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Bethany M. Divakaran  
*University of Minnesota School of Nursing*

Julia Nerbonne  
*University of Minnesota Department of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Biology*

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## BUILDING A CLIMATE MOVEMENT THROUGH RELATIONAL ORGANIZING

Bethany Divakaran, DNP, BSN, PHN, and Julia Nerbonne, PhD

### Abstract

Community organizing is a process for achieving social change through the mobilization of resources and the formation of collective identity. Relational community organizing is a particular approach to developing new leaders and building organizational capacity for sustaining a powerful movement, and is especially relevant in the climate justice movement because relationships serve to bring actors from isolation and despair toward communal identity and hopeful action. Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (MNIPL) is a community organization that is using relational organizing to activate faith communities to take action on climate change. This paper describes the design and first phase of evaluation of MNIPL's Movement Builder Program, a networked distributed leadership model that uses peer mentors to increase the efficacy of new organizers. Can a peer-to-peer network increase the leverage of organizers? Will supportive relationships move people to increased action and to develop the leadership of others? We provide an introduction to this inquiry as well as the foundational frameworks and historical context of this new approach.

**Keywords:** Climate justice, community organizing, collective identity, distributed leadership, faith communities, motivation, networks, relational organizing, social movements

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### INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, societal change has been birthed through movements of ordinary people rallying around a common cause. It is through shared passion, skilled leadership, and ripe conditions for change that the status quo of human society is shifted through a social movement, establishing a new way of functioning together. Ganz (2010) described these social movements as dynamic and participatory, emerging through "...the efforts of purposeful actors to assert new public values,

form new relationships rooted in those values, and mobilize the political, economic, and cultural power to translate these values into action” (p. 2). While such movements may seem to gain momentum spontaneously, there is an intentionality to the way people are united and power is built, facilitated by those who call themselves community organizers.

We believe that the most successful of these emerging social movements employ the partnership model and are built through the careful tending of relationships built on mutual respect, accountability, and benefit (Potter et al., 2015; Mercanti, 2015). This paper showcases work to better understand relational community organizing to build a social movement, develop leaders, and create sustained community power in the context of the modern climate justice movement. We build on the literature of social movements and psychology, as well as on expertise from the practitioners of community organizing models. More specifically, we discuss the use of the Snowflake Model, originally described by organizer Marshall Ganz and applied by climate justice organization Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (MNIPL) to its work designing a Movement Builder Program in faith communities. The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the factors that facilitate lay persons’ participation in the climate justice movement and to articulate why building relationships matters when moving people to meaningful action.

## **CLIMATE JUSTICE: THE MOVEMENT OF MOVEMENTS**

The negative consequences of human activity on the earth’s natural systems are no longer speculative; rather, the effects of climate change are happening now, impacting natural and human environments globally (The Interagency Working Group on Climate Change and Health [IWGCCH], 2010; National Aeronautics and Space Administration, 2016). Climate change disproportionately burdens vulnerable populations that, due to age, ethnicity, geography, socioeconomic status, or disease status, may lack the resources and resiliency to counteract its impacts (IWGCCH, 2010; Moore & Kahn Russell, 2011; US Global Change Research Program, 2016). For

example, under-resourced populations in East Africa are suffering from drought and famine that are perpetuated by the changing climate (Oxfam International, 2017). Communities on Pacific Islands are experiencing loss of homeland and culture due to changing weather patterns and rising ocean waters (Ferris, Cernea, & Petz, 2011; Ives, 2016). Moore and Kahn Russell (2011) discussed climate change's disproportionate impacts on certain populations through the lens of *climate justice*. We are all impacted by climate change, but often those who are least responsible will bear a disproportionate burden (Moore & Kahn Russell, 2011). Climate action, therefore, is not only a scientific and political issue, but a moral one.

Communities all over the world are acting to resist the systems that promote human-driven climate change and to fight for a new vision of climate justice. The climate justice movement is being led by *frontline communities* – those “...directly impacted communities who have been able to collectively name the ways they are burdened and are organizing for action together” (Moore & Kahn Russell, 2011, p. 13).

Participating in the climate justice movement requires each person to identify her or his own frontline community and to stand in solidarity with the frontline movements of others (Moore & Kahn Russell, 2011). This climate justice movement is not merely about addressing injustices, but also about envisioning and enacting new ways of living together (Mingle, 2013; Moore & Kahn Russell, 2011; Shah, 2012). Organizer Marshall Ganz explained, “... [A]t the core of any social movement there are highly committed people who are ready to take risks. It's not just about passing a law – at heart they are movements of moral reform” (Mingle, 2013). How can we mitigate the impacts of climate change, especially for the vulnerable, and more equally distribute the benefits of climate solutions? How can all people have equal participation in the change process? Such a challenge requires new ways of thinking and new models of collaboration.

## WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

*Community organizing* is the “...process that engages people, organizations, and communities toward the goals of increased individual and community control, political efficacy, improved quality of life, and social justice” (Orr, 2007, p. 2). Minkler and Wallerstein (1997) described it as the process of identifying common problems, mobilizing resources, and implementing strategies for reaching collective goals, all of which empowers individuals and communities to claim ownership over their lives and environments. Community organizing is necessary for initiating and maintaining collective, grassroots efforts toward systems-level change. It assumes that problems in society can be addressed by communities when communities become better or differently organized (Linthicum, 2003; Walter, 1997). According to Ganz (2012), social movements depend on shared commitments, voluntary participation, ongoing motivation, and quality leadership. The role of the *community organizer* is to act as a strategic leader, but also to identify and develop the leadership of others, building community and drawing power from that community (Ganz, 2002; Han, 2012).

## FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORKS: HOW COMMUNITY ORGANIZING BUILDS COLLECTIVE POWER

There are competing theories about how community organizing builds collective power. *Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT)* is fundamentally concerned with the way organizers attain and utilize limited resources such as financial, human, or social capital (Buechler, 1993; Nerbonne & Nelson, 2004). *Identity-Oriented Theory* postulates that social movements succeed when movement actors are able to cultivate new social identities (Cohen, 1985; Fominaya, 2010; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). These frameworks are equally important in attempting to understand the nuance of what makes a movement work.

### **Resource Mobilization Theory**

While it was historically believed that social movements emerged when long-standing discontent finally became too much for a population to bear, RMT adds an understanding of the structural and collective conditions and resources that must also be in place to build a movement (Jenkins, 1983; Klandermans, 1984; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Nerbonne & Nelson, 2004). Resources can be obtained internally or externally and in a variety of ways. The resources that can be used to build power to impact change are not limited to monetary funds, but also include materials, human capital, social capital, and/or reputation (Edwards & Gillham (2013; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004). Social movements aim to leverage particularly the power of people and networks, and community organizing provides the infrastructure for building this human and social capital (Klandermans, 1984; Nerbonne & Nelson, 2004). Structural change is certainly influenced by money, for instance, but decision-makers are also influenced when a significant number of constituents take action.

### **Identity-Oriented Theory**

Another equally important factor is the building of collective identity and narrative that provides movement actors the motivation to stay engaged. Social theorists and psychologists alike struggle to understand what makes some individuals motivated to act even if they lack the resources, while those with resources may not have the will to contribute. According to Klandermans (1984), RMT is a helpful framework, but we cannot neglect the psychosocial reasons for which people take action. As Edwards and McCarthy (2004) articulated, social capital can only be built when a group of citizens “band together” and are able to overcome the barriers to ongoing participation (p. 621). What is the “glue” that binds people together in a common cause?

Literature has recognized *collective identity* as an important component of group cohesion (Cohen, 1985; Fominaya, 2010; Hunt & Benford, 2004; Polletta & Jasper, 2011; Snow, 2001). Polletta and Jasper (2011) defined collective identity as “...an individual’s cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community” (p. 285). It’s more than just the aggregation of many individual identities, or having a

common goal in mind. Collective identity is not only shaped on the individual level, but also emerges in public spaces as a “shared sense of ‘we-ness’ and collective agency” (Snow, 2001, p. 2), developed through shared experiences, common practices, and affective ties (Fominaya, 2010). The development of collective identity is never fixed, and can be described as both a process and a product of community organizing (Fominaya, 2010; Polletta & Jasper, 2011).

Ganz (2010) articulated forming collective identity through the frame of *public narrative* – “the story of self, the story of us, and the story of now” (p. 14) – which explores how values move us into action and how those values link us together with others. Han (2009) also inquired about these topics of motivation and participation; knowing that representation is an important part of equitable decision-making processes, how do organizers motivate citizens to participate? Han (2009) postulated that motivation can be increased by connecting political/civic issues to individuals’ personal experiences, values, and concerns. If Han’s (2009) premise is true, there is potential to involve far more people in the climate justice movement, if we look to understand how to harness collective identity as well as resources.

## **BACKGROUND OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING MODELS FOR PRACTITIONERS**

There are a variety of ways to organize communities for change, though all community organizing approaches have a few things in common: a focus on power, the large-scale and continued involvement of people, the strategic role of organizers, and the leadership development of participants (Miller, 2010). Rothman (1987, 2007) became influential to the field of organizing literature by categorizing community organizing approaches into three typologies: community capacity development, social planning, and social action. Rothman established a framework for practicing community organizing which included assessing the community’s orientation to change, developing the strategies and tactics, articulating the grounding social philosophy, and assessing the nature of power within relationships (Laing, 2009).

A plethora of models have emerged to either supplement or contest Rothman's views. Laing (2009) critiqued Rothman's lack of attention to social culture, recommending cultural competency as a necessary component to organizing work. Weil (1996) reviewed alternative community organizing approaches to fill this gap for organizing within diverse communities: asset-based organizing, feminist models, and culture-based models. Many emerging frameworks have placed greater emphasis on community empowerment and collaboration, such as Himmelman's (1992) collaborative empowerment model which differentiated *community betterment*, which originates from outside, from *community empowerment*, which is self-determined.

Christens and Speers (2015) described the emerging strategy of organizing within population subgroups, such as youth organizing and congregation-based organizing. Jones (2015), too, spoke of the power of faith-based community organizing, in which faith communities are, "...a conduit and mediator for civic action" with capacity to, "...bring together a diverse, sometimes less engaged constituency" (p. 369).

For some, the term community organizing itself is associated with the *Alinsky Model*. Saul Alinsky was one of the first practitioners to bring community organizing into the mainstream through his work with industrial workers in Chicago in the 1930s (Strom, n.d). Alinsky sought to organize the poor around self-interest in order to 'take back' power from the elites (Alinsky, 1971; Miller, 2010; Stoecker & Stall, 1996). This work was a precursor to other influential movements, such as that of Cesar Chavez and the United Farmer Workers (Strom, n.d).

Rising alongside Alinsky was educator and organizer Myles Horton. While both organizers focused on building power, Horton was known for his practice of *relational organizing*. In 1932 Horton pioneered the Highlander Folk School, which originally influenced disenfranchised Appalachian workers to increase civic participation and leadership preparation, and later became essential to the Civil Rights Movement, training activists including Rosa Parks and John Lewis (Evans, 2007). Relational

organizing emphasizes building relationships as way of discovering untapped leadership potential. According to Evans (2007), Horton gleaned new leaders who “... learned their role in demanding a new social order and developed the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to do so” (p. 260). As Saul Alinsky is known as the ‘father of community organizing’, modern-day thought leader and organizer Marshall Ganz has become associated with relational organizing through his practice and articulation of the approach.

While Alinsky certainly leveraged relationships to build power, in the Alinsky Model the organizer is a tactical expert, and there is less emphasis on the development of indigenous leadership (Stoecker & Stall, 1996). Ganz (2009) described Alinsky’s approach as, “...a lone organizer who ‘agitates’ people into awareness” (p. 11). Conversely, relational organizing is consensus-based rather than conflict-based, emphasizing the layperson’s growth, with the organizer’s role being to translate the values of participants into action through storytelling, relationship building, and strategy (Ganz, 2012; Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997; Miller 2010).

It is worth noting that the social movement strategy of mass mobilization differs from community organizing in significant ways. Jenkins (1983) defined *mobilization* as, “...the process by which a group secures collective control over the resources needed for collective action” (p. 532). Often with mobilizing, a centralized organizational team does the work of recruiting, emphasizing a breadth of membership over a depth of engagement and commitment (Han, 2012). Mobilizing masses to sign a petition or attend a rally is an effective strategy in some instances, as well as a tool utilized by community organizers, but it may not contribute to a lasting social movement in itself (Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015; Gladwell, 2010; Han, 2012). For instance, Brady, Young, and McLeod (2015) recognized the power of social media in mobilizing constituents, but also its limitations in keeping people actively engaged over the long term. Han (2012) described mobilizing as more ‘transactional’ than organizing, as the focus is on maximizing resource mobilization without developing capacity for future civic action. Rather, organizing is, “...transformational activism, where the goal is not only to get

work out of the activist in the short term but also to invest in developing the activist's capacity to act" (Han, 2009, p. 96). Organizing, with its longer-term commitment to social change, prioritizes the development of lay leaders with shared responsibility and commitment (Berlanger, 2015; Gladwell, 2010; McAdam, 1986).

## **RELATIONSHIPS ARE KEY TO BUILDING AND SUSTAINING POWER**

Social movements by nature are relational. However, the intent of the relationships can vary. Sometimes relationships are viewed as the means to an end, a necessary component of achieving the goal of an organizing effort. With relational organizing, relationships are more than a means – they are an end in themselves (Christens, 2010). Oftentimes people join movements for personal or relational reasons, and only later do they engage in the politics of systemic change (Han, 2009). Relational organizing is the process of empowering others through a trusted interpersonal relationship, a process which Christens (2010) described as “transformation to leadership” (p. 891). The premise of relational organizing is that movements are more powerful in reach and capacity when the development of leaders through intentional relationship building is emphasized (Christens & Speers, 2015; Ganz, 2010; Han, 2012; Han 2009).

This is distinct from bureaucratic or dominant organizing structures that can alienate participants, hamper exploration, and stifle a movement's ability to adapt to change (Ganz, 20; Green, n.d.). Han (2009) indicated that for organizations aiming to create a sustainable movement, “...by delegating responsibility, by making people accountable for outcomes, and by grooming individuals for leadership positions, they can motivate people to stay involved” (p. 121). Christens and Speers (2015) similarly argued that interpersonal relationships can give an organization a greater sense of clarity and commitment to movement priorities.

From Ganz's perspective, leadership itself is practiced through and for relationship. “Organizers are people developers[;] ... [they] build community by developing

leadership. They help leaders enhance their skills, articulate their values, and formulate their commitments, and then they work to develop a relationship of mutual responsibility and accountability” (Ganz, 2004, pp. 1134-35). Leadership development through relationship building is a strategic choice, both an ‘input’ and ‘output’ of an effective movement (Ganz, 2005). As Berlanger (2015) explained, “Relationships provide not only a source of personal fulfillment but also a strong foundation for community organizing...[W]e must recommit ourselves to an organizing approach that places a high value on [leadership] development” (p. 13). Rather than being swayed by the short-term outcomes that mobilizing often produces, relational organizing keeps the long-term goal of systemic change in mind (Berlanger, 2015). The relational organizer’s goal is to turn the “...‘I’ of the organizer into the ‘we’ of a new organization” (Ganz, 2004, p. 1143) through the creation of a new narrative of shared values.

The nature of these relationships also matters. Christens (2010) described the relationships that are formed within the context of community organizing as *public relationships* – civil interactions, not intended to be sentimental or intimate, but rather built on shared self-interest and developing in mutual respect and trust over time. While all social negotiations involve exchanges of resources, time, and ideas between actors, an exchange becomes a relationship when these investments are applied to a shared future (Ganz, 2010). According to Christens (2010), this building of trusted relationships not only brings individuals out of isolation, but also empowers them to act and to lead others into action. It is through these working relationships that one’s individual commitment to civic involvement is strengthened and the impact of the movement itself grows through an expanding network (Christens, 2010). A key strategy for building these public relationships is through *one-on-one interactions* – intentional conversations through which the organizer establishes trust, explores the passions and motivations of others, and entertains the potential for leadership development (Corner & Clarke, 2017; Green, n.d.; Linthicum, 2003).

Researcher and organizer Hahrie Han found that organizations that practice relational organizing were most effective at transforming their members' motivations and capacities into results. The organizations most highly engaged in social movements were those that utilize both mobilization and organizing, while low-engagement associations used only mobilizing strategies or were run by experts working in isolation (Han, 2014). In Han's view, the difference between low and high engagement is in having a community of people who are learning how to translate action into power. Relational organizers seek to move individuals beyond one-time action to full membership, from affiliates to leaders. And, as Han (2014) articulated, "...it is through relationships and autonomous collective action that people's motivations for action are likely to change, grow, and develop" (p. 16).

## RELATIONAL ORGANIZING TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE

The American Psychological Association (APA, 2009) reported that isolation is a key barrier for individuals acting to address climate change. Even the most aware and concerned individual may feel that her or his actions do not make a difference to address such a large challenge. Relational organizing brings individuals into community with others, where they can act together and collectively contribute to solutions. Collective action is not only more productive, but it also combats the cultural narrative that prioritizes individualism over the common good (APA, 2009).

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher (2013) further discussed the trauma one experiences in the face of overwhelming stress. Our confrontations with the realities of climate change and the devastation and loss it brings – if we dare confront it at all – can lead us quickly to denial or despair. Pipher (2013) indicated that, "The most effective way humans deal with emotional pain they cannot handle is to turn toward other people" (p. 80). It is within relationship with others that we can work through the *trauma-to-transcendence cycle*, moving from denial to awareness, to acceptance, to resilient coping, and to hopeful action (Pipher, 2013). According to Pipher (2013), "The transition from 'me' to 'we' is deeply healing" (p. 153); but even beyond this,

collective action has and can again spur a greater movement that results in paradigm shifts and systemic change.

Relationships not only provide support for the most climate-conscious, but may also have the potential to shift the perspectives of those who are less than concerned. According Leiserowitz, Maibach, and Roser-Renouf's (2009) *Global Warming's Six Americas*, most people on the spectrum of opinion are "concerned" or "cautious", meaning they know of climate change and believe it is problematic, but are not acting on the problem personally or civically. Lakey's (2016) *Spectrum of Allies* model informs how organizing can shift individuals who are inactive, to be more activated. The intention of this model is not to focus effort on those who are most dismissive of or opposed to climate change, nor to move all individuals to the alarmed category. Rather, it is a win to move individuals one step closer to activism (Lakey, 2016). Pipher (2013) shared similar advice in describing how her environmental coalition spent little energy trying to move the "converted" or the "intractable" (p. 161), but rather focused on those open to conversation. The way in which relational organizing emphasizes understanding the personal views, motivations, and values of an individual may aid with moving people from disengagement to taking action. Corner and Clark (2017) recommended, then, that the message about climate change be framed using "values-based narratives...weaving it into stories and narratives that connect with core communal values" (p. 68).

## GAPS IN THE LITERATURE

While there is a growing body of literature related to relational organizing, there are few studies that explore the approach's impact on organizing outcomes. The social movement studies that are conducted are typically limited in their focus on constraints rather than enablers (Ganz, 2010). There is a need for scholarly analysis to articulate what it is about a relationship that specifically makes a difference in creating and sustaining a movement. Christens (2010) argued for drawing links between relationship building and specific constructs such as self-efficacy,

empowerment, or sense of community. Han (2009) also noted the lack of research about motivation, leading to little understanding of the circumstances under which individuals, especially individuals who lack resources or political savvy, engage in social movements. Our research will address some of these limitations by exploring what motivates individuals to get involved in the climate justice movement and how relational organizing enhances the effectiveness of new leaders in the movement.

## THE MOVEMENT BUILDER PROGRAM

Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light (MNIPL), including the authors of this paper, designed the *Movement Builder Program* in 2016 with the support of the Climate Advocacy Lab<sup>1</sup> to explore the basic assumption that relationship building and leadership development can leverage staff time and help to grow an effective social movement. With the ultimate goal of motivating action, we constructed the program to explore the variables that lead to the success or failure of networked yet independently motivated lay leaders in faith communities. How can a social movement organization leverage its time and effort by building a peer-to-peer network that emphasizes relationships as well as accountability? Will pairing movement actors with a volunteer mentor significantly impact the outcome? What are the barriers and bridges to growing a successful network?

### Organizational context

MNIPL is a non-profit organization that is building a climate justice movement among faith communities in Minnesota. For the past five years, we have focused on building leadership capacity in faith movement actors as well as providing on-ramps for action. In recent years, Minnesota has made strides in creating equitable access to clean energy, including passing one of the most aggressive Renewable Energy Standards in the country in 2008 (Energy Foundation, 2012; Jossi, 2017). However, as with most other regions in the US, Minnesota communities encounter social, political, and economic challenges in addressing climate change. MNIPL believes that faith-based

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<sup>1</sup> Climate Advocacy Lab (<https://climateadvocacylab.org/>) hosted by Skoll Global Threats Foundation.

organizing leverages the social networks in existing faith communities as well as the moral motivations inherent in faith practices. Through training and coaching, MNIPL engages and grows organizers equipped to address climate change in a multidimensional fashion, practically, spiritually, and systemically – a model the organization calls the *three-legged stool* (MNIPL, 2016). MNIPL currently engages over 8,000 people from more than 300 faith communities. The Movement Builder program is the newest initiative to expand the network of faith communities that are engaged in the movement and to formally articulate the model by which our relational organizing work is accomplished.

### **Theoretical framework**

The Movement Builder Program was designed to mimic Marshall Ganz’s Snowflake Model (Figure 1), a model of *distributed leadership* which relies on forming a network of leaders rather than maintaining centralized control (Han, 2012; Trainer, 2016). The model’s success was demonstrated during Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign (Ganz, 2009). This decentralized model of leadership leverages the time of paid organizers to focus their efforts on growing community leaders rather than doing their own organizing. The actors at the outer edge of the network have the responsibility for direct programmatic activity, reserving the ability of core actors to focus on developing and supporting those within the network (Han, 2012). In this way of building relationships and distributing responsibility, with the network extending outward layer by layer like a snowflake, the movement grows to include more people, reach further, and increase in its capacity to be sustained. Han (2012) notes that this model tells a distinct story about the nature of power and where it originates; relationship-based structures move organizing work away from the “heroic individual” and reorient it toward a collaborative team approach (Ganz, 2010, p. 34).

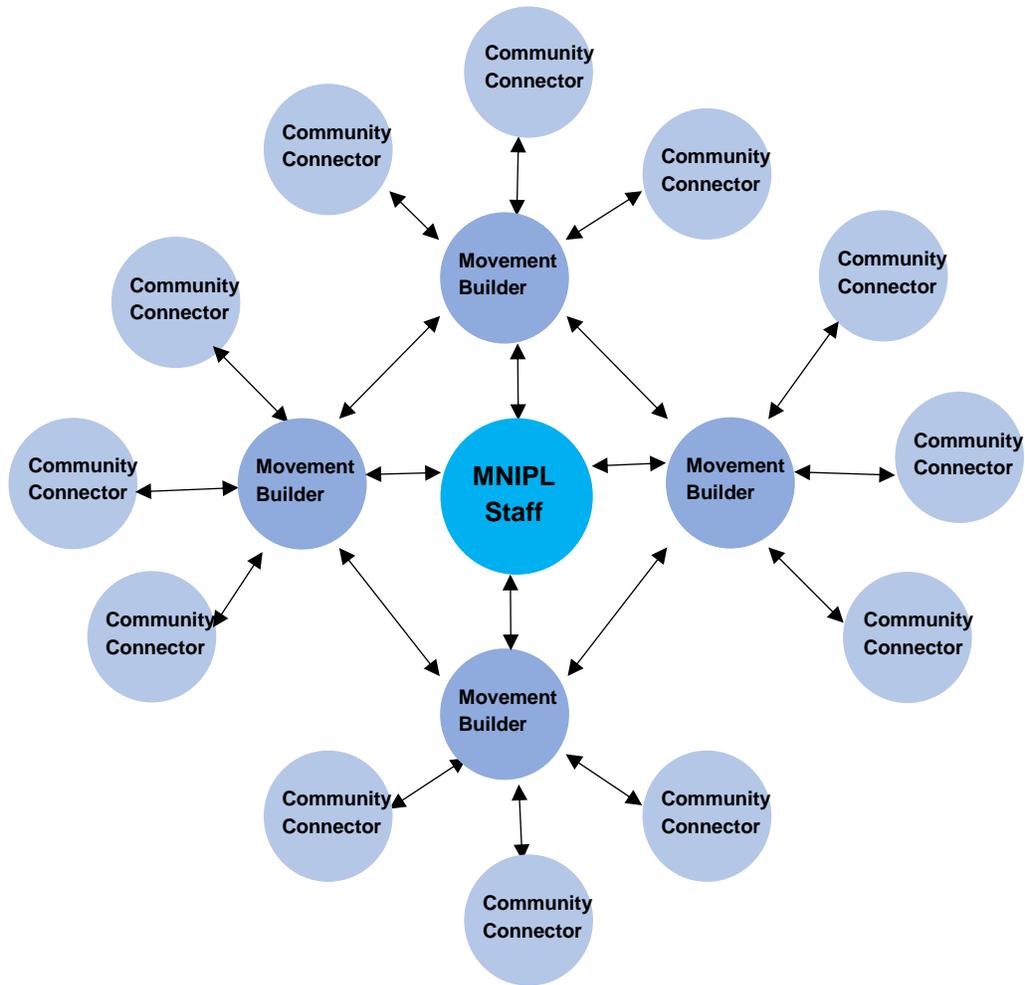


Figure 1. Snowflake Model

Adapted from Han (2012); Originally articulated by Marshall Ganz

The Movement Builder program involves participants called *Community Connectors*, who serve as liaisons between their faith communities and MNIP. We support Community Connectors with training and resources aimed at increasing their motivation, skill, and influence. In this way, leadership and responsibility for the social movement is extended from MNIP staff to Community Connectors, then from Community Connectors to the other community members they engage. The project also involves volunteer *Movement Builders*, whose role is to get to know and support the Community Connectors in their transformation to leadership. This design of assigning Movement Builders to support the Community Connectors' leadership of others allows us to explore the effectiveness of this distributed leadership model in

growing MNIPL's network and organizing influence, as well as the impact of promoting non-transactional relationship building.

### **Evaluation design**

Our pilot Movement Builder Program was launched in March 2017. Our hypothesis is that Community Connectors who are given the resources to act, and actors who form significant relationships with other volunteer leaders in the network, will be more likely to show increased knowledge, will feel more positive and hopeful, and will be more likely to act. Over the next two years we are eager to explore the variables that lead to the success or failure of this network model as it plays out in faith communities.

Our evaluation process is designed to collect rich data from a variety of sources, honoring the fact that no one source of data can describe the complexities of a social movement. A pre-survey was collected from participants to learn more about their reasons for participating in the program; to collect a snapshot of their individual knowledge, experience, attitudes, and behaviors; and to understand the context of the communities in which they are organizing. Personal interviews and small group listening sessions with Community Connectors and Movement Builders will be conducted throughout the process to better understand the nuances of relational organizing in a faith-based social movement. At the end of the study period, participants will take a post-survey, and we will analyze the role of relationship building through the Snowflake Model as well as the variables of knowledge, attitudes, and actions.

### **Results to date**

MNIPL recruited 155 volunteer Community Connectors from 95 faith communities representing a variety of faith backgrounds and traditions. Additionally, 12 volunteer Movement Builders joined to serve as support for these Community Connectors. To date, 122 pre-surveys have been collected from this participant pool, and one listening session with Movement Builders was conducted.

### Participant and community attributes

Program participants self-reported information about their demographics, organizing experience, and faith communities. Participants also described their current level of engagement in the climate justice movement, and any affiliation with MNIPL. This population is majority female and Caucasian, as well as highly educated (Figure 2). Most participants (70 percent) described themselves as “lay leaders” in their faith community, while 19 percent reported being in a formal leadership position.

<u>Gender</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Female	58
Male	39
Genderqueer	3
<u>Race</u>	
Caucasian	95
African American	2
Asian/Asian Am.	1
Biracial/Other	2
<u>Highest Level of Education</u>	
Graduate	67
Bachelor’s	27
Associate’s	1
Some College	4
High School/GED	1

**Figure 2. Participant Demographics**

Participants vary in their level of organizing experience, from novice to professional organizer, from newly involved in the climate justice movement to being engaged for years (Figure 3). A majority of participants are already involved in some form of climate justice work, with about 76 percent of participants indicating involvement

within their faith community and 75 percent reporting involvement outside of their faith community.

<u>Level of Experience</u>	<u>Percent</u>
No Experience	11
Some Experience	27
Leadership Experience	55
Professional	7
<u>Time of Involvement</u>	
Less than a Year	16
1 to 2 Years	18
3 to 5 Years	20
More than 5 Years	46

**Figure 3. Participant involvement in Organizing**

Figure 4 describes the attributes of the represented faith communities. Many participants reported representing politically progressive faith communities (67 percent) and socially active communities (62 percent). The faith communities vary in decision-making structure, but 90 percent of participants reported that their faith leaders are either somewhat or extremely supportive of climate justice work. No participating faith communities reportedly have leaders who are actively opposed to acknowledging climate change.

<u>Political Affiliation</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Progressive	67
Moderate	12
Conservative	7
Unaffiliated	5
<u>Social Activism</u>	
Highly Active	62
Moderately Active	28
Neutral/Inactive	10
<u>Decision-Making Structure</u>	
Input from Lay-leaders	54
Driven by Lay-leaders	41
Driven by Religious Leaders	5
<u>Support of Formal Leaders</u>	
Extremely Supportive	47
Somewhat Supportive	43
Disengaged	10

**Figure 4. Faith Community Attributes**

### Participant Motivations

From the pre-surveys, four key themes emerged to describe individuals' motivations for increasing participant involvement in the climate justice movement. From the 122 survey responses, the motivation that was mentioned most often (79 times) was *concern* or *urgency* about the current state of affairs and the impacts of climate change on the future. Secondary to this theme was being motivated by a sense of *moral responsibility* or *calling* to care for the earth (mentioned 31 times). This was manifested in statements such as, "I care deeply about our earth and feel called to try and make a difference". Additionally, 22 participants reported being motivated by having or needing *knowledge*, 14 reported being motivated by *connections* with others, and 12 reported being motivated by having or needing *skills*. One participant

indicated concern, calling, and connection all in one statement: “I believe that the current state of the world requires urgent climate action, faith, and action that unites people.”

The listening session allowed for more in-depth exploration of these themes with volunteers who were already in a leadership role. The following prevalent themes emerged from the rich discussion: *experiences in nature*, *moral calling*, the *power of a faith-based approach*, and *connections with others*. Some participants shared stories of growing up on a farm or near the woods, citing these experiences as being foundational to their orientation toward creation care.

The group discussed their activism and organizing work in the climate justice movement as being “existential” or “sacramental”. One participant stated, “It is ultimately a religious question - why are we here and what are we going to leave to our children?” Movement Builders noted the intersectionality between faith practice, climate advocacy, and justice work. One individual expressed his strong belief that “Climate work is justice work...we take care of our home so we can ultimately address other needs within it such as caring for the poor.” One’s spiritual beliefs may motivate and mandate action to create a more just world, while the work manifests as a spiritual practice in itself.

Participants also spoke of their optimism about the faith-based, relational approach. One individual called climate change the “great unifier”; despite divisions that exist among people of faith, “The interfaith approach is most likely to succeed in terms of getting everyone aligned.” While climate change can often be a polarizing topic, participants discussed how partnership-based approaches can overcome such barriers. One contributor explained, “The goal is to have people support the work that needs to get done...there are ways we can frame a message that are focused more on making connections than winning people over.”

Partnership through personal connections was a prominent theme when discussing what will make the Movement Builder Program work. One individual indicated he chose to participate in this program because of how it connects him to others, which is better than working in isolation. Another participant stated, “People tend to be changed through personal relationships...the only time they receive information into their brain which is contrary to what they think is if it comes from somebody they know pretty well and respect.” One participant attributed the powerful potential of this relational, partnership-based approach to the fact that it “...creates an opportunity for people outside [the movement] to join in”...people realize they are, “...not just out there on their own.”

### **Lessons Learned to Date**

Exploring the impacts of relationship building and leadership development to enable effective activism and organizing is important in our current context when climate change demands both prompt and transformational action. Given that one of the purposes of the Movement Builder Program is to expand MNIPL’s network of active volunteers and congregations, these initial survey results are promising in that 20 percent of participants reported being new to the organization, and 50 percent of their faith communities have had no past involvement in MNIPL’s work. Further understanding the motivations of these movement participants is an essential aspect of the relationship-building process and the transformation to leadership (Corner & Clark, 2017; Christens, 2010; Linthicum, 2003).

In a follow-up report to *Global Warming’s Six Americas*, Roser-Renouf, Maibach, Leiserowitz, Feinberg, and Rosenthal (2016) noted a cultural shift from viewing climate change as a political and scientific issue to reframing the issue as a moral and/or spiritual concern. MNIPL’s Movement Builder Program, an interfaith-focused initiative, seeks to leverage these individual and collective faith-based motivations, values, and hope that compel people and communities to take action. Interestingly, however, there were fewer program participants than expected that explicitly named

moral responsibility or calling as their primary motivation for participation in the climate justice movement.

Over half of the participants expressed feelings of despair, urgency, or concern for the future as their primary motivation for program participation. Far fewer participants mentioned wanting to be involved in the climate justice movement because of the connections they could make, the skills they could learn, or the knowledge they could gain. Few participants expressed feeling hopeful about what could be achieved through the social movement as a primary reason for action.

Seemingly, many of these program participants are in the acknowledgement phase of Pipher's (2013) trauma-to-transcendence cycle. Having gone through or bypassed denial and awareness, participants are recognizing that now is the time to act, as evidenced by their voluntary participation in the Movement Builder Program and their vast amount of work that is already being done in various contexts. However, the survey responses did not indicate the resilient coping discussed by Pipher (2013). For many of the respondents, concern or fear for the things they love and value is what is moving them to act – and a fitting motivation this is. However, we also believe that if people stay motivated solely by fear and despair, they will fail to achieve the inspired collective action needed to bring others into the movement and to sustain lasting and transformational change.

This finding emphasizes a need for the Movement Builder Program; we see that there is a need for people to be more connected. While it is a win to have so many motivated people involved in the movement for any reason at all, it is our hope that this program will help move our participants from fear and despair toward social togetherness and hopeful action through partnership. While despair over our current situation and fear of the future can immobilize somebody who is standing alone, collective action makes transcendence much more possible (APA, 2009; Pipher, 2013). Mercanti (2015) expressed this power to create new things together as *actualization*

*power*. We hope that this project will help individuals articulate and align with their own frontline to more effectively engage in the movement.

## WHAT'S NEXT?

This paper has highlighted the planning of the Movement Builder Program, the recruitment of motivated volunteers, and the initial findings concerning motivating factors. We also articulated the context in which this program is being implemented and why it is fitting in our current age of environmental crisis and opposition to climate justice action. Future publications will share more about the organizing process as it evolves, the outcomes, and the ongoing lessons learned. In addition to exploring whether the Movement Builder Program brings participants from despair to action and connection, we hope to explore the nuanced factors that help the mentoring relationship of Movement Builders to increase the efficacy of Community Connectors as they organize in their respective faith communities. Can hopeful and connected Community Connectors grow in their own leadership capacity to activate others into action? Is their growth augmented through one-to-one relationship and mentorship?

The outcomes of this program are truly to be determined. But as Ganz (2010) stated, “Social movements are, in the end, about changing the world, not yearning for it, thinking about it, or exhorting it” (p. 27). Through the Movement Builder Program, we hope to learn more about the role of relational organizing and distributive leadership as a collaborative approach to building successful social movements for creation care and social justice. Stay tuned!

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**Bethany Divakaran**, DNP, BSN, PHN, is a public health nurse with a passion for healthy communities and environments. She recently completed her Doctor of Nursing Practice degree in Public Health at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities, and is currently pursuing a Master's degree in Public Health. At the University of Minnesota, Bethany works as a lab instructor for undergraduate nursing students and co-chairs *Health Students for a Healthy Climate*, an interdisciplinary student group focused on addressing the impacts of climate change on human and planet health. She consulted with Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light for evaluation of the Movement Builder Program. You can reach Bethany at [divak005@umn.edu](mailto:divak005@umn.edu).

**Julia Nerbonne**, PhD, is the Executive Director of Minnesota Interfaith Power & Light, and an Adjunct Assistant Professor in the Department of Fisheries, Wildlife and Conservation Biology at the University of Minnesota. She enjoys the work of growing a successful organization using the Partnership Model, in which she brings her skills as an organizer and academic to build a vibrant movement for climate justice in more than 400 Minnesota congregations. Her academic research focuses on how to create powerful social movements. She has spent more than 18 years teaching ethics and sustainability studies to college students. You can reach Julia at [julia@mnipl.org](mailto:julia@mnipl.org).

Correspondence about this article should be addressed to Bethany Divakaran at [divak005@umn.edu](mailto:divak005@umn.edu) or Julia Nerbonne at [nerbonne@umn.edu](mailto:nerbonne@umn.edu).