For Pax Christi People of Color to identify Pax Christi as a predominantly White peace and justice organization shows a level of awareness and critique that also can be respected by People of Color. It is also important to be honest about your intentions. In your own words, be prepared to describe your desire to move into accountable relationships with Communities of Color and why you think this is important to the work of resisting the war at home.

Demonstrating your Commitment:

As you introduce yourself to Communities of Color, one question they may have about you is whether you are serious about being in an accountable relationship with them. When it comes to working with White organizations, Communities of Color want to know if the White folks will follow through or if they are just passing through.

In many Communities of Color there is a long history of well intentioned White folks who say they will stay but in fact were only passing through. Part of White privilege and entitlement is having the option of taking up the anti-racism challenge of the war at home when it is in their interest and then moving on to something else when it is not. People of Color do not have this luxury. White folks can walk away from this struggle, People of Color cannot.

One important measure of commitment is the willingness of White organizations to invest both time and resources into building accountable relationships with Communities of Color. These communities are particularly sensitive to the willingness of White organizations to invest money and resources in the work. This money should not come to the table with strings attached or as another strategy to take control of the agenda. Resources should be made available as a way for White organizations to support and empower Communities of Color.

Answering the question of who is in control:

There are many ways that Communities of Color can express their displeasure if they feel that they are only being used as props by White organizations. One of the most common strategies is to simply walk away from the table. Another way to express displeasure with the way a White organization is controlling the agenda, is by being present at meetings but not being willing to invest themselves or their community in the work.

Nobody likes to be used; this is especially true of Communities of Color who have a long history of being used by well-meaning White folks. In order for accountable relationships to develop there has to be a common agenda that can be owned by everyone in the room.

Testing our partnerships:

At some point in the process of building relationships with Communities of Color there comes a time when these communities will make a choice about what kind of relationship they are willing to have with your Pax Christi group. Being in accountable relationships is not something that a White group can decide on its own.

Historically it has been easy for those in power to keep folks who work for social justice divided and in competition for resources and credibility. The temptation to narrow one's focus and work to one's own issues (or in one's own community) is not just a problem for the White peace movement; it is a problem for all groups working on social transformation. It is not easy to make the case for why Catholic Communities of Color

(who often lack sufficient resources and have little respect in our U.S. Catholic Church) should invest in building an anti-racist multi-cultural Catholic movement for peace with justice.

Just because your Pax Christi group may express a willingness to develop relationships with Communities of Color does not mean that you will always get a positive response. There are many reasons why a Community of Color might decide not to engage in a relationship with your Pax Christi group; and some of them have nothing to do with you.

For instance, a Community of Color may determine that it is not a good time for such a partnership. There might be some issues internal to that community that needs to deal with first. It might be that a community just does not have the time or energy to engage with a White organization.

The point is that at some point you need to determine which communities to focus on and which ones to walk away from. In those situations the challenge will be in determining if there are things your group is doing that makes building relationships across racial lines difficult. Doing this kind of discernment requires a lot of honest self-evaluation and an openness to getting honest feedback. If you are constantly being put off by Communities who are working on social justice issues, it might be a good idea to do an inventory of your attitudes and behaviors.

Developing and demonstrating the right attitudes and behaviors:

As was mentioned before, this is not easy work. It is more of a long-distance run than a sprint. In order for our efforts bear fruit it is important to cultivate the virtues of patience and persistence. The legacy of racism has been with us for over 500 years. Each of us has been socialized into false identities based on racial superiority and racial inferiority.

These evil forces will not yield easily and there are many vested interests in keeping them in place. Discouragement with ourselves and with our efforts to build accountable relationships across racial and ethnic lines will always tempt us to give up the struggle. The only way to move forward with this work is by being grounded in prayer and by staying engaged in building these relationships. We cannot do this work without grace nor can we do it alone.

It is also important to cultivate the virtues of flexibility and openness. We need to be willing to change course and to be open to the unexpected. Sometimes what we think we need or want from a relationship at the beginning does not turn out to be the most important thing that we get. For White peace activists, who often are focused more on agendas and issues than on relationships, working to build accountable relationships with Communities of Color can mean letting go of our to-do lists and 5-year goals and objectives.

What we are learning is that when we start with cultivating relationships based on trust and accountability; the “work” gets done a lot quicker and more effectively. In the end it

is all about the relationships. Agendas and projects are merely the means to building a movement for social change. In the final analysis any movement strong enough to challenge “the powers” needs to be built upon the foundation of relationships of trust, respect and mutuality.

Another important attitude to cultivate in this work is openness to learning from our mistakes. For all the confrontational protesting we Pax Christi folks engage in, when it comes to honest and direct confrontation within our own group, we often avoid it at all cost. But if we are to grow as anti-racist peacemakers we need to become comfortable with the confrontation that comes from being in honest relationships with people across racial lines.

For all Pax Christi members, we need to face that fact that each of us have been scared by racism and that we are all operating out of mis-shaped identities that make building relationships across racial boundaries very difficult. We will make mistakes. White folks will say and do things that enforce White power and privilege. Pax Christi People of Color will say and do things that perpetuate the internalized racist oppression of People of Color. The only way of exorcizing these demons is by staying open to learning from our mistakes and by creating a safe place where people can deal with the legacy of racism in their own attitudes and behaviors.

One useful tool in helping with this very important work is caucusing. It is a time set aside on a regular bases for White folks to get together and for People of Color to get together in order to work on issues of internalized racist superiority (for Whites) and internalized racist inferiority (for People of Color). (When you get to the point of regularly working with groups across racial lines, contact PCART for more resources about how to use caucusing to build accountable relationships.)