

Albuquerque Interfaith 2007... and On, and On...

By Stephanie Block

“I think they’re receding, like the snow pack,” he insisted, referring to *Albuquerque Interfaith’s* activity in New Mexico. “I haven’t noticed them doing much of anything recently.”

How does one answer that? Alinskyian organizations often keep a low profile when it’s expedient. One well might *not* notice their doings as there might not be many *doings* to notice. There’s no expansion. There are no major news stories. There are no big actions. From the organization’s perspective, however, that’s all right. “Two steps forward; one step back,” as they say.

For a precedent, one might look south, to El Paso, where Alinsky’s *Industrial Areas Foundation* made a tremendous organizing push during the 1980s. It created EPISO - the *El Paso Inter-religious Sponsoring Committee*. The faithful pushed back, countering with their own organization under the banner of “*Cristo, Sí - EPISO, No!*” So, EPISO had a few years of excitement, quieted down, and then spawned a “sister” in the area after 2000 - *Border Interfaith* - that claims it’s “connected to the IAF but not to EPISO,” despite having shared the same lead organizer. Credulity is strained but the action will begin again, under new circumstances and under a new name.

Which is the whole idea. While the locals are thinking short-term and looking for immediate gratification, progressives are building a machine for the long haul.

Think phases. In phase one, those seeking a specific sort of social change have found each other and are networked together.

After a decade or so, however, the organization may become predictable. Phase two, therefore, is introspective...a development period, if you will. July 9, 2006, the Sunday *Albuquerque Journal* carried a front-page article “Left Flexes Its Muscles”. Debra Dominguez-Lund, on the *Journal* staff, writes, “Religious liberals, noting the success Christian conservatives have had in Republican politics, are trying to catch up. They’ve become more active, united, and media savvy, say local and national experts.”

The large, front-page photo accompanying this article shows the Rev. Trey Hammond of La Mesa Presbyterian, identified in the caption as “co-chairman of Albuquerque Interfaith - a multi-denominational group of at least 30 area churches, schools, unions and non-profit institutions - says he believes the 2004 presidential election was a catalyst for religious liberals to be more vocal about their own religious and political views.”

In case there’s any question about what a “religious liberal” believes, a companion piece (offered side by side with “Left Flexes Its Muscle” and boxed together with it by a distinct, black border) about an alternative “Catholic”

parish in Las Cruces that “rejects the authority of the pope, ordains female, homosexual, and married priests, and consecrates same-sex marriages...”

Another companion piece by the same author as “Left Flexes...” opens: “In the world of religion, the left corner includes *Albuquerque Interfaith*, the *Network of Spiritual Progressives*, *Faith in Public Life*, the *Catholic Alliance for the Common Good*, *FaithfulAmerica.org*, and the long-standing *National Council of Churches*.”

Further into the first article, we discover that Hammond also identifies “... the issue of war, caring for the poor and a whole better way to operate as a nation.” And further still, we discover that the traditional Catholic Church, as represented by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, has a nuanced political position, siding with political conservatives on abortion and same sex marriage and with the liberals on poverty and healthcare. Despite its dual political citizenship, however, the article makes it clear that the Archdiocese is publicly allied to the “religious liberals,” through support of *Albuquerque Interfaith* and other progressive companions.

So, in 2007, *Albuquerque Interfaith* spent much of its energy “flexing.” In June, it offered an Institute for Public Life, with an advertisement in the Aquinas Newman Center parish bulletin that described the event in grossly liberationist terms: “*Liturgy* is a Latin word meaning *public servant* or *the work of the people*. What are the traditions and institutions that once buffered and defended our families? Our traditions of caring are rooted in liturgy. These traditions are deeply engrained yet somehow lost in the shuffle of economic and cultural pressures. Catholic social teachings say, ‘...we cannot realize our full potential or appreciate the full meaning of our dignity unless we share our lives with others and cooperate on projects that hold the promise of mutual benefit.’”

Now, in the first place, the quote isn’t from Catholic social teachings but from the writings of Thomas Massaro, SJ (*Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*, p. 120), which is quite a different thing. In the second place, and what is far more significant, the deliberate blurring of the Catholic meaning of the word “liturgy” with a secular and politicized meaning - on Catholic property, no less - is very offensive.

Then in November, *Call to Action’s Pax Christi* and *Albuquerque Interfaith* co-hosted a Leadership Training at the Aquinas Newman Center. All Newman Center leaders from the two “ministries” were invited - and any other interested party. “The purpose of this upcoming training is to give us better tools to begin to understand what it takes to organize in our parish in a more effective way. ...It is first and foremost about building relationships and identifying potential leaders. Frank Pierson, an Industrial Areas Foundation organizer, will lead us in this training.”

What business does Frank Pierson, a national staff Industrial Areas Foundation organizer concerned about the business of organizing “religious liberals,” have with *reorganizing* a Catholic parish?

The Holy Family Catholic parish webpage on evangelization boasts “We have sponsored chapter meetings of the Albuquerque Interfaith Organization.” Wonder if the other denominations know, when they come to Holy Family for a chapter meeting, that they’re being “evangelized?”

The Archdiocese of Santa Fe 5-year *Pastoral Plan*, published in 2006, has, as a goal, cooperation “with programs that address issues and populations not served by existing Catholic organizations but which promote Catholic Social Teaching values. (i.e. WINGS, Dismas House, Bread for the World, Albuquerque Interfaith, etc.) beginning fall 2007.” To this end, Chris Sandoval serves the Archdiocesan Office of Ecumenical & Inter-religious Affairs on the Service to Gospel Justice Committee, representing both *Albuquerque Interfaith* and the *Call to Action* group *Pax Christi New Mexico*. Chris Sandoval has been active with the Aquinas Newman Center Peace and Social Justice Committee, working on these same, two programs.

The pieces are in place. A major election is looming and the “religious liberals” are pushing same-sex marriage and embryonic stem cell research on the state level. Phase three is coming.